

Alternative Sexuality in Indian Media: Representation of Queer Bodies since c. 1990s

**Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December 2019**



Date: 24.12.2019

DECLARATION

I, Priyam Ghosh, declare that the thesis titled '**Alternative Sexuality in Indian Media: Representation of Queer Bodies since c. 1990s**' submitted by me in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is an original research work. The thesis has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma to any other University/Institution.

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CERTIFICATE

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Raison d'être

“Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it come from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility, it's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak, and I simply will not do that anymore, not to myself or anybody who identifies with me”.

Hannah Gatsby in Nanette (2018).

Hannah Gatsby sums up my experience of growing up as a 'lesbian' in India in the 1990s. The inherent shame and guilt for being 'not normal' is something that most individuals of non-normative sexuality go through. “Where do I go from now?”, sometimes I wondered aloud. Though, I stayed in the closet for most of my teenage years attempting to seek any representation of 'who I am' in media, it remained an exasperating task. The little representation I did find in newspaper or television mocked or feared individuals like me. It was only when I came to do my Masters in Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2009 that I confronted my guilt and acknowledged my 'criminalized identity'. This dissertation is culmination of my guilt, angst and academic rigour.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

One of the most intense yet challenging relationships that I share in this world is with my parents- a relationship which comprises of incredible sense of trust, individuality and ideological differences. I am incredibly blessed to have my mother- Veena Ghosh who despite being a working woman for most of her life, juggling between chores at home and a full time job, imparted within, the values and a deep sense of agency. She has been a pillar of strength, attempting to understand my queerness and extending her heartfelt support for the same. I am grateful to my father- Probir Kumar Ghosh for making me inquisitive and develop an astute taste in art, literature, music and food. In his own nonchalant ways, he makes sure that I have enough resources to support myself. My parents have been the backbone of my intellectual journey towards self-exploration and learning.

Centre for Media Studies, School of Social Sciences has been an extended family for me in the last four years. The institution has provided me with sound theoretical and practical knowledge and strengthened my politics. I am grateful to my supervisor and mentor Dr. Chitrlekha for her patience, acute reading and editing of my drafts and valuable insights she provided during the course of my research. She has been exceptional in her support and has encouraged me to be brave with my ideas without a hint of imposition. I would also like to thank you Dr. Rakesh Batabyal and Dr. Sujith Parayil who have contributed to the work formally and informally. The Chairperson of Centre for Media Studies, Prof. Heeraman Tiwari, who has been a hard taskmaster in the past year and have been critical for supporting the academic vigour in students. I am deeply indebted to Jawaharlal Nehru University administration and all the non-teaching members of the Centre for Media Studies family, especially Mr. Deepak Kumar and Mr. Satish for their efficient management of resources, and rescuing research scholars from bureaucratic hassles. Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar from School of Arts and Aesthetics for their endless support of my ‘deviant’ work.

My humble thanks to my interlocutors and resource persons across India. Chayanika Shah, Shal Mahajan, Mridul from LABIA, Mumbai; Rituparna and Ritambhara from Nazariya, Delhi; Ashok Row Kavi, Sohail, Owais Khan, Sonal Giani, Sridhar Rangayan, Shrirang, Koninika, Pearl, Richa, Bhoomika from Humsafar Trust and Yaariyan; Subhagata Ghosh, Malavika, Poushali, Ree, Monami, Epsita from Sappho for Equality, Kolkata; Arvind

Narrain, Darshana Mitra, Danish Sheikh from Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore; Deepa Vasudevan from Sahayatrika; Paresh, Kaushal, Jyoti, Apeksha from Hasratein, JNU and many others who aided in this research project.

I would like to thank my colleagues across various organisations who continued inspiring me during my PhD writing phase. Dr. Ravi Chaturvedi, Ms. Shruti Nagpal, Ms. Tahzeeb Fatma, Ms. Bhumika Chandola, Ms. Akanksha Jain, Ms. Bhavya Katyal, Mr. Ashish, Mr. Namit, Dr. Baninder, Dr. Debrati, Dr. Vaishali, Ms. Neha, Mr. Sahil, Ms. Shikha, Ms. Garima who helped me go through a rather smooth ride during my course of PhD writing. Prof. Charulata Singh, Prof. Sidharth Mishra and Dr. Neeru Johri for their endless support.

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi has been a second home and brought many beautiful people in my life without whom this work would not have completed. I would like to express my gratitude to my friends who have stood the test of time and were by my side in the hour of need. The (un) holy trinity of Ankush, Megha, and Subhajit without whom this work would have been unthinkable, for all those late night conversations over coffee and alcohol, for introducing me to new ideas and having patience to let me whine about my heartaches. Tarun Bisht for being my friend and comrade, when we were both struggling through financial and emotional breakdowns.

Anirban Kumar, Anannya, Anubhuti, Shruti and Anirban Baishya who helped me formulate my ideas and making my M.A. days memorable. Arushi, Akhila, Anupam, Bhargav, Jainendra, Kritika, Tanvi, Shilpi and Sangha, with whom I had meaningful academic interaction during the M.Phil coursework. Shrinkhla and Raja with whom, I have had numerous cups of tea and banter. Ritubrata, Priya, Twinkle, Devam for their support during my PhD writing phase.

One of the best things that came out of this research was finding love online. Who knew a dating application like Tinder would play a matchmaker and a good one too. To my drop of sunshine, Aparna Seth, thank you for being a friend, partner, lover, dreamer, traveller and comrade. For making me believe in power of love. For helping me articulate my thoughts which could materialise into this thesis. For proof-reading and editing my work so diligently. For loving me so passionately and selflessly. You are the most beautiful thing in my life. I love you, Appu. Every day with you is an adventure and I can't get enough of how incredible it will be to spend my whole life with you.

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Alternative Sexuality in Indian Media: Representation of Queer Bodies since c. 1990s

Abstract

This thesis undertakes to explore the myriad representation of ‘alternative sexuality’ (specifically of the LGBT community) in newspapers, magazines, television, films etc. and specific online media (social networking websites including queer dating websites) in an effort to examine shifting narratives in the representation of queer sexuality in India. Since the onset of satellite television and the end of government monopoly over the airwaves in India, which happened in 1990 and 1995 respectively, there has been a transformation in media ownership and control (Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001; Kumar 2006). India’s restructuring post-1990 era of liberalization and entry of cable television and Foreign Direct Investment in advertisement agencies and newspapers has shifted the governmental and political discourses around sexuality and it is in this purview, I intend to examine the post 1990s public sphere of India (specifically in the metropolitans) which was constantly changing and yet retaining its connections to the earlier periods. I am particularly interested in the idea of representation of the queer body as spectacle that dominates media representation in contemporary times.

Keywords: Queer, Neoliberal, Media, Representation, Sexuality.

Introduction

India's economic liberalization and the cultural impact of globalization that it ushered in, saw widespread celebration around her new status as an ambitious nation ready to take on the global stage. The economic restructuring in 1991 saw significant shifts in governmental discourse and policy on hitherto protected terrain, including changes in media ownership with entry of cable television, Foreign Direct Investment in advertisement agencies, television and newspapers etc. The nineties in India also saw the beginnings of political assertion of sexuality in the public sphere.

The decade was significant for its shift in feminist ideologies, as the 'third wave' feminism emphasized on 'individual choices', rather than those of the community or collective. The 1990s also saw the transition from 'prohibition of the kiss', to the era of sexual liberation within the aegis of neo-liberalization, neatly fitting the narrative of progress. With proliferation of cable TV, many Indian newspapers and magazines followed suit, and reiterated that the new generation of globalized India was seen as sexually permissive and did not share the prudery of the pre 1990s period. Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam in their work *Power and Contestation: India since 1989*, argue for instance, that the "new economies of desire and fluidity of sexuality are linked to an 'unshackling of the imagination'" (Menon and Nigam 2007, 85), due to neo-liberalization in the post-90s period.

Through my research, I attempt to disrupt linear narratives of globalization and sexual progress by studying the role of media in creating representation of non-normative sexuality for mass consumption. This thesis attempts to unsettle various homogenous notions of sexuality and its representations in media, describing a more enmeshed, non-linear trajectory of representation of queerness in the post 1990s period, which was marked by liberalization of the India economy, and changes in the cultural and public sphere. I attempt to establish various links between mediated representations of non-normative sexualities, politics of subjectivities, and various transgressions made by the queer community within the public sphere of neoliberal India.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey in their seminal essay titled *Thinking Sexuality Transnationally* (1999), condemn the tendency of scholarship on globalization "to read social

life off external social forms-flows, circuits, circulation of people, capital, and culture without any model of subjective mediation” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999, 445). My research project is an endeavour to examine various cultural and media circuits within the Indian context, and to describe how this is central to the ‘mediations and mediatization’ of non-normative sexual subjects. Cultural practices such as reading newspapers, journals, magazines, social media posts to watching cinema and browsing the internet helped creating the public sphere in India, where sexuality was formative.

This thesis attempts to take this thought further, by providing a critical understanding of ‘politics of sexuality and its representation’ by tracking key events in the cultural sphere in India in the 1990s and how it interlinked to representation of non-normative sexualities and their subjectivities. It attempts to locate these cultural and media representations of a sexually marginalized group, and makes an important scholarly intervention for following reasons. Firstly, with neo-liberalization, queer sexuality has been pushed ‘out of the closet’ and the rich Indian history of homoerotic traditions are finally reflected upon. I address early history of sexualities in India in the very first chapter of the thesis, to reflect upon the rich cultural history of sexuality in ancient, medieval and colonial India, a terrain of scholarship which has not received much attention, perhaps at least in part due to the colonial amnesia still attendant upon the postcolonial subject.

Secondly, there have been several attempts in the past few years to archive a diversity of ‘Indian queer experiences’ (Narain and Bhan 2005; Vanita and Kidwai 2001; Thadani 1996; Zaffrey 1996). Jackson (2000) points out a “lack of detailed historical research within Asian discourses around sexualities leading to proliferation of new modes of eroticized subjectivities” (Jackson 2000, 1). He further adds,

“We...lack studies of the changes in economies, social organization and political systems which have created the spaces for the emergence of Asian gay and lesbian scenes. Current histories, ethnographies and sociologies of gay and lesbian identities are overwhelmingly from the West, and we need studies of gay Bangkok, gay Seoul, gay Mumbai, gay Taipei and other major Asian cities that are as detailed and as comprehensive as those we have of gay Sydney, gay New York, gay London and gay Amsterdam” (Jackson 2000, 1-2)

I would be acknowledging recent works in this domain, which includes works of scholars like Brinda Bose, Jyoti Puri as well as collaborative efforts made by Arvind Narain and Gautam

Bhan in *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. Academics like Gayatri Gopinath, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Ashwini Sukthankar, Jasbir Puar cover myriad issues of history of sexuality, mass media, films, identities, community in their respective works. Thirdly, post neo-liberalization in 1990s, representations of alternative sexuality still operates within the binary of 'good and bad', and this is a superficial understanding of 'politics and poetics of media representation' which needs deeper reflection. Finally, there is a dearth of academic work done on virtual ethnography of online queer community specially in terms of understanding the 'dating culture' of these queer community and varied representational politics that operate within the 'so-called' safe spaces online in India. However, focussing only on the 'online' tends to leave out the 'offline' component of queer individual's lives and their mediated representation, which I am deeply interested in. I am in concurrence with Miller and Slater (2002) when they write on role of internet and related new media technologies as "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces that happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but cannot escape" (Miller and Slater 2000, 5). With a similar vision in mind, this thesis is an attempt to address unanswered questions about queer sexuality and its reflection and representation in Indian media.

With the new economic policies implemented in 1991, the turn of the 20th century witnessed invasion of satellite television and new media technologies in Indian households. Print media caught up to speed with rest of the world and made stylistic changes in their style-sheets to lure in more readers. These transformative cultural and literary practices continue to be adopted by the newly emerging urban middle classes. In this thesis, I attempt to undertake an in-depth examination of national cultural formations with respect to the sudden explosion of endless diversity of images that entered both the public and private sphere in India post liberalization. The rhetoric of economic reform and cultural politics of right-wing nationalism drew upon the market forces energized through the particular processes of (neo) liberalization in India.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri in her seminal essay *Indian Media and its Transformed Public* (2010) reflects upon the transformations that both publics and the public sphere in India have gone through, with the 'coming of neo-liberal capitalism in contemporary India' (Chaudhuri 2010). This was further heightened with increasing popularity of television and print media and the

space it devoted to expressions of sex and sexuality post 1990s. The 1990s saw transgressive representation of unbridled sexuality through foreign based television shows on cable television as well as Indian advertising campaigns such as Kamasutra condoms which was launched in 1991. These representations drew the ire of the government and right-wing activists alike, leading the Indian state to devise more stringent legislation and greater censorship.

Newspapers, magazines, news bulletins, talk shows, sitcoms and a variety of television shows now featured works that challenged the conventional heteronormative family values and questioned established norms on marriage, monogamy and heterosexuality. There were several instances when queer sexuality was “pushed out of the closet” (Dasgupta 2014, 651), specifically when several news reports highlighted suicides and suicide pacts carried forth by women from small town and rural areas, which was published in the Indian press in English and other vernacular dailies. Scholars and activists like Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000), Giti Thadani (1996), Bina Fernandez (2002) and several others highlighted that the approach of the English language press along with vernacular press in India which was particularly ‘sensational in nature’ during the 1980s until early 2000, while reporting such incidences (Shahani 2008, 176-177). Headlines like “*Macabre Suicides*” (India Today, December 21, 1998) reported in India Today or “*Girl student and Tuition Teacher Poison Themselves to Death*” (Mokkil 2010) draw on the “idea of dreadful and unavoidable end of one’s life, a kind of punishment for such action” (Mokkil 2010). Curiously enough, the majority of suicides reported in the press came from two of the most literate state of India, Kerala followed by West Bengal. Apart from the cases described above, in Kerala alone there have been twenty-one reported lesbian suicides from 1995 to 2001 (Joseph 1996). This trend would be discussed in detail in Chapter three.

Except sporadic presence in literary texts such as Ugra’s anthology of short stories titled *Chocolate*, Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* (1945), Kamala Das’s *My Story* (1972), there were only fleeting references to same-sex desire post-independence. The 1990s however saw queer fiction and non-fiction novels as well as anthologies by acclaimed writers like Vikram Seth, Hoshang Merchant, Firdaus Kanga, R. Raja Rao, Devdutt Pattanaik, Shyama Selvadurai, Suniti Namjoshi, Manju Kapoor and many more.

In the 1990s, sitcoms like *Hum Paanch*, *Sriman Shrimati* featured characters who were “unmistakably queer with films like *Sadak* (1991), *Daayra* (1996), *Darmiyaan* (1997), *Tamanna* (1997) etc challenged hetero-normativity by presenting queer protagonists” (Ghosh 2005). But the critical moment of disruption in recognition of Indian queer sexuality occurred with the release of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* in 1998, that launched the ‘first ever public debate on homosexuality in India’(Dasgupta 2014, 627). The film narrates the story of struggle of two women namely-Sita and Radha married into a middle-class Hindu family living in Delhi. Over the span of the film, intimacy develops between Sita and Radha bordering on same-sex desire, which draws the ire of their respective family members. Emphasizing on sensuality and emotions, Mehta’s *Fire* depicts how “two women struggle to find respect and intimacy in a ‘hetero-patriarchal middle class Indian family’ and during the course of the film, eventually fall in love with each other” (Dave 2012, 140). The depiction of lesbianism, however, aroused curiosity, conflict, hysteria and moral panic among right wing nationalists in India setting off the first ever national discussion on the theme(Gomathy and Fernandez 2005, 197-205). According to Gomathy and Fernandez,

“the screenings of the film was disrupted across India specially in Delhi and Bombay by Shiv Sena activists, who vandalized the New Empire and Cinemax theatre in Bombay, and Regal in New Delhi demanding that cinema halls across India cancel the screenings” (Gomathy and Fernandez 2005, 197-205).

The violent demonstrations were meted with peaceful counter protests by organizations like Stree Sangam aka LABIA (Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action) in Mumbai and CALERI (The Campaign for Lesbian Rights) in Delhi, along with several NGOs, support groups working for women as well as an unprecedented support from the film fraternity across India. Finally, the Indian Censor Board of Film Certification (CBFC) authorized the English version of *Fire* in November 1998, and allowed its distribution without cuts.

Despite the new outlook of the state towards sexuality, the state of marginalized communities in India remained ‘abysmal’ as the representation of the queer community within media swings between ‘invisibility and hyper visibility’ (Narrain 2004, 34). Representation or expression of sexuality across any of the media format (television, films, newspapers) has either been termed as “obscene or has been ridiculed or mocked at, especially in relation to sexual expressions of queer individuals” (Russo 1981). My analysis aims to focus on how

heteronormative homophobic¹ cultural norms in turn affected the representation of the LGBT community in various online and offline media.

Theoretical Influences

This research project is situated at the intersection of cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies cyber-cultural studies, and digital ethnographic studies. Each of these domains are relatively new (except cultural studies, and gay and lesbian studies which have been in existence since the late 1800s) and are intersectional in nature. These intersectional complexities and interconnectedness means that there is no fixed path to take while navigating them—but trajectories have to be consciously configured, drawing from what it may be in each of these domains that is relevant to this research project.

A. Cultural Studies

Arising from the social turmoil across the world in the 1960s, Cultural Studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field of research drawing from the social sciences and humanities to study communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, political economy, media theory, film studies, cultural anthropology etc. Cultural studies frequently borrows from Marxist, post-colonial, structuralist, post-structuralist, or postmodern theories to reframe, reimagine and investigate experiences of an individual with respect to their social life, relations and power in a cultural context.

This project follows the road of cultural studies in its attempt to investigate varied media representations available around queer sexuality, and as such the concept of ‘spectacle’ is one of the pivotal points in terms of representation of the queer body. The ‘idea of spectacle’ first originated from Guy Debord’s book, *The Society of Spectacle* (1967), which deals with the

¹ A homophobic India was the result of subjugation of Indian belief system by the advanced Victorian state. British educators and missionaries often denounced Indian marital, familial, and sexual arrangements as primitive-demeaning to women and permissive to men. Hindu gods were seen as licentious, and Indian monarchs, both Hindu and Muslim, as decadent hedonists, equally giving in to heterosexual and homosexual behaviour but indifferent to their subjects’ welfare. While doing laudable work for women’s education and against women’s oppression, Indian social reformers tried to form an ideal Indian man, woman, child, and family, largely on the model of the British Victorian nuclear family. Monogamous heterosexual marriage came to be idealized as the only acceptable form of sexual coupling, within which the woman was to be the educated companion of the male head of the household. It is therefore no surprise that the new homophobia was also internalized by modern educated Indians.

ever-changing relation between ‘direct experience’ and ‘mediated representation’ in modern times. The book opens with the overarching assertion that, “*All that once was directly lived has become mere representation*” (Debord 1967, 10).

Debord attempts to present a critique of contemporary society, by employing history and time as a background. He describes the ‘role of spectacle’ as an instrument used by capitalism for distracting and placating the masses. He has a critical stance towards such developments which serve for the “individualization and isolation of humans² and reinforcement of exploitative class society under advanced capitalism through the aid of advertising, television, film” (Debord 1967).

The Society of Spectacle (1967) essentially reworks the various Marxist concepts like ‘commodity fetishism’ and ‘alienation’ for various media formats such as print media, television, films and advertising. This concern is encapsulated in Debord’s fourth thesis which states, “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord 1967, 4) (emphasis mine).

The postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, one of the key theorists working with the idea of spectacle, follows Debord’s idea of ‘spectacle’ in his seminal work ‘*Simulacra and Simulation*’ (1981). In the book, Baudrillard inquires, “what happens in a world that denies all access to the ‘real’ and in which only ‘simulacra and simulation’ exists” (Baudrillard 1994). For Baudrillard this is in fact the world in which we live, where only ‘simulations’ and ‘hyperreality³’ reality exists, which is a “copy that has no original” (Baudrillard 1994).

² For Debord, “The spectacle is the vehicle of separation and creation of lonely crowd (a term coined by the American sociologist David Riesman, to describe our atomization) and it originates from the loss of unity in the world. It is an exploitative mechanism for in the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it”. For more, read Debord, Guy. 1967 (1994). *The society of the spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.

³ Jean Baudrillard sees the hyperreal in the following terms: “There are three levels of simulation, where the first level is an ‘obvious copy of reality’ and the second level is a ‘copy, so good that it blurs the boundaries between reality and representation. The third level is one which produces a reality of its won without being based upon any particular bit of the real world. The best example is probably “virtual reality”, which is a world generated by computer languages or code. Virtual reality is thus a world generated by mathematical models which are abstract entities. It is this third level of simulation, where the model comes before the constructed world, that Baudrillard calls the Hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1994). For more see Baudrillard, Jean (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,

The hyperreality occurs only when the “difference between reality and representation collapses and we are no longer able to see an image as reflecting anything other than a symbolic trade of signifiers in culture, not the real world” (Baudrillard 1994). He further adds,

“We know that we are living in a mediated world, but in result of the ubiquity of the simulation life is now spectralised...the event filtered by the medium—the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV” (Baudrillard 1994, 55).

Debord’s polemic against the role of media and how capitalism intervenes in production of images in the *‘Society of the Spectacle’*, and Jean Baudrillard’s dictum on the hyperreal are related positions on culture and technology in the 20th century. It would only be appropriate to begin this research in an attempt to understand and examine the idea of representation around non-normative gendered body. This thesis attempts to explore transgressive media representations, where invisibilised oppression in form of hetero-patriarchal cultural and representational norms gives rise to language of resistance. The idea of spectacle in terms of the non-normative queer body has been something that is worthwhile exploring, where the body of queer person struggles between living his/her reality and the media representation of the same, which at times vary; as media ends up depicting its own ‘hyperreality.’

This research project is driven by the attempt to explore myriad media representation around queer sexuality, and the concept of ‘representation’ is one of the key elements at play. Stuart Hall’s idea of ‘representation’ from his seminal work *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997), more specifically the chapter titled *‘Spectacle of the Other’* focuses on ‘representation of African-American culture’, and how specific culture’s representation can be applied to any marginalized culture (Hall 1997) (emphasis mine).

For Hall, there is no fixed meaning attached to any one image or event. In his work, the interpretation of meaning is ‘subjective’ i.e. it changes from person to person, and depends on the cultural, sociological and historical context from when/where it is being seen or presented. Stuart Hall works with the ‘idea of stereotypes’ and asserts,

“how stereotypes fixes meaning that are given to groups (Hall works with media representation of African community), limiting the range of perceptions that people

can have about a group; what they can do, what the nature of constraints on them etc” (Dyer 1986).

Though, Hall along with several cultural theorists like Richard Dyer, Larry Gross work upon the idea of stereotypes, and how most stereotypes have a negative and reductive connotation attached to it, Hall’s assertion of stereotypes attached to the African community across America and Europe is countered by the need to break out of such stereotypes or reductive narratives. Hall in an attempt to expose power structures within the world of images and language, argues, “we need to go inside the image and use it against itself, opening up- the practice of representation. This exposes the politics and power structures within the image” (Hall 1997).

Hall’s idea of stereotypes can be applied to ‘rampant stereotyping’ of gender non-conforming, non-normative sexual identities in media and how there’s strict need to address such stereotyping that is used by media at times to create ‘moral panic’ and social anxiety amongst heterosexual population. Hall works with the idea of ‘moral panic’ in his work *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). Hall revisits the work of British sociologist Stanley Cohen to understand the phenomenon of ‘moral panic’ in postwar Britain. Stanley Cohen in his famous study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) describes the social reaction as,

“A condition episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests...Sometimes the panic is passed over and forgotten... and other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself” (Cohen 1972, 1).

In recent years, the concept of moral panic has generated in relation to the AIDS epidemic, globalization, availability of sexual speech and emergence of non-normative gender and sexuality in public sphere of India. Hall’s work on representation allows an access to bricolage of ideas and reflections to understand the changing narratives around representation of alternative sexuality.

Any discourse around representation and stereotyping of sexuality would be incomplete without including the idea of ‘gaze theory’ which was essentially part of the feminist film theory. Here, I would also like to engage with Laura Mulvey’s idea of representation from

her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Mulvey reworked with the Freudian theory of ‘fetishism’ and ‘erotic spectacle’ through her interpretation of male gaze that in turn objectify and control images of female sexuality on-screen and their representations. The representations of queer bodies on screen also go through,

“similar experience as they are deemed with idea of castration or lack and hence lesser of being which offers the body in terms of viewers/spectators/ reader/observer’s scopophilic⁴ pleasure” (Chaudhuri 2006; Mulvey 1975).

Mulvey’s essay asserts that the theory of ‘male gaze and erotic spectacle’ further dehumanizes and reduces women as sexual objects (Mulvey 1975). Mulvey’s theory of male gaze has been well received by feminists and queer theorists alike. This theory is highly influential in the field of both cinema and photography, and has been used by cultural theorists, film theorists and queer theorists alike to discuss ‘sexual objectification’ and ‘othering of women and queer population’ in the field of cinema and advertisements (Berger 1972; Gross 1991; Russo 1981). However, it strictly focuses on the ‘heterosexual role’ in visual pleasure and scopophilia, and does not pay attention to role of the homosexual male gaze at all. It becomes essential while analysing Laura Mulvey’s theory to acknowledge the fact that her work “only adheres to only one kind of gaze, that is of a heterosexual (white) male looking at cis-gendered woman on-screen, but there are many different gazes from many different points of view” (Chaudhuri 2006). This where bell hooks’ work titled *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (1992) comes in. The essay is seen as a rejection of Laura Mulvey’s essay, as hooks’ addresses “gaze of black female spectators” (hooks 1992, 123).

bell hooks’ *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female’s Spectators* (1992) sheds light on how black women spectators view film differently, and how their “perspectives have not been articulated, theorized or explained as well as they should be” (hooks 1992, 24). hooks

⁴ Originally, in his ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’, “Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exists as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point, he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Freud’s particular analysis that centre around the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden (curiosity about other people’s genital and bodily presence or absence of the penis and, retrospectively, about the primal scene.) Scopophilia is the “love of looking” that creates sexual objects of those human forms that we are looking at. Her essay further states that the male gaze is so overpowering, that women cannot be represented in movies as anything more than foils for these scopophilic tendency male viewers have” (Chaudhuri 2006, 34). Cited in Chaudhuri, Shohini (2009), *Feminist Film Theorist: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis and Barbara Creed*, pp 33-45

explains that during “colonial times especially in practice of slavery, blacks were repressed from their right to gaze, and this has produced an overwhelming desire to look in blacks, a powerful ‘oppositional gaze’” (hooks 1992). According to hooks,

“movies with black women placed black female in narrowly defined context, where they need to accept their absence, deny their own body to promote white supremacy and accept that phallogocentric perspective that the woman had to be looked and desired in terms of their lack” (hooks 1992, 118-119).

hooks acknowledges that most of the recent films don’t conform to this idea of ‘*black female spectatorship*’ (hooks 1992, 124). Her theory of *Oppositional Gaze* becomes key to understand the double imbibe or oppression that queer womenface in the Indian context. Whether the women spectator in picture is also of non-normative gender and sexuality within homophobic Indian context, and belongs to a realm of margins with intersections of caste, class, religion, gender, affects both her representations, and her visions of self-representations.

While Laura Mulvey addressed ‘heteronormative male gaze’, and bell hooks contends with ‘black female spectatorship’, Judith Butler in her essay titled *Imitation and Gender Subordination* (1991) addresses the “issue of homosexual gaze⁵ which is used as a tool to resist homophobic regulatory oppression through rethinking gender and sexuality” (Butler 1991, 13). An example of homophobic oppression that Butler is trying to counter the claim that “homosexuality is a bad copy of heterosexuality” (Butler 1991, 313). By using the example of ‘*drag*’, she demonstrates that both gender and sexuality are ‘performed’ by social actors, but they are ‘performative in nature’ too. For Butler, heterosexuality is merely an ‘imitation’ of itself. Therefore, even if “homosexuality is a copy, it’s only *a copy as there is no original*” (Butler 1991, 313).

Since, conversations around ‘gaze’ pertains to dominant discourses around heteronormative sexuality, Larry Gross in his essay *Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass*

⁵ According to Butler, “The homosexual gaze is not transvestism but rather a channelling through an outlet of the female desire for the male character, thus objectifying him while he is objectifying her. Because the homosexual gaze overpowers the female gaze, we are essentially turning her into commodity to look at heterosexual men with. A Kaleidoscope, if you will, that alters the perception of the film in our favour to turn a sexual being whose gaze is stronger than the female counterpart and meeting that gaze with an equally strong gaze through woman”. For more see Butler, Judith. 1991. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Media (1991) elaborates on the 'fate of minorities' specifically on "how sexual minorities are treated and represented in mass media" (Gross 1991). Gross coins the term '*symbolic annihilation*' for addressing complete invisibilisation of sexual minorities from the media (Gross 1991, 21). For him while "the holder of real power-the ruling class-do not require (or seek) mediated visibility, those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies are kept in their places in part through relative invisibility" (Gross 1991, 143-145). He reflects on Seiter's work in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences & Cultural Power* (1989) where he sees, "Representation in the mediated reality of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that non-representation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases"(Seiter 1989, 131). Larry Gross analyses Seiter's text further in terms of sexual minorities, where he views,

"Sexual minorities specifically the LGBT community are most vulnerable in the media industry due their lack of representation and at times complete invisibility. However, when they do appear they appear as 'foils', that is always in supporting roles to the main character that is largely heterosexual" (Gross 1991, 143).

Gross reflects on portrayal of homosexuals either as 'helpless victims or villains' (Gross 1991). He reiterates the fact that marginalized sexual and gendered non-normative communities are either 'completely invisibilised or have to adhere to demeaning stereotypes' (Gross 1991).

It would be interesting at this point to conjecture that ideas of mediatization are closely related to the idea of spectacle, and they will closely influence my methodology. The concept of 'mediatization' has emerged as a "historical and theoretical framework for considering the interplay between media, culture and society" (Hepp 2013; Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2015, 2; Hjarvard 2008; Hjarvard 2013; Lundby 2009). The central framework of mediatization is emphasis on the "role of media as 'agents of change'" (Hepp 2013; Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2015, 2; Hjarvard 2008). Stig Hjarvard work on mediatization titled *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (2013) considers how both old and new media influence "human interaction, social institutions and cultural imaginations" (Hjarvard 2008). Mediatization is then defined as the "process where culture and society becomes dependant on the media and their logic" (Hjarvard 2008). Hjarvard further explains,

“how the media has to spread to become intertwined with, and influence other social institutions and cultural phenomenon like *politics*⁶, *play*⁷, *religion*⁸ and *lifestyle*⁹” (Hjarvard 2013, 41-153).

One of the most important discussions in feminism has been around sexuality and the ‘body’ itself. With emergence of neoliberal spaces which are constantly under the surveillance of the state, how does the gendered subject come up with new ways of transgressing the norms? Rereading Butler’s previous work against her more recent work like *Frames of war* (2009) is significant as she sees “the neo-liberal states exhibiting its ‘liberality’ particularly in terms of encouraging and sponsoring performances around gay sexuality in public spaces, while raging wars overseas in the name of human rights” (Butler 2009). For me this is an entry point to “critique the neo-liberal city scapes of India which are increasingly touted in the world market as exhibitory spaces narrating the progress of capitalist success” (Ghosh 2014, 163). These spaces also reflect upon the various apparatuses of surveillance (ideological and repressive) that work in tandem to then produce “‘safe spaces’ for demonstration of identity politics which the ‘neo-liberal’ state is supposed to promote” (Ghosh 2014, 163).

B. Gay and Lesbian Studies

Like Cultural Studies, Gay and Lesbian studies is an interdisciplinary field of research comprising of history, literature, religion, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, law, medicine, law and many others. Evidences suggested existence of homosexuality since the beginning of civilization from artefacts to literature excavated from Ancient Greece to its

⁶According to Hjarvard in *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, “the focus on politics pays specific attention to the transformative specific attention to the transformative influence of the media and political matters. First and foremost as a result of the media’s role as negotiator of public consent of political decisions”.Hjarvard, Stig (2013) *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* published by Routledge, Oxon, London p. 41-153.

⁷ Hjarvard also writes “a section on mediatization of religion, which aims to develop on understanding of how the media works as an agent of religious change. Through this process of mediatization, the media has come to influence and alter religion at several levels, including the authority of religious institutions, the symbolic contents of religious works, and other religious practices and traditions”.Hjarvard, Stig (2013) *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* published by Routledge, Oxon, London p. 41-153.

⁸ Hjarvard idea on Play deals with the “mediatization of play, and chooses to convey the fact that a growing media presence has caused a change in children’s play behaviours. For instance, 50 years ago, children solely played with solid objects, whereas today children’s toys have become more of an immaterial nature. Objects are visual representations on a screen and they are manipulated via the media interface. Actors that inhabit these alternate worlds are seldom realistic characters”. Hjarvard, Stig (2013) *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* published by Routledge, Oxon, London p. 41-153.

⁹ Hjarvard idea on lifestyle addresses “the mediatization of lifestyle, and shows how the mediatization process affects out relationship between the individual and society. He particularly focuses on how the media has “enabled, structured, and changed how individuals acquire normative orientation and enter social relations with each other”.Hjarvard, Stig (2013) *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* published by Routledge, Oxon, London p. 41-153.

presence in temple architecture to mythological texts in India. However, identity categories such as ‘invert’, ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’, and ‘lesbian’ were introduced in the late 18th and early 19th century. The association of same-sex desire and homosexuality was seen as abhorrent vice in Western societies due to condemnation of homosexuality in the Book of Genesis and through the New Testament in the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah. Since, Christianity as a religion was widely practised across Europe, homosexuality specifically sodomy was a cognizable offence, with laws like Abominable Vice of Buggery introduced in Britain as early as 1553 by then King Henry VIII.

In Britain, until the 1880s, “the punishment for ‘The Abominable Vice of Buggery’ was death” (Sullivan 2003, 3). 19th century saw the pathologisation of homosexuality and a new discourse emerged to describe various available non-normative sexual behaviours and identities other than heterosexuality. As Michael Foucault (1976) famously framed it as,

“The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.... It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 1978, 43).

Western society’s persecution of homosexuals found its resonances well into the 20th century, with colonizers carrying this forth as part of their colonization and reformation missions around the world, to rid colonized nations of this ‘vice’. The 1960s saw the rise of Gay and Lesbian liberation movement around the world, with events such as May 1968 student protests in Paris, the Binnehof protest in Holland and the Stonewall rebellion in New York. These events provided fuel for a larger ‘Queer liberation movements’ around the world.

Queer liberation movement in India entered the public sphere post neoliberalization in 1991. This brings me to the Indian feminist scholarship of recent times which I have drawn upon. While there is no precedence for me of a feminist critique which forefronts representational politics around non-normative sexuality, some of the key readings has opened up critical areas and allowed us to make a transition from a “preoccupation with history of Indian public and its relation to media” (Ghosh 2014, 24-25). I read this as an important intervention in

context of Indian public sphere where a transition from history to the contemporary would also require a critical stance in terms of including the discourse around 'sexuality'. Ancient Indian texts from the Vedic period including Kama Sutra all indicate that ancient Hinduism acknowledged "a third sex or people who were by nature a combination of male and female and such people were considered special in many ways..." (Wilhelm 2004, xix-xx). S/he adds,

"People of the third sex were described as homosexual, transgender and intersexed people, they were such by birth and consequently were allowed to live their lives according to their own nature.... Even gay marriage...was acknowledged in the Kama Shastra 108 many thousands of years ago" (Wilhelm 2004, xvii).

Vanita and Kidwai in their seminal anthology *Same Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2001) have claimed that,

"pre-colonial India was 'tolerant and accepting of homosexuality'. In India, love between women and between men, 'even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted' and there are no records to prove that anyone was ever executed for homosexual behaviour in India" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, xviii).

As opposed to this, men found engaging in homosexual acts were 'publicly humiliated, tortured or legally executed' in many parts of Europe till early 19th century (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 194-195). They argue that all literary evidence points to the 19th century being a "crucial period of transition when a minor strand of pre-colonial homophobia becomes the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse" (Vanita 2002, 3). These discussions would form major part of my discourse in my First chapter titled 'Early Representation of Sexualities in India'.

Works of queer scholars like Arvind Narrain, Ruth Vanita, Shohini Ghosh becomes quintessential in understanding the idea of caste/class/gender and 'criminality' associated with queer or alternative sexuality. The release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998), gave another gendered lens to look at alternative mode of female sexuality with the idea of 'Indian lesbian'. Labelled as "un-Indian" by Right wing nationalists¹⁰, the hegemonic discourse

¹⁰There was a severe backlash from the right-wing nationalists wing organizations like Shiv Sena, who resorted to vandalism etc. Bal Thackeray, the chief of the fundamentalist party, the Shiv Sena, commented: "Has lesbianism spread like an epidemic that it would be portrayed as a guideline to unhappy wives not to depend on their husbands?" Similarly, Ministry of State, Sushma Swaraj, undoubtedly asserted: "Lesbianism is a pseudo-feminist trend borrowed from the West and is no part of Indian womanhood". Jai Bhagwan Goel went further and said : "What do you gain in showing lesbianism? As it, the institution of marriage is breaking down. This will make it worse". For more CALERI, Campaign for Lesbian Rights, 1999

defined the Indian lesbian or lesbianism, by producing social myths, and cultural prejudices that still are inscribed on the lesbian body. The elaboration of a discourse on lesbianism characterized by negative visions of the West is also a two-fold act of control.

Firstly, there was and still is a control over the Indian lesbian to render her vulnerable, invisible and silent. Secondly, control is gained over the Indian masses by overemphasizing occidental evils and drawing assumed linkages to the Indian national cause. In the recent past, many women organizations have boycotted lesbian workshops¹¹ and conferences including The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW).¹² Most of them claim that discussing lesbianism in India is immoral and vulgar for women's dignity and welfare.¹³ Hence, *Fire* was able to bring forth the much debated idea of 'lesbian standpoint', which was developed to examine given structures of intimacy and different imagination of intimacy, which are not necessarily confined to norms of bloodline or marital lineage.

In her essay, *Same sex weddings, Hindu tradition and modern India* (2009), Ruth Vanita analyses "the prevalence and acceptance of gay marriages in Hindu tradition, she gives instances of women's agency in lower classes and remote areas demonstrating how women are constantly negotiating for space within traditions as well" (Vanita 2009, 58).

Gayatri Gopinath in her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) looks at "queer diaspora through the lens of nationalism, cultural identity,

¹¹In December 1993, Sakhi organizes a conference on "Gender Constructions and History of Alternate Sexualities in South Asia," in Delhi; which aimed at delivering issues related to queerness throughout the history of alternate sexuality.

¹²There is a need to point out that the NFIW holds a vision of "feminism that considerably differs from the Western perspective". According to NFIW, "Feminism in India has emphasized women as victims. As a result, and within the field of sexuality, the movement has worked to enforce laws that act as deterrents from male privileges' over women's bodies and their lives. They neither challenged nor critiqued the dominant structure and heterosexuality and vehemently opposed the Asian Gay Conference, which according to NFIW," promoted and legitimized homosexuality which would surely start a move of sexual permissiveness among urban youth who have become vulnerable to the vulgarity of Western culture brought to them through the media." Their concerns and appeals were in turn supported by ultra right-wing group Shiv Sena. For more see John, E. Mary and Janaki Nair, "Sexuality in Modern India: Critical Concerns. Voice for Change." A Journal on Communication for Development. April 1999. 3(1), p4-8

¹³According to Naisargi Dave, "The first time woman's sexuality was discussed in a national conference of the women's movement was in 1990 in Calicut, in an evening capsule on 'single women'. There was a quiet 'coming out' and lesbianism was heard of in hushed tones and hesitant whispers. In the next conference in Tirupathi 1994, massive convulsions were precipitated by a lesbian group's proposal to have a separate session on the issue. In 1997, the convulsions resolved to give way to a session organized by Stree Sangam at the Ranchi conference".

race and migration across an impressive range of media and genre” (Gopinath 2005).¹⁴ Gopinath believes that “female queer subjectivity gets channelled through seemingly heterosexually-oriented hyperbolic femininity in the films that she studies, going against the imagined ideology of the First world feminist” (Gopinath 2005, 155). She further argues,

“queerness references on alternative hermeneutics, the particular interpretative strategies that are available to those who are deemed ‘impossible’ within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses” (Gopinath 2005, 22).

For Gopinath, the category ‘queer’ names a reading and citational practice which she deploys to read multiple cultural texts. Similarly, Shohini Ghosh in her book, *The Wonderful World of Queer Cinephilia* (2010) laid out the

“journey of restructuring of the urban mediascape of the 90s accelerated wide-ranging cultural transformations from the absolute resistance it faced particularly from the saffron *Hindutva* brigade to the ensuing movement supporting it that for the first time created the environment for the public debates that it led to” (Ghosh 2010, 40).

The issue here is more complex and positions these moments as a collage style narrative of representational practices within India with respect to queer sexuality, within a crucial time frame. The implication of it needs to be unraveled both in terms of foregrounding the representational politics within mainstream media as well as its analysis to see how it fits in within a narrative particularly in contrast to its contemporary representational politics.

C. Digital Ethnography

Ethnography as a qualitative research method is key to understand the world from the standpoint of its social relation. Ethnography as a research method involves study of human behaviour in their natural settings in which the research subjects resides to reveal their common cultural understandings. Digital Ethnography (not to be confused with virtual ethnography) has emerged as an interdisciplinary field comprising of anthropology and cyber cultural studies which outlines an ‘approach to study ethnography in the contemporary world’. Digital Ethnography attempts to explore the role of digital media in shaping and framing various techniques and processes through which one accounts for various digital, practical and methodological ways of conducting research in a virtual environment (unlike

¹⁴In this book Gopinath also engages in queer reading of a range of Bollywood films including classics like *Pakeeza* (Amrohi 1972), *Sholay* (Sippy 1975) and *Razia Sultan* (Amrohi, Razia Sultan 1983), later Bollywood hits like *Hum Aapke HainKoun* (Barjatya 1994) and *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Advani 2003), and arthouse films like *Utsav* (Karnad 1984) and *Subhah/Umbartha* (Patel 1982).

ethnography which deals with studying subjects in their natural environments). Digital Ethnography emerged as a methodology (as part of anthropological research) and research method for both researching and redefining central concepts in sociological and cultural studies based research.

Interestingly, Ethnographic methods of real world are transferable to a digital ethnographic approach. Digital Ethnography involves mediated contact with research participants rather than their direct presence in their natural environment. This involves studying online behaviour on cyberspace such as social media networking sites like Facebook to online dating sites and apps like Tinder, Grindr, OkCupid as studied in Chapter Five. Through informed consent of the research participants, one digitally tracks their research subjects or the researcher request the research subjects to invite them to study their social media practices. Karen O'Reilly defines ethnography as, "iterative-inductive research (that involves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods that acknowledges the role of theory as well as researchers own rule and that views as part object/part subject" (O'Reilly 2012, 3). O'Reilly's definition is useful because it bridges the gap between 'ethnography as theory' and 'ethnography as practice'.

'Multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995) becomes an appropriate approach to conduct this research, "for studying spatially dispersed phenomenon" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 34). Digital ethnography holds within itself immense potential as a research method to study social structures, cultures, gender and visual aesthetics operating within a community and corresponds a sense of reflexivity and self-reflexivity with respect to knowledge production. Works of ethnographers like Ruth Behar (1996) and Kamala Vishweswaran (1994) draws parallel to these reflexive practices while researching on lives of women as part of feminist ethnography (Behar 1996; Behar and Gordon 1985; Vishweswaran 1994). There is an increasing focus on understanding representation cultures and visual aesthetics through the use of 'ethnography' as a research method (Classen 1993; Classen, Howes and Synott 1994; Holmes and Marcus 2008; Pink 2001).

The work of digital ethnography began with Christine Hine's seminal work titled '*Virtual Ethnography*' (2000), though there were earlier predecessors as well (Baym 1999; Correll 1995; Gray and Driscoll 1992; Lindlof and Shatzer 1998; Lyman and Wakeford 1999). For my

research I heavily rely on ‘virtual ethnography’ by Christine Hine as it effectively tackles ideas around ‘ethnographic inquiry’. Despite my research interest in digital cultures and practices as reflected in Chapter Five in this thesis, it is interesting to observe that most of the attempts to define ethnography as ‘digital’ would not be possible without taking into consideration fields such as anthropology and sociology. Fields such as human geography, media and cultural studies often engages with ‘ethnography’ as part of ‘ethnographic turn’ to understand various media and digital practices by research subjects.

While in its originary past, anthropologists like Bronisław Malinowski studied the ‘other’, I am not studying the ‘other’ but ‘native’ subjects like myself (most of my research subjects identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans* and queer). When researching for the thesis, particularly while studying the representation that are specific to queer sexuality within the various media formats, I relied on ethnographic methods such Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick description’ that takes into account “the structure and nature of a culture’s semiotic formation” (Geertz 1973, 27). In Chapter Five, I employ Geertz ‘thick description’ and digital ethnography method to study the nuances and understand what goes in to create the notion of an ‘online user/subscriber’.

Manuel Castells work on Cybercultural studies reflects upon “*online versus offline* identities and communities reflects upon *virtual versus real* or ‘*net*’ versus ‘*self*’ debates” (Castells 2000; Castells 2009). Formative works of scholars such as Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1994) and Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet* (1995) study the “implications of the digital through a focus on digital media or transformations that accompany ‘the digital age’” (Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1995). Many of these works reflect upon the various structural forms and inequities on the basis of class, gender and sexuality to understand how social inequalities are replicated on digital media platforms as well, which would be discussed later in the thesis.

I pursue in this research project ‘multi-sited ethnography’, as the queer community exists in both online and offline spaces, and deviation from this method-in my opinion, would be a grave injustice to my research subjects as well as the research project.

Research Problem

The historical trajectory of sexuality based research on non-normative sexuality is a neoliberal phenomenon in India. This can be taken as a historical juncture that ushered in contemporary debates about changing narratives, content and politics of representation of alternative sexuality in India. In the last two and half decades, the cultural impact of globalisation, and the coming of cable television impacted how content was viewed and what kind of representations were being broadcasted, and within that the hushed silences around non-normative sexuality found expressions in media spaces. However, these representations projected rampant stereotyping of the newly emerging queer community, and mass media went to lengths to fuel moral panic amongst majoritarian heterosexual masses. Even the activists and NGOs working with issues of gender and sexuality followed a homogenous linear project of attempting to educate the masses in line with the neo-liberal imperatives of a globalising India; while being blind to various fissures and fractures that the so-called 'unbridled sexuality' discourse had unleashed.

It is this rift that this research attempts to highlight and mend between available representations of queer community in mass-media in India, perceived by the larger heterosexual masses, along with queer communities' own sense of self-representation within media. Discussions on sexual culture of India would be incomplete if one doesn't acknowledge India's rich cultural past. The ritualistic nature in traditional beliefs and modern practices can be seen between the instructional mode of Kamasutra and Nationalist efforts to erase desire. The coming of neoliberalisation transformed Indian public and public spaces, and contributed successfully to focus on representation of queer sexuality.

This research also explores various anxieties and concerns around queer sexuality, and its representation in various media platforms ranging from English language dailies, English magazines to independent publications; how queer desires are depicted within cinematic spaces; the representation and performance of sexuality on online social networking platforms to how corporate organisations are representing the newly emerging queer cosmopolitan consumer/citizen within the aegis of neo-liberalisation.

This research further investigates various trajectories of media representations available around queer sexuality, as well as the meanings ascribed to them by the people belonging to sexual minorities and non-normative groups, where they witness their own representations in online (queer dating websites, social networking sites, advertisements) and offline spaces (literary representations, newspaper reports etc). Within the specificity of socioeconomic/ political context of time, the study aims to examine these existing portrayals in relation to the postmodern idea of spectacle. In addition to documentation of the dominant codes of representations within this period in both offline and online spaces, my work will engage in ethnographic study of reading of these representations, and lived contestations of queer people with these dominant codes of representation available within mass media.

Research Questions

The research project examines into media representations of non-normative queer subjects in the neoliberal period in India. The case studies under the purview of the project, explore the articulations of these subjectivities and their representation, its critical positioning within state structures, its ways of resistance and transgression, and its interactions within mass media. The important questions to be raised here are as follows:

- What have been the earliest representations of sexualities in India? How do the ancient, medieval, pre-colonial and colonial archives provide several possibilities for ‘authenticating’ queer identities and claiming some of the histories that modern nationalist homophobia seeks to wipe out? How are contemporary Indian sexual identities along with their varied available (at times absent) representations constructed out of multifarious effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonization and globalization?
- What have been the modes of representation through which non-normative sexuality historically surfaced in public imaginary through mass media in India post-neoliberalization? What have been the existing social conventions on which these representations are based? What were the dominant formats of these media representation? Is there a speaking relationship in these representations between the

invisibility of the queer community and the hyper visibility of some of these representations?

- How are these representations of queer lives and assumed realities which at times is seen as celebratory (in terms of pride parade, celebration of same-sex marriage), *tragic* (lesbian suicides, murders of homosexuals) and *abhorrent* (the fear of non-normative sexuality dismantling hetero-patriarchal order) read, lived and contested by media and in turn queer publics?
- How have the dominant codes of representational politics in mainstream media changed in the wake of recent judicial verdicts – the High Court’s reading down of Section 377 in 2009, Supreme Court’s reversal of 2009 judgement leading to recriminalizing of Section 377 in 2013, Supreme Court’s verdict on recognition of transgenders as the ‘third gender’ in 2014, and finally reading of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code in September 2018?
- How has the emergence of cyberspace led to new forms of political mobilization and participation in social media for queer counter-publics? What have been the codes of varied representations of gender and sexuality specifically around the spectacle of the queer body in digital space? How do queer subjects themselves perceive the reality of ‘self’ in online spaces specifically in sites like queer dating websites?
- What seem to be the representational codes of various product-based advertisements such as *Myntra: Bold is Beautiful* campaign in 2015? How has the emergence of queer cosmopolitan consumer/citizen post neoliberalization changed the queer subjectivities in India? How far do they seem to address sexual citizenship and its intersectionalities between class, caste and gender?¹⁵
- There have been recent launch of public service advertisements around acceptance of same sex relationships and also same-sex Hindu marriage as depicted in *The Welcome* (2014), an advertisement campaign in support of LGBT rights in India and *The Seatbelt Crew* (2014) by advertising giants Ogilvy and Mather in collaboration with Channel V as

¹⁵ The queer movement have faced criticism due to lack of inclusivity of class, caste and gender and have been seen as primarily upper class urban elite driven movement, completely negating lower caste and class queer individuals across India.

part of an awareness raising campaign employing a ‘transgender’, how have these idioms changed the representational politics of the queer subject?

Methodological Influences

Poststructuralist and feminist methodologies have enabled us to accept diversity of voices which challenge the singularity of narratives from the privileged end of a white, western, middle class heterosexual man (hooks 1992). I am trying to foreground (and perhaps bracket away) subjectivities of being an ‘insider’, borrowing primarily from anthropology (specifically queer anthropology¹⁶ and particularly ethnography) feminist methodology, followed by philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology¹⁷, and Gadamerian hermeneutics¹⁸.

The primary methodological influence of this work is that of the ‘ethnographic tradition’. Throughout the study ‘participant observation method’ of ethnographic research will be followed. The sites for this research cut across disciplinary boundaries traversing media

¹⁶ Queer Anthropology can be broadly defined as the “effort to examine social systems, practices and symbolic resources that emerge in contexts of sexual difference from the (presumed) norms of heterosexuality and gender ascription. While queer anthropology has, by definition, contra normative impulses, it is also true that the subfield has struggled to be recognized and legitimated; queer anthropology has had to balance its political, theoretical, and substantive penchant for subversions against conceits that would consign it to triviality, lewd preoccupation, or a minority concern. Like feminist anthropological work that was so foundational to its evolution, queer anthropology is an experimental mode of ethnographic practice”. For more read *Queer Anthropology* by Cymene Lowe https://anthropology.rice.edu/uploadedfiles/People/Faculty_and_Staff_Profiles/Howe/Howe%20Queer%20Anth.pdf Accessed on 10/12/2016

¹⁷ Phenomenology, per se, is a “branch of philosophy owing its origin to the work of Husserl and later writers [eg. Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau Ponty, who took the ideas into existentialism]. The aim of phenomenology, as propounded by Husserl, is to study human phenomenon without considering questions of their causes, their objective reality, or even their appearances. The aim of phenomenology, how human phenomenon are experienced in consciousness, in cognitive and perpetual acts, as well as they may be valued or appreciated aesthetically. Phenomenology seeks to understand how person construct meaning and a key concept is intersubjectivity. Our experience of the world, upon which our thoughts about the world with and through others. Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human actions, and the totality of social artefacts and cultural objects is grounded in human activity”. For more see Husserl, E. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*. 1st book: *General introduction to a pure phenomenology*, trans. by F. Kersten. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982.

¹⁸ Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts. As a methodological discipline, it offers a tool box for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. Hermeneutics looks back at a long tradition as the set of problems it addresses have been prevalent in human life, and have repeatedly and consistently called for consideration: interpretation is a ubiquitous activity, unfolding whenever humans aspire to group whatever interprets and they deem significant. Due to its long history, it is only natural that both its problems, and the tools designed to help solve them, have shifted considerably over time, along with the discipline of hermeneutics itself. For more see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/> accessed on 18/11/2016

studies, digital culture and anthropological ethnography. The study attempted an empirical mapping of dominant codes of representation working within media and attempts to be reflexive simultaneously, while adapting dialogism in the fieldwork. Varied sites of investigation may be chosen to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the issues.

The age of Internet has facilitated easy communication and connection amongst participants of the hitherto hidden queer world. Emergence of cyberspace has ushered in a “new wave of connectivity questioning the factor of distance rather than reflecting it in most varied forms” (Boellstorff 2012; Hine 2000). Works of scholars like Tom Boellstorff (2007) on *Queer Ethnography*’ in his earlier works like *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in India* (2005) and *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies in Indonesia* (2007) become important for reading digital networking platform like “social networking sites like facebook, myspace to queer dating websites which is becoming a key platform for congregation of these counter-publics in South East Asian scenario” (Boellstorff 2005; Boellstorff 2007; Boellstorff, et al. 2012; Boellstorff 2012). Queer digital sites as an ethnographic field of enquiry open up new kinds of potential. Through digital ethnography, I would analyse questions of how queer individuals reflect on images of themselves as well as how they view their own representations in the digital world. However, one of the biggest hurdles was concerns of ‘ethics and confidentiality’ while maintaining the closeted nature of a major part of the queer community in India, which often restricted accessibility to the subjects studied.

The research relies on ‘Multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995) and ‘participant observation’ method given the spatially dispersed characteristic of the Queer Community, a definite locality-based survey seems impossible. Also, multiple social locations (given the heterogeneity of the community) again “posits concerns of representation in the analysis” (Dave 2012, 21). Under such constraints of investigation, a “multi-sited ethnographic research seems most appropriate” (Dave 2012, 21). It enables the investigator to look through the continuum of identities and locations to understand the subjects under study. Varied sites of investigation can be chosen to reach out to most nuanced understanding of the issue.

Alfred Schutz’s concept of “‘bracketing away of subjectivity’ becomes a key methodological position while acknowledging issues such as ‘insider-outsider debates’” (Schutz 1946).

Alfred Schutz brought forth his phenomenology to bear on “political issues such as citizenship or racial equality” (Schutz 1946). One of the Schutz’s essay titled ‘The Well-Informed Citizen (1946)’ exemplifies the idea of types of citizen, where he writes on,

“citizenship but also the sociology of knowledge under the rubric of the social distribution of knowledge, constructs the ideal types of expert, the so called ‘man of the street’, and the well informed citizen (to whom it falls to determine which experts are competent)” (Schutz 1946).

From phenomenology as philosophy of method, I, as a researcher learned to grapple with “nature of human experience and the meaning that people attach to their experiences, perhaps be able to ‘bracket’ or suspend my belief in the phenomena of the external world, to put them aside and focus on the consciousness of the world” (Schutz 1946). Paradoxically, as “modernity’s rationalization processes heighten anonymity, modern technology also brings everyone within reach, as Schutz examines how socially derived knowledge originates and, again, uses ideal types to explore the phenomenon” (Schutz 1946). Apart from ourselves, as central to our mind and can be socially derived from consultation of four types of individuals i.e. i) eyewitness¹⁹, ii) the insider²⁰, iii) the analyst²¹ and iv) the commentator.²²

Taking cues from feminist and phenomenological methodological insights, I carefully navigated the ‘insider-outsider’ issues that I faced in the course of conducting my research. While I may be an insider in certain aspects (being queer women myself, it is easier to get access in collective safe spaces meant of queer individuals) as well an outsider (compared to certain spaces where media content is produced within the mainstream media), I constantly dealt with my own predetermined notions and prejudices that comes in the way when one operates within certain circuits of knowledge.

¹⁹ For Schutz, “the eyewitness is someone who reports something that he or she has observed in the world within that person’s reach”.

²⁰ For Schutz, “The Insider is someone who, because of his relationship to a group which is more direct than my own, is able to report some event, or the opinions of others, with the authority of sharing the same system of relevance as the other members of the group. I accept the insider’s knowledge of the context of the situation is deeper than my own”.

²¹ For Schutz, “The analyst is someone who shares similar system of relevance”.

²² For Schutz, “The Commentator is someone who does not share the same system of relevances, but who has collected information in the same way as the analyst and has presented that information in such a way that I can form a sufficiently clear and precise knowledge of underlying deviating system of relevance”.

In stark contrast to modern aversion to prejudice or bias as a hindrance to ‘objectivity’, I have been helped with Hans Gadamer’s “‘idea of positive prejudices’ in his view of hermeneutics” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 1996, 267-298). According to Gadamer,

“all of us come to the text with our own set of prejudices or ‘horizons’ and these biases are not understood as solely negative or as necessarily closing off understanding our prejudices or presupposition can and do limit on our interpretation endeavours, it is not the case that our prejudices are unalterable nor are they always active in a negative limiting way” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 1996).

Rather, they have a positive or productive function as well and actually promote understanding. Addressing this positive aspect of our prejudices, Gadamer further states,

“Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [prejudgement], constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are our own biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something-whenever what we encounter says something to us. This formulation does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall or prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, nothing new will be said here” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 1996, 280-281).

Unless there wouldn’t be an engagement with the text (with an openness to being changed by the text), one remains unaware of one’s biases. Thus it is through dialogic encounter with the text that its prejudices is made relevant to my research and there would be a constant attempt of having the historical locations till my presuppositions were laid bare. Apart from above methods, close interaction would be maintained with journalists, activists, scholars etc to understand their individual explorations in the field of feminist and queer movement and related initiatives that they engage through their organizations. Interviews with scholars, activists and practitioners will seek to map out the transformations and trajectories that have taken place in counter-heteronormative practices associated with sexuality in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Kerala and Bangalore.

My identity as a ‘lesbian feminist researcher’ granted me easier access to my field and my subjects. Queerness and gender seemingly mattered in matters of access and trust. A minimum level of commonality was critical for forging relations within these spaces. Many lesbians and gay men sometimes queried the motivations for and necessity of my research,

and how the outcome of this research would change their present living conditions? In those moments neither could I give them a false hope nor an response of their liking causing many respondents to turn down conversations at the outset. However, there were respondents who never doubted my solidarity and sympathy, and welcomed me within their circles. The importance of lesbian identity in the queer landscape seemed to prequalify me for trust and often brought me close to people before I even had the chance to try.

However, ‘intersectional identity politics’ becomes a difficult terrain to traverse which I found out during the course of research. The collectives working with intersections of class, caste and gender were suspicious of my intentions due to my middle class, upper caste ‘Savarna’ identity since these groups have had several unfortunate encounters with ethnographers making these ‘support spaces’ their personal projects. Language was another barrier that I constantly struggled with my vernacular language speaking subjects but friendships within these queer circles allowed my access to translators who were willing to devote their time.

In the period of May 2017 to June 2019, I conducted my field work in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Kerala. Groups and collectives like PRISM (Delhi), Nazariya (Delhi), Dhanak (2014-2018 JNU, Delhi), Hasratein (2018 onwards, JNU Delhi), Saheli (Delhi), LABIA (Mumbai), Humsafar Trust (Mumbai), Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW , Mumbai), Sappho for Equality (Kolkata) and Sahayatrika (Kerala) aided in archival research and in-depth interviews. Archival based methods was devised and adopted to capture representations and spatial imaginations within the existing idioms. The primary resource for this archival work remains the archives and libraries of various NGOs working with the marginalized communities across India, specifically Sappho for Equality in Kolkata, Sahayatrika in Thrissur, Kerala, Alternative Law Forum in Bengaluru, Sound and Picture Archives on Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai among others.

Throughout my research (employing participant observation and ethnography method), I attempted to refrain from using the voice recorder (or kept to the minimum). This was done in view of the fact that most of my respondents/interlocutors were either too ‘shy’ or too ‘overt’ with their responses and didn’t remain informal while being recorded. The research subjects/interlocutors with whom I established absolute trust and subject were then asked if

they were comfortable with being audio recorded. I used to keep a small diary in my bag all the time, penning down minute details where I went. The notebook held fragmented thoughts and pointers which I would construct in my field notes. Through aid of writing, reading, listening and audio recording of my field notes, I could design semi-structured interviews. My interviews and recording of life histories (see appendix 7 for reference) took place either at interlocutor's home or my home, or in a public place such as cafes or restaurants of their choice.

Chapterisation

Chapter-1

Early Representations of Sexualities in India

Chapter One on “Early Representations of Sexualities in India” attempts to trace emergence of queer sexuality in India with the aid of various historical, mythological, literary texts and artefacts. According to Dasgupta, “the precolonial and colonial archive serves as a source of numerous possibilities for varied representations of queer identity and claiming some of the history that nationalistic homophobia attempts to wipe out” (Dasgupta 2014). Ruth Vanita refutes any claims by staking, “most twentieth century texts that represents same-sex desire strive to reinforce an imagined, pure indianess of manhood and woman” (Vanita 2002) By revisiting various pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial archival practices, I map various articulations and representations of queerness and provide documented evidences that challenge any discourse and framework that views queerness as a western import. Any research on queer sexuality remains complex to begin with and linkages of history and contentious issues such as modern nationalism and homophobia attempts to wipe out such identities. The anxieties of a newly independent nation was multiplied manifold, with ideas of homoeroticism and queer sexualities circulating within the public sphere, as witnessed from the demonstrations around films like Fire by the right wing nationalist groups (Ghosh 2007).

The chapter endeavours to lay out foundations to not only evidences of same-sex desire but highlight modern day homophobia that is inherently connected to the ideas of nationhood and modernity. This chapter serves as a review of literature for representation of queer sexuality in pre-neoliberal India.

Chapter-2

Print Media and Imagined (Queer) Communities in Neoliberal India

Chapter Two titled “Print Media and Imagined (Queer) Communities in Neoliberal India” tries to rework with Benedict Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined communities’ to locate how mainstream print media for the first time in the 1990s and 2000s highlighted issues around same-sex desire and pushed homosexuality out of the closet. While homosexuality and terms like ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ were first mentioned in academic and activist circles; however the contemporary queer communities were later visibilised and exhibited by various English language press. Through this chapter, I attempt to formulate emergence of sexuality movement and gay and lesbian subjectivities in post 1990s neoliberal India. The chapter in a chronological fashion captures key narratives around homosexuality that appeared in English language media.

Magazines like India Today and Sunday Magazine have played an important role in drawing attention to non-normative sexuality through their coverage. 1986 marked an important year in marking the “pivotal moment for an emergent ‘gay subjectivity’ in India with Savvy magazine publishing Ashok Row Kavi’s coming out interview” (Fernandez 2002, 195). The interview was accompanied with a photograph of Ashok Row Kavi, marked the “first time that an Indian man publicly declared himself to be gay”(Joseph 1996). The 1990s also saw a myriad range of articles on homosexuality in publications of all kinds-newspapers, general interest magazines, research-based journals etc. Among English dailies, Indian Express, The Times of India, The Telegraph and The Statesman have attempted to cover the issue ‘fairly and objectively’. This chapter attempts to bring out the aesthetic vocabularies, strategies and concerns that relook at shifting narratives of non-normative sexuality within English language dailies as well magazines.

This myriad coverage of homosexuality across English language Indian press led to the formations of several queer support groups and collectives that attempted to further the queer cause across India. These included organizations such as Bombay based Humsafar Trust, Stree Sangam aka LABIA: A Queer Feminist LBT collective; and Delhi based SAKHI (a now defunct Lesbian and Bisexual women support group). These organizations and support groups reflected upon the available representations of queerness in mainstream media (both

positive portrayals and negative portrayals) and addressed the need of these communities to come up with alternative modes of narratives by coming out with their own journals and magazines. This chapter reflects upon publications like ‘Bombay Dost’ (that primarily targeted homosexual men) and ‘SCRIPTS’ (targeting queer women), and how they reached out to the queer population in India, hence attempting to validate their then ‘criminal’ subjectivities and making them feel less lonely.

Chapter-3

Lives worth grieving For: Representation of Lesbian Suicides in Print and Cinema

Chapter three titled “Lives Worth Grieving for: Representation of Lesbian Suicides in Print and Cinema” focuses on how print media as well as cinema covered news of lesbian suicides by same-sex women lovers from late 1980s to early 2000s. ‘Lesbian suicides’ became one of the pivotal issues through which “sexuality became a political matter in the public sphere of these two states” (Mokkil 2011, 391) (emphasis mine). Since the mid 1990s, several newspaper reports expressed their “concern over reports of women who die together” (Mokkil 2011, 391). According to Navaneetha Mokkil, “A selected list of lesbian suicides, reported in print media in India in 1980s to 2002, compiled by Alternative Law Forum, has thirteen cases and ten out of thirteen are from Kerala” (Mokkil 2011, 391).²³ This chapter would try to observe the pattern in which investigative reports on these suicides was conducted across Kerala by K.C. Sebastian in *Sameeksha*, a Malayalam fortnightly along with independent investigative research conducted by *Sahayatrika*, an activist group fighting for sexual minorities in Kerala, and by *Sappho for Equality* another activist group in Kolkata.

In this chapter, I analyse select documentary and fictional narratives around lesbian suicides along with representation of these cases across myriad of newspapers and journals and how in turn these stories get articulated in the public sphere of post 1990s Kerala and Kolkata. These would also include cinematic representations such as Ligy Pullappaly’s film *Sancharram* (2004) and Debalina’s *Ebang Bewarish* (2014) (the unclaimed...). By going through the newspaper coverage of the lesbian suicides and rereading the cinematic representations, as well as through the process of remembering and reiteration of cultural

²³Annexure D, table of Lesbian Suicides compiled by Alternative Law Forum. Accessed on 30/07/2016
http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/PLD_IND_UPR_S1_2008anx_LesbianSuicides.pdf

memories that existed within the public sphere of Kerala and Kolkata, I would counter the general trend in the media where a “lesbian life is reported as an ‘isolated spectacle’”(Sharma 2006). This chapter also attempts to recreate historical accounts in which sexual excess are written out, and how lives lead by these deceased subjects become more recognizable once they are co-opted within the larger narrative of sexuality based politics.

Chapter-4

Performing Spectacle: Gendered (Queer) bodies as sites of protest and celebration in Pride Parades

Chapter four titled “Gender (Queer) bodies as sites of Protest and Celebration in Pride Parades” reflects upon the role of queer pride parades pre and post reinstatement of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Queer pride parades that are held annually across various metropolitan cities across India becomes a transgressive site of myriad representation of queer sexuality for mainstream media. This chapter aims to address role of queer pride parades as one of the unique proposition of queer representational strategies which are largely missing. The queer pride parade which happens annually across India is known for transgressing gender norms. The space becomes not only as “one of the few spaces for the queer community to achieve more visibility but it also challenge the production of everyday space as heterosexual” (Valentine 1992).

The chapter attempts to investigate various representations of queer bodies within the so-called safe space for protest and celebration as well as the representations of queer bodies available in the mainstream media and how it differs. The pride parade becomes the site of ‘spectacle’ for varied representations due it’s “seemingly blatant overtones and capture images of the participants flaunting their sexuality through acts of masquerade, drag, camp as well as crossdressing etc” (Ghosh 2014). This chapter reflects upon various issues of representation and self-representation of queer subjects in the aegis of neoliberal state. Queer Pride parades and its representation and coverage in mainstream media also become a space of critique and reflection for the queer community due to the nature of its ‘spectacle’ and media end up perpetuating and fuelling various stereotypes and stigmas around queer sexuality. Interestingly, the media coverage overlooks the protest and demonstrative aspect embedded within the parade, while only covering and publicizing the blatant sexual

overtones of the parade. This chapter endeavours to read various representations within/of pride parades as it becomes a space of spectacle, resistance, and defiance against all the normative of the real world---a world forbidden to subaltern counter-publics.

Chapter-5

Negotiating the ‘sexed other’: Performing Sexuality on Queer Dating Websites

Chapter five titled “Negotiating the ‘Sexed Other’: Performing Sexuality on Queer Dating Websites” investigates the role of cyberspace within neoliberal India, and how it aids in creating various spatial, political, familial spaces of communication for marginalized groups like non-normative sexual communities. This chapter attempts to understand various discourses operating on various queer dating websites and apps like www.planetromeo.com, www.pinksofa.com, www.gaydar.com , www.grindr.com etc., where discourses of gender and sexuality operate around the “abhorrent, abject and invisibilised queer bodies” (Fraser 2009, 62). These dating websites is used by the queer youth for “congregating, communicating, and forming community” (Brown, Maycock and Burns 2005, 1). This chapter further explores ways in which dating apps enable members of the queer community to “gain some understanding of queer lifestyle as a subculture while operating in a country like India where draconian laws like Section 377 was used to persecute queer individuals till 2018” (Ghosh 2014). These dating apps further aid the members of this earlier ‘criminalized’ community to seek romance and friendships.

This chapter through digital ethnographic methods like informed consent-based interviews and participant observation method would emphasize on varied representations of gender and sexuality in digital sphere. Digital spaces are hailed as an important platform for expressing views on tabooed issues like queer love and sex, without being subjected to violence which is witnessed in offline spaces. The chapter further analyses and critiques discourses around politics of representation within queer dating websites and applications such as Tinder, Grindr, Planet Romeo etc. These websites are known for subjecting the ‘queer’ subscribers to varied stereotypes associated with gendered and sexed expressions of the available users in their database. This is done by using algorithm to refine their search for friendships or hooks up on the basis of users choice for respective caste, class and gender roles. This becomes a

key facet in reading these representations of gender and sexuality on these websites and how it serves as a living archive of queer bodies and work, evolving with time.

Chapter-6

Sexual Citizenship and Transgressions in Indian Advertisements

Chapter six titled “Sexual Citizenship and Transgressions in Indian Advertisements” attempts to interrogate ideas such as ‘sexual citizenship’ and rise of ‘queer-cosmopolitan consumer/citizen’ in Neoliberal Indian settings. The chapter seeks to investigate the representational politics of neoliberal mainstream media when broadcasting the queer cosmopolitan consumer/subject, all the while claiming sexual citizenship for these subjects by taking into account product-based advertisements released since the 1990s.

The chapter also attempts to understand and critique the segregated, flawed and at times exclusionary nature of queer representations across various media platforms with special reference to advertising campaigns which saw the newly recognized queer subjects as target audience. This chapter analyses selective product-based advertisements including Kamasutra Ad campaign released by Lintas in 1991 that opened realm of conversation around recreational sex to Myntra’s Bold is Beautiful campaign with one of the advertisements titled The Visit (2015) depicting lesbian romances. Similarly, recent launch of public service videos titled – The Welcome (2014) launched by the ‘Free and Equal’ Campaign under United Nations in support of LGBT rights in India, post recriminalization of Section 377 of IPC by Supreme Court of India; and The Seat Belt Crew (2014) created by Ogilvy and Mathers in collaboration with Channel V as part of a road safety awareness raising campaign employing ‘transgenders’, post the NALSA judgement in 2014.

This chapter is trying to deconstruct various representational as well as assimilationist strategies of the mainstream Indian media in the wake of recent political and legal developments- the High Court verdict of reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009, Supreme Court’s reversal of the HC verdict in 2013; NALSA judgement recognizing transgenders as the third gender in 2014 and finally the 2018 judgement of reading Section 377 of Indian Penal Code by Supreme Court.

Conclusion

The conclusion seeks to bring together the various roles of media in investigating the lives of queer individuals through the lens of spectacle and explores varied representations of alternative sexuality within media and queer individuals perceptions of the so-called available representations. The conclusion draws from all these elements to understand that queer body's representation within media as not a monolith but rather a set of multiple idioms of sexuality and identity that need to be studied with nuanced understanding.

Chapter-1

Early Representations of Sexualities in India

I don't know the world outside

I can't face it on my own

I'm not yet ready

ready to be born.

-- A.G from *Leaving* (A.G 1999)

INTRODUCTION

The above verse from the anthology of lesbian writings, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing in India* (1999) by Ashwini Sukhthankar reflects the difficulties that the queer community experiences in becoming fully integrated into the cultural milieu, revealing the complete unpreparedness of the nation to accommodate a significant section of its minority population. It is curious that while in modern times, we find certain ways of life described as unnatural or as taboo, the Indian worldview since ancient times has had space for many, diverse entities social to scientific, imaginary to real, and hardly any way of looking at life has been excluded.

(Homo) erotic and same-sex love has had a long history in Indian culture. The Colonial legacies and right-wing political dispensations have made several attempts to “homogenise ‘Indian culture’, and made claims that homosexuality is ‘un-Indian’ and an imported construction from the West” (Narain 2004, 33). Arvind Narain in his work *Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social change* (2004) highlights three key ways that queerness is usually dealt with; this includes “‘politics of silence’; ‘dismissal of same-sex tradition’; and ‘wilful attempt to heterosexualise existing queer tradition’” (Narain 2004, 33). Historians working with ancient India²⁴ such as D. D. Kosambi and Romila Thapar at times exemplify the

²⁴ I would like to explain the usage of the term ‘India’ as it was coined recently with the “latest boundaries being marked only in 1947 (after independence from colonial rule) and have been disputed ever since. The geographical boundaries of any country are marked randomly during different historical periods, depending on who was ruling, and its current political scenario. Many modern-day historians and social scientists prefer the term ‘South Asia’ which includes Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. However, like all terms, this term is not fool proof. The region which is known as South Asia despite its linguistic, socio-cultural and religious differences has enough similarity through its shared literary and cultural traditions for being studied

tradition of the first approach i.e. ‘silence’ (Narain 2004, 33). However, this silence itself, as Foucault in *History of Sexuality Vol. I* (1978) reminds us, remains an integral part of the discourses of power. He asserts,

“Silence itself- the things one declines to say or is forbidden to name... is less than absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is a binary division to be made between what one says and what one cannot say...There are not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 1978, 27).

Hence, silences around homosexuality became a deeply political act, resulting in production of a heterosexist history of Ancient India. Similarly, several historians rejected and wilfully ignored same-sex traditions of India, despite various evidences available through the texts. In his work, *The Wonder That Was India* (1959), Al Basham reluctantly acknowledges the presence of homosexuality, but denies its practice in ancient India. He notes,

“The erotic life of ancient India was generally heterosexual. Homosexuality of both sexes was not wholly unknown; it is condemned briefly in the law books²⁵, and the Kamasutra treats of it, but cursorily and with little enthusiasm. Literature almost ignores it. In this respect ancient India was far healthier than most civilisations. Castration, whether of men or animals, was disapproved of, and harems were generally guarded by elderly men and armed women” (Basham 1959, 172-173).

under the aegis of a single nation. Rohit Dasgupta claims that the term South Asia is fraught with many problems and covers a large area which includes Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives in addition to the fluid nature of borders in this area and the texts that are present in this area”. For more read Dasgupta, Rohit k (2011), ‘An Exodus of Scripted in Blood: A Gendered reading of the partition,’ in Debra Castillo and Kavita Panjabi (ed) *Cartographies of Affect: Across Borders in South Asia and Americas*, New Delhi: Worldview Publication, pp276-286.

²⁵ Dharmasatra, known as “one of the first collection of ancient Sanskrit texts which gave the codes of conduct and moral principles (Dharma) for Hindus comprised of 18 to 100 texts. Among these texts was Manusmriti written by Sage Manu, and studied widely by British scholars including Sir William Jones, who wrote his own interpretation of Manusmriti in 1794. Hailed as one of the treatise on law for Hindus, the British regime used this text to codify the Hindu law, and as their policy of divide and rule, reimplemented caste-based divides, and to adhere to ways of lives ascribed by it. The only mention of homosexuality in ancient Indian texts is found in the Manusmriti, which sees it as a ‘sin’. In the chapter on penance and expiation it is noted; Injuring a Brahmin, smelling of what should not be smelt, intoxicating liquors, deceit, and intercourse with a man are said to cause a loss of caste (11.68). The law is applicable only to a Brahmin and was easily expiated by having a bath fully clothed (11.175). The misconduct was equivalent to having intercourse during the day with either a man or a woman. However, sex between women merits a more serious punishment which cannot be expiated. A Kanya (virgin woman) who has sexual relations with another kanya (virgin woman) must be fined 200 panas, pay the double of the bride price and receive ten lashes of the rod (8.369). But a stri (married woman) who has sexual relation with kanya (virgin woman) shall instantly have her head shaved or two fingers cut off and be made to ride through the town on a donkey” (8.370)

To counter these opinions, several manifestations in Indian art, literature, religion, and philosophy speak of an acquired mystique, “a (queer) sense of attraction that embodies the ‘omnierotic and pangendered nature of life and divinity’” (Arroyo 2010, 3). According to Ana Garcia-Arroyo, establishes a timeline for reading queer culture in India, where she asserts,

“From the Vedic period (1500 BC), through the medieval period (AD 8th-AD 18th) up to modern period which saw the colonisation by the British (AD 18th – AD 19th), several expressions of sexuality can be read as ‘queer’. Myths, legends, poems, literary texts give manifestation to tales of sexual transformation through gender transgressions, sexual and gender metamorphosis, of divine friendship, of (homo) erotic love and queer attachments, there is an attempt to unravel the queer past within Indian tradition” (Arroyo 2010, 3).

Recent publications and discourses around queer sexuality confirm the richness of India’s (homo) erotic and queer history, denying the myth that homosexuality or any form of alternative sexuality is ‘un-Indian’, or is a ‘Western’ deviance (Narain 2004, 33-34). Indian historians and Queer scholars, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in their anthology, *‘Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History’* (2001) trace these discourses further back to Ancient India till Contemporary time period. Vanita and Kidwai (2001) “examine the uncharted territory of homoerotic love from earliest Vedic culture up to colonial era” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001). Their work on Indian sexualities covers a wide range of queer representations, ranging from high art to literary and popular culture, and I will rely on their extensive breadth of work.

Similarly works of Giti Thadani (1996) and Devdutt Pattanaik (2002; 2014) brings together an ‘encyclopaedic anthology of literature’ ranging from ancient Sanskrit epics to folklores, tales, myths, religious poetry and scholarly documents that focuses on same-sex love between men, women, gods, goddesses, including epics, devotional and mystical poetry, medieval puranic narratives and Urdu poetry to modern literary texts. Giti Thadani’s book *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (1996) tackles the “theme of sexual and erotic bonding between women through ‘ancient cosmology and mythology’” (Thadani 1996). *In the Man who was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from the Hindu lore* (2002) and *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell You* (2014), Devdutt Pattanaik compiles evidences where “sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis are quite common” (Pattanaik 2002).

I would also be referring to works of several queer scholars and historians, who have published widely around “imperial and colonial histories” (Aldrich 2003; Arondekar 2009; Ballhatchet 1980; O’Flaherty 1973) and scholars who’ve been writing about “contemporary Indian society” (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007; Nandy 1983; Ghosh 2010). Due to richness of the countless available queer texts from ancient, medieval and modern sources, I have chosen selected representation of queer sexuality in this chapter, according to their relevance and popularity. Though it is impossible to refer to all the queer and (homo) erotic material of the Indian heritage, the queer representations in this chapter will contribute to “dismiss the notion that heterosexuality is the norm and other (homo) sexual and (homo) erotic expressions have never existed in India” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001).

This chapter would attempt to give a brief historical overview of the cultural representation of queer sexuality in public sphere of India. The pre-colonial and colonial archives serve as a source of numerous possibilities for varied representations and manifestations of queer identity, and how there’s a constant attempt to expunge, some of the history through nationalistic homophobia²⁶. Queer sexuality remains “complex to begin with and linkages of history to contentious issues such as modern nationalism and homophobia attempts to wipe out such identities” (Dasgupta 2014, 651). The chapter attempts to map the varied representational histories of queer sexualities in India, their construction, public perception of such traditions, influence of modernity, colonisation and globalisation on representation of non-normative sexualities.

²⁶ ‘Homophobia’ was conceptualised by George Weinberg in 1971 and popularised through his book ‘Society and the Healthy Homosexuals’ which received much criticism from various opponents. Many anti-gay critics- for example, former US Congressman William Dannemeyer- complained that “homophobia shifts the terms of debate away from the idea that homosexuals are disturbed people by saying that it is those who disapprove of them who are mentally unbalanced, that they are in the grips of a phobia” (Herek 2004 (2015)). Hence, Gregory Herek thus “considers homophobia as a word bearing a negative connotation and says there is a need to advance a new vocabulary and scholarship in the area” (Herek 2004 (2015)). He notes that “homophobia as a word bearing a negative connotation and says there is a need to advance a new vocabulary and scholarship in this area” (Herek 2004 (2015)). He further notes “homophobia has served as a model for conceptualising a variety of negative attitudes based on sexuality and gender, and derivative terms such as lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia etc. have emerged as labels for hostility towards sexual minorities” (Herek 2004 (2015)). Though society has negative attitudes towards homosexuals, the minimal data available do not support the claim that most antigay attitudes represent a true phobia. Thus, a more nuanced vocabulary is needed to understand the psychological, social, and cultural processes that underlie the oppression. He prefers using words such as sexual stigma, heterosexism, and sexual prejudice instead of homophobia. For more read Herek, Gregory M (2004), *Beyond Homophobia: Thinking about Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century*. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 1(2):6-2 and For more read Gupta, Ankush (2012), *Pink Nights: The Queer (Male) Discotheques of Delhi and Music as the Site of Performance*, M.Phil Thesis (unpublished), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The focus in this chapter would largely remain on written texts, firstly, because they are relatively more accessible; secondly, because there's an attempt to draw attention on evidences of same-sex sexuality within mainstream literary traditions, a presence that was ignored till recently; and finally, because tracing and access to oral sources is even more difficult than that of written sources. The chapter attempts to address evidences around alternative sexualities across ancient, and medieval to late medieval period to discourses on sexuality during Colonial rule to Nationalist debates at the time of independence. The first section addressing the ancient texts comprises of “*classical and early Puranic and Vedic period*” (between ca. 2nd century BC to 8th century AD) (Dasgupta 2014, 652-654).²⁷

The Medieval section beginning from eight to the eighteenth-century AD, attempts to look at the nascent roots of the Islamic tradition in the Indian subcontinent. With subsections on *Bhakti movement (Shaivite²⁸ and Vaishnavite²⁹ traditions)*, *Perso-Arabic Traditions* and *Birth of Sufism* (happening simultaneously between eight century AD to eleventh century AD); and attitudinal changes brought forth during the British rule with the introduction of Criminal Tribes Act 1860 and Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and the various colonial discourses regarding the same. The final section would address the silences and homophobia percolating with the early nationalist discourses, and the silences that followed.

²⁷ It is difficult to create watertight divisions between ancient and medieval texts, as one traces similar texts relevant to the medieval texts of the Sanskrit traditions.

²⁸ *Shaivite or Shaivism (Saivism)* is a major sect of Hinduism, practiced by old Dravidians, a tradition that upholds the belief that Lord Shiva (Siva) as the creator of the Universe. There are five main subsects within Shaivism, namely *Shaiva Siddhanta* (practiced in South), *Siddha Shaivism* (practiced in Kashmir), *Vira Shaivism* (practiced in Karnataka amongst Lingayata), *Gorakhnath Shavism* (an ascetic cult) and finally *Pasupatha Shaivism* (one of the oldest forms of Shaivism which is almost extinct now). For more see Ramanujan, A.K. (1973) (2015) *Speaking of Siva*, published by Penguin Books, Baltimore, MD.

²⁹ *Vaishnavita or Vaishnavism (Vaisnavism)*, another sect of Hinduism, that upholds and practice beliefs of Lord Vishnu and worship various incarnations of him (Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Parshuram among many others). The Vaishnavites are distinguished between into four principal Samradayas (tradition or religious system), *Sri Samradayins*, one of the oldest sects founded by Ramanuja Acharya, who follow Lord Vishnu and Goddess Laxmi; *Brahma Samradaya*, which believes in Dvaita (dualism), espoused by Madhavacharya and Achitya Bheda Abheda (inconceivable and conceivable); *Rudra Samradaya* embraced by Vishnuswami and Vallabacharya and finally *Kumara Samradaya* embraced by Nimbarka.

1. Sexuality in Ancient and Medieval India

Ruth Vanita categorises primarily “three dominant tropes of same-sex love” in Ancient India (Dasgupta 2014, 652). Vanita highlights,

“*kinship specifically via friendship*’ that often leads to a *‘life of celibacy or the forming of intimate relationship’* (usually platonic in nature) as depicted in ancient texts. In many ancient texts including epics like Mahabharata, friendship between two friends is given similar status-quo of marriage, which is represented symbolically in the *seven steps taken together or seven words spoken together*. The distinction between conjugal friendship and friendship between individuals of same-sex is deemed quite thin. A friend according to the epic Mahabharata is that person, “who gladdens another, makes himself agreeable to another, who protects, honours, and rejoices in the joys of another” (Vanita, Introduction 2002a, 7).

One of the instances of such friendship or attachment is present in ancient Hindu epic Mahabharata (300 BCE and 300 CE). Vanita writes,

“Lord Krishna and Arjuna, are frequently referred to as *‘the two Krishnas’* which reflect the bonds of friendship going beyond marriage and procreation. In fact, throughout the epic, Krishna clearly states that Parth (Arjuna) is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen- there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 5).

In the *Varna Parva XII*, within the Mahabharata, Krishna confesses his love for Arjuna in divine dimensions, Krishna said:

“44. *You are mine and I am yours. All that is mine is yours also. He who hates you hates me, and he who follows you follows me.*
45. *O irreproachable hero, you are Nara and I am Narayana (Hari). We are the Rishis Nara and Narayana born in the world of men for a special purpose.*
46. *O Partha, you are from me and I am from you. O best of the Bharata race, none can understand the difference that exists between us*” (Dutt 1895, 20).

There are numerous instances of same sex friendships many of which have been discussed have been illustrated upon Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000) and Devdutt Pattanaik (2002; 2014) throughout their reading of Mahabharata, one of the most important epics in Hinduism. However, the “Krishna and Arjuna friendship remains one of the most important aspects of the epic” (Dasgupta 2014, 652). A much celebrated conversation in the epic is between Krishna and Arjuna, which marks their deep love and friendship for one another.

This collected conversation between the two in the Bhagavad Gita, one of the widely read Hindu texts.

Similarly, instances of same-sex friendship are also present in *Skandapurana* (8th century CE) comprising of the tale of life-long friendship between Ratnavali, daughter of King Anarta, and Brahmini, daughter of the King's head priest. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, "Ratnavali could not marry due to a curse, and Brahmani refused to marry, as they left their natal home and sought refuge in the nearby forest" (Pattanaik 2014, 76-77). They performed penance under guidance of the sage Bhartrayagna. Pattanaik writes, "When Shiva finally appeared before Brahmani to bless her, Brahmani refused to take the blessing until Shiva blessed Ratnavali too. The place where Shiva blessed the two girls became a holy place known as *Shudri-Brahmani-tirtha*" (Pattanaik 2014, 77).³⁰ This tale of divine friendship which foregoes the heteronormativity by rejecting the institution of marriage, where two women chose to live together embodies not only same-sex friendship and but hints towards possible (homo) erotic elements. This practice of living together became precursor to modern day practice of a rare live-in practice called "*maitri karar*" attempting to challenge class, caste and gender hierarchies.³¹

Hindu mythology has seen making several references to queerness including another trope comprising of " '*idea of rebirth or reincarnation*' which is used to justify same-sex love in ancient India" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 8).³² When Arjuna's son is stillborn, Krishna resuscitates him from divine power of friendship and love between Krishna and Arjuna. Thus, same sex friendship '*breathes life*' into a new born in this case instead of heterosexual conjugality.

³⁰ The sacred place is named Shudri (referring to the shudra varna (caste) of the princess) and Brahmini (referring to the Brahmin varna of the priest's daughter).

³¹ Maitri Karar or friendship agreement originated among Hindu, upper-caste people in Gujarat in the 1970s. This was eventually banned by the government upon alleged misuse within both Hindu and Muslim community to justify bigamy and polygamy practices within heterosexual couples. For more see Essay on the Maitri Karar under the Hindu Marriage Act <https://unlocking-the-future.com/essay-on-the-maitri-karar-under-the-hindu-marriage-act/>

³² According to Devdutt Pattanaik, "Hindu mythology has the idea of rebirth and hence the notions of *Samsara* (wheel of birth and death) and karma (impact of past actions on present circumstances and present actions on future circumstances). In the Karmic worldview, one is queer because of Karma, and it may be seen as a boon or curse". See Pattanaik, Devdutt (2018) *Queerness in Indian Mythology*, Delhi, Penguin.

Vanita and Kidwai contend that,

“the concept of previous births serve to legitimise actions perceived as improper in the present life. Rebirth makes several social constructs and divides less important, and love between two people of conflicting gender, class or caste seem as a result of their past life” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 28).

This is evident in *Somadatta's Kathasaritasagara* (11th century CE), where authors elucidate the love between Somaprabha and Kalignasena,

“Somaprabha (a Chandala by birth) falls in love with a beautiful princess Kalignasena (Brahmin) and attributes this love to her previous birth. She claims, I am sure she and I were female friends in previous birth. My mind is overwhelmed by affection towards her, tells me so” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 86).

The two lead characters belong to different class and caste hierarchies but by attributing their attraction to their previous birth, they justify their same-sex desire.

Similarly, evidence of same sex desire is found in *Krittivasa Ramayana*³³, where the text describes, “the two widows of King Dilipa as living together in ‘sampati’ (in extreme love). The translator describes the women living together and ‘behaving like husband and wife’” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, XXX). In the text, “the sage Bhagiratha’s birth is attributed to sexual union between the two wives of King Dilipa” (Pattanaik 2014, 92). The birth of Bhagiratha is aided via divine intervention of Lord Shiva as the sages prepared a fertility potion and advised one of the queens to drink it, while the other queen approaches her as a husband approaches his wife. The child born out of this union is hence named *Bhagiratha* by Brahma as “he is born out of union of two *bhagas or vulvas*” (Pattanaik 2014, 92). In tales of birth of *Urvashi* from the *Bhagavata Purana*, her birth is ascribed to the “sexual union between *Nara and Narayana*, two male warriors of great repute” (Pattanaik 2014, 112-113). As she is born out of Narayana’s thigh, “she is christened as *Urvashi* as ‘*Uru*’ in Sanskrit means ‘thighs’” (Pattanaik 2014, 113).

³³ “Krittivasa Ramayana or Krittibasi Ramayana or Sri Ram Panchali composed by the 15th century Bengali poet Krittibas Ojas, is a translation of Ramayana in Bengali. Written in traditional Ramayana Panchali form of Bengali literature, the Krittivasa Ramayana is not just a recording of the original Indian epic, but a vivid description of the society and culture of Bengal in the middle ages”. For more https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krittivasi_Ramayana Accessed on 10/04/2017

The above-mentioned episodes remain synonymous to the cultural setting that operated within ancient India. Whilst hetero-normativity and marriage remained contentious, cultural norms and any possible sexual and gender transgressions were also highlighted. However, any transgression was only legitimised through ‘divinity’.

The third trope that Vanita and Kidwai identifies is “*sex change* brought through *divine intervention*” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 58). According to Dasgupta, “the Hindu deities were ‘multidimensional and fluid’ in their form, one of their remarkable features was their *multiplicity and variability*” (Dasgupta 2014, 653). Thus, a deity might appear in any form be it male, female, intersex, third sex, non-binary or even in an anthropomorphic form. Lord Vishnu, one of the three primary gods in the Hindu pantheon has been known to take form of a beautiful apsara (female spirit), *Mohini*, from time-to-time. Similarly, there are tales of gender transgressions in the epic Mahabharata primarily in tale of *Shikhandi*, which remains one of ‘*sex-change*’ and ‘*rebirth*’ (Pattanaik 2014). According to Devdutt Pattanaik,

“While queer readings of the ancient tale would see the character as a transgender (female to male), the re-tellers of Mahabharata avoid this detail and see the character as a eunuch (castrated male)³⁴ and sometimes of Tiritiya Prakriti³⁵. The ambiguity of gender here acts as the agency through which same-sex desire between the two gods could be realised. This is significant in understanding the cultural setting of ancient India” (Pattanaik 2014).

Amongst several visible examples of discourses around queer sexuality in the past, Sage Vatsyayana’s much celebrated text ‘*Kamasutra*’ was written around 4th century AD, during the Gupta reign. As the title signifies:

“‘Kama’ refers to a *compound of desire, love and pleasure of the senses* (i.e. touch, sight, taste, smell and hearing), while Sutra stands for ‘treatise or brief cryptic statement whose aphoristic narrations have connections with both science and religion’” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 54).³⁶

³⁴ Shikhandi’s character according to mythologist Devdutt Pattnaik remains a “contentious one as s/he is used as a pawn during the battle between Kauravas and Pandavas and was never desired by her natal family. This is similar to the abuse faced by queer individuals in the society even today specifically with transgenders who don’t adhere to the gender assigned to them by the society. Shikhandi is painted by the mythologists and the re-tellers of the classic as eunuch, and not as female to male trans* person” (Pattanaik 2014,54-65).

³⁵ Tiritiya Prakriti, “also used to refer to people of the Third sex, along with homosexuals and intersex during the vedic period”. For more read Wilhelm, Amara Das (2003) Tiritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex. Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation.

³⁶ Kamasutra begins with the basic conceptual trinity of Hinduism, or discussion of *Dharma* (piety, society, duty, religion, justice), *artha* (profit, success, political, power, domination) and *kama* (pleasure, sex, desire). It

Kamasutra attempts to catalogue,

“Sixty four art forms, necessary to be studied by individuals to be attractive such as cooking, gardening, needle work, word games to vocal and instrumental music and dance. The text addresses point of views of particular sexual agents such as virgin boys and girls, younger and older courtesans, younger and older co-wives, males of Tiritiya Prakriti, and men who are primarily city dwellers”³⁷ (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 55).

However, Kamasutra compared to *Manusmriti* was much more sympathetic to women, and perceived them as active sexual subjects and participants in sexual and erotic behaviour. Many sections of the book promote women’s emotions, enjoyment and erotic pleasures and gives equal importance with that of men.

Works of scholars like Wendy Doniger sheds light on various sexual practices like “*hasthmaithun* (masturbation), *mukhmaithun* (oral sex or cunnilingus as well as fellatio) as well as anal sex (which primarily became the premise of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code)” (Doniger 2002, 36) (emphasis mine). Doniger citing Vatsyayana’s words, puts it in this way, “it is not possible to enumerate all the forms of sex. There are just too many” (Doniger 2002, 36). The Kamasutra also discusses some sexual behaviour which is now considered as ‘queer’, immoral or non-procreative, that furthers Wendy Doniger’s claim on the presence of queerness in ancient India.

Contrary to the contemporary belief that only homosexual men indulge in carnal intercourse (anal sex), which was introduced by either as a ‘western import’ or by Persians and Muslim invaders, *mi* refers (non-derogatorily) to anal sex as another type of sexual interaction: “the people in the South indulge in ‘sex below’, even in the anus” (Doniger 2002, 56). Vatsyayana also speaks of men who indulge in oral sex, thus he hints at homosexuality both in men and women, as we can read in the following quotations:

“The love that comes from erotic arousal
Arises from the imagination,
not in response to any object of the senses,

further categorises types of sexual behaviour even though it does not prioritise some over others. According to Vanita, they are categorised on account of temperament and inclinations, and thus, there is the energetic, the melancholic and the whimsical, similarly there is a category based on relations with men: the virgin, the widow and the courtesan (Vanita 2000).

³⁷ For scholars like Kum Kum Roy, the text focusses on “upper class, upper caste male desires, despite several references to courtesans as well as Tiritiya prakriti men who would like to seduce other men”. For more see Roy, Kumkum (1996) ‘Unraveling the Kamasutra’ in Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Volume 3, Issue 2, pp 155-170.

not in activities that have previously become
a habit
it can be recognised in the course of oral sex
with a woman
or with a person of the third nature³⁸
or in various activities such as kissing [...]
the love that comes from the objects of the senses
right before one's eyes, is well known in the world"

(Doniger 2002, 38)

Hence, classic instructional scriptures such as “Kamasutra not only described but even prescribed queer sexual practices such as *‘auparishtaka’ or mouth congress*” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 59) as described in the above quotation. What made Kamasutra unique, was the sex-positive nature of the text, and unlike emphasis towards procreative sex as present in previous ancient texts and treatise, there was a “celebration towards recreational sex for pleasure” (Burton 1994, 70). The text finds its portrayal in sculptures and walls of Khajuraho’s temples, and possibly gave rise to the idea that the carvings offered a kind of sex education of the time, communicating knowledge to the masses who visited the temples.³⁹ Literary evidences from ancient India suggest that the society was much more open, accommodating and embraced non-normative sexualities.

³⁸ In the late 19th century, Western scholars coined new terms and concepts such as ‘homosexual’, ‘inverted’, and ‘third sex’ as part of pathologized and criminalising such identities under Criminal Tribes Act as well as Section 377. Much to the surprise of many scholars, the Kamasutra coined the term ‘third nature’ as *Tritiya Prakriti*, which does not have such a restrictive and pathological sense. According to Vatsyayana, the third nature recognises two types of men: *‘those who try to look feminine by dressing or behaving like women’ and those who ‘appear manly by growing moustaches or beards.’* (Vanita and Kidwai 2001) The text speaks of masseurs, hairdressers and chambermaids who are assigned men at birth, who like men, and whose virile appearance helps in seducing customers, while earning a living. Vatsyayana does not disapprove of the desires of the ‘third nature’, for it is the custom of the country and therefore, it should be allowed. Zia Zaffrey (1996) in *The Invisibles. A Tale of Eunuchs of India* mentions that hermaphrodite and the hijra or eunuch as sexual categories that are included within the ‘third sex or nature’.

³⁹ Built between 950 and 1050 CE, the temples of Khajuraho represent the outstanding architectural achievement of the Chandela kings of Bundelkhand. Twenty-two temples survived of the original eighty or more that would have been part of the thriving city of brick and wooden buildings. The panels comprise of figures of deities and their attendants, with elephants, horses and warriors, camels and snarling yalis. And amongst the carving are tableaux showing extraordinary energetic and provocative erotica, representations of individuals and couples performing every possible variety of sexual acts. Khajuraho’s widely known erotic sculptures also celebrate the twin aspects of gender and sexuality with a loving spotlight in the creative energies of the feminine and the principles of desire that guide it.

1(a) Bhakti Movement

During the medieval period (between 6th century AD till 16th century AD), with the rise of Islamic culture in India, the Bhakti movement blossomed in India and was similar to the Sufi movement in the Perso-Arabic tradition, reframing the perception of “god and divinity” (Dasgupta 2014, 654). In India, “Bhakti movement emerged in the 7th century AD in the South India and periodically shaped and reshaped a sacred landscape; in embodying the sacred as a living reality, it created and extended to the realms of brotherhood among men” (Rishi 2009, 201-204). What made Bhakti movement popular was that it created a non-hierarchical religion, universal, a humanistic lifestyle and egalitarian counter-communities along with a culture of subaltern poetics of spiritual dissent. During Bhakti movement, “the gods were no longer worshipped as superior beings but were rather seen as ‘friends, lovers, spouses, and even as children’” (Dasgupta 2014). This opened up “fluid intimacies and ‘fluidity of gendered structure’ between the deity and the devotee” (Rishi 2009, 201-204). Through a process of domestication of the deity, the devotee makes him/her a lover (deity), forging new forms of intimacy which went beyond the confines of marriage and family.

With everyone equal in the eyes of the god, the movement spearheaded egalitarianism as well as brought religion and spirituality to the marginalised sections of the society—specifically women, whose religious expressions were restricted in many cases. The movement was not only aimed at religious salvation for all, but also created a space for many to have a personal relationship with god without any intermediaries rendering all Brahmanical traditions, and the role of Brahmin priests futile. This led to sudden influx of many women as well as lower class and caste individuals joining the movement and expressing themselves without inhibitions.

According to Dasgupta, “by incorporating god as family the devotee conflicted with the traditional reproductive family, as there is a constant tension between the devotional family and the biological one” (Dasgupta 2014, 654). Bhakti poet Surdas writes,

“These eyes thirst for Hari (Lord Krishna)
Wanting to see the lotus eyes one
Grieving for him day and night”
(Dasgupta 2014, 655).

Dasgupta further asserts, “If the above lines are taken out of context of ‘Bhakti’, they could easily be read as a poem addressed to a male lover who appears distant and unavailable” (Dasgupta 2014, 655). Vanita comments that “with devotees imagining themselves as ‘brides of god’, intense emotional relationships developed between disciples and devotees who desired union with god” (Vanita 2005, 91). Another poet and mystic, Jagannath born in fifteen century was known for his devotion to Shri Chaitanya (reincarnation of Krishna). Vanita and Kidwai observes that “all devotees tend to identify with the female who desires union with the male deity” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 65). Stories of Jagannath Das and his love for Chaitanya are well documented. Dibankar Das writes about their encounter (Lord Jagannath and Shri Chaitnaya) in *Jagannath Charitamrita*, “overwhelmed with love, he held Das in a tight embrace. They stayed in this posture for two days and a half. Chaitanya addressed Jagannath as his ‘*sakhi*’ (female friend/companion) (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 204).

The term ‘*Sakhi*’ emerged during the medieval Bhakti movement and is now used in everyday conversation. *Sakhi* quite literary means a ‘female friend’, ‘*sakha*’ being the ‘male equivalent’. This intimate friend through the devotional poems, have been known to occupy the space of “the unavailable, at times absent lover, she (*sakhi*) is accessible and shares the same intellect as well as interests as that of her friend” (Arroyo 2010, 36-37). Unlike in hetero-normative Western narratives, where marital conjugality is given prime importance, and the friend occupies almost a secondary role, the *sakhi* and *sakha* plays a far more important role in Indian narratives.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Giti Thadani reworks the idea of *Sakhi* in the Krishna-Radha tradition, where “Radha laments her love for Krishna to her *Sakhis* rather than addressing them to her male lover. Hinduism remains content with allowing opposites to confront each other without resolution, hence, providing a space for non-normative sexualities and same-sex desires to exist” (Arroyo 2010, 37). As Wendy O Flaherty remarks, “[this] celebrate(s) the idea that the universe is boundlessly various and... that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other.” (O’Flaherty 1973:318). However, the cult of “*Sakhibhavas*, worshippers of Radha as her *sakhis*, is rarely mentioned in most of the literature, where desire between women is largely co-opted within the heterosexual fantasy. The myth exhibits Radha’s erotic identification with her *sakhis*; their nude bodies bathing and playing together in a homosocial space that gives the sense of eroticism (with two of the *Sakhis* in deep embrace and visibly engaged in oral sex) and the assumption of an independent feminine space which Krishna tries to invade with his voyeuristic gaze” (Thadani 1996; Arroyo 2010, 37). For more see Thadani, Giti (1996) *Sakhiyani Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*, Bloomsbury, London.

However, Bhakti movement was embraced by the masses due to its inclusivity and rejection of Brahmanical patriarchal practices. According to Vijaya Ramaswamy,

“Bhakti saints rejected all fixities of religion as the movement was spearheaded by several women saints. As most of the institutionalised spaces were restricted for women, they embraced Bhakti to define their own truths to reform society, polity, relationships, and lastly religion. The movement saw several women saints as well as saints from lower class and castes leading masses in their own regions, singing songs and poems in their vernacular language, breaking all societal norms and living as they pleased” (Ramaswamy 1996).

One can trace the genealogy of Indian feminism through Bhakti movement. A.K. Ramanujan in Talking to God writes,

“In the Bhakti movement, women take on the qualities of men and break rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children and family” (Ramanujan 1992, 56).

He further adds,

“the lines between male and female are continuously crossed between body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that ‘sex’ the body. Bhakti saints turned away from sex, because their sexual passion was invested entirely and in a disembodied manner, in the chosen deity as lover” (Ramanujan 1992, 55).

A tenth century devotee of Shiva, Devara Dasimayya writes:

“If they see breasts and long hair coming,
They call it woman,
If beard and whiskers
They call it man
But look, the self that hovers in between
Is neither man or woman...”

(Ramanujan 1973, 110)

Women saints expressed their love for god in form of poetry and songs, which saw the ‘figure of the god as a lover, consort or husband’. This devotion towards the almighty led to several women transgressing traditions as many female Bhakti saints and poets gave up on

‘marital conjugality and motherhood’.⁴¹ Women bhakti saints like Mirabai⁴², Lal Deb⁴³ of Kashmir and Akka Mahadevi⁴⁴ walked the path of celibacy and devoted their lives to the almighty. While Mirabai devoted herself to Lord Krishna and spent hours at the temple worshipping him, Akka Mahadevi left her husband’s abode and roamed around naked in the forests, her body only covered by her matted hair. She was known for her vachanas⁴⁵, where she referred to Lord Shiva as *Channamallikarjuna* (Lord of Jasmine Tender).

Ramanujan points out that Lal Deb of Kashmir and Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka threw away their clothes, as they saw ‘modesty’ – which is invested in hiding the body with clothes- as “a way of resisting and enhancing sexual curiosity, not of curbing it” (Ramanujan 1973). It is this paradox that is highlighted when clothes are thrown away. By exposing the “difference between male and female, by becoming indifferent to that difference, [they are] liberated” (Ramanujan 1973). Akka Mahadevi wrote in her vachana:

“To the shameless girl
wearing Mallikarjuna’s light, you fool
where is the need for cover and jewel?”
(Chaitanya 2017)

Commenting on her own nakedness, she writes:

“People, male and female
Blush when a cloth covering their shame
comes loose
when the lord of lives, loves drowned without a face
in the world, how can you be modest?
when all the world is the eye of the lord

⁴¹ In this aspect, Bhakti meant different things to women and men. According to Ramaswamy, “while a male Bhakta could follow his path and remain a householder, this was not possible for the women. Most women had to choose between their Bhakti and their married and domestic life. Many of these women could proceed on their chosen path by discarding their marital ties altogether” (Ramaswamy 1996).

⁴² Mirabai, a bhakti poet of the 15th century, and a Rajput princess, refuted the legitimacy of her marriage to Raja Bhojraj and refused to consummate it. She devoted herself fully to the service of Lord Krishna. Roughly a decade into their unconsummated marriage, Bhojraj died. Mirabai repudiated the role as his widow, and refused to adorn the mourning garb, and didn’t follow any customs expected of a royal woman grieving a lost husband. Mira’s devotion is hailed as a fortifying precedent of a woman who refused to be loved. She has lived through the ages through her songs and poems, describing her utmost devotion to Lord Krishna.

⁴³ Lal Deb, one of the earliest Kashmiri mystic poets also refused to stay confined to domestic tyranny and its power hierarchy. She left her home, broke all material ties and wandered unclothed in search of god as well.

⁴⁴ Akka Mahadevi (Akka is an honorific that means ‘elder sister’ in Kannada) was a visionary poet of the twelfth century AD in South India, belonging to the Virasaiva movement. Her vachanas or verses in Kannada challenged social norms including intersections of gender, class and caste and continue to be sung into the twentieth first century.

⁴⁵ The word Vachanas literally means ‘that which said’. They are intelligible rhythmic prose written in Kannada that evolved in the 11th century CE and flourished in the 12th century, as part of the Sharana movement.

onlooking everyone/everywhere
what can you cover and conceal?"

(Chaitanya 2017)

Women Bhakti poets and saints laid the foundation of Indian feminism as they constantly struggled with immense discrimination with hetero-patriarchal and Brahmanical hegemony. The normative notions of 'good' (procreational) and 'bad' (recreational) sex had come into being, against which the Bhakti saints were in constant rebellion. However, with the coming of colonialism, traces of sexual fluidity were revised, at times 'erased in tandem with modernising nationalist elites who began the process of disciplining it' (Arroyo 2010).

1(b) Homoeroticism in Perso-Arabic tradition and Sufism

While ancient and early medieval texts contained fewer references to same-sex love and sexuality, the late medieval period ranging approximately from 8th century AD to the 16th century AD witnessed rise of Islamicate culture in India, which saw "vast body of literature written on same-sex love, especially those between men" (Dasgupta 2014, 656). This was made possible due to cultural confluence of once travellers, sea merchants and invaders from the North West of India (primarily Persia, Turkey, Arabia) who travelled to India by the end of the 10th century AD, carrying with them what we now call Perso-Arabic traditions.

The latter half of the tenth century witnessed "invasions led by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030 AD), initiating a series of assaults that led to creation and in turn establishment of Islamic culture in India" (Dasgupta 2014, 656). According to Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (1974), "homoeroticism and homosexuality have always had a notable tradition in Muslim societies" (Hodgson 1974, 140). Anissa Helie in her article titled *The Religious Right and Homophobia in Islam* (2001) asserts, "despite religious fundamentalism of today, and the persecution against sexual minorities homosexuality was prevalent in the Muslim communities during medieval period (Helie 2001; 2012). Marshall Hogson describes it in the following way:

"Despite strong Sharia disapproval, the sexual relations of a mature man with a subordinate youth was so readily accepted in upper class circles that there were often little or no effort to conceal their existence. Sometimes it seems to have been socially more acceptable to speak of man's attachment to a youth than to speak of his woman,

who were supposed to be invisible in the inner courts. The fashion entered into poetry, especially in the Persian courts. The narrative poetry, indeed conventionally told the love affairs between men and women; but the person to whom lyric love verse is addressed by male poets was conventionally and almost without exception, made explicitly male” (Hodgson 1974, 146).

Hence, homoerotic and same-sex love affairs were quite visible during the time of Perso-Arabic influence in India and were not mentioned ‘derogatorily’. One of the primary examples would be “Muslim ruler Mahmud Gazna’s relationship with his slave Ayaz; their love have been compared to likes of timeless lovers (heterosexual couples) like ‘Heer-Ranjha and Laila-Majnun’ ” (Dasgupta 2014, 656). Saleem Kidwai sees this new found visibility as a direct impact of “cosmopolitanism of urban Islamic Culture” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 108). Urbanisation allowed people of varied class, castes and backgrounds to freely mix, with the city spaces allowing them relative anonymity to live their lives as they desire. Most of the queer literature around this time depicted erotic interaction amongst men of different class, caste and religious background.

Homoerotic love became the subject of many ghazals (medieval love poems), as more evidences surfaced to show love, and more precisely, the passion of homoerotically inclined men who transgressed social norms of caste, class, religion and social status as witnessed in tale of Mahmud of Ghazana and his non-Muslim slave Ayaz. Scott Kugle translates one of the ghazals written in homage to Mahmud of Ghazana and his slave Ayaz,

“In that market in Badalkshan, trade in young men thrives
But Mahmud was searching for a rose of a different hue
His gaze fell upon the face of his Ayaz, in a flash
He knew they must be together, he must buy him as a master
The gaze of a lover lingered over the one he loved
As struck his heart like the sting of a wasp”.

(Kugle 2002, 32)

The above verse exemplifies how Emperor Mahmud buys Ayaz in a slave market after he falls in love with him at the first sight, and afterwards takes him to Ghazana. One comes across a whole body of literature celebrating Mahmud as a lover.

“Mahmud set a cup beside him and decanter before him
Full of burgundy wine, as if distilled from his own heart

He filled the cup with wine like his love's ruby lips
Entangled in the curls of Ayaz, Mahmud began to lose control"

(Kugle 2002, 33)

The aforementioned lines from Maulana Zula Khwansari's *Mathnawi-yi Zulali* (written in 16th century CE) translated by Scott Kugle represents Mahmud's passion for Ayaz. The Mahmud and Ayaz ghazals break the popular colonial myth that "all same-sex love between men was pederastic"⁴⁶ (Arroyo 2010, 40-41). In fact, as Kugle asserts, "Mahmud and Ayaz are the archetype of perfect male lovers, but both are adult men" (Kugle 2002, 35). Shibli Nomani, provides an interesting counterview on same sex male relations in the Perso-Arabic tradition. He says that "Arab soldiers were uninitiated in pedestry... fell in love with them because they were away from women and *amarad parasti*"⁴⁷ (Rahman 1990, 1).

Devotional Perso-Arabic mystic poetry has similar resonances while representing "love for god/deity through imagery of romantic relationships between males which were similar to Bhakti movement" (Wafer 1997, 107). Sufism⁴⁸ or Islamic mysticism emerged as a new form of devotion and began to spread across India between 8th – 9th century AD. Sufis believed that "personal experience of divine love is the path towards God" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 115). For Sufis⁴⁹, "love is the essence and centre of their spirituality, and loving god means

⁴⁶ "Pederasty originates from the practice in Ancient Greece known as *paidierastia* where *pais* means "child, boy, younger men" and *erastēs* means "lover". This roughly translates to 'love of younger men', a common practice of sexual relations between older men (patron) and younger men, the older man is the active partner, while the younger men are the passive receiver. This practice has been prevalent across several cultures around the world.

⁴⁷ Tariq Rahman translates "'amrad' as beardless boy and 'parasti' as worship, thus the love of beardless boys" (Rahman 1990). In most ghazals the gender of the beloved is ambiguous, in contrast to the Mahmud and Ayaz poems "consistently identifies the beloved as male through the trope of Mahmud's passionate longing for Ayaz" (Rahman 1990). For more see Rahman, T (1990), 'Boy Love in the Urdu Ghazal', Annual of Urdu Studies (7), pp1-20.

⁴⁸ 'Sufism is defined as the inner, mystical and purely spiritual dimension of Islam. Although popularly known as Islamic mysticism, it must be pointed out that the Sufism has received influences from philosophical currents like Neo-Platonism, and from the other religions such as Christianity. The Encyclopaedia Britannica further defines Sufism as,' 'mystic Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God'. For more see www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=108145/ Accessed on 5/3/2017

⁴⁹ For Sufis, "the practitioners of Sufism, believe that personal experience of divine love is the path towards God. God, who is represented in multiple forms is the source of all existence. While the shariat or Islamic law interpreted by the Ulema (Muslim clergy), prescribed dogmatic teachings to reach salvation, sufis who do not follow the shariat, lead more independent lives, cultivating personal and spiritual devotion" (Sikand 1996). For these Sufis, love is the essence and centre of their spirituality, and loving God means contemplating his creation in divine terms.

contemplating his creation in divine terms” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 115). In Sufi literature, love is expressed in homoerotic metaphors, however as Kidwai asserts,

“the relationship between divine and human was often expressed in homoerotic metaphors. Many Sufis insisted that only same-gender love could transcend sex and therefore not distract the seeker from his ultimate aim of gnosis. Worldly love was only a bridge to reach divine love (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 115).”

Similar to Mahmud and Ayaz’s story, Kidwai reflects upon several ghazals which consistently feature the “devotional love theme between the poet and the beloved” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 140). This is witnessed in the poetic works of Amir Khusro, a Sufi mystic whose poetry venerated Saint Nizamuddin Aulia Chisti, a fellow mystic and saint during the late 13th and early 14th century AD. The following poem depicts how Khusro falls in love with Nizamuddin:

“The Muslims have become sun-worshippers.
Because of these simply sprightly Hindu boys
I am desolate and intoxicated...
Khusro is like a dog with a collar” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 127-128)

Kidwai further asserts,

“In Sufi tradition, embracing or kissing on the lips is a way for the master to transmit his worldly knowledge to his disciple, and ignite a spark of divine love. Similarly, sharing a drink from the same cup or chalice is also a way of initiating the follower to the path of truth” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 149-150).

The poems feature traits similar to Bhakti tradition, and sees imagery from domestic life as the beloved is always imagined as male.⁵⁰ The Sufis’ use of indigenous language makes it more emotive as Kidwai points out, “Indian Sufi poetry...was influenced by ancient Indian poetics and traditions such as Radha-Krishna tradition of mystical love poetry” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 117). The method of devotion adopted by Sufis wasn’t through a “system of prescribed prayers and religious texts but through constant mention of god’s name popularly known as ‘zikr’” (Dasgupta 2014, 658). The homoerotic love poems of the Sufi tradition are similar to the ‘zikr’ tradition as there is constant mention of the beloved in the poems.

⁵⁰ In the classical Urdu ghazal, which is also called Rekhta, “the voice of the narrator and lover always come in the masculine first person, and addresses his female beloved. The idea of addressing women could explain the literal meaning of the term ghazal, which implies talking to women”. Carla Petiviech (2002) in her analysis of Urdu poetry also points out that even when “the male writer describes the attributes of his female beloved, the term used is ‘he’, in order to protect her from hard social criticism and preserve the good nature of the family”.

J. Wafer analyses the theme of homoerotic love between men (between 8th century AD to early 18th century AD) and broadly places them under three categories namely- “poets who practised ‘*shahidbazi*’ (Love of boys) , poets who used the symbolism of male-male love under pseudonyms to avoid gaining reputation and thirdly poets who denounced ‘shahid bazi’” (Wafer 1997, 117). Poets like Amir Khusro, Saádat Hassan Rangin⁵¹, Mir Taqi ‘Mir’⁵², Abru were known to openly discuss and celebrate homoeroticism through their poetry. They openly discussed their “attraction to males, dwelt on what they found attractive in young males... and heartbreaks” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 119). T. Rahman writes that,

“these poems neither celebrate nor denigrate homosexual love... they accept it as a natural outlet for erotic feeling, and are quick to use pseudo mystical arguments against any religious minded detractor. In short, they do not feel stigmatised at all” (Rahman 1990, 18).

Another form of poetry (ghazal) emerged by the end of the 18th century in the city of Lucknow called the ‘*Rekhti*’. Deriving its origins from *Rekhta*, Rekhti is a feminine voice of Rekhta “written by male poets in female voice and depicting women’s locale” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001). Carla Petievich (2002) calls ‘Rekhti’, Urdu poetry’s ‘lesbian’ voice’, introduced by poet Saádat Yar Khan Rangin to the literary elites of Lucknow. Genre of Rekhti poetry explicitly describes “same sex love between women, as this form of poetry was composed in the ‘*begumati zaban*’ (ladies language) and was addressed to the feminine *aashiq* (lover/narrator) and her beloved” (Petievich 2002, 51). The male poets voiced “experiences of women in love and longing for other women as well as their erotic relationships which were explicitly sexual” (Petievich 2002, 51). Carla Petievich in her translation of Insha Allah Khan’s (1817) poem, ‘Noble lady’ clearly points towards the suggestiveness of the relationships:

“when you join your lips to my lips
it feels as if new life pours into my being
when breast meet breast, the leisure is such
that from sheer joy the words rise to my lips
the way you rub me ah! It drives my heart wild

⁵¹ Saadat Rangin was a horse trader and a poet who lived with courtesans, and learned their language and idiomatic expressions and decided to compose verse in *begumati zabaan* (lady’s language).

⁵² Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810) is generally considered the greatest urdu poet. He was considered one of the originator of the Urdu literary tradition. It was during his time that Urdu replaced Persian as the more popular literary language. He was also considered the master of ghazals.

stroke me a little more, my sweet dogana⁵³”

(Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 223)

Another one states:

“When did my Zanakhi last come to my house?

Poor me, when’s the last time I had a bath?

That girl’s been angry for a long time:

When have we cleared up matters between us?”

(Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 223)

With dawn of twentieth century, literary practice of Rekhti was associated with disrepute due to the usage of ‘*begumati zubaan*’ which was the language used by courtesans and women of ill-repute which further led to this poetic form been expunged from Urdu literature during colonial revisionist movement.⁵⁴ While male homosexuality and homoeroticism was being actively discussed in Islamic tradition, women addressing their own desires through feminine erotic idioms constituted a greater challenge for 20th century critics who were influenced by Victorian Puritanism. Similarly, various symbolism of love between both gender in the Islamic tradition further challenges the modern-day Islamist hetero-patriarchal biases, despite the fact that idioms of homosexuality have always been part of various cultures.

2. Colonial Discourses: Criminalisation of Homosexuality

With Vasco Da Gama’s voyage arriving at Calicut in 1498, “the Portuguese became the first Europeans to establish sea contact with India and were also the first to acquire territorial possessions in maritime Asia” (Correia-Afonso 1981, 151). An estimated ‘one quarter and one half of a million people’ found themselves under the Portuguese rule in India by the early seventeenth century. India with its rich agricultural resources and spice trade became a key “attraction for the Dutch who established the Dutch East India Company in 1602 and followed by establishing their first trading post off the coast of the Coromandel in 1606” (Prakash 1984). While most of the scholarly work has emphasised on the trade relations, socio-economic and religious implications of Dutch’s influence on India, almost no work has been found on the “symbolism or manifestations of sexuality in Dutch and Portuguese India”

⁵³ In the last verse, the word Dogana is used to refer to the woman’s beloved. Dogana, in urdu, literally alludes the two (do) and implies the idea of two or doubling. Poets use it to refer to homoerotically inclined women.

⁵⁴ While recurring themes of male homoeroticism are well documented, “Rekhti is absent from Indian or Pakistani libraries and only found in the British library in London”. For more see Petievich, Carla (2002), “Doganas and Zanakhis: The Invention and Subsequent Erasure of Urdu Poetry’s Lesbian Voice,” in Ruth Vanita (ed) *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, London: Routledge, pp. 47-60.

(Prakash 1984). As M. Newitt points out, “the policy of the Portuguese government was to maintain the status quo and to interfere as little as possible in their (Indians) affairs” (Newitt 1986, 94). It was however the British colonial invasion, with the infamous Battle of Plassey in 1757 that led to the establishment of the British empire across India, that would “re-configure the social, cultural and judicial architecture of the country” (Robbins 2012).

The colonialist view on sexuality has had a deep underlying distrust towards the already existing Indian sexual identities and their representations. One of the main characteristics attributed to Indians by their coloniser, that was used as a justification for their subordination, was their naturally ‘deviant sexuality’. As the colonial lords spread their empire across India, the country witnessed an amplification of the homophobic voice, and “policies of sexual regulation in the colonies by a Victorian ‘fanatical purity campaign’” (Bhaskaran 2002, 16). The colonial prohibition against homosexuality was disseminated through the discourses of law, medicine and literature. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was written as part of the ‘reformatory’ colonial project by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay to “codify and regulate the various personal systems of Hindu and Muslim laws” that left the colonisers in disarray (Singh 2015, 1).

The British anti-sodomy law introduced in 1860 by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay as form of “educational and legal reforms, famously known as Macaulay’s ‘Minutes on Education’ formulated in 1835, seemingly reduced the punishment of sodomy from execution to imprisonment” (Macaulay 1835, 2004). The draft of the Indian Penal Code of 1837 was premised on ‘utilitarian philosophy’⁵⁵ aimed at colonised natives of India. Though the implementation of the draft was delayed due to Sepoy Mutiny followed by Indian revolt of 1857, the Indian Penal Code was finally passed in 1860. The Indian revolt of 1857 reaffirmed the colonisers view, who saw “Indian native subjects as ‘deviant, perverse and barbaric savages’ in need for Victorian morality which the British brought forth through their civilising mission around the world” (Singh 2015, 1) (emphasis mine). Hence, Section 377

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Arvind Narrain asserts that, “The provision against unnatural lust was in fact in complete non-conformity with the utilitarian philosophy. In fact, Jeremy Bentham, acknowledged as the father of utilitarianism, himself argued that by utilitarian principles, intercourse between two persons of same sex should not be an offence” (Narrain 2004, 48; Bentham 1997) For more see Narrain, Arvind (2004) *Queer ‘Despised Sexuality’*, Law and Social Change, Books for Change, Bangalore, India, p. 48 and Bentham, Jeremy (1997) *Offences Against One’s Self: Paederasty in We are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* eds. Mark Blasius et al., Routledge, New York, p. 15-32.

was written as part of the Indian Penal Code to regulate “the vices of the flesh and crimes against the body, which were regarded by the colonial government as crimes against the empire itself” (Macaulay 1835, 2004). However, upon its implementation in the colonial nations like India, it was seen as a retrogressive move. The law states,

Unnatural offences: “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term, which may extend to 10 years, and shall be liable to fine” (Arondekar 2009, 76; Gupta 2006, 4815-4823; Bhaskaran 2002, 15).

Explanation: “Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section” (Arondekar 2009, 76; Gupta 2006, 4815-4823; Bhaskaran 2002, 15).

All these discourses exemplified a Victorian morality which seems to have taken root not just in the coloniser’s discourse but also in the responses of the colonised. As Vanita and Kidwai illustrate it further, “love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted in pre-19th century. As far as we know, no one has ever been executed for homosexuality in India” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, xiii). However, with the passing of Section 377, homosexuality was condemned by the state and framed as a criminal activity.

With Section 377 in place along with laws such as Criminal Tribes Act (1871) and Contagious Disease Act (1864)⁵⁶, these laws became colonial state apparatuses to monitor the ‘Indian deviant subject’, specifically identities such as that of the prostitutes working in Lal Bazaars, along with hijras or eunuchs⁵⁷ who were seen as ‘habitual sodomites’.

⁵⁶ The Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866 and 1899) was “intended to protect members of the British armed forces from sexually transmitted diseases. Soldiers who enlisted to serve in the British army were not permitted to marry and hence faced consequences of the prohibition that officials deemed unacceptable. Firstly, approximately a third of the armed forces contracted venereal diseases from their visit to brothels or Lal Bazaars and due to lack of sexual outlets, most of the soldiers resorted to homosexual activities in the barracks. Finally, this act was introduced and legislation was sought to preserve the health of the soldiers by permitting, policeman to arrest prostitutes in ports and army towns and bring them in to have compulsory checks for venereal disease. If the women were suffering from sexually transmitted diseases they were placed in a locked hospital until cured.” Hence, this act provided soldiers to commit crimes such as adultery etc. with impunity but ended up policing the bodies of working-class women who were at times making a living out of prostitution. Most of the brothels had to apply for a mandatory license and renewal of license for the same”.

⁵⁷ Zia Jaffrey quoted the Act about Eunuchs about a collection of the acts passed by the Governor General of India in Council in the year 1871. In 1871, the British government in India passed a law against the hijras, which extended to all of its local governments, excluding princely states, one of the points of the “Act No. XXVII... for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs,” thus stating “ any eunuch so registered who *appears, dressed or ornamented like a woman*, in a public street or place, or in any other place with the *intention of being seen from a public street or place*, or who *dances or plays music*, or takes part in any public exhibition, in a public

Homosexuality was “officially condemned by the state and was seen as ‘special oriental vice’” (Ballhatchet 1980). Kenneth Ballhatchet further suggests that “the lack of sexual energy on part of colonisers was another reason for imperial expansion, he mentions British men with tastes which could not be satisfied in England...[were] agreeably satiated overseas” (Ballhatchet 1980, 1). However, there remained anxiety and moral panic on part of the British administrator, who attempted to control the sexual behaviour of deputed officers in India to oversee the regime. There was a constant attempt by the Colonisers to trace the root of homosexuality in Indian customs and instead of turning towards the available scriptures which had the evidence of same-sex love; they targeted the various practices such as child marriage, sati, endogamy etc. Lord Curzon once remarked: “I attribute this largely to early marriage. A boy gets tired of his wife or of women at an early age and wants the stimulus of some more novel or exciting sensation” (Ballhatchet 1980, 120).

While there is a constant surveillance on bodies of individuals with ‘deviant behaviour’, one wonders who truly is deemed responsible for this ‘vice’? Suparna Bhaskaran cites an example from an “advice column in the Bengali magazine; *Sanjibani* dated 1893, where schoolboys engaging in ‘unnatural and immoral habits’ were asked to be cured by visits to prostitutes” (Bhaskaran 2002, 17). However, one Major Hamilton, a surgeon serving in the East India company alleged the availability of homo-social spaces were responsible for the rise of this situation (homosexuality) in England as well. He notes,

“I have had a good deal of experience of schools, seminaries and colleges for boys, and, as I daresay you know, few of these institutions escape being infected with some immorality or other; but, once it creeps in, it is most difficult to eradicate” (Ballhatchet 1980, 120).

Further, *Health Memorandum to British Soldiers in the Tropics* (1919), a pamphlet published in 1919 by the British government explicitly warned the soldiers to not engage in any ‘immoral behaviour’ which may bring disrepute to the company. It stated, “We have an empire, which extends right round the world, and our service may be, often is, in many queer and uncivilised countries” (Ballhatchet 1980, 162-163). Ballhatchet emphasised on the

street or place or for hire in a private house may be arrested without warrant, and shall be punished with imprisonment of either description of a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.” It is interesting to note that there was special emphasis on words like dresses like woman, dances or plays music or intention of seen as the British government penalised any sexuality which was non-normative or didn’t adhere to the heteronormative norm. For more read Zaffrey, Zia (1996) *The Invisibles. A Tale of Eunuchs of India. Channel Islands Great Britain: The Guernsey Press Co. Ltd.* <https://genderanddevelopmentinpakistan.wordpress.com/eunuchs/history-2/> Accessed on 06/02/2017.

“various debates which took place in the Parliament at the possibility of sexual relations between the white coloniser and the native subordinate” (Ballhatchet 1980, 162-163). While there was a constant surveillance around the need for sexual relation, one of the major bone of contention was the “presence of prostitutes in the army cantonments, however excluding them revealed prospects of homosexuality” (Ballhatchet 1980, 162).

The fundamental concern remained the preservation of power by establishing status quo and regulating the lives of the natives.⁵⁸ Robert Aldrich in *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (2003) states, “colonialism... encouraged sexual irregularity, heterosexual and homosexual; the colonies provided many possibilities of homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality” (Aldrich 2003, 3-4). The colonial regime witnessed both clandestine spaces and multiple outlets of queer bonding and (homo) erotic desires in the colonial regime.

For the nationalist leaders and their struggle against colonial rule, homosexuality was seen as an ‘aberration to Indian masculinity’. Scholars such as Ashish Nandy place the criminalisation of Oscar Wilde due to his ‘alleged homosexuality’ in a colonial context for ‘valorisation of masculinity’ (Nandy 1983). Mrinalini Sinha viewed this colonial contradictory tendency as,

“assigning *hyper virile masculinity* and thus degenerate sexuality to some colonised males (often associated with the lower class and caste, non-intellectual groups) and *hyper effeminacy* (often ironically associated with the colonised elite who were from the intellectual class) to others” (Sinha 1995, 19).

Further, the Victorian attitude towards sexual puritanism was amplified by release of *Mother India* (1927) by Katherine Mayo. She notes, “deviant sexuality is a characteristic of Indians and painted a ‘horrible picture of licentiousness’ among Hindus” (Mayo 1927, 22). However, the response to Mayo’s book from some Indian nationalists was to strongly reject the phenomenon of homosexuality in India, while another camp of nationalists acknowledged these practices but stated that this phenomena was imported during Islamic rule in India. This response can be best understood in context of what Ashish Nandy calls the ‘*Intimate Enemy*’- which he speaks about in his book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under*

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that one’s role during sexual act also asserted the kind of role the individual governs in their day to day life. So, if the British lords or at times soldiers engaged in same sex activities, if they took on the passive role, that was seen as emasculating not only for the individual but also for the regime as well.

Colonialism (1983). Nandy highlights the “internalising of the coloniser to the extent that the coloniser is, so to speak, inside the colonised’s own language, which sets up a common communication between the two” (Nandy 1983, 1-10). Colonialism, according to Nandy,

“alters the original cultural priorities on both sides and brings to the centre of the colonial culture sub-cultures previously received subordinate in the two confronting cultures. Concurrently the codes remove from the centre of each of the culture’s subcultures previously salient to them” (Nandy 1983, 2).

Nandy further analyses,

“the key change in consciousness which took place [with colonialism] can be stated in terms of three concepts which became central to colonial India: *purusatva* (the essence of masculinity), *naritva* (the essence of femininity), and *klibatva* (the essence of hermaphroditism). The polarity defined by the autonomous *purusatva* and *naritva* was gradually supplanted, in the colonial culture of politics, by the antonyms of *purusatva* and *klibatva*; femininity-in-masculinity was now perceived by as the final negation of man’s political identity, a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself” (Nandy 1983, 8).

Thus, under colonial regime the existing traditions of same-sex desire and forms of gender non-conformity and non-normativity were ignored and the past was constructed based on the ‘hyper-masculine’ principle. Nandy illustrates this with an example of Bankim Chandra’s essay on Lord Krishna where Bankim argues,

“In lieu of the new norms relating to sexuality, politics and social relationships... Krishna’s feminine traits become unacceptable, as Krishna was a respectable, righteous, didactic, ‘hard’ God protecting the glories of Hinduism as a proper religion” (Nandy 1983, 22).

The Nationalism of Bankim Chandra and Arya Samaj founder, Dayanand Saraswati was based on the complete erasure of a complex (queer) past, so that the values of virility, conquest and control could be glorified. This marked the shift in Indian literature in the colonial period with respect to the cultural self-perceptions (Arroyo 2010).

Besides attacking Hindu scriptures, the British ascension in India also prompted series of attacks on (homo) erotic Perso-Islamic texts which were deemed ‘filthy’ and the need for abridging them or complete removal. Kenneth Ballhatchet points towards the censorship that literature such as,

“‘The Arabian Nights’ faced as it was deemed ‘vulgar’ and full of the adventures of gallantry and intrigue, as well as of the marvellous... but the Hindu and especially the Muhammadan youth... gloats quite much on the former, to his own moral harm” (Ballhatchet 1980, 5).

Series of educational and legal reforms were then implemented by Thomas Macaulay, who designed the colonial education system and further introduced these reforms to check the vulgarity displayed by the Perso-Arabic texts, as well as on practices such as sodomy.

Scott Kugle highlights upon the introduction of cultural readjustments and revisionism to “expunge the literature of most erotic themes especially of homoerotic themes” (Kugle 2002, 38). The Victorian morality and puritan rhetoric were laid out and new forms of poetry and literature were encouraged under Colonial guidance to replace the earlier vulgar forms. According to Kugle,

“It was during these attempts for radical ‘ethical cleansing’ and revisionism, that works of poets such as Altaf Hussayn Hali (1837-1914) and Muhammad Husayn Azad were commissioned and encouraged, and it eventually led to figure of Sultan Mahmud Ghazna being emptied of homoerotic imagery” (Kugle 2002, 38-41).

Historians such as Anjali Arondekar provide a counterview to colonial ideas around sexuality as she attempts to place sexuality at the “centre of the colonial archive instead of the periphery” (Arondekar 2009, 3). This is done to recover the lost or silent histories from sites of suppression of (homo) erotic texts. In her seminal text *On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009), she mentions the famous case of *Queen Empress v Khairati*⁵⁹, which was one of the earliest cases of sodomy. For her, presence of homosexuality in “colonial archive is seen as both ‘obvious and elusive’” (Arondekar 2009, 14).

The Indian imagination of the nation-state, and the denunciation of homosexuality as ‘foreign’ and ‘other’, was not based on the sheer mimicking of a colonial discourse, but the

⁵⁹ In the case of *Queen Empress v. Khairati*, the police suspected the victim of being a eunuch, who dressed in women’s clothes and on occasions was found dancing and singing with women, and arrested him under Section 377. The court also observed that the accused was a regular sodomite, due to the medical reports which showed a distortion of his anal orifice as well as the accused’s feminine behaviour. The Court held that Section 377 punishes the act of sodomy, but the law did not prescribe a punishment for regular sodomite. In the above case, Khairati is framed as a ‘habitual sodomite’ whose sexual dalliances are seen under unnatural offences. Due to lack of evidence against Kharaiti, the earlier conviction against him gets overturned. However, this case set a precedent for further cases that were registered under Section 377. This constant attempt to erase the queer past in the colonial India was based on the needs of Indian nationalism. For more see Sehested, Ken (1999) ‘Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn’t’, in ‘Homosexuality and the Christian Faith (Walter Wink, ed.) Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p.60.

need to construct a 'virile' nation which could unshackle itself from the colonisers. What remained fascinating for Arondekar, and other scholars was the "anxiety of the Colonisers regarding sexual irregularities" (Arondekar 2009). The Victorian Puritanism along with anti-sex views towards non-normative sexualities had a major influence in the development of the Indian national identity. The following section examines the relationship of these homophobic anxieties with the anti-colonial struggle and process of nation building.

3. Nationalism and its Silences around Homosexuality

The mandate of Indian nationalism project during the freedom movement included the construction of a sexual citizen, who would represent the "superiority of Indian culture over Western culture" (Nandy 1983). Thus, the nationalist project in its construction of realms of private/public debate stressed on the "normative aspects of sexuality with idea of same-sex love viewed as 'perverse' and 'deviant', and to be discarded to construct the 'inner' as a realm of nationalist perfection" (Chatterjee 1993, 20). It was inevitable that the stress would be on perfecting the institution of heterosexual marriage and procreation, thereby marking the 'difference' from colonisers and their culture. This meant that the domain of sexuality was defined by the nationalist project using the idiom of colonisers. Hence, the constant marginalisation of same-sex tradition owes as much to the nationalism as it did to colonialism.

The views and moral panic over non-normative gendered and sexual behaviour espoused through Victorian morality had a major influence in the advancement of the national identity construction. As Bose and Bhattacharya point out, "questions of identity are complex to begin with, and they become even more so when one has to relate questions of sexual identities or preferences of national specificity" (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007, X). Narratives of sexuality underwent a great transformation during colonialism which shifted these discourses from the public to the private sphere. Partha Chatterjee emphasises on this "new amplified division between private and public life in Indian society which despite being a normative proposition of modernity was greatly exacerbated in India by the colonial presence" (Chatterjee 1993, 24).

The homophobia introduced during colonialism was further internalised by the modern Indian citizen. In order to regulate any sort of deviant behaviour, domestic spaces along with homosocial spaces such as army, schools and colleges were under 'constant state surveillance' (Nandy 1983). However, friendships among opposite sex were equally frowned upon by Nationalists, who saw this as a marker of western influence and found same sex friendships more acceptable. "This [space] allow[ed] homoerotically inclined individuals to develop ties of varying closeness with one another" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 198).

Similarly, narratives of sexualities underwent a great change during colonialism as there was fostering of homophobic myth that homosexuality was imported into India from somewhere else. "The British attacked the Muslims in particular for being disposed to the 'abominable vice 'of sodomy'" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 200) . Similarly, "Arabs argue that Persians introduced the vice, while Persians blame it on the Christian monks" (Nomani 1912 , 1970). As John Boswell shows in his work *Christianity, Social Intolerance and Homosexuality* (1980), "Anglo-Saxons blamed it on Normans who in turn blamed it on the French" (Boswell 1980, 52). Many deem that the "idea of and practice of same-sex love were imported into India by foreigners- Muslim invaders, European conquerors, or American capitalists" (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, XXXV).

British attacked any form of literature or oral repertoire that contained traces of (homo) erotic same-sex love and launched various revisionist campaigns to rid the existing texts of these abominable vices. The British revisionism commenced with attempts to purify the available literature especially, Urdu poetry. Urdu ghazals and nazms (prose poetry and rhymes) could be traced back to pre-colonial and colonial India, and writers of such novels or stories hardly confessed their sexual identity or politics publicly. Muhammad Zafiruddin in *Nasl Kushi* (1965) blames the Persians as well as the Shias for spreading this vice. Zafiruddin issues warning, that "this vice is spreading 'like a plague' in educational institutions" (Zafiruddin 1965). He further emphasises, "the need for surveillance over self and others-adolescent boys should be watched: friendship between men and boys is dangerous, and men should not even look at beautiful boys faces" (Zafiruddin 1965, 201). Similarly, through poets like Azad and Hali, campaigns to purify Urdu poetry from (homo) eroticism were carried out during the 19th century AD. However, counter movements were launched in 1936 by India's celebrated poet Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896-1982) who was known to be homosexual through his writings, while

he never identified himself as one. He wrote an essay defending the ghazal and arguing that “homosexual love is natural and universal” (Vanita 2005, 143). Similarly, Pandey Bechchan Sharma’s *Chaklet* (Chocolate, 1927), and Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* (The Quilt 1942), though based on (homo) erotic love stories drew widespread public attention and protest as well as counter protests.

Colonialism and Nationalism almost worked symbiotically in attempts to expunge homosexuality in India. The Indian identity remained contentious due to the “‘tradition versus modernity’ debate coupled with religious tension” (Dasgupta 2014). Anxieties about homosexuality and homoeroticism circulated in variety of spheres. An example is the collection of short stories titled *Chaklet* (*Chocolate*) by Pandey Bechain Sharma alias ‘Ugra’, which was published in 1924. Ugra (which means fiery or extreme) identified himself as a “nationalist and a social reformer” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 245). The collection of stories was aimed to denounce homosexuality, and when the title story was published in the Hindi weekly *Matvala*, it prompted massive controversy which further encouraged Ugra to write similar stories highlighting the issue. In the words of Ugra, “Chocolate is the name for those innocent tender and beautiful boys of the country whom society’s demons push into the mouth of ruin to quench their own lusts” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 247).

The full-page blurb for his controversial collection of stories *Chaklet*, compiled and published in 1924 read:

“This is a collection of those short stories by Ugra ji that will make you hold your breath/heart while reading them. This book which gives a stinging portrayal of the horrible consequences of the ever increasing misdeed of our society ‘laundebazi’⁶⁰. It has such an animated description of the devious strategies of their descriptive male demons, that after reading this, even the most innocent of boys of our society will be able to recognise these hellish creatures as soon as he sees them and not only will he be able to save himself from their seductions but also save the nation that, due to the

⁶⁰ C.M. Naini translates laundebaaz generally as a ‘pederast’, literally as a ‘boy player’ (2004:35). Similarly, Afsanch Najmabadi in her book *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards* (2005), while studying, ‘gender and sexual anxieties’ of turn of the nineteenth century ‘Iranian modernity’ revisits the historical figure of the amrad, that is not very different from launda in laundebaaz. Analysing the early Qajar paintings and poetry in Iran, she notes that they were ‘populated by the hur and more commonly by the ghilman (also referred to as amrads... beautiful young beardless men) who often double as wine servers...today.’ Shibli Nomani, provides similar evidences on same sex love in the Arabic tradition. In pre-modern and early modern Persian (male) homoerotic culture, an amrad was more often a young male, in contemporary usage an adolescent, although he could be in his early twenties, so long as he did not have a fully visible beard. For more read Gupta, Ankush (2012), *Pink Nights: The Queer (Male) Discotheques of Delhi and Music as the Site of Performance*, M.phil Thesis (unpublished), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

addictions of these rascals, is heading towards destruction. The biggest proof of the utility and the necessity of this book is the fact that its first edition was sold out in the brief period of two months. The price of this 216 page book, which is printed on excellent, thick antique paper has been kept at Rupee 1, only from the perspective of the dissemination of its message” (Gupta 2012).

Another candid self-confessed advertisement for *Chaklet* appeared in the third edition of Ugra’s epistolary novel *Chand Haseenon Ke Khutoot* (‘Letter of Some Beautiful Ones’) published later that year. The preface of *Chaklet* comprised of catalogue of allied bad habits, targeting not only an isolated transgression but an entire scene of social misdeeds:

“If adultery, going to prostitutes, alcoholism [‘sharab’ is ‘liquor’, ‘khori’, implying consumption is a device similar to ‘baazi’ or ‘khari’] is a major ail. As this society voices itself against those evils and openly debates and denounces them, similarly, it should also have public voices and criticism against this evil⁶¹” (Gupta 2012).

In these stories in the collection, the narrator is depicted as being repulsed by any kind non-normative sexuality or sexual conduct of the protagonist and his friend. Except for one, all the protagonists are respectable members of society, most of them are married and a couple of them even combat the narrator’s attempts to dissuade them from their same-sex desire. The narrator appeals to their conscience by quoting authors such as Tulsidas and giving examples as diverse as Krishna, Socrates, Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. In another story, a character denounces the western education system (especially the concept of boarding schools and residential universities) claiming, that he would rather kill his son than allow him to be educated in such a system (implication of being that such a system encourages homosexuality).⁶²

⁶¹ Ankush Gupta in his thesis *Pink Nights: The Queer (Male) Discotheques of Delhi and Music as the site of Performance* analyses “the concept of ‘Baazi’ and further terms like laundebaazi or chaklet panthi, as it is cast in the same mould as other allied form of indulgences that are to be targeted by what is here, at any rate, formally, even if it bluntly, articulated as a social reformist literary aim. Laundebaazi, for Ugra, is part of a constellation of the misdeeds of demonic, hellish men and becomes recognisable precisely as part of a piece with its mis-enscene of debauchery. It is positioned as another, albeit in this example a more intense, form of dissipation, compared to alcoholism or gambling along with which is listed”.

⁶² According to Ugra, following diktats were laid down by one of the protagonists from *Chaklet* regarding homosocial spaces such as schools:

1. The boarding system in schools should be banned by law.
2. The classrooms should be long and wide, open on each side, and every boy’s ‘seat’ should be at a minimum distance of two yards from other seats. ‘Bench system’ (the system where by many boys sit on the same bench should be removed.
3. A study of ethics should be set up (not a study of religions). There should also be little physical education.
4. Those masters and students, whose characters are a least bit suspicious, should be removed. The local inspector should have the right to remove teachers and the principal should have the right to remove students. For their help, a committee of serious men, of wholesome character, could also be set up.

One of the key things that the collection did, was not to represent the protagonists as “isolated character but rather as a part of a larger social milieu, with friends who both denounce and sympathise with his situation” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001). Vanita calls the publication of Ugra’s stories as “the first public debate on homosexuality in modern India” (Vanita 2009, XV). While the collection asserted to denounce homosexuality, and any deviant behaviour, many readers saw it as positive representations of same sex male love. She points out, “while wonderfully encapsulating how ineradicably Westernness is a part of modern Indian identity, it [Ugra’s stories] also works to ‘normalise’ male-male desire” (Vanita, Introduction 2002a, 132).

Although Ugra claimed that,

“he was denouncing homosexuality through these stories, he was lambasted for having brought forth such a subject in the public sphere through the medium of literature rather than the ‘*pamphleteering*’, with the stories being referred as *ghaasleti* (inflammatory) literature and Ugra himself becoming the subject of frequent abuse and insults” (Vanita, Introduction 2002a, 132).

In 1953, he published a new edition of *Chocolate* with forewords by himself and others, in which he was portrayed as a “selfless nationalist crusader” out to expose and exterminate the plague of homosexuality affecting Indian youth.

What remained contentious was the question of where homosexuality could then be placed within the revisionist paradigm. There was heterosexualization of ghazal, as well as

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5. The consumption of betel and of cigarettes should be stopped in schools. Even at home, there should be an effort that boys should remain away from these and other intoxicating substances.
 6. Boys of 20 years or less should watch only those films and plays that are based on bravery and patriotism for the nation.
 7. Obscene and provocative books like ‘Savaayar Katumedhis’, ‘Do Do Batein’, ‘Raat mein Saath’, ‘Tota Maine’ should be ceased. Those who sell nude and disgusting pictures openly in the market should be punished.
 8. Walking with your hands over the shoulders of boys who are 16 years of less should be declared a crime.
 9. Parents should stop the tendency towards luxury in their kids. They should not be made very dependent on the servants and the boys should be trained to become self-made.
 10. These sort of complains against the teachers should be filed in a permanent register that the local inspector should inspect from time to time.
 11. Parents should stop their boys from taking part in singing and dancing. Efforts should be made that prostitutes and others of ilk should not be called for communal and cultural programmes. See *ibid* 57-59.

“suppression of Rekhti poetry under Section 292⁶³, and criminalisation of non-normative sexualities under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code” (Dasgupta 2014, 665). A commission of experts in Persian and Urdu were appointed to complete the task of reformation. Most of the reformists were mainly Indian bourgeois intellectuals or poets who were either forced to earn a living in the colonial regime or to get substantial benefits under colonial regime (Kugle 2002). Scott Kugle comments that “the Anglo Oriental reformists aimed to elicit a new body of Urdu poetry in moral and natural themes thus cleansing poetry of obscene and homoerotic imagery” (Kugle 2002, 39).

According to Kugle, “British colonialism emptied all the metaphors and suggested symbolism of homoeroticism and replaced it with brotherly equality” (Kugle 2002, 42). Mahmud of Ghazna and Ayaz’s love, along with idioms of eroticism and slavery was rewritten by nationalist poet Muhammad Iqbal, as the one with ‘pious brotherhood’:

“Mahmud and Ayaz stand in the same row to pray
Neither of them was a slave and neither a master” (Kugle 2002, 41).

With India’s independence in 1947, conversations around homosexuality almost disappeared from the public discourse. According to Dasgupta, “If the national integration of India was made possible by imagining a common history and thus reaffirming the idea of ‘common citizenship’, sexuality with its heterogeneity, fractured the idea of a homogenous nation” (Dasgupta 2014, 665).

The hetero-patriarchal ideology of nationalism made any visible queer spaces almost non-existent, hence erasing any traces of queer sexuality out from the grand narrative of Indian nationalism. According to Jyoti Puri,

“nations and states uphold certain sexualities as respectable and others are abnormal or unacceptable; these individuals are inclined to construct their sexuality, often with unsatisfactory results, according to the mandates of the nation. Queer narratives have risen in organised contexts where truth claims are structured in competition with

⁶³ Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, makes it an offence to sell, distribute, circulate and publicly exhibit or even possess obscene content for public exhibition. Obscenity is defined as “any visual or written material that is ‘lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest’ or which has the effect of depraving or corrupting persons exposed to it” (Kapur, 1997). In equal terms, the “Indecent Representation of Women Act” (1986) conceives indecency as “the depiction of the figure of a woman as to have the effect of being indecent or is likely to deprave or corrupt people’s mind if their content is filthy, obscene or advertises, writes indecent materials or sings and performs immorally in public is liable to be fined or punished with imprisonment (Horizons, 1999).

hegemonic discourses of the nation state. In these queer narratives... not only the politics of nationalisms but also transnational cultural discourses are evident” (Puri 1999, 174).

Vanita and Kidwai reflect upon an interesting letter from Mahatma Gandhi, one of the prime architects of modern India. In a letter written and published in 1929 for *Young India*, he refers to “homosexuality as an ‘unnatural vice’, but complicates it by suggesting that there is no difference between homosexual and heterosexual lust. Gandhi also points out that, unnatural though the vice is it has come down to us from time immemorial” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 255).

According to Rohit Dasgupta, “the post-independence narrative around Indian nationalism can be divided in to two major phases. The idea of secular nationalism advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru, that can be traced up till 1970s to rise of right-wing fundamentalism in the 1980s” (Dasgupta 2014, 665). This idea owes mainly to India’s key integrative policies along with affirmative action plans under the Congress government. However, with the unpopularity of Mrs. Indira Gandhi following her implementation of emergency in 1975-1977 led to massive disrepute for Congress Party, and guided the ‘rise of Hindu nationalism under the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)’ (Nandy 1983; Varshney 1993). Under the Nationalist movement in the 1970s marked another shift in India’s history that as noted by Shakuntala Rao,

“constrained self-identification for same-sex desiring citizens, where nationalists had to set out to prove their distinction from and equality with the West through modernisation and tradition; nationalists shifted to a more aggressive and masculine identity, returning to their ‘roots’ by reconstructing old visions of India’s glory through conservative Hinduism” (Rao 1999, 321).

In presenting the nationalist party’s rhetoric surrounding the ideal Indian woman as the main symbol which is manipulated and subverted without looking at how it was actually understood by the public. The BJP has been utilising the dormant Hindu fear that nation was in danger from the political demands presented by the minorities...which had the potential to disintegrate the country to develop a ‘powerful rhetoric of Hindu Nationalism centred on Hinduism’ (Ghosh 1999).

Idioms of same-sex love disappeared due to ‘Victorian Puritanism’ and were further rejected through modern nationalist homophobia. One can see how the “desires and lives were sought to be controlled by the Siamese twins of nationalism and colonialism” (Narain 2004, 45).⁶⁴ One can venture to guess and debate whether there was a space for same-sex affiliations as long as marriage and subsequent procreation was fulfilled. As long as the ‘outer’ domain of sexuality, i.e. being married and having children, was fulfilled, there was no stigma around ‘closeted homosexuality’ in the inner realm. In this context, India has been described by anthropologists as a ‘shame culture’ rather than ‘guilt culture.’⁶⁵

Several temples and sculptures from Konark and Khajuraho to literary texts such as Kamasutra and numerous literatures contain enough references to substantiate evidences that ancient India and medieval India was much more accommodating of the range of sexual behaviours. This went against the grain of the heteronormative monogamous institution of marriage which was seen as the only way for individuals to engage in sexual behaviour. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India went so far as to claim, “that homosexual behaviour was an aberration introduced into India in the British Colonial period” (Vanita 2005, 269). Ruth Vanita further argues that “this desire to rewrite India’s past as one of normative purity is in part, the result of defensiveness against Western attempts to exoticize that past as one of the unbridled sexuality” (Vanita 2005, 269). This was specifically aimed at the “decadence of Indian princes who were described as ‘ignorant and rather undisciplined’” (Ballhatchet 1980, 119).

However, it is interesting to observe that many scholars such as Ashish Nandy use ideas such as ‘queer effeminacy’ as well as ‘anti-masculine’ image of Mahatma Gandhi to critique homophobia induced by colonialist forces (Nandy 1983, 45). He further asserts, “it was

⁶⁴ Hindu nationalists were also anxious about their ‘queer past’. The western epithet of India being the ‘land of Kamasutra’ was met with unease and shame. These anxieties, as I have explained were a response to the colonial educationist’s attacks on the constructs of Indian masculinity and sexuality.

⁶⁵ While individuals across India have been shamed for their choices be it matters of love or sex, caste, class, gender, religion so on and so forth, individuals are especially shamed if they supposedly exhibit deviant sexual behaviour which is non-normative or doesn’t conform to societal standards. This makes shame culture insistent and guilt culture suggestive. Guilt culture is specifically exhibited in case of non-normative sexuality where the individuals besides being shamed for their choices have to live with the guilt of not being able to cope with their non-normativity, struggling to come out if they are queer or the fact that they have let their family’s name down. In our times, modernity provides the opportunity for an increase in the power of the individual. When one gains power over their “selves,” the idea of this power becomes ingrained into the psyche of the society, until finally, the Eastern paradigm becomes more like the Western, the Western more like the Eastern and the individual chooses to deal with these feelings independently, rather than as any particular culture dictates.

colonial India... still preserving something of its androgynous cosmology and style, which ultimately produced a transcultural protest against the hyper-masculine world view of colonialism in the form of Gandhi (Nandy 1983, 45).”

Late 1970s and early 1980s saw the phenomenon of individuals confessing their sexual identities through their writings. Women writers such Kamala Das, who wrote her autobiographical account in her magnum opus *‘My Story’* (1976) depicted vignettes of Das’s life which includes an extramarital affair, her adolescent infatuation with a female teacher, and a brief lesbian encounter with an elder student during her time in boarding school. The story saw traces of same-sex love, but despite the self-confession of the writer of her affair with a woman, it was dismissed as a phase and never been acknowledged in the literary circles as something serious. The first academic book on Indian homosexuals appeared in 1977 titled *‘The World of Homosexuals’* by Shakuntala Devi, who was also known as the human computer due to her mathematical and analytical abilities. Similarly, Shobha De considered as the pioneer in the chic-lit genre (Chic literature) penned her novel *Strange Obsession* in 1993. In her novel, the female protagonist, Amrita has a torrid lesbian affair with the antagonist called ‘Minx’. The novel highlights ‘lesbianism as vice’, a vice that can only be expunged by marriage. Shobha De has time and again refuted homosexuality as an aberration from the West, and has been at times referred to as a ‘liberal homophobe’ in literary circles.

In late 1980s till end of 1990s, many authors engaging with the subject of homosexuality, ‘came out’ through their writing. These confessions were either written as part of the subtext of their work, or were presented upfront in the preface, acknowledgement or acknowledgement section of their books. This included authors⁶⁶ and filmmakers of Indian origin who were born and brought up in the western academic and professional world. Scott Summers (1995) points out that the relative openness of this small group of writers was perhaps largely due to their diasporic locations. According to Summer,

⁶⁶ Most important among them were the works of “Suniti Namjoshi (*The Conversation of Cow*, 1985; *Because of India* 1989); Pratibha Parmar (*Khush* 1991, *Queer Looks* 1993); Rakesh Ratti (*A Lotus of Another Color*, 1993) from India and Shyam Selvadurai (*Funny Boy*, 1974; *Cinnamon Gardens*, 1999) from Sri Lanka”. For more see For more read Gupta, Ankush (2012), *Pink Nights: The Queer (Male) Discotheques of Delhi and Music as the Site of Performance*, M.phil Thesis (unpublished), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, pp 10-15.

“They (authors) live in either the United States or Britain, countries that have well-established gay and lesbian communities with a tradition of organised resistance and therefore have a greater sexual and artistic freedom and wider publishing opportunities. Further, their physical separation from family and community probably gives them privacy and greater freedom from culturally imposed constraints.” (Summers 2001, 667).

Summer further asserts,

Since the mid-1980s, many young gay and lesbian South Asians living in the metropolitan cities of Europe and North America as well as in India began to “assert their presence by forming support groups, begun partly in response to the racism they encounter in predominantly white queer communities of the West. Many of the groups regularly publish newsletters, such as *Shakti Khabar* (London), *Trikone* (San Jose), *Shamakami* (San Francisco), and *Khush Khayal* (Toronto), which have subscribers in many countries of South East Asia. These publications seek to link South Asian queer individuals as well as communities scattered around the world and to help forge a South Asian Queer identity” (Summers 2001, 667).

Interestingly, despite the impact of globalisation and neo-liberalism that opened its way to new form of sexualities and sexual conduct, twentieth century India still frames same-sex desires as an import from the West. Structured by this myth, “most twentieth century texts that represent same sex desire, strive to reinforce an imagined pure Indian-ness of manhood or womanhood” (Vanita, Introduction 2002a, 127). It is pivotal to insist that “modernity in India has not necessarily been a liberating phenomenon” (Menon 2005). It has either homogenised or altogether erased spaces and subjectivities. The all accommodating nature that is also an inherent part of Indian culture saw a massive change after the advent of colonialism, with struggles to fit different form of sexualities and identities within a ‘modernising’ nationalist rhetoric.

The next chapter attempts to trace formation of an imagined (queer) community through mainstream print media covered the stories related to the queer community between 1990s till late 2000s, and got homosexuality out of the closet post neoliberalization in India.

Chapter-2

Print Media and Imagined (Queer) Communities in Neoliberal India

Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to (re)work with Benedict Anderson's idea of 'imagined communities' to locate how mainstream print media covered the stories related to the queer community between 1990s till late 2000s, and got homosexuality out of the closet.⁶⁷ The idea of community formation- with its fractures and all- were made possible by critically examining the concept of community itself in the early 1990s.

By accessing various archives and libraries housed in NGOs like *Humsafar Trust*, *Sappho for Equality*, *Nazariya* etc. along with several personal collections, I examine the coverage of LGBT-related stories. I limit the study in this chapter to only the English language press because of its readership and reach within the middle class. I emphasise on stories that are predominantly metropolitan centric with emphasis on Delhi and Mumbai although I attempt to draw upon stories pan India, whenever needed. While this is not a comprehensive survey but more of an analysis of the stories that were published and how the community was represented through them, this chapter attempts to analyse the media coverage in Hindi and other Indian vernacular languages besides English.⁶⁸

One of the phenomenon I examine is, how the imagination and practices of the queer community in India have been produced through what Naisargi Dave asserts as, "series of 'transnational textual mediations'- mediations that, are then at times blurred due to the moral politics of authenticity required to be imbued within a nascent community with a sense of coherence and political necessity" (Dave 2012, 34).

⁶⁷ In describing this social world as an 'imagined community', I draw on Benedict Anderson's understanding of imagined community in which "members...will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds of each, lives the image of their communion" (1991:6). Anderson's view that "community" is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" is what I am attempting to interrogate here.

⁶⁸ Post 2009 Delhi High Court judgment that was overturned in 2013 by the Supreme Court of India, several attempts have been undertaken to work with the existing archives and digitising them and making them available online for availability to larger audiences. Blogs such Queer Media Watch (<http://qmediawatch.wordpress.com/about/>) , orinam.net and various NGOs working with the LGBT community are attempting to create digital archives for the same.

As a methodology of this chapter, I rely primarily upon Naisargi Dave's work titled "*Queer Activism in India: A Story of Anthropology of Ethics (2012)*", where she sees normalising of exclusionary practices central to production and operation of political communities. This chapter is also an ode to long history of struggle within feminist and post-colonial scholarship.

Works of scholars like Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1983); and Shane Phelan (1989) all indicate towards the adverse racial, sexual, socio-political class based exclusions inherent in the notion, while addressing the "idea of community of women within the North American Feminist Activism" (Dave 2012, 210). In context of transnational activism, I refer to works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) (1991), Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (1991) that encourage decolonising representational and political practices of feminism in Third world nations. In the field of anthropology, works of David Valentine (2007) extends this feminist critique of political identification operating within largely white, cisgender feminist groups, that are at times "racist and trans* exclusionary or TERF (trans* exclusionary radical feminist)" (Valentine 2007). Valentine details this complex identity politics around the transgender community and various strategies and resistance employed by trans* community in New York to create a "community of their own" within largely divisive queer spaces (Valentine 2007).

Dave's critique of "community" further aids in my research in understanding various exclusionary practices within non-normative communities as reflected within the rise of queer community in India in the pre-1990s and post neo-liberalisation in 1991. In this chapter, I attempt to construct a timeline (in chronological fashion) of important events and issues in the post-neoliberal India in terms of creating queer history; and how it was marked by change in attitudes and beliefs amongst the newly emerging middle-class Indian society during that time span. The late 80s and 90s witnessed an attitudinal change among the anglicised elites as well as the emerging middle classes around various discourses around homosexuality. From its introduction within the media as a social taboo to various stereotypes it still holds, the media helped to catapult queerness into the English-speaking Indian mainstream consciousness. I draw from Arjun Appadurai's argument that,

"lives are now inextricably linked with representations, and thus we need to incorporate the complexities of expressive representation (film, novels, travel

accounts) into our ethnographies, not only as technical adjuncts but as primary material with which to construct and interrogate our own representations” (Appadurai 1996, 63-64) (emphasis mine).

I follow this method, by examining various representation in print media news reports, news magazines and even practices of letter writing etc. that I have discussed in this chapter. I begin this chapter by addressing critical questions that frame this chapter: firstly, how the identity categories such as lesbian, gay etc. emerged, were identified, called into being and variously adopted within print media? In this specific case, how did men and women in India begin to think of themselves as gay and lesbian, and did media coverage construct a timeline of important events and issues in neo-liberal queer history?; what were the useful markers of the changing attitudes and beliefs within the various classes within Indian society during that time span? This chapter would then be an attempt to map the discourse around homosexuality in the Indian media and how it propelled queerness into English speaking Indian mainstream consciousness- or at times became a “vitriolic weapon to propagate the idea of reproductive hetero-normativity as the way forward” (Appadurai 1996).

Secondly, this chapter attempts to bring out the aesthetic vocabularies, strategies and concerns that are employed in these shifting narratives of non-normative sexuality within English language dailies as well as magazines. It examines how various representations saw both positive and negative portrayals that further pushed the community to come up with alternative modes of narratives by coming out with their own journals such as *LABIA's Scripts* targeting LBT population of the country and magazines like '*Bombay Dost*' that primarily targeted gay men. One would notice that specific themes such as issues about family, coming out, being gay in India, and so on, constantly repeat themselves in this chapter's examination of print coverage of the same.

2.1 Press Coverage of Gay-related issues prior to 1991: From Ugra to Ashok Row Kavi

As indicated in Chapter-1, there was a huge media uproar around the year 1927 due to the release of Ugra's *Chocolate*- a compilation of short stories in Hindi dealing with homosexuality. Ruth Vanita writes that, “this was probably the first instance of widespread public debate in the local Indian press on the topic” (Vanita 2001). This was followed by the infamous obscenity case in 1944 over Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt). In 1942, Chughtai published in the journal *Adab-I-Latif*, the tale which “depicts sex between a

neglected wife and her maidservant, witnessed by a horrified girl. It is indicated that Begum Jaan, tired of her husband's infidelity and neglect turns to her maidservant; as the affair unfolds, it is witnessed by a horrified adolescent niece" (Saleem Kidwai 2001).

Besides scattered news stories here and there, media coverage of gay-related issues was exceptionally rare in India prior to 1991. These would be either limited to the occasional letters to editor, or the gay readers would write to 'advice-seeking' columns usually responded by subject experts. Most of the incidents reported around queer sexuality would portray homosexuals either as "victims or as perpetrators" (Russo 1981). In 1977, the English bi-weekly magazine *India Today* was able to interview couple of gay men about their day to day struggles with law enforcing authorities. Most of the respondents included men who identified as homosexual, few as MSM (Men who have sex with men), and some married men with children. These men reported gay-bashing, extortion and even sexual assault as their everyday reality. Interestingly, most of the men interviewed were coming from the margins of the society.

In 1977 an interview was published of a man who just identified himself as SK, the then president of a now-defunct organisation '*Laundebaaz-i-Hind*' (Homosexuals in India), in August issue (15-31 August 1977) of now-defunct *Onlooker* magazine. The piece wasn't accompanied with any photograph of this individual as he preferred to remain anonymous and this generated a lot of curiosity among the readers. Queer rights activist Mario D'Penha describes this historic moment in his blog *Historiqueer* as:

"...It was perhaps the first time in post-colonial India that an open articulation for a more positive recognition of homosexuals by the law was being made. Although, SK was asking for legalisation and not decriminalisation, which seems to be more legally sound term (and since the original interview was translated by the magazine from Hindustani to English, there is a chance that this may have been lost in translation), I believe it is very significant that the linkage between harassment, the law and law-enforcement was being made and was publicly articulated in 1977" (Penha 2004).

D'Penha writes that SK stumps the interviewer and readers alike as he breaks every stereotype that one associates with homosexuals...

"Here is 6 feet tall, 28-year-old Muslim young man, someone who is 'very masculine' and has a 'deep bass voice' and 'looks anything but a homosexual', but is so articulately flamboyant anyway, that he leaves you in complete and utter awe" (Penha 2004).

The interview had highly controversial statements made by SK regarding presence of homosexuality in India. The interview first appeared in Hindustani and then was translated in multiple languages. Here are some of the excerpts from the interview:

“इंडिया में एक करोड़ से भी ज्यादा समलैंगिक है, यह कोई छोटी संख्या नहीं है? हमारे समुदायों में कवी, कलाकार, फिल्मस्टार और लेखक है, फिर भी हमें गुंडे और पुलिस पकड़ कर पीटते है। देश में इस समय ईसाइयों से ज्यादा समलैंगिक है। फिर भी हमें लोग सुकून से नहीं रहने देते । यह कैसा इन्साफ है भाई?”

(There are more than one crore homosexuals living in India, it's not a small number, right? In our community, there are poets, artists, film stars and writers, still we are beaten up by goons as well as the police. Right now, the population of homosexuals is higher than the Christians in India).

“सबसे बड़े गुनेहगार है शिव सेना वाले है। लालबाग में रहने वाले मेरे कुछ दोस्तों ने बताया है की शिव सेना के लड़के उन्हें प्यार का लालच देते है। फिर उनके साथ सेक्स करते है और फिर उन्हें पीटते है। उनके सारे पैसे लूट लेते है। इसका रुकना बहुत जरूरी है। ऐसा कर वो क्या दीखाना चाहते है? क्या यह उनके मर्दागनी दिखने का एक तरीका है । ”

(The biggest culprit right now is the Shiv Sena members. Some of my friends from Lalbagh district told me how Shiv Sena members bait the young gay men, lure them with promises of long-term partnership, have sex with them and beat them and extort money out of them. This needs to stop! What do they want to show, is this a way to show their toxic masculinity?)

“लौण्डेबाज़ जरा डरपोक होते है। डूंडो तह बड़े छुपेरुस्तम भी निकलेंगे। अपनी समलैंगिकता को माने वाले हिन्दू कम होते है, मुस्लिम और ईसाई ज्यादा होते है। ”

(Homosexual men are usually coward but if you know them well, they are also dark horses, Hindu men are in denial of their homosexuality, while Muslims and Christians embrace it with ease and are larger in number).

“सरकार को समलैंगिकता को लीगल कर देना चाहिए। हम यही चाहते है। ”

(We want the government to legalise homosexuality).

मराठी और केरल के लड़के सबसे अचे प्रेमी होते है। नार्थ इंडिया वालो को अपनी मर्दागनी की चिंता सताती है। वह सोचते है की लौंडेबाज़ बनने से उनकी मर्दागनी खतम हो जाती है।

(The best lovers are usually from Maharashtra and Kerala. North Indian men are too concerned with their masculinity, they think that indulging in gay sex would destroy their masculinity).

औरतें मर्दों के नीचे होती है, हमेशा उनका ध्यान खींचने की कोशिश करती है । आदमी और औरत का प्यार खुदगर्ज होता है। दो मर्दों का प्यार ही सच्चा होता है।

(Women are beneath men, they always try to seduce them and hence, the love between a man and a woman is selfish, however true love exists between two men).

1977 also saw the release of Shakuntala Devi's book *The World of Homosexuals*.⁶⁹ Devi who was lauded for her efforts in the field of mathematics and early prototype of computers, delves into socio-political, cultural, juridical, scientific, anthropologic as well as the religious aspects, as she analyses presence of homosexuality through history of India. She draws parallel with gay revolution post Stonewall riots in America in 1969 and other similar incidents in the West with the help of statistics as well as personal accounts. Devi issues a disclaimer in the preface of the book, as she argues that she is "neither a homosexual nor a social scientist, psychologist or a psychiatrist. My only qualification for writing this book is that I am a human being" (Devi, 1977:vi).

Through her work, she attempts to fight the power of ignorance, hate, prejudice, discrimination and even criminalisation of homosexuality in Indian law, and "valiantly challenge the existing heteronormativity" (Arroyo 2010, 72). On the other hand, she accepts that the hindsight would involve her being 'labelled as a homosexual herself' but that doesn't stop her from,

"hinting at renowned professionals from the field of scientific research, who in the name of scientific temper⁷⁰, have contributed to the abhorrent and disdainful vision of homosexuality" (Arroyo 2010, 72).

However, the homophobic attitudes remained evident not only in works of fiction and non-fiction but also in English media and more so in vernacular language press. The national level media especially English press in lieu of keeping itself abreast with secular media in the West, and not to appear retrogressive were carrying stories with both positive and negative discourses on homosexuality. The English media attempted to contemplate and interpret contemporary Indian phenomenon in the light of both. The women's movement in India did set a trend and received positive coverage within Indian media, and so did individuals who

⁶⁹ In 1992, Arvind Kala publishes *Invisible Minority: The Unknown World of the Indian Homosexual*, which, like Shakuntala Devi's essay, takes an anthropologic perspective.

⁷⁰ Scientific Temper, a term coined by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his book 'Discovery of India' refers to a practice of "logical and rational thinking in an individual's daily life". Nehru in his writings, urged the newly independent Indian nation to employ scientific temper in their daily lives, as part of the nation building exercise. Scientific temper also became a key measure to rid the Indian society of various social evils and superstitions such as child marriage, female foeticide, child marriage, sati etc.

were involved in the nascent gay liberation movement. However, vernacular press was overtly hostile to anything they label “Western” and were explicitly “anti-sex” and equally “homophobic”.

2.2 Press Coverage of Homosexuality Related Issues Between 1991-2017

The Press coverage of gay and lesbian related issues in the Indian English language press in this period covered mostly four themes, which I categorise as:

- a) Being Gay and Lesbian in India
- b) Coming out stories
- c) Queer Activism
- d) Changing public perceptions

2.2(a) Being Gay and Lesbian in India

Throughout the late 1970s to early 1980s, English language press reportage on major gay related topics were fuelled by the paranoia created by AIDS epidemic in the West. This was followed by various ‘coming out’ stories of celebrities such as Elton John, Rock Hudson, and Freddie Mercury (dying of AIDS related complications) along with tennis legends Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova to historical figures ranging from Michelangelo, Tchaikovsky, Christopher Isherwood, who found themselves in feature articles and cover stories. This would be followed by mentions and achievements from the gay liberation movement within the West regarding pride parades, change in legislations, and at times same-sex unions.

When it came to stories within Indian society, the reports usually had a sensational theme from news stories ranging from ‘coming out’ stories to double suicides by young women who were torn apart by family pressure. These reports were at times sympathetic in nature but mostly marred by sensational aspects of it, and would not have a follow up stories accompanying it. Also, there would be reviews of various Western novels as well as films or plays produced or showcased in Indian cities that had even a hint of homosexual and homoerotic content appeared in press. Most of the English dailies varied in their coverage of the stories, attempting to maintain a liberal undertone but failing to acknowledge the phenomenon to anything remotely Indian. Rarely, a feature or a cover story on a homosexual

Indian historical figure would appear, but under suggestive titles such as “A Youthful Folly” (Hindustan Times, February 27, 1983).

The press would use “euphemism for celebrities such as the novelist Aubrey Menen to implicitly suggest their homosexuality” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001). In a letter to the editor, a reader wrote a scathing response to an earlier article published after Menen’s death that described Graham Hall, his lover/partner of twenty years as a “friend”. The magazine responded by publishing the letter with a photo of the two men captioned “Hall and Menen: Friends and Lovers” (Illustrated Weekly, March 5 and 19, 1989). However, when a small press report mentioned “Madame Helena Blavtsky’s possible lesbianism, a disgruntled theosophist vehemently protested against such ‘slander’” (Hindustan Times, August 1 and 7, 1981). Any undertones of homosexuality and homoeroticism would be vehemently denied by reporters, readers and critics alike, who saw “homosexuality as a western phenomenon” (Bachcheta 1999).

Sunday Magazine published a cover story on lives of Indian homosexuals in August 1988, titled *‘The Love that Dare not Speak its Name: A Journey through the Secret World of the Indian Homosexual’* by Mukund Padmanabhan (Padmanabhan 1988). The cover story was a comprehensive account of the gay environment prevalent within the country then. It comprised of interviews with gay men, their families, lists of hangouts for the gay community in major Indian cities. Issues encountering

“Gay men at home and at work fronts, the societal pressure to marry, the looming AIDS crisis, alleged practice of homosexuality in Indian prisons, class and caste differences, extortion and harassment in the hands of police, gay prostitution and lack of social networks amongst gay men” (Padmanabhan 1988).

Post 1990s, newspaper and magazine articles on existence of homosexuality in India began to appear on a regular basis. Most of my interviewees who were in their 30s and 40s in the 1990s marked this decade as a ‘positive marker of change’. Interviewees from this age group spoke about their isolation while growing up and dearth of reference material for them to access, as well as lack of representation of queerness in mainstream media. Most of them had to turn to reference libraries to subscribe to international magazine like *Time* or to newspapers like *The Guardian* for narratives on sexuality. However, for my respondents in their twenties, access to information about sexuality was not much of an issue but most of

them were irked with the representation of homosexuality in city tabloids like *Mid-day* and *Bombay Times*, along with national newspapers and wide range of magazines.

Some of these newspaper articles had a positive tone while covering issues like homosexuality and same-sex desires. Gentleman Magazine did a cover story by Shridhar Raghavan in August 1991 issue titled “*Gay: Everything you wanted to know about Homosexuality but were afraid to Find Out*” (Raghavan 1991). The writer does an elaborate and well researched feature article, and traces the origins of homosexuality down the ages from Greek mythology to Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra* along with its existence in India, and covers myriad issues ranging from theories on what makes people homosexual, the Kinsey report, the difference between homosexuality, queerness and being gay. He concludes his feature by declaring, “...nothing matters, not even object of one’s affections, whether it is man, woman, stone, tree, animal, music, ashtrays, penguins...nothing. Pure love-love for love’s sake itself...” (Raghavan 1991).

However, not all media representation was kind to the queer community, Sunday Mail Magazine cover story ‘*Homosexuality: A Thorny Issue (1991)*’ by Madhumita Ghosh reaffirms the negative stereotypes attached with the queer community- and laments the loss of India’s “*close knit family structure*”, and holds Western decadence responsible for the malice of homosexuality. It further asserts the “need of psychoanalysis, conversion therapy and behaviour modification theory as possible treatments for the ‘habit’” (Ghosh 1991). It ends with a premonition and a dire warning to those practicing this vice stating that “the *gay* is more vulnerable to AIDS because most of them do not stick to a single partner” (Ghosh 1991).

Mid-Day’s ‘*I Want my Sex*’ by Anusha Srinivasan published in August 1993 was a biased piece of journalistic work, as it was full of ill-informed facts, replete with negative stereotypes about homosexuality and saw gay men as sexual predators. The Mid-Day feature talks about two gay men- Shailendra and Rafiul. The journalist paints Shailendra as gay because of his “*childhood fetish of crossdressing in his sister’s clothes*”, while Rafiul becomes the classic Freudian subject as he became gay because he was abused as a child “at the hands of his homosexual uncle, which led to his ultimate disorientation” (Srinivasan 1993).

In the 1990s journals like *Economic and Political Weekly* carried various stories as well as essays regarding homosexuality in India. One of the essays titled “*Gay Rights in India*” by Vimal Balasubrahmanyam (EPW, February 3, 1996) pointed to the “conundrum of both right and left wing unequivocally opposing homosexuality and calls on civil societies and liberties organisations to support the Naz petition for repeal of Section 377” (Vanita and Kidwai 2001, 206). This essay further elicited a one-and-a-half-page response titled “*Natural is not Always Rational*” by columnist H. Srikanth. Srikanth states that, “homosexuality is ‘backward and reactionary’, just like sati, polygamy, and the caste system: he further argues that like incest, homosexuality may be ancient and widespread but nevertheless immoral in nature” (Srikanth 1996).

He takes this a step further and combines ‘xenophobia and homophobia’ (similar to Bacchetta’ idea of xenophobic queerophobia), condemning Indian media’s attempts for reporting on gay liberation movements across West and labels it as “decadent bourgeois... encouraging all deviant forms of sexual relations” (Srikanth 1996). He concludes his article with malicious and suggestive undertones stating,

“Marxists... stand for heterosexuals, monogamous relations and proscribe all deviant forms of sexual relations, including homosexuality... Marxists try to change sexual behaviour through education...if some people much against public conscience take to the streets on the plea that they have the right to gratify their sexual urges in any way they like, Marxists do not hesitate to use of force against such homosexual activists” (Srikanth 1996,975-976).

Srikanth’s concerns were supported by right wing intellectual like Swapan Dasgupta, who makes similar argument in the aftermath of release of Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*. Condemning activists who carried the placards stating “Indian and Lesbian”, Dasgupta writes,

“Thievery, deceit, murder, and other IPC defined offences have a long history. That doesn’t elevate them to the level of heritage...Homosexuality may have found mention in some ancient manual and even depicted (sic) in a temple carving or two, but as in the promiscuous West, it was a preference, that was greeted with tolerant disapproval. It was always an alternative to marriage and family but never a socially acceptable option” (India Today, December 21, 1998).

For K, a 55-year-old gay man, 1990s ushered the age of queerness and sexuality, in a personal interview, he remarked:

“Change is the only constant, and even conversations around homosexuality took a lot of time. In the 1990s, magazines were writing feature stories on ‘Wow! Homosexuals exist in India’. Now their articles cover in-depth issues and more insights about the gay community. Yes, we are still struggling with issues of representation but at least more and more stories about being gay in India are coming.”

(Interview with K, 23 November 2017).

By the end of 1990s, one sees an articulation of a wider range of issues concerning being gay in India. There are many opinion pieces that appear in newspaper and magazines regarding ‘acceptance of homosexuality as a part of the Indian society’ (Khan 1993; Rao 2002). In 1998, India Today published a cover story titled “*Sex, Lies, Matrimony*” written by Vijay Jung Thapa and Sheela Raval as they reflect upon the changing norms of acceptance within the medical community across the country, with counsellors advising their clients to not enter “marriage of convenience’ and rather ‘stay single and assert their identity” (Thapa and Raval 1998). The cover story further estimates the “number of gay populations in India to be 13 million and claims that 10.4 million of these are married” (Thapa and Raval 1998).

*I Want to Break Free*⁷¹ in *Society* magazine became one of the first cover stories which interviewed the parents of gay children and articulates their hopes, fears and concerns about their children’s sexuality. One of the parents quote in this story, “Love means acceptance. Bottom line is that I want my child to be happy. Unfortunately, the social reality makes this difficult” (Roy and Sen 2002). Other interesting and related articles dealt with medical and mental health issues plaguing the gay community (Maddox 2003); extortion of gay men on the internet by con artists and police alike (Pate 2004) to Roman Catholic church’s position on the possibility of homosexuality amongst its priests.⁷²

Though, these were few instances of positive representation and validation of queer existence in India, most of the news coverage covering issues around homosexuality was marred by misrepresentations by the Press. “*Gay couple stabs each other*” describes the tragic suicide pact carried out to its conclusion by two men in 1992, “*following the non-recognition of their marriage by society*” (Reporter 1992). Similarly, “*Lesbians’ death wish*”, a feature story, covered reports of 24 women committing suicide across Kerala, “belonging mostly from

⁷¹The authors of this story said they were inspired to use this title as a homage to classic rock British band Queen’s popular track ‘I want to Break free’, as Queen’s lead singer Freddie Mercury was bisexual and died of AIDS related complication and struggled with his sexuality all through his life.

⁷²No Gay Priests, We’re Indians, Mid-Day, 6 August 2003, for more see <http://web.mid-day.com/news/city/2003/august/60407.htm>

marginalised communities, especially Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims committed suicide in Kerala between the years 1998-2004” (Babu 2004).

Another sensational story that grabbed the front-page coverage was murder of USAID employee Pushkin Chandra in Delhi in August 2004 along with his close aid Vishal. The initial coverage highlighted discovery of naked bodies of the victims in Chandra’s home but as the follow up stories revealed much deeper web of sex and lies. The police also recovered at least “100 nude photographs, of several gay men from Delhi and adjoining areas, who have said to have participated in several orgies with him” (Correspondent 2004). The case took a sinister turn as it was revealed that “Pushkin and Vishal might have been killed by one of the men who they might have roped in for orgies, out of disgust” (Dasgupta 2004). Journalist Vikram Doctor in his Times of India op-ed claims this to be ‘a gay panic defence’⁷³, as he writes,

“one wonders why the killers of Pushkin are still bothering to hide as the Delhi police is working through their tame media contacts has given them their defence. They simply need to claim that they were lured into the gay sex networks that we are told trap young men like this and forced into doing what they did” (Doctor 2002).

He further adds that these murders are latest in the string of criminal extortion and blackmail cases and police should “focus on locking up the perpetrators instead of shaming the victim and using 377 against them” (Doctor 2002). Though Pushkin’s case remains one of the most publicised, but there are several other high-profile gay murder cases that media have used as a page one bait.

⁷³ Gay panic defence is a “rare legal strategy which refers to a situation when a heterosexual man charged with murdering a gay man can claim that the assailant panicked and killed a person under temporary insanity or in self-defence when provoked by unwanted same sex advance of the deceased. One of the most common defences in case of homophobic violence which results in death of a gay man or woman, this defence have been used in courtroom for acquittal or reduction of sentence of an accused charged with murder. The premise of acquittal is on grounds that reinforce and at times promote negative stereotypes against gay men or women as they are established as sexual predators. In a recent verdict by Bombay High Court, a life imprisonment sentence given to a man accused of killing a suspected gay man was turned down on account of gay panic defence used by the defender, as the life imprisonment sentence given to the accused was reduced and accused was later acquitted”. For more read Bombay HC accepts ‘gay panic defence’, reduces murder term of city man by Shibu Thomas. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/bombay-high-court-accepts-gay-panic-defence-reduces-murder-term-of-city-man/articleshow/65523280.cms>

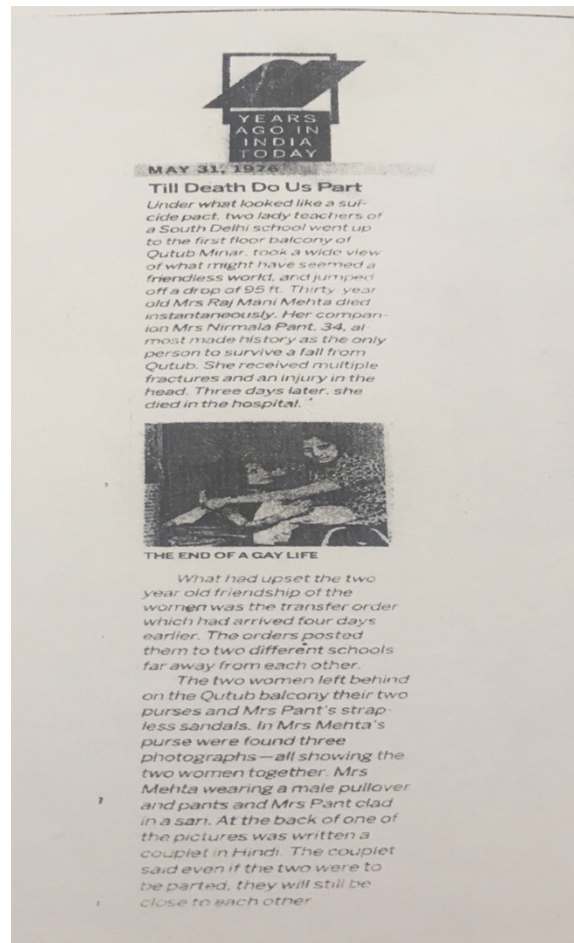


Image 2.1: One of the first stories that were published on homosexuality was a sensational account of suicide pact between Mrs. Raj Mani Mehta and Ms. Nirmala Pant from Qutub Minar in 1976. Source: Sappho for Equality archives in Kolkata.



Image 2.2: UNAID employee Pushkin Chandra's murder served as a grim reminder of pathologizing of life of a gay man, when the news of the murder became an excessive focus on gay culture which overshadowed the brutal murder. The accused men were given life imprisonment under the pretext of 'gay panic' defence. Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/crime/story/20040830-pushkin-murder-sensationalisation-of-gay-culture-overshadows-motive-behind-killing-789398-2004-08-30>

Man murders partner over sex

The two men were dressing up to go to work and got intimate; however, a bitter argument led to one of them throwing a stone at the other, injuring him severely on the face

SAGAR RAJPUT
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A BITTER argument between a couple took a turn for the worse after one of them murdered the other with a stone. The accused man, who had fought with his partner over sex, left for work after attacking him, and a colleague found his partner dead in the house later. A case was registered with the Vikhroli police.

According to the police, the incident occurred on October 19. The accused has been identified as Mannalal Gupta (55). The deceased, Mohinuddin Makandar, was in his forties. The two stayed together near Tagore Nagar, Vikhroli.

Gupta works as a cook at a shop in Mulund, while

Makandar works as a painter. On the day of the crime, Makandar got up early to report to his job. While dressing up, the two got intimate. However, an argument broke out over who would go first during intercourse, and this escalated into a fight.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Ramdas Gaikwad (Vikhroli division) said, "Both the accused and the deceased have been staying together in Vikhroli. As they were about to have sex, the two had an argument, during which Makandar threw a small stone at Gupta, which hit him on his leg. An angry Gupta threw a big stone at his partner, which hit him on his face."

After the attack, the 55-year-old left for work. Upon finding Makandar absent at



After hitting Mohinuddin Makandar (right) with a large stone, Mannalal Gupta got dressed and left for work

his job, a colleague came to the house to check on him and found him lying insensate in a pool of blood. He informed the police, and Makandar was taken to hospital, where he was declared dead on arrival.

Maresh Kamble, assistant police inspector, said, "As it was the day the election results were declared, we couldn't work on the case. But we later narrowed down on the people who stayed with Makandar. During interroga-

tion, Gupta confessed to the crime and revealed the facts of the case."

Police said that Gupta, unlike the deceased, was married and stayed apart from his family. He has been working as a cook in a fruit shop in Mulund for more than 10 years. The accused was arrested last week and booked under section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code.

He has been remanded in judicial custody.

Image 2.3: Mid-Day have been known for sensationalising stories around homosexuality, particularly if the members from the queer community were involved in a crime. Source: www.midday.com published on November 6, 2014.

Image 2.4: Mumbai based news tabloid Mid-Day have time and again fuelled paranoia in Indian households by making suggestive remarks regarding Gay men who enter marriage of convenience to hide their sexuality through their advice columns. Though the newspaper has claimed that it is to bring forth the practice of forced arrange marriage within the gay community, it has led to severe backlash within the community and led to arrests made by police under Section 377. Source: <https://www.mid-day.com/articles/ma-am-your-husband-is-gay/55129> published on August 21, 2009.

2.2 (b) COMING OUT STORIES

Media around the world has often speculated about the sexuality of celebrities from the world of art, culture, entertainment, business and politics while some celebrities were open about their sexuality from the outset, few remained in the closet and led a double life till their death. In India, there have been only few instances where celebrities from India have come out to the media and public alike risking ostracization and possible career suicide. There have been others “who do not publicly deny their homosexuality, but do not acknowledge it either” (Srinivasan 2003).

In the mid-80s, similar writings appeared but there was a considerable change in emphasis as well as proportion. By the end of 1980s, newspapers and magazines were publishing stories around homosexuality. But one wonders whether the Indian public with rudimentary and at times secondary engagement in English- came to know of the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and further articulated their political identities as one? Readers wrote back to the newspapers and magazines as part of the letters to the editors actively seeking lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer content within media suggesting that they already had a conception of themselves as gay or lesbian. What interests me here are the moments of recognition, and how, when and where men and women came across the terms circulating within the media; and attempted to measure their experiences, desires against it?

Tom Boellstorff described this in Indonesia, the primary means through which “‘lesbian and gay’ have become widely accessible as terms of self-definition in mass and primary print media” (Boellstorff 2005). This is true for India as well, as by the mid 1980s words such as ‘gay’ and ‘homosexual’ (as linked to Indians living in India) began circulating in print media. One of the strategies which was brought forth by the early queer movement activists is to bring forth coming out stories of individuals within the movement. This approach was seen as an effective offensive against the politics of heterosexism.⁷⁴ For Sherry Joseph (1996), one of the article that is often anecdotally cited as marking a pivotal moment for an emergent ‘gay

⁷⁴ Sherry Joseph defines heterosexism as “analogous to racism and sexism, the concept of heterosexism validates and strengthens the dominant group’s claim to superiority and privilege.” For more read Joseph, Sherry (1996) Gay and Lesbian Movement in India published in Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 31, No. 33, Aug. 17, 1996 accessed on 9/6/2019.

subjectivity' in India is journalist Ashok Row Kavi's coming out interview published in Savvy magazine in 1987 making him "a pioneer, and the patriarch of the gay movement in India" (Joseph 1996).

The interview was accompanied by a photograph of Row Kavi, marking the first time that an Indian man publicly declared himself as 'gay'. While most of the stories of gay men coming out in this decade had a sense of "gloom or imminent danger" for those who choose such lifestyle, as gay men were projected as either victims or someone that heteronormative population should fear. This interview, however laid out a fresh perspective for the struggling gay population in India, and most consistently cited moments of cathartic recognition, that there is a possibility of happiness in this long road of struggle.

Following Kavi's public outing, one of the first Indian celebrities to come out was painter and artist Bhupen Khakhar whose artwork is emblematic of his own sexuality. In *Gay and Hearty* by Dibyendu Ganguly, published in Indian Express Sunday Magazine in 1992, the painter while talking about his work, comes out to Ganguly and rest of the world. While Khakhar was always "open about his sexuality through his work, most of the critics and writers writing about him often underplayed it" (Ganguly 1992). Ganguly talks about,

"Khakhar Paintings like *You Can't Please All (1981)*, *Two Men in Benares (1985)*, *Yayati (1987)* and *Old Man from Vasad Who had Five Penises Suffered from Runny Nose (1995)* have been compared to works David Hockney⁷⁵, almost emblematic for a whole generation of homosexual in India" (Ganguly 1992).

Khakhar's reflection about his own queerness was well covered in the press as he was one of the few vocal celebrities to reflect upon his own sexuality and its influence on his works. In an interview, he ruminates growing up as a gay man in Khetwadi, Mumbai in the 1950s and 1960 as a "lonely and frightening experience" (Ganguly 1992). He adds,

"now the organisations like Bombay Dost have established themselves, there is more openness on the subject and things are better for young men who are gay. At least they know that they are not the only ones they can find friends with whom they can talk about it" (Ganguly 1992).

⁷⁵ David Hockney (1937-) is one of the influential English painters, printmaker, stage designer and photographer, who was also one of the key contributors to the pop art movements in the 1960s along with artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Hockney identified himself as a gay man and also worked on similar thematic like 'gay love', 'loneliness within the gay community' etc. in his paintings and photographs.

Similar to Row Kavi's coming out interview was Giti Thadani's much publicized coming out, through the publication of an article aptly titled *Emerging from the Shadows* by Parvez Sharma published in the English daily *The Statesman* in 1994. A four-page feature based on interviews with Giti Thadani and five Sakhi volunteers, the feature article was accompanied by a photograph of Thadani, as she stands on a terrace wearing a T-shirt that she designed, bearing a lesbian temple image from Khajuraho. Parvez Sharma sees this article in contrast with earlier articles that were published around homosexuality particularly lesbianism in India, where one sees that, "infectious joie-de-vivre" and determined spirit of the lesbians he meets through Sakhi" (Sharma 1994). The article ends on a positive note with one of the volunteers from Sakhi sending a message of hope to the lesbian readers, "My advice to young lesbians is not crumble under pressure...you are not a bad human just because you desire another woman" (Sharma 1994).

In 2006, fashion designer James Ferreira came out officially in the article titled "*I'm seeing someone*" by Anil Sadarangini. Ferreira declares in the article, "I am what I am and I have never been ashamed of myself. I have had very intense meaningful relationships with men." (Sadarangani 2006). Article titled, "*Gay Partner tie knot amid hostile laws*" by Georgina Maddox served as a "coming out platform" for Goa based fashion designer Wendell Rodricks as he married his French partner Jerome Marrel at a star-studded event on 26 December 2002 (Maddox 2002). The marriage was officiated by senior consular official from the French government, with the couple signing an official French Civil Solidarity Pact (Maddox 2002). The article caused an uproar across the nation, as Maddox lauded the celebrity couple for being able to navigate the 'societal pressure openly as a gay couple' (Maddox 2002). Another fashion designer Rohit Bal who has been known for his work in the fashion industry and his openness about his gayness professed in an article, "I think I am too damn sexy. I am attractive because I am so cool about my sexuality. It is part of me" (Singh 2007).

R, growing up in Delhi in the 2000s, responds with disdain to these coming out:

"There's beauty in silence, the sangam, the spirituality...one doesn't have to go overboard with the shenanigans of being gay. These men (referring to the fashion designers and other out celebrities) make it overtly sexual, and when someone from outside highlights it, they have a problem."

(Interview with R, November 2016)

O, now 38, works as a line manager in Mumbai film industry feels that it is moral and political obligation of the celebrities to come out:

“Celebrities need to be outspoken about their sexuality. People like Karan Johar⁷⁶ feed a very toxic narrative about homosexuality in their films where he himself is clearly gay. He owes this to the community.”

(Interview with O, November 2016)

Both the interviewees, reveal both sides of the spectrum who struggle with this sudden obsession of media with the sexual minorities. This choice between “poetics of silence” and the “politics of visibility” stirred many members of the community to ‘come out’ or ‘stay in the closet’. But with positive outlook of the newspaper and magazines, more celebrities decided to ‘break the silence’ and come out.

In June 2006, Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil belonging to the royal family of Rajpipla- a small princely state in Gujarat, came out as a homosexual in the Indian media. The story was covered by various national and international media alike. This caused a massive furore across India as right-wing organisations burned effigies of the prince on occasion of Holi while the royal family published classified advertisements in local newspapers declaring that “they were disowning him from his title” (Foster 2006). Foster adds, “but within, three months however, the prince and his family reconciled, with the Prince contemplating adopting a child as their legal heir” (Foster 2006).

Authors and Poets like Hoshang Merchant, R. Raja Rao, Firdaus Kanga, Vikram Seth have all implied their sexuality in their work. Hoshang Merchant and R. Raja Rao have been outspoken regarding their homosexuality as well as their identity that of gay rights activist for decades. Hoshang Merchant, poet/professor/activist acknowledges the importance of coming out in his work, as he writes, “As everyone knows, I am a homosexual, for me to speak this publicly and write this sentence is a great liberation” (Merchant 1999).

Rao describes himself as a ‘reluctant activist’ while speaking to Shibu Thomas during the release of his book *Boyfriend* (2003). He further elaborates,

⁷⁶At the time of this interview, there were speculations and grapevine about Johar’s sexuality, it was after the release of his autobiography titled *Unsuitable Boy* in January 2017, that Johar confirms he is gay.

“activism is not a dirty word for me as it is for other writers...I cannot stay in my ivory tower and ignore calls of help from gay men who are on the verge of committing suicide or are being hounded by cops or harassed by blackmailers” (Thomas 2003).

Other out academicians include Somenath Banerjee, the Calcutta based trans* professor of Bengali known to “walks into class dressed as a woman, complete with showy earrings, matching lipstick and eye make-up” (Pandey 2003).

Vikram Seth’s sexuality was speculated upon for several years until his official coming out that happened through his mother’s Justice Leila Seth’s autobiography- On Balance (2003), where she writes, “it was difficult for my husband and I to come to terms with their son’s bisexuality...but we loved him and accepted it without understanding it” (Seth 2003, 429). Following the release of his mother’s autobiography, Vikram Seth became increasingly vocal about his sexuality and involved with the campaign against Section 377 in India. The frequency of article where “celebrities were asked about their sexuality and their views homosexuality-has significantly increased in the English language press” (H. Correspondent 2006).



Image 2.5: Bhupen Khakar became one of the first celebrities to come out in an interview published in Indian Express in 1992. Source: Gay and Hearty by Dibyendu Ganguly <https://bhupenkhakarcollection.com/gay-and-hearty/>

Karan Johar opens up about his sexual orientation for the first time

By - TNN | Updated: Jan 29, 2017, 12:00 IST



Is he gay or isn't he? **Karan Johar** may have finally answered that question. In a forthcoming biography, 'The Unsuitable Boy', the filmmaker has come out candidly on matters of sex and sexual orientation, just stopping short of a bald admission. 'Everybody knows what my sexual orientation is. I don't need to scream it out. If I need to spell it out, I won't only because I live in a country where I could possibly be jailed for saying this. Which is why I Karan Johar will not say the three words that possibly everybody knows about me' he says.

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Image 2.6: In 2017, Director finally came out of the closet in his autobiography, *An Unsuitable Boy*. Source: Karan Johar opens up about his sexual orientation for the first time https://m.timesofindia.com/entertainment/news/out-of-the-closet-karan-joar-gets-candid/amp_articleshow/56398417.com

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Waxing Sapphic Gently

Of couples who can look you in the eye and say, yes, I'm lesbian, and proud of it

PRİYADARSHINI SEN | 15 APRIL 2013

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Image 2.7: Waxing Sapphic Gently by Priyadarshini Sen in Outlook magazine became one of few feature stories that featured 'out' lesbian women in coupledness. Source: <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/waxing-sapphic-gently/284806>

2.2 (c) QUEER ACTIVISM IN INDIA

The term “lesbian” was later to arrive in the mass mediascape and found its mention for the very first time in 1987, when sensational accounts of women marrying one another and living together to double suicides of women in love started emerging. This phenomenon rapidly overshadowed the emerging fascination with male homosexuality. One of the first stories about lesbianism dealt with marriage of two policewomen, Urmila Srivastava and Leela Namdeo in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Once, the word of their private ceremony was leaked by fellow officials, both were unceremoniously fired from their jobs and subjected to frenzied media attention. The story appeared in vernacular language newspapers as well as English dailies, with the photographs of the couple and suggested that their families also accepted this union:

“In December of 1987, policewomen Leela Namdeo and Urmila Srivastava of the Twenty-Third Battalion, stationed in the outskirts of Bhopal, India, capped their year-long close friendship by marrying each other. The wedding consisted of a simple ritual of exchanging garlands, a gandharvavivah⁷⁷, conducted by a Brahmin in a Hindu temple at Sagar. Their parents, who had consented to the wedding, were also present at the ceremony” (Dave 2012, 43).

In the reports that circulated afterward, “Leela was perpetually described as ‘sari-clad’ and mother of three; Urmila-always ‘sporting’ men’s clothes- was promised at the age of three to a husband who turned out to be a drunkard and a wastrel” (Dave 2012, 43). Other constables noted that, “they ate off the same thali (plate) and slept in the same bed, and were seen sobbing and consoling each other on occasion” (Dave 2012,43). Mary John and Janaki Nair see this as, “the tragedy of women’s personal lives was an oft-cited fact” (John and Nair, 1998:33-34). Over a dozen articles appeared across national English dailies and periodicals in the weeks and months following the incident. Most of them were poorly written and wreaked of ignorance and homophobia and made these women into laughing stock: “*Bridegrooms Bride*” read a headline in Savvy magazine and “*Unbecoming Conduct*”, chastised The Indian Post.

⁷⁷ The gandharva marriage is an ancestral erotic tradition and thus, a non-contractual union. Giti Thadani in *Sakhiyaani* (1996) further informs us about a friendship pact between women called maître karar that occurs in the state of Gujarat. There is also another old tribal ritual in which women celebrate their friendship and after the deity’s blessing, they become sahiyas or lifelong companions. The women, as companions, share their mutual love and equal status. There has also been news reporting of lesbian marriages based on folk rituals.

What these media coverages did forego were the transgressions that these women were involved in, as the act of these homo-normative marriages were political act against silence and compulsory heterosexuality and gender roles. Also, given the ambiguity regarding legality of their marriage, Section 377 could not be applied as it doesn't say anything about homosexual matrimony in particular, or even transgressions within female sexuality from larger heteronormative narrative. The late 1980s became the decade where subject of sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in particular, was pushed "out of the closet". Taboos and cultural biases against homosexuality and homoeroticism was challenged, and Indian society was reminded of their rich heritage and homoerotic roots (some of which is discussed in Chapter-1).

When the news of the 'elicit' marriage first broke in February 1988, the public responses towards this particular incident were noteworthy. Women's rights groups were the first to respond to this incident. While, most of the women's groups were on the same page regarding concerns around 'unjust dismissal' of the women and the abuse meted to them by the law enforcing authorities, the bone of contention was how one would define this 'union'. Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW) insisted that, "their marriage was a clear defiance in the face of heteronormative marital and gender norms, and saw the union as a "viable alternative" to heterosexual matrimony" (Dave 2012, 106). Both women worked in police force, which implied that they were subjected to sexist treatment.⁷⁸

For groups such as Jagori, this was a reductive understanding of a much complex scenario in terms of "articulation of lesbian politics" (Dave 2012, 106). Urvashi Butalia, a feminist activist, writer and publisher debated around the ethics of representing Leela and Urmila as "lesbians" given the fact that these women have wilfully and unequivocally rejected this term of identification. In a conversation with Naisargi Dave, Butalia said:

"There was a concern that if these two women who had chosen to marry were not willing to recognise themselves as lesbians, what right did we have to walk in there and say, 'Hey, you might not know it, but you are lesbian?' It's also a question about the identity of the women's movement. Who are we? Are a people who have an ideology and politics of our own? Or are we as service group who responded to the desire of others?... So, in the end, what was decided about the MP (Madhya Pradesh)

⁷⁸ FAOW recalls the affair as a pathbreaking moment in their own thinking about lesbianism. The public form of shaming meted to the constables, coupled with the acknowledgement of FAOW members towards presence of lesbians within FAOW, forced the collective to take its first public stand on behalf of rights of the lesbians.

case was that a couple of women would go there and talk to the women themselves, and come back and we could discuss (what do we do next). Our responses were based on that. Anyone reading it from the outside might say that, ‘the women’s movement is scared of articulating the lesbian experience’. If you see it from the inside, you might see it a bit different. But sure, there was no doubt a kind of fear” (Urvashi Butalia to Naisargi Dave, 2012: 106).

Finally, after much debate and deliberations, Jagori decided that Leela and Urmila cannot be forced to be the flagbearers of “lesbian rights”, and the only way forward is to unequivocally support these women in their struggle for livelihood. The group wrote to many newspapers as well as to political leaders in Madhya Pradesh demanding immediate reinstatement and rehabilitation of these women and to curb the abuse of police power.

Naisargi Dave points out, “It is not surprising that lesbian women did not find in such pieces the ‘Aha! Moment’ that so many gay men and women anecdotally report finding in early articles about gay men” (Boellstorff, 2005b: 69; Dave, 2012: 43). Following sensational reportage on Leela and Urmila’s wedding came a barrage of other articles in the same vein. *The Sunday Mail* published a story in 1990 titled “*The Two That Got Away*” – about two young women from Bombay who fled to Australia so that one of them could undergo a sex reassignment surgery, enabling them to marry and live together as husband and wife. In the same year, *The Independent* published a tale from Gujarat which was nothing less than a ‘Bollywood melodrama’ (Desai 1990).

The story comprised of two women, one named Tarulata who underwent a sex reassignment surgery to become Tarun, to wed his lover - a young woman named Lila. According to the report,

“Lila’s father upon learning Tarun’s previous identity as Tarulata, filed charges against Tarun which included kidnapping and abetment, as well as inability of the couple to have a child naturally under Hindu marriage act, and moved to court to have the marriage annulled⁷⁹”

(Dave 2012, 43).

The Hindi press undertook euphemistic and retrogressive undertones in reporting the wedding of Neeru and Meenu in Faridabad under the titled “*The Interesting Wedding of Two*

⁷⁹ A condition for marriage under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 is that neither spouse suffers from a “mental condition” that renders him or her unfit for procreation.

Girls” (Madhur Kathayen 49, October 1993). The report allegedly pointed out, as many before, that this kind of unions are fairly common in the West. Interesting to note would be the choice of photographs accompanying the news stories of the wedded couple. One would be dressed in conventional male and other in conventional female attire. In couple of cases where photos appeared of women who committed suicide together, both would be dressed in female attire (this would be discussed further in Chapter-3). Strangely, in most of these same-sex wedding involving women, there were fewer organised religious or political opposition as compared to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages.⁸⁰

In couple of reported cases, women were following a Hindu religious ceremony by attempting to file an affidavit under the Hindu Marriage Act whose ambiguous language makes it difficult for the authorities to refuse permission.⁸¹ There were also reports from Gujarat, of women filing “friendship contracts”⁸² (generally used by men as a counter-measure to endow their extra-marital female partners) to allow partnership and inheritance rights on one another. Some of the portrayals in English language dailies saw women being portrayed sympathetically both because of their tabooed romantic love for one another or the sheer absurdity that added news value to the mass appeal weddings have in general for the Indian population.⁸³

For gay men, the launch of Bombay Dost marked the ushering of a gay revolution in the country, this was followed by launch of Humsafar Trust in 1991 which was spearheaded by Ashok Row Kavi, Sohail Abbasi and Sridhar Rangayan with a mandate to work in the field of HIV/AIDS awareness amidst the AIDS epidemic. Mid-Day reported that, “The establishment

⁸⁰ In a first, A Gurgaon court granted ‘marriage status’ to two lesbian runaways who had entered matri karar and provided police protection to the couple from their families who threatened them with dire consequence upon learning about their relationship. For more see <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/In-a-first-Gurgaon-court-recognizes-lesbian-marriage/articleshow/9401421.cms>

⁸¹The Hindu Marriage Act 1955 allows right to marriage to any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms or developments, including a Veerashaiva, a Lingayat or a follower of the Brahmo, Prarthana or Arya Samaj. For more see The Hindu Marriage Act 1955 https://highcourtchd.gov.in/hclsc/subpages/pdf_files/4.pdf

⁸²It’s a relationship sanctioned by court, upholding a rare live-in practice called “maitrikarar (friendship agreement)” that originated among Hindu, upper-caste people in Gujarat in the 1970s.

⁸³The press, however, takes a much less sympathetic view of other kinds of “odd weddings” that doesn’t have parallels with the practices in West. Example of wedding of Devdasis or temple girls to the goddess Yellama, which allows them the status of a married women and their children, both of liaisons and prostitution, the status of the goddess children, is condemned, despite work done by social reformers. For many reporters this akin to replacement of one kind of child marriage of Devdasi girls to adult men with substituting one for another (Times of India, January 25, 1998). This at times is true for the annual mass wedding practice amongst hijras to their deity of Aravan in Tamil Nadu is also linked to homosexuality and condemned as “a useless lifestyle” (Deccan Herald April 19, 1998).

(Humsafar Trust) was granted a permanent centre on 31 October 1995 by the Bombay Municipal Corporation, which allotted it an office at its Municipal Health Building in Vakola, Santacruz (East) in Bombay” (Correspondent 1993). Ketan Tanna adds, “This was followed by creation of Post office box number along with country’s first voicemail service for gay community in Bombay and across India” (Tanna 1996).

One of the first (in) auspicious beginning of lesbian activism happened at an International Women’s movement event in 1984. While speaking on a panel with likes of Toni Morrison and Adrienne Rich, Urvashi Butalia, author and publisher of Kali for Women, a feminist press was asked by one of the panelists to comment upon lesbianism. Butalia sincerely apologised, responding that she was not adept enough with the issue to respond. This comment was gravely misquoted to “There are no lesbians in India”, with magazines like Bombay Dost, Trikone carrying it in their issue. This misquote, however became “a rallying call for formation of lesbian subjectivity and activism in India” (Khayal and Heske 1986).

This was followed by coverage of various gay and lesbian conference and seminars, with these events themselves becoming high profile and public in nature. The year 1990 was significant as the first Asian Lesbian Conference was held in Bangkok. The conference was attended by around 50 lesbian women from Asia where issues related to politics, relationships, family, networking etc. was discussed. This event became the “precursor for the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) known for building strategies for advancing LGBT rights, with a conference organised in Bombay in 2002” (Garari 2002). The ILGA conference drew an unprecedented media coverage with photographs and interviews of International delegates along with national and diasporic queer rights activists coming together.

With Humsafar Trust organising a South Asian Gay Conference in Mumbai in 1994, the tension between women’s movement and LGBT activism spilled over to national and international headlines. Vimla Farooqi, head of National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) affiliated to Communist Party of India (CPI) expressed her deep disgust and outrage against the South Asian Gay Conference, writing an open letter to then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to not allow this conference to happen on Indian soil. In her letter published in The Pioneer she cautions the Prime Minister that, “it (the conference) would surely start a

move towards sexual permissiveness among youth who have become vulnerable to the vulgarity of decadent cultures, a direct fallout of signing GATT” (Joseph 1996, 2230).

National Gay and Lesbian conferences also drew media attention, the first in the line was a National Law School seminar held in Bangalore in 1997, this was one of the first events that didn’t face “any obstacle from the school authorities or the state government” (Dakshina Murthy 1997). Similarly, an International Conference on “Sexualities, Masculinities and Cultures in South Asia was held in 2004 in Bangalore, and was attended by over 200 participants” (Correspondent 2004). The World Social Forum, organised in January 2004 by different Indian LGBT groups in Bombay, called for fair representation of the LGBT community in the media (Shertukde 2004).

2.2 (c1) Trial By Fire: Public Emergence of Lesbian Activism

Throughout the various interviews that I conducted as part of my research, one of the common threads that emerged in most of the narratives of women, who were in their teens as well in their twenty’s in the late 1990s was the ‘Fire moment’. Upon asking A: “*How did you come to think of yourself as a lesbian?*” “*Fire*”, she replied. Upon further enquiring whether she meant Deepa Mehta’s ground-breaking film, *Fire* (1998). She replied,

“Yes and No”. “It was the film that propelled a mo(ve)ment but more than that it was the placard: ‘Indian and Lesbian’.” She paused and then went on: “I picked up the newspaper at my parent’s home, and a chill rushed through my spine. Tears streamed down my face, I muffled my screams of excitement and agony. I could not believe that newspapers across India published those two words: ‘Indian. And Lesbian.’”

(Interview with A, 2016)

This euphoria remained a key moment throughout my research as it was a ‘coming of age’ narrative for most queer women growing up in the late 1990s. On November 13, 1998, Canada based Indian director Deepa Mehta released her film ‘*Fire*’ after months of negotiations with the censor board, and the film was screened across major metropolises in India.⁸⁴ According to Dave, “The film opened with lukewarm and unsensational reviews

⁸⁴A \$1.6 million-dollar venture, *Fire* was conceived and directed by Delhi born and Toronto based writer and director, Deepa Mehta. *Fire* was shot primarily in Delhi with Indian actors like Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi and was funded primarily through private sources in North America. It made an award-winning debut at the 1996 Toronto film festival and won thirteen more international awards and critical acclaim before debuting in

within media casually covered across the English and vernacular language press” (Dave 2012, 140). Some of the cinema halls like Shakuntalam in Delhi ran popular women only screenings, as the discussion remained “active only in organisational meetings, hostels, classrooms etc” (Dave 2012, 140). Naisargi Dave calls “the initial three-week period of its release as ‘pregnant silence’” (Dave 2012, 140).

It was on December 2, 1998, nearly three weeks later after its release, the “*Ire over Fire*” (1998), as one of the headlines in India Today magazine suggested, finally erupted. Around 200 activists hailing from Mahila Aghadi Sena, the women’s wing of Shiv Sena stormed a Bombay theatre during the matinee show of the film to disrupt the screening. Shortly after, barrage of attacks led by Shiv Sena activists began across Bombay’s theatres, with windows smashed and posters of movie torn from the walls and collectively torched. Theatres across Bombay surrendered their reels of the films to the government. What followed remained historic as Shiv Sainiks stormed and attacked Central Delhi’s historic Regal Cinema leading to suspension of screenings of *Fire* across the country with requests of resubmission to the Censor Board of Film Certification (CBFC), and historic claims by Shiv Sena and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) regarding “protecting the Indian culture from the evil of West” (with reference to alleged practice of lesbianism in the film) (Dave 2012).

Considerable space was devoted to the controversy surrounding the release of the film in various print media platforms as the coverage of subsequent screenings and protests and counter protests in the media polarised the Indian public. The *Fire* controversy carried forth various standpoints varying from lesbian rights, sexual politics, politics of Hindu Nationalism to Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression to impact of neoliberalism on Indian culture and tradition. The attacks on theatres was the last straw for liberals who were seething with growing wave of intolerance in the nation, as activists across India came together to protest against the hooliganism committed by the right-wing groups (see image 2.10). The furore over the screening of films and subsequent vandalism spread to other parts of the country to states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Guwahati etc. Supreme Court’s intervention did not stop the protestors from resorting to violent measures, as right-wing groups succeeded in sending the film back to CBFC for a second review. CBFC cleared the film for the second time with minor cuts and by changing the names of the two principal characters.

India in 1998. Scholarly attention have been paid to *Fire*, from literary criticism (Gopinath 1998 and 2005; Patel 2002 and 2004) to various discursive analysis (Bachmann 2002; Kapur 2002).

Much to the dismay of the queer rights activists amidst the commotion, it was Deepa Mehta comments on the film, “lesbianism is just another aspect of the film...*Fire* is not a film about lesbians, but rather about ‘the choices we make in life’ that could have possibly derailed the counter protests” (Kishwar 1998). However, the counter-protests around the film had gone beyond interpretations and became a space for possible analysis of rupture between autonomous women’s movement and the state on questions of sexuality, as *Fire* opened doors for the lesbian emergence from the closet of patriarchy.

2.2 (c2) Naz-Bharosa controversy

2001 marked an important year in terms of gay rights activism in India. Naz Foundation, a sexual health NGO working with gay men and HIV prevention work filed the now historic public interest litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court, challenging the constitutionality of Section 377 and calling for the ‘legalisation of homosexuality’. However, precursor to this event was quite tragic in nature. In July 2001, the offices of Naz Foundation International were raided by the law enforcement agencies resulting in arrest of nine outreach workers from the two organisations. What remained shocking was how every major newspaper including English dailies misreported this incident based on a PR feed by the Lucknow Police. The Asian Age story was titled “*Two NGO-run gay clubs in Lucknow (2001)*”, falsely reported that police “seized pornographic literature and blue films cassettes from the offices” (Reporter 2001).⁸⁵ Similarly, Indian Express headline was equally ill-informed titled “*Police busts gay clubs in Lucknow (2001)*” and reported that workers were “charged with abetment of sodomy and criminal conspiracy” and further quotes the Lucknow police chief alleged that the gay clubs had a “*membership of at least 500*” (Reporter 2001).

These allegations by the police along with media’s callous representation sowed the seed for dissent in the country’s queer activist community, as there were many news articles condemning this incident into the mainstream media reportage (Reporter 2001)(Correspondent 2002). Similar situation arose in Lucknow, five years later, as police orchestrated media coverage with sensational headlines like “*Gay Club running on net unearthed-four arrested and Cops bust gay racket*” hit the newsstands. However, these reports were followed by protest and demonstrations by queer rights activist groups across

⁸⁵ The police mistook the manuals for HIV AIDS prevention and sexual health as pornographic material.

India, as the protests and counter protests were also covered in several national and international dailies. The police and the state were hand-in-glove with their response to this outcry with the assertion that “Homosexuality as a crime is as heinous as murder” (Correspondent 2006). Bombay saw its first public protest against the wrongful arrest of the Naz Foundation and Bharosa outreach workers on 27 September 2001. With protestors belonging to various LGBT and human rights organisations (this included Humsafar Trust, HIV/AIDS Alliance, Stree Sangam/LABIA, Forum Against Oppression of Women and the Arawanis Social Welfare Society amongst others).

India’s first public gay demonstration was organised as a protest march by AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan in front of the police headquarters in New Delhi against the gay bashing and extortion of members of the community in Delhi in 1992. News of the event was circulated by major news agencies such as Press Trust of India and carried forth by various leading newspapers. The first gay march which “sowed the seed of pride parade across India was carried forth in Calcutta on 29 June 1999, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969” (Ganguly 2003). This became an annual feature known as Rainbow Walk between 2004-2008, till the different cities decided to have Pride parade over the year on different dates.

Protests as well celebration became a regular feature with annual pride parades. This is discussed further in Chapter Four.



Image 2.8: File photograph of the First Gay Conference in Bombay in 1990. Courtesy: Trikone

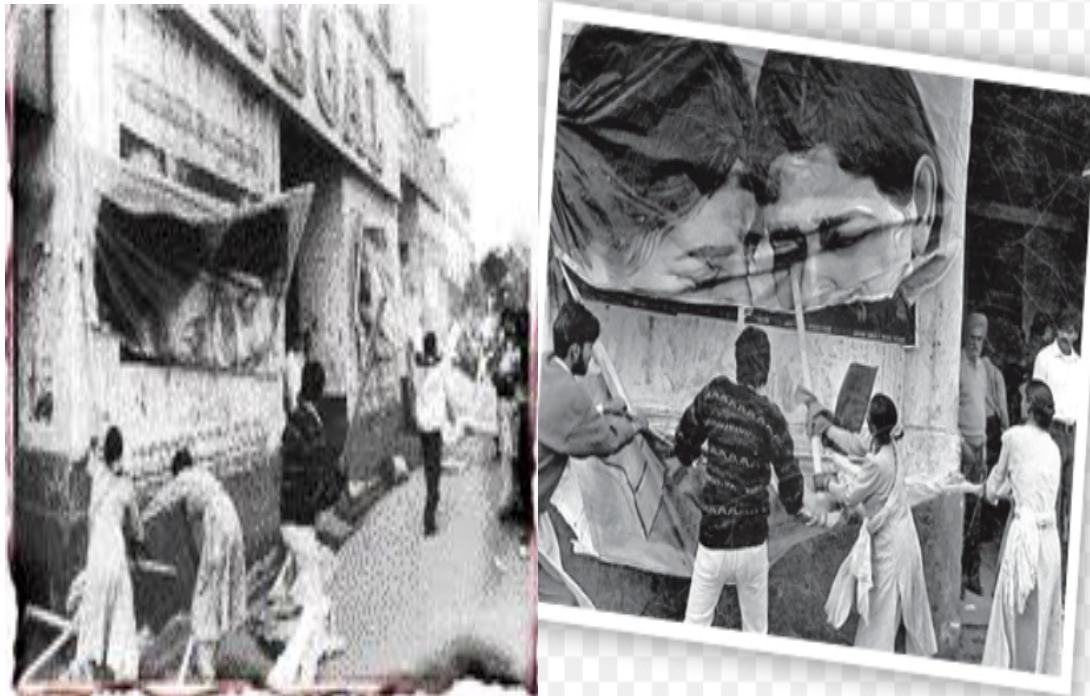


Image 2.9&2.10: File photograph of Mahila Aghadi Sena vandalising Regal cinema hall upon screening of Fire.

Voices

I fear we are witnessing the emergence of a Hindu Taliban, a growing intolerance to freedom of expression.

- Govind Nihalani, *Filmmaker*

Two women having a physical relationship is an unnatural thing.

- Pramod Navalkar, *Maharashtra culture minister*

I oppose censorship of any kind, particularly extra-constitutional censorship.

- Amol Palekar, *Filmmaker*



The sign of any healthy democracy is to accommodate dissent.

- Shabana Azmi, *MP and actress*

You can portray the most delicate of issues, rape or lesbianism, without titillating.

- Sushma Swaraj, *BJP leader*

Vandals are dictating the law and order instead of the other way around.

- Teesta Setalvad, *Lawyer*

Image 2.11: Views expressed by activists, filmmakers, liberals along with right wing leaders upon protests over release of *Fire*. Source: Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* creates a furore published in India Today on December 21, 1998 <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/films/story/19981221-controversial-film-fire-is-sent-back-to-censor-board-matter-taken-to-court-827561-1998-12-21>



Image 2.12: Cartoon published in The Hindu depicting Shiv Sena Patriarch Bal Thackeray fanning the moral panic over burning reels of the film *Fire*. Source: The Hindu, published on December 31, 1998.

2.2 (d) Changing Public Perceptions

The opinion and particularly vox-populi sections in newspapers and magazines carried various surveys in the last two decades that reflected upon the changing public perceptions regarding homosexuality. The first consolidated sex survey was carried out in Debonair magazine in 1991 (which coincided the release of Kamasutra condom ad campaign) that echoed “sexual habits of Indian males in the country” (Correspondent 1991). Despite, its sample size of 1424 respondents, the survey gives startling results with respect to homosexuality and sexuality in general. For example,

“out of 81 percent respondents who were sexually active, 36.8 percent reported to have had same-sex encounters (this includes around 32 percent married men and 41.7 percent unmarried men). The startling aspect was that wives of 31 percent married men were aware of their latent homosexual behaviour” (S. Correspondent 1991).

The Outlook magazine survey, conducted with a sample size of 1665 married men and women in eight cities in India in 1996, revealed “15 percent of respondents admitting to have had sex with person of same-sex, while 30 percent believed that homosexuality is as normal as heterosexuality” (Tejpal 1996).

Similarly, much publicised release of Kamasutra condoms was followed by a sex survey conducted by Kamasutra in 2004, with the survey’s sample size collected from 10 heavily populated cities in India. The survey included both men and women as their primary respondents with a much larger sample size (13, 437 married and unmarried individuals between 18 and above (Kamasutra Sex Survey 2004). According to the survey, “around 17 percent of the respondents acknowledge being attracted to person of same sex, while 51 percent acknowledge to have sex with a person belonging to the same-sex” (Kamasutra Sex Survey 2004). The survey further reflects that, “while 43 percent still believed that homosexuality is a taboo, only 8 percent felt that it normal” (Kamasutra Sex Survey 2004). Most of these surveys were directed towards highly educated urban respondents and were filled and reported in English. Most of the editors who oversaw the survey admit that their

survey reflected the behaviour of an upcoming important segment of the Indian population- “upwardly mobile, middle and upper classes”.⁸⁶

One can witness the changing perception around homosexuality in the advice columns in the newspaper and magazine. Shobha De, a prolific writer whose novels are placed in between “Western popular and pulp fiction genre” (Dwyer 2000) has mostly campaigned for the gay rights in India in her capacity as society columnist.⁸⁷ She has lauded the launch of Bombay Dost, “as the voice of the gay community” (De 1991), and praised Wendell Rodricks “commitment ceremony” (De 2002). Advice columnists such as writer Khushwant Singh to noted psychologist Radhika Chandiramani in her article “*Everything You Wanted to Know about Midlife Crisis*” in The Asian Age in 1999 spoke about “how homosexuality as normal as heterosexuality” (Chandiramani 1999).

However, on the flipside, there were journalists and columnists who permanently carried a torch for homophobia, and fuelled public’s imagination with negative stereotypes towards the gay community. This included Farzana Versey with her columns in Mid-Day, which were full of vitriolic gay bashing with quotes like “Those who go about in queer clothes with uncalled behaviour have no right to talk about acceptance? Won’t these guys laugh at a circus clown?” (Versey 1990). In another column titled “*Not Novel, These Guys*” in Mid-Day published in 1991, she draws her ire at differently abled gay writer Firdaus Kanga, admonishing him to “get over...his wheelchair, his (homo)sexuality-for the purpose of his literary endeavours” (Versey 1991). This malicious diatribe continues in her piece titled “*The Gay Glut*” published in Afternoon magazine where she calls out the homosexuals for morally corrupting the youth and initiating “young boys who probably are uncertain about their sexuality into the gay cult” (Versey 2000). In another of her columns in 2006 titled “*Does it pay to be gay?*” in Deccan Chronicle, she claims that, “the gay movement is a hugely successful public relations exercise” (Versey 2006). Columnists like Swapan Dasgupta writing for DNA, Kanchan Gupta writing for Pioneer and author/columnist Chetan Bhagat

⁸⁶The survey was also indicative of the growing class divide between the lower class, middle class and upper classes as the lower sections were pushed more towards the margins, as they failed to be seen as sexual subjects, let alone sexual citizens in this neoliberal economy.

⁸⁷Shobha De becomes an interesting case of what is known as a ‘liberal homophobe’, as she has used homosexuality as a bait in the purest homophobic style in her novels like *Strange Obsession* (1992). In an interview with Bombay Dost in 1999, she condemns all attempts taken by the gay movement to parade one’s sexuality in public, as she saw it as ‘unnecessary provocation’ inviting backlash (Bombay Dost Vol. 7 no.1, 1999).

have expressed their distaste for homosexuality and queer rights in equally reprehensive fashion.

One significant change that one observes is that with repealing of Section 377 in 2009 by the Delhi High Court, many coming out stories after 2009 featured gay men and women confidently being quoted with their full names accompanied by their photographs instead of “pseudonyms or subjects names have been changed’ disclaimers accompanied by either sketches or shadowy illustrations” (Maddox 2003; Nair 2004; Sen 2013). Well-researched cover story *Gay Spirit (2004)* by Shefalee Vasudev in India Today captures the “confident tone of the now emerging Pan Indian queer movement which attempts to ‘revolutionise minds’ across the nation” (Vasudev 2004).

It was however, the alternative print subcultures in the 1990s with magazines along with newsletters like Bombay Dost, zines like LABIA’s Scripts and practices as intimate as letter writing in case of Sakhi that reflects upon the writing histories of sexuality. Ann Cvetkovich in her seminal work *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (2003)* describes these practices as “cultural texts embodying within its repositories of emotion in their content, production, and reception” (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). She is particularly interested in lesbian and gay archives, which she argues, “must preserve and protect knowledge and feelings, as the history of queerness demands documentation intimacy, sexuality and love” (Cvetkovich 2003, 241-242). This is clearly visible when one goes through the archives of Bombay Dost, Sakhi, as well as LABIA’s SCRIPTS as there’s an assumption that emotions are ever-present in queer history. While Cvetkovich sees, “affect’s centrality in gay and lesbian archival practices as a resistance to institutional and cultural neglect” (Cvetkovich 2003, 241), Naisargi Dave sees, “letter writing as a queer archival practice in India, stemming from desire to render queer politics respectable” (Dave 2012, 35). Most of the mainstream newspaper and magazine are unable to capture that essence of representational struggles that describe the queer community, even as more and more readers searched for better representation of the queer community within publications such as Bombay Dost and LABIA’s Scripts. The next section would enlighten upon the role these print cultures played in creating an ‘imagined queer community’ through publications like Bombay Dost and LABIA’s SCRIPTS.

2.3 Bombay Dost and Rise of Gay Subculture in India

In “*The Contract of Silence*,” Ashok Row Kavi narrates his autobiographical experience and points out:

“Bombay in the seventies and early eighties was ripe for a gay sub-culture. A distinct class of skilled professionals had a firm grip on the city’s cultural life. A corporate work ethic had finally evolved in contrast to the babu-raj of Delhi and the Bengali queasiness regarding sexuality in Calcutta. All these signs were important ingredients for a gay (male) sub-culture.” (Kavi 1999, 18).

Ashok Row Kavi’s words indicate Bombay of 1970s and 1980s as pioneering metropolis that embeds within itself the essential perquisites for a queer subculture.⁸⁸ This subculture spreads its roots slowly across various other cities across India by the early 90s, as the neoliberal policies adopted by India opens the realm of tabooed subjects such as homosexuality. Ashok Row Kavi was aware of impact of neoliberalism and saw this as a perfect opportunity to launch Bombay Dost- India’s first registered LGBT magazine. Kavi in “*Publisher Helps Cultivate India’s Burgeoning Gay Movement*” published in *Frontiers* (1997) comments: “If I were to die tomorrow or next week, I’d like to be known for the infrastructure I’ve left behind” (Arroyo 2010, 77).

He is referring not only to his work within the gay movement but also to the creation of the newsletter for gay community titled *Bombay Dost* (Bombay friend/lover). Launched in May 1990, the launch of Bombay Dost was widely reported across English language press. Sunday Mid-day provided an account of the launch party of the magazine:

“At the bash was a prominent architect with his live-in lover, a senior chartered accountant. A lesbian couple. And assorted gays, of both sexes. And all spoke to the media with little traces of hesitation...” (Correspondent 1991).

The first issue of Bombay Dost was published in 1990, thanks to the willing efforts of many gay men as well as few lesbians who worked together to reach out to the community. The magazine circulation remained underground for the first year as the government permit was worked upon and finally the magazine applied under the “Men’s Health’ section” (Gargan

⁸⁸ Kavi refers to a cultural life, a distinctive middle class integrated by skilled professionals who have been educated in English and the influence of modernisation and industrialisation in India post-independence.

1991). Bombay Dost attempted to expand its visibility across the queer population across India as well as towards Asian diaspora. The content of the magazine varied from news, political commentary, letters from readers, contact of NGOs working on gender and sexuality, gossip and literature.

For Ashok Row Kavi, Bombay Dost represents the, “the lifeboat for many people who thought they had no one to turn to. In a heterosexist world where marriage was a marketplace, we had created a space to be ourselves” (Kavi 1999). The impact of this new publication was heard and lauded across India and abroad as it features in The Times in London: “India’s invisible gays get a voice” (Thomas 1991). Bombay Dost came up with a Charter which also served as its stylesheet where terms like “alternative sexuality” and “sexual identity” as it states the objectives accurately:

“it aimed to provide a platform and framework for queer individuals across the Indian subcontinent; as it encouraged self-awareness and confidence; aiming to provide counselling, prevent state-sponsored harassment and create a network with other similar groups across India and abroad” (Arroyo 2010, 77-78)

During the initial years, the magazine comprised of sections in English and Hindi, to reach out to vernacular audiences, it published articles in Marathi and Konkani sometimes. The first issue comprised of 16 pages which was in form of an instruction manual for the gay men informing them about how to manage their lives, how to safely navigate heterosexist society and gain confidence to live their lives fully. In the earlier years of the magazine, the letters to the editor ranged from 2000-3000 letters per week through the section called ‘KhushKhat’ (happy letters), a platform where readers exchanged their correspondence. The magazine though had limited subscription as well as circulation saw its popularity soaring across Afghanistan, Dubai, Iran, Pakistan and many more Central Asian and South East Asian countries. The year 1996 saw a dominant format and stylesheet changes as the magazine began its publication in colour and published in English.

Bombay Dost covered myriad of mainstream issues to strengthen the LGBT cause in India. The beginning years focused on local news as well as major issues around the world dealing with issues of gender and sexuality, with columns like “*Papa Passion*” dealing with Men’s health issues, “*KhushKhat* and *Pushtak*” (similar to letters to the editor) along with an entertainment section. Another section introduced in 1996 titled “*Poison Pudi*” was a

fictitious diva who would delve into the lives of married men from Bombay, who realised they were gay after their marriage.

The issues time and again highlighted controversies including the one surrounding the Asian Lesbian Conference held in Bangkok in 1991 to bromance of actors in films. Ashok Row Kavi found himself at the receiving end of a controversy when he published a tongue-in-cheek review of Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan starrer romance-comedy film titled “*Mein Khiladi, Tu Anari*” (1994) that led to homophobic attack by Khan on Ashok Row Kavi in 1995.⁸⁹ The 2002 issue saw an eight page article describing the police raid on Naz Foundation in Lucknow and the subsequent petition filed by the Naz foundation in High Court against Section 377.

However, the issues were erratically published due to lack of funding that led to fall in their subscription. The editorial board was primarily comprised of gay men and couple of queer women, but the women departed soon due to ideological differences with the founding members. The magazine sparked an outrage within the lesbian and trans* community for lack of representation in terms of the articles published altogether though it attempted to publish a small section for lesbians to participate.

Bombay Dost saw its decline in the early years of 2000s, as the magazine went out of print in the year 2002 due to lack of funds and logistical issues. It was relaunched with a new editorial board in 2009 by celebrity and queer rights activist Celina Jaitley in a book launch in Oxford Book Store in Mumbai, and marked appearance of founder Ashok Row Kavi along with Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil. The launch marked new avatar of Bombay Dost with a fire brand editorial board that promised better content as well as representation across the gay community. The following editions were released in both print as well as an e-magazine for a larger reach within the community and outside. One of the primary concerns that remained amongst the publishers was to make sure that the digital divide doesn't affect the accessibility to the magazine and it was made sure that the magazine is available in all major bookstores.

Another major hurdle that forced the magazine to briefly shut down was the way it was circulated within the gay community and for the larger public. According to Ashok Row Kavi

⁸⁹There are multiple versions of the story that has been circulating that Saif Ali Khan didn't launch into a homophobic rage but rather was responding to Ashok Row Kavi's mocking of his mother Sharmila Tagore.

(Founder Bombay Dost and Humsafar Trust), and Vivek Anand (CEO, Humsafar Trust), the magazine had limited circulation as there were very few street vendors who agreed to sell the magazine in the first place. The vendors would avoid displaying the magazine out in the open and keep it behind some other titles, and would only show it buyer who were genuinely interested. A transaction for the magazine would be a hushed affair, as vendors would wrap the magazine in newspaper or keep it in brown paper bag as if they were selling contrabands. This process was quite detrimental for the sale of the magazine as it would change hands quite often, as the magazine upon its initial purchase would be left in public places and offices for further consumption, resulting in losses as demand for the magazine was far less compared to the supply. It was only in the 2000s, that other vendors and major bookstores started selling Bombay Dost.

Upon its relaunch in 2009 which coincided with the Delhi High Court judgement that decriminalised Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, Bombay Dost started the *Likho initiative*. Every year since 2009, *Likho initiative* sees an open call for participation by the organisers of the workshop to individuals who might be interested in writing around topics related to gender and sexuality. While doing my research for my thesis, I had an opportunity to work up, close and personal with the Likho editorial team in July 2018. I was selected as a participant for a two-day long intensive workshop on ‘*Citizen journalism*’ organised by Likho initiative. Workshop saw mentors training individuals from across the country on how to write news articles or features on issues around LGBT, gender and sexuality that could be published in the upcoming editions of Bombay Dost. This exercise was aimed to get individuals from different corners of India, with their myriad experiences and make the process of writing and publication more inclusive and intersectional rather than the earlier upper class, upper caste, metropolitan driven experience.

Managing Editor of Bombay Dost, Shibu Thomas explains,

“the process of roping in journalists to write for Bombay Dost after its relaunch but most of the journalists were cisgendered heterosexuals who would end up writing about similar experiences about stigma and ostracisation faced by members of the community.”

(Interview with Shibu, July 2018)

The aim of the LIKHO workshop was to develop voices from within the community who would write their own stories rather than having it mediated by journalists who didn't have the experience from within the community. Since representation remained a primary concern, and most of the mainstream representation of the community was driven by stereotypes, the attempt was to avoid misrepresentation and to equip the members from within the LGBT community with journalistic writing skills and ethics. But a void that remained prevalent in Bombay Dost and drew criticism from activists and readers alike was lack of lesbian or trans* content that could be explained by absence of any lesbian and trans* individual in the current editorial board as well. This is where groups like Sakhi and LABIA felt this inherent need to create safe spaces for queer women for networking, hence giving birth to collectives like Sakhi in Delhi and Stree Sangam aka LABIA in Mumbai. The next section delves into attempts made by these two autonomous groups to create safe space for queer women, and attempts to establish an 'imagined lesbian community' through poetics and politics of print cultures in form of letter writing in case of Sakhi and writing for SCRIPTS in case of LABIA. The section will further address how these groups attempted to create a pan-Indian, transnational alliances for women and create a sense of belonging amongst them, while facing resistance from within the women's movement and from the homophobic state.

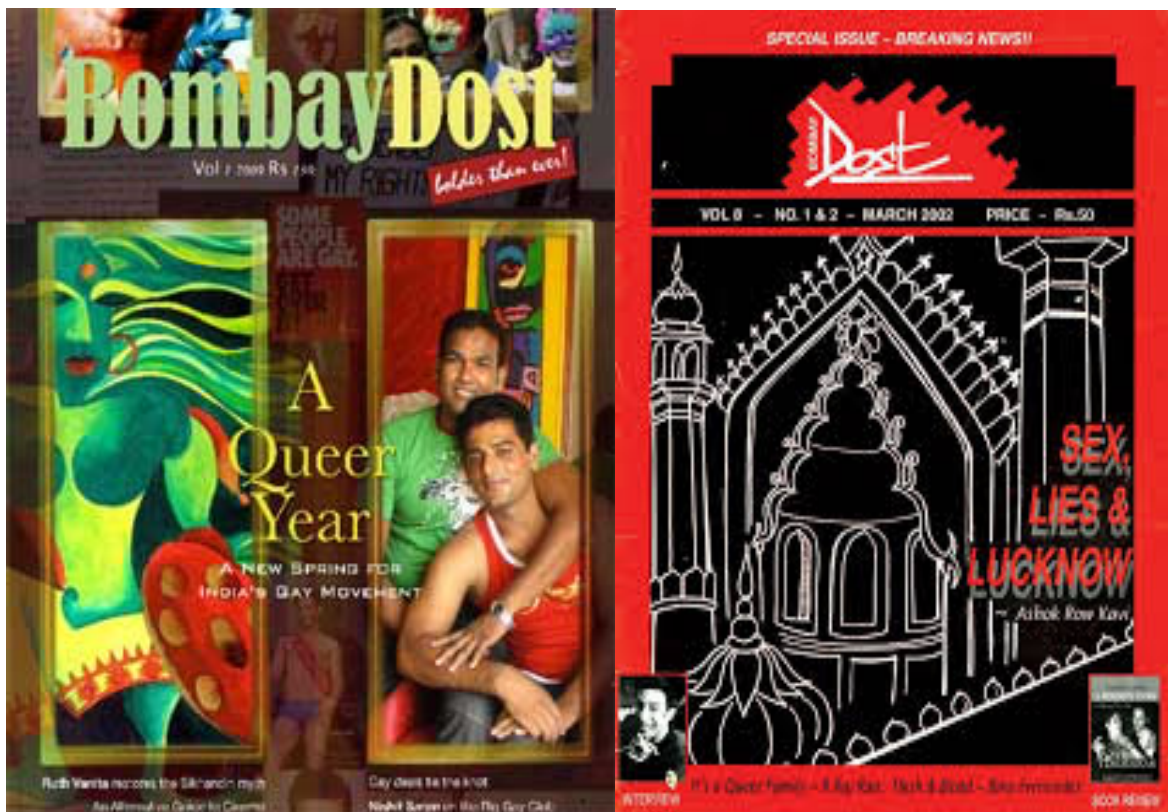


Image 2.13: Various editions of Bombay Dost over the years.

2.4 A Will To Remember: Creating Lesbian And Queer Herstory With Sakhi And Labia's Scripts

(a) Role of Sakhi and Letters as a medium of Community Building

As stories about brave gay men thrived in Indian media with concepts like “Yaarana” (friendship) being one of the most common idioms perpetuated by the dominant narratives coming from the gay community. Stories of queer women were constrained in two crucial ways: there was a *constant rejection* from the largely heterosexist women’s movement to accept any activism around sexuality in 1990s and unlike the coverage received by Ashok Row Kavi’s courageous and unabashed proclamation, the stories around lesbian women, according to Dave, “*neither inspired nor invite but rather repelled*” (Dave 2012). There was a shame associated with calling oneself ‘lesbian’ as most of the media coverage ended up pathologizing and chastising women who desired other women, and at times bordered on calling them ‘hysterical’.

As discussed in earlier section that sexuality becomes a relevant issue on its own after the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s in the West, with funds directed towards medical welfare, such as “disease prevention as well as palliative care”. According to Gayatri Gopinath,

“lesbian and bisexual women were considered as a low-risk group as compared to at risk groups such as sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM), and remained a debatable topic whether these women (lesbian and bisexual) actually benefitted from the upsurge in sexuality related issues within public sector, though there was an increase in visibility around female sexuality and lesbian politics” (Gopinath 2007).

In this section I examine how women in two metropolises of Delhi and Mumbai attempted to establish an “imagined lesbian community” by means of “politics and poetics of Print circulation” especially in form of letter writing, magazines, newsletters etc (Butler 1997). Though, informal groups of same-sex desiring activist women have been meeting by the mid-1980s; it was in the 1990s that they began forging national and transnational alliances.

Bina Fernandez traces these history of “transgression, and transnational alliances for the newly emerging lesbian movement with two key conferences, that took place in 1985 and

1987 respectively” (Fernandez 2002, 181-182). According to Fernandez, “In 1985, Indian delegates attended a workshop held at Nairobi Women’s Conference followed by a conference of the Asian Lesbian Network in Bangkok in 1987 where seven Indian women from Delhi and Mumbai came together and interacted with each other for the first time” (Fernandez 2002, 182). However, both Menon and Dave point out towards the two major drawbacks of such informal grouping, “most of the informal groupings comprised primarily of activists and most of the women who did want to be part of a larger lesbian community resisted ‘Western signifiers’ such as ‘lesbian’, ‘dyke’ etc. in the name of culture, and distanced themselves from lesbian politics” (Menon 2005, 39).

Feminists critique of heteronormativity was meted with labels such as ‘radical feminists’ in keeping with the Western nomenclature. Indian feminism largely operated within the realm of family and marriage and didn’t want to dismantle heteropatriarchal practices such as procreative family, as it remained the mantle upon which battles for women empowerment have been fought. The question of the ‘Personal/Private’ and ‘Political/Public’ was clearly demarcated, with questions around sexuality treated more within the realm of private, and saw any kind of consciousness raising or mobilisation around sexuality outside the Indian feminist practices.

Maya Sharma observes that unlike the gay movement which saw discourses around Maasti⁹⁰ and Yaarana (male bonding and friendships), women’s movement for decades held on to the position that sexuality (and homosexuality) threatened the women’s movement unity. Most of the discourses around Indian women’s movement attempted to extinguish any politicisation of lesbian issues on the grounds that “such politicisation should be postponed for a later time, presumably when there is a greater level of societal awareness and acceptance of homosexuality” (Sharma 2006, 22). Chayanika Shah adds,

“we recognised that we were one of those oppressed minorities who has been invisibilised by the larger women’s movements. Conversations let alone politics around lesbian subjectivities were deemed unimportant as compared to discourses around reproductive rights or victimhood that Indian feminism most often addressed” (Shah 2005, 147).⁹¹

⁹⁰ Masti or Maasti refers to the “sexualised play or fun between males” Also transliterated as “Maasti”, the sex takes the form of sexualised play, where taboo attached to is reduced by defining it in a frivolous light.”

⁹¹One of the bones of contention between mainstream Indian feminists and lesbian rights activists was the class dichotomy that saw queer rights activism as an upper class an urban phenomenon. This divide escalated to the

One of the possible solutions was offered by Delhi-based NGO called Jagori by introducing the term “*Ekal women or Single women*” which included unmarried, single, divorced women etc. which became a cloaking device for an easier entry point to gauge conversation between mainstream Indian feminism and lesbian subjectivities. However, “language remained a key criterion as there was an inadvertent refusal to the Western politics of lesbian identity out of deference to non-English speaking women in urban slums (bastis) and villages” (Bacchetta 2002, 960). Dave further adds, “several women across Delhi, most of them identifying as lesbian, met informally in one another’s homes between 1987 to 1993 under ‘single women’s rights’” (Dave 2012, 37).

Fernandez reminisces, “In addition to this informal collective of ‘single women’ in Delhi, another circle of same-sex desiring woman known as the Delhi group was founded in 1989” (Fernandez 2002, 182). Comprising mostly of feminist activists, all had a “commitment to understanding the macropolitical dimension of compulsory heterosexuality” (Bacchetta 2002, 959). Most of the members belonging to Urban Indian feminist circle were under a lot of pressure to prove their indigenous mettle, as they chose signifiers such as ‘women who love women’ or ‘single women’ instead of ‘lesbian’ as they wanted “the politics to be more accessible and palatable to poor, grassroots Indian women” (Dave 2012, 37). These outward projections of Indian feminism’s anxieties at the outset of neoliberalism forced third wave feminists to address issues of representation and intersectionalities much more seriously.

Problems with Indian feminist movement’s addressal of sexual minorities meant that a single forum may not be able to address various kind of subjectivities and issues that needed to be addressed. Among the organisations that attempted to claim and create safe spaces for lesbian women included a Delhi based group *Red Rose* which started holding meetings from 1989 onwards, but became one of the instances from amongst almost a dozen other organisations that did not survive long.

extent that queer rights and lesbian activists were not allowed to carry banners from organisations like CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights in India) because it had the word lesbian in it during International Women’s Day March in the 2000s. Shah notes most elicit demurrals about participation of lesbian women by mainstream Indian feminists would be, “our women will not be able to identify with groups whose names contain words like lesbian and so we cannot march with for 8th March” or “there are no lesbian women amongst the women we work with” (Shah 2005).

Giti Thadani, a scholar in Lesbian (Her)story in India and queer rights activist became the founding member of a Delhi based Lesbian Network named Sakhi in 1991.⁹² Sakhi became the "first openly lesbian group involved in networking, research and documentation of lesbian images and history in South Asia, with an archive of personal narratives beginning to flow in from all over India" (Fernandez 2002, 183). Dave further adds,

“Sakhi aimed at democratising the possibility of formulating a lesbian community across India by taking it beyond local activism and opening it for more pan Indian and transnational network of women who could communicate with one and another about their trials, tribulations, desires through the relative anonymity of letters” (Dave 2012, 35).

Most of the letters which are now scattered between Sakhi members primarily Giti Thadani, Jaya Sharma and Naisargi Dave were written after seeing the word ‘lesbian’ in the network’s advertisement as well as in few of issues of Bombay Dost, thus attempting to build a “nascent network and formulate an imagined Lesbian community where nothing of the sort existed before” (Dave 2012, 35). This section investigates the various strategies through which both women rights activists and nonactivist women from across age and socio-economic background from India came to imagine themselves as lesbian, and thus becoming part of a larger web of belonging.⁹³

Practices such as letter writing became prevalent in an attempt to create safe spaces for the queer woman across India. Sakhi which broke out of the Delhi Group, Red Rose Society, and registered a PO box address, came out with a letterhead as they announced their arrival as

⁹²Giti Thadani, a devout scholar whose commitment was to advance an Indian lesbian identity began her research in the 1980s to “reveal India’s rich Jami and Chapti (twin traditions/homosexual) culture. Her methods of excavation included re-reading and re-interpreting Vedas to show the acceptance of homo-erotic bonds between women and embarking on independent photography research capturing lesbian erotic images in ancient temple carvings. Despite her rich research, her discourse revolved around rise of Islamic and Victorian morality that caused rise of homophobia in India, as many academics and activists have pointed out towards an anti-Muslim narrative common in her research, while others find her work historically inaccurate” (Bacchetta 2002, 965).

⁹³Though most women who were writing to Sakhi or attempting to create safe spaces of belonging varied widely in terms of their socio-economic as well as cultural capital, most of them were able to write and converse in English, thus indicating that most of them were not only literate but educated and receiving high school education at the most. This remains a key in terms of understanding how lesbian public cultures is often in itself a fragile enterprise and presents itself as a surmounting geographical and cultural difference. Since, the class position and accessibility to language is implicitly middle class (except few exceptions where Sakhi organisers and SCRIPTS editorial team encouraged writers to write in vernacular languages), this attempt to create sometimes anonymous and placeless democratised access to lesbian community was meted with questions of representation within lesbian politics among ‘unprivileged India’- a category that is defined in terms of lack of education. For more see (Dave 2012; Cvetkovich 2003; Sharma 2006)

Lesbian and Bisexual women support group to various diasporic South Asian Gay publications, as well as in Bombay Dost.

In one of the earliest letters addressed to Sakhi, Ms. K from Tamil Nadu described this void of not having lesbian women only spaces as well as lack of representation either in mainstream media as well as niche publication:

“Bombay Dost is mainly for homosexual men and not lesbians. I need a magazine for lesbians. Lesbian communication is needed”⁹⁴

Another Ms. K from Bombay writes in a letter dated to 1993:

“Since I have not found any ad from ladies seeking lady friends (in Bombay Dost), I am not able to put an ad into it.”⁹⁵

These transnational alliances and intercontinental manoeuvring became a daunting task for non-activist women seeking friendships within same-sex groups in the 1990s. For Monish Dasgupta, “many of the queer support groups and NGOs were formed, post publication of queer magazines; as queer individuals across India and abroad were first made aware of an existence of a larger ‘imagined queer community’ and saw an immediate need for formation of queer communities” (Gupta 2005, 159-160).⁹⁶

Following this new wave of communication, Sakhi began advertising in issues published by Bombay Dost, as it gained popularity across India’s major cities, as well as increased readership in small cities as well. Number of women in their letters to Sakhi referred to Bombay Dost, after seeing the word ‘Gay’ boldly gracing the publication. This recognition of

⁹⁴Ms. K to Sakhi, dated May 10, 1994. Most of the letters produced in the course of this chapter are archived from Queer activism in India: a story in the anthropology of ethics by Naisargi Dave (Dave 2012). Dave in her book credits Giti Thadani for making this somewhat lost archive of letters available to her. Most of the respondents to Sakhi were given a pseudonym to protect their identity, and Dave chose not to change the content of letter on the basis of their grammar and language to provide authenticity. One observes how, most of the women writing to Sakhi came from a range of social positions, which came as a shock to many who saw lesbianism as an ‘urban phenomenon’.

⁹⁵ In case of Ms. K from Bombay, language and cultural accessibility allowed her to write many diasporic publications and collectives such as South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) which responding by providing her with Sakhi’s Delhi address. For more see (Dave 2012).

⁹⁶ While Bombay Dost became the predecessor for Humsafar Trust in 1994, SALGA was founded after an anonymous South American saw an issue of a diasporic queer magazine, Trikone, published by a group with the same name.

one's desire, identity was a brave acknowledgement on part of many women who lived in silence for most of their lives, reaching out for any available recognition, taking risk of ostracization, in an attempt to meet others like themselves.

Giti Thadani disagreed with a lot of Indian feminists who believed that Indian women could not or would not identify themselves as lesbian.⁹⁷ According to Dave, “Thadani’s attempt with Sakhi, was similar to Ashok Row Kavi’s for gay men, as she attempted to provide the possibility of lesbian identification to Indian women, and, thereby, direct access to the world of belonging” (Dave 2012, 40). By 1994, Sakhi’s PO box saw surge of letters, as Sakhi members attempted to respond to at times 200 letters a month. Since, there was always a concern regarding the anonymity of members writing to Sakhi, Sakhi members made a policy to screen each letter until the respondent believed that it was written by a woman, and then share a ‘networking’ list consisting of mailing address that previous writers agreed to share (Dave 2012, 40).⁹⁸

Among the early voices reaching out for support was A, who wrote from Allahabad in 1991:

“We are very few lesbians (in Allahabad), and also we are not sure of each other, except a few. Please let me have some addresses of lesbian sisters. Well I am 35 years of age. I want to be an active lesbian member of your organisation” (Dave 2012, 41).⁹⁹

Ms. N from Kolkata requested,

“names and addresses of other friends who are your members and who are also interested in the world of lesbianism/bisexualism” (Dave 2012, 41).¹⁰⁰

Ms. B from Jammu wrote,

⁹⁷In “Silence and Invisibility”, Giti Thadani comments: “The self-identified Indian lesbian is viewed as inherently Western, and is subject to frequent criticism on this account.” Thus, lesbianism is a Western importation that refers to abnormal sexuality or sexuality against the law of nature. Likewise, the Indian lesbian defies “correct” gender roles, claims feminist independence and attempts against the moral codes and traditions of the country. From the Indian perspective, the construction of the West holds layers of materialism, sexual vices, moral corruption, capitalism, pornography, violence etc. For more see Silence and Invisibility” in Facing the mirror. Lesbian Writing from India. Ed. A. Sukthakar. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999 pg 150.

⁹⁸LBT women only groups have time and again highlighted that they are harassed by crank calls, letters as well as visits to their community spaces by straight men who would request perverse desires to the call handlers in lieu of money, and make it difficult for women running these groups as well as the one attempting to access such groups.

⁹⁹Ms. A to Sakhi, 1991

¹⁰⁰Ms. N to Sakhi, November 11, 1991

“I am a 21-year-old lesbian of Jammu, I do not have any other companion except one here. I hope you will help me... You are my only hope” (Dave 2012, 41).¹⁰¹

Many Indian women outside of urban, elite networks and activists’ circles wrote to Sakhi in an attempt get addresses of ‘lesbian sisters’, in search of love and romance or sometimes the letter would be highly erotic in nature. What was interesting to note, that most of these women did recognise themselves to be lesbian, without linking its genealogy or politics attached to the term. Most of the women who were writing to Sakhi were attempting to establish a “‘possibility of belonging’, and reaching out beyond the confines of their loneliness” (Dave 2012, 42).

(b) Building Identities, Building Communities: LABIA’s SCRIPTS

LABIA, a queer-feminist collective based out of Mumbai, first began as a lesbian and bisexual women’s collective originally calling itself *Stree Sangam* in 1994. Born out of the women’s movement of 1980s and 1990s, a large component of their activism included organising get togethers for queer and queer friendly allies, engaging with college students about issues of gender and sexuality, publishing a queer zine called SCRIPTS, running a LBT (Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) helpline, and organising monthly film screenings.¹⁰²

The members decided to rename the organisation as LABIA as “not (be) hidden anymore under innocuous sounding names like ‘Stree Sangam’ but (to be) in the open stating who we are,” as founder Chayanika Shah remembers (Shah 2005). She further writes in one issue of Scripts, the magazine that LABIA produced,

“Stree Sangam has decided to reinvent itself, in name and in deed. Today we conceive ourselves as a campaign and action group of queer women called Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Action. We choose to remain autonomous and non-funded. We choose to speak loudly and proudly of who we are and want to reclaim the space for political action and personal expression. We see oppression based on gender and sexuality as part of the same hetero-patriarchal norms that oppress other marginalised

¹⁰¹Ms. B to Sakhi, 1992.

¹⁰²LABIA’s political mission is situated within a “feminist and ideological framework, in which they seek to break the silence around queer women’s identities and sexualities and raise awareness about issues faced by other marginalised groups. As a queer feminist collective, LABIA is uniquely situated within both women’s and queer movements, thereby providing an important intersection of identities for queer discussions of gender and sexuality. As one of the first spaces of/for queer women to socialise and organise in Mumbai and an influential and crucial voice within the queer community”. For more see www.labiacollective.org accessed on 5/19/2019

people as well. We wish to continue to ally with other, who, like us believe that working towards a society where all gender and sexualities would be respected and treated equally is necessary. Our strategies are multiple and complex, but our alliances are crucial. As are politics and our lives” (Scripts 2003).

These gatherings constituted what can be seen as the creation of alternative public spheres or what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counter publics” (Fraser 1996, 123).¹⁰³ Such alternative spaces and publics arose specifically in response to their exclusion within their regulated discourse surrounding decriminalisation of Section 377, which was bringing new perspectives, atypical discursive conventions, and distinct rhetorical strategies to light, expanding the message from singular to plural.

This space as Nancy Fraser suggests also has a “dual characteristics for the counter publics accessing it, while on one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitation activities towards larger publics” (Fraser 1996, 124). Phyllis Mentzell Ryder cites, “various strategies through choice of style, genre, evidence, grammar, language and other discourse conventions writers and readers and organisers of these collective negotiate for general acceptance of public discourse” (Ryder 2007, 506).

SCRIPTS zine which was started in 1998 became an extension of the letter writing exercise that was carried forth by both SAKHI and LABIA. Both Chayanika Shah and Shal Mahajan realised the dearth of queer literature especially lesbian literature available for queer women and realised that SCRIPTS would be an excellent space for creating an exclusive queer women and trans* only based magazine. SCRIPTS would include original pieces written in vernacular languages and provide translations in the adjoining pages. The editorial board aimed at making sure that the zine was cheaply published, easily affordable (unlike Bombay Dost which was priced Rs. 150 in 2000s) and work on the idea of suggested contributions, a widely acceptable practice within women’s and labour movement.¹⁰⁴ SCRIPTS was priced at

¹⁰³ Subaltern Counter publics are discursive arenas that develop in parallel to the official public spheres and “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.” Nancy Fraser, coining the term from Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern” and Rita Felski’s “counter public”, argues that counter publics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant publics and their existence better promotes the ideal of participatory parity.

¹⁰⁴The suggested contribution method is one of the oldest ways of collecting funds in both women’s and labour movement, where participants are requested to pay whatever amount comfortable for them to buy feminist literature etc. This practice is done in view of the fact that everyone can then afford to buy a particular work of

Rs. 100, with special discount to school and college students along with members from the lower sections of the society who wanted to access the magazine.

The editorial board of the SCRIPTS believed in Copyleft movement and lifted material during the initial days of magazine owing to the limited and private circulation of the magazine. Shal Mahajan candidly remembers this act of subversion as,

“We totally believed in Copyleft movement and lifted material freely from the internet. We loved June Jordan (a lesbian poet), and realised more lesbians (in India) should be reading her poems, and made her a recurring feature in SCRIPTS.”

(Interview with Shal Mahajan, July 2017)

The magazine would often amplify the use of pathos as augmented emotion, as most of the editorials would mention concern over lack of intersectionalities between queer movement and other parallel movements (Dalit movement, Labour movement, farmer struggles etc.), interference of law enforcement agencies as well as violence committed by natal families which at times led individuals to commit suicide (lesbian suicides were one of most grappling concerns within the queer movement in 1990s).

There was use of “*rhetoric of anger*” along with humour, as most of the contributors were welcomed and encouraged to use various emotions as tools of engagement in their contributions. The editorial board of SCRIPTS encouraged contributors to employ humour, satire, pathos among plethora of other emotions in their contributions to appeal to queer women community and create a wider fan base, and encouraging women to rewrite and retelling their own stories. Shal Mahajan in a personal interview quote:

“Always, we were asked (in letters addressed to SCRIPTS), but you don’t mean my work, my poems, my letters, my photographs? There was always an incredulity within our contributors, an assertion that their lives, their stories are not important. We had to tell them time and again- yes, yes, it (SCRIPTS) exists for you, to tell and share your stories.”

(Interview with Shal Mahajan, July 2017)

SCRIPTS gave space to a lot of community members to be expressive, as most of the contributors would send pieces based on their personal as well as lived experiences of being

literature. So, if a book is priced at Rs 100, if one can afford to pay Rs. 200 or Rs. 300, LABIA can then give away the magazine to someone for free who would like to read it, but can’t afford it.

in love, to being heartbroken, to traveling to a foreign country in search of love and acceptance etc. The contributors made use of these lived experiences as ‘rhetorical tool’, highlighting their experiences, so that other members of the community can empathise with it and gain a sense of belonging.

In the beginning, the editorial board comprised of the five founding members of LABIA, and slowly more members were added to the editorial board, and now there are a total of thirteen members. The issues between 2000 till 2010 didn’t follow a set stylesheet as SCRIPTS editorial board struggled to keep the zine printing, this was also due to lack of funds, as LABIA refused to take funding from either governmental or non-governmental organisations. It was only after the editions that came out after 2010, which followed a set stylesheet, this included the issues on Travel (released in September 2010), Food (released in June 2012) and Bees Saal Bad (released in December 2015).

SCRIPTS was discontinued briefly after its 15th edition which was released on the 20th anniversary of LABIA on December 15, 2015. Upon inquiring whether SCRIPTS would be revived, Shal responded,

“It was becoming more and more difficult for people to write for every issue, and we at times were left with same set of people contributing to the zine. Also, in the era of digital may be, we need to think whether we require a print magazine and may switch to e-zine.”

(Interview with Shal Mahajan, July 2017)

SCRIPTS came out with its sixteenth edition in December 2018, after the historic decriminalisation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code by the Supreme Court of India on 6th September 2018. True to their word, SCRIPTS had changed formats and moved towards a digital platform, which was well-received by their readers.

While efforts were made continuously for bringing lesbian activism and representation to the forefronts by groups like SAKHI and magazines like LABIA’s SCRIPTS, the reach of these initiatives were limited to most of the metropolitan cities. There was inability to transcend state-sanctioned surveillance along with misrepresentations by the mainstream media. The next chapter would be an attempt to explore the representations of lesbian suicides in print

media and cinema, with an attempt to understand the creation of lesbian subjectivity in Indian media.

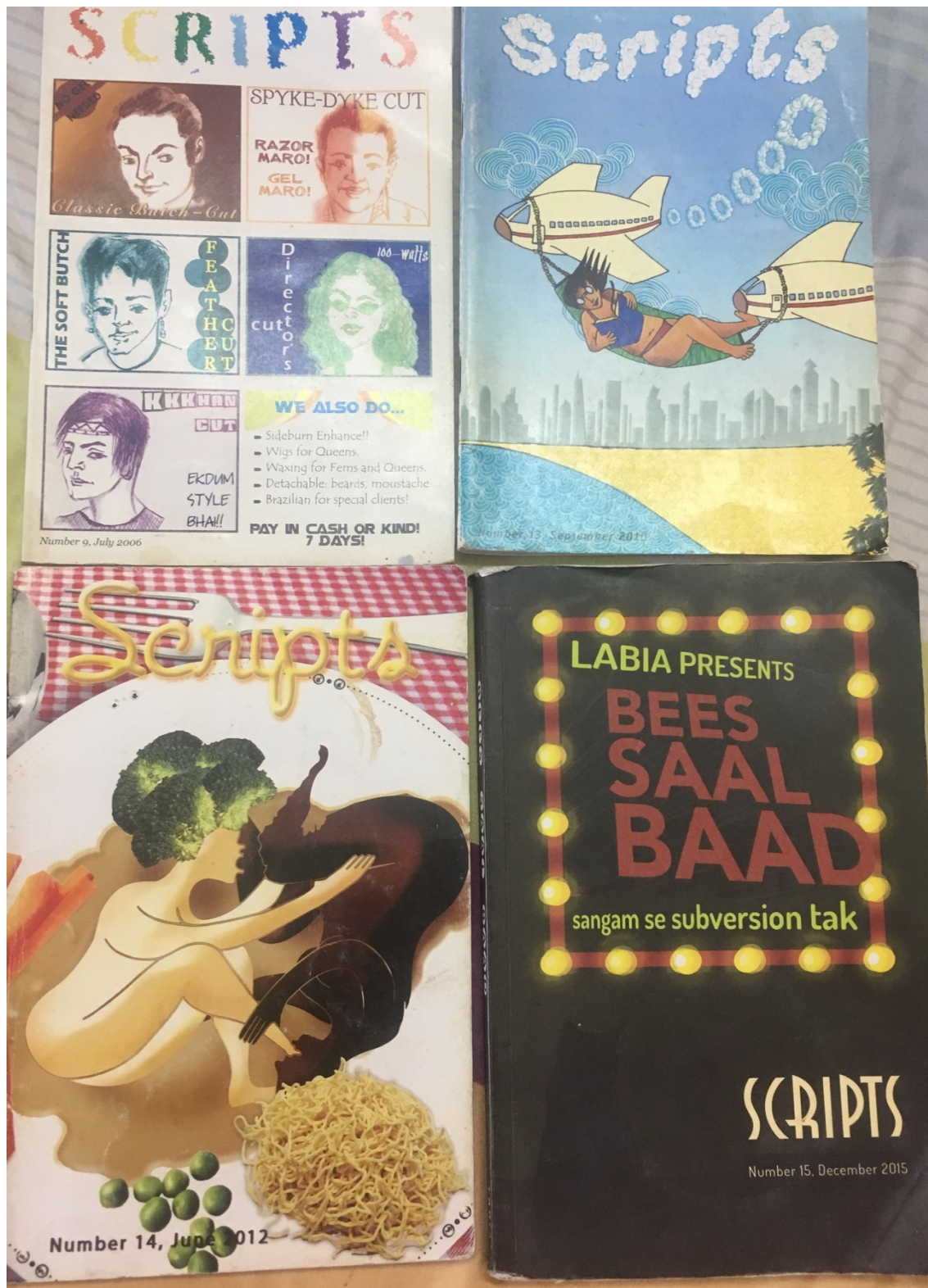


Image 2.14: Various issues of SCRIPTS published over the years. Courtesy: LABIA

Chapter-3

Lives worth Grieving For: Representation of Lesbian Suicides in Print and Cinema

INTRODUCTION

One of the ways in which queer sexuality especially lesbian subjectivity found coverage in the media in the mid 1990s was through the phenomenon of ‘Lesbian Suicides’ in states like West Bengal and Kerala. ‘Lesbian Suicides’ became one of the critical issues through which sexuality became a political matter in the public sphere of these two states.¹⁰⁵ According to Navaneetha Mokkal,

“A selected list of lesbian suicides, reported in print media in India in 1980s to 2002, compiled by Alternative Law Forum, an organisation working with legal rights of the sexual minorities based in Bangalore, has ten cases out of thirteen from Kerala” (Mokkal 2011, 391).¹⁰⁶

This chapter would try to observe the pattern in which investigative reports on these suicides was conducted across Kerala by journalist K.C. Sebastian in *Sameeksha*, a Malayalam fortnightly along with independent investigative factfinding research conducted by

¹⁰⁵ “Renowned for its successful inroads in pioneering in high literacy rates, gender equality as well as social development along with low per capita income, both Kerala and West Bengal have remained an enigma. Characterised by markers of modernity such as high levels of social development in terms of birth rate index, infant mortality rate, sex ratio, literacy, access to health care etc., performance of both the states have been credited as appreciable, giving the term such as ‘Kerala Model of Development’ in case of the former state, while West Bengal lost its edge to various controversies”. However, there have been disquieting evidence regarding sex-selective abortions, dowry related crimes and an epidemic of domestic violence cases against women that have become part of the everyday reality. According to the State Crimes Record Bureau the number of atrocities case against women increased to an all time high in both Kerala and West Bengal, with West Bengal ranking third in 2013 out of all the states, and Kerala following a close fifth. For more read, Franke, R.W. and B.H. Chasin, 1992, ‘Kerala State, India: Radical Reform as Development’, Internal Journal of Health Services, 22.1 and ‘Is Kerala Model Sustainable? Lessons from the Past and Prospects for the Future’, W. Franke and Barbara H Chasin Papers About Kerala, Montclair State University, <http://chss.montclair.edu/anthro/deconf.html> Accessed on 2/12/2018; Jeffrey. R, Politics, *Women and Well Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, Macmillan, 1992.

¹⁰⁶ The increasing incidents of violence against women in both public and private sphere opened a whole gamut of questions on the lived experiences of women across these two states, stark enough to find the ‘mismatch between the shrill claims of women’s agency, contraceptive-acceptance... and the embarrassment that cloaked sex and contraception in everyday discourse’ (Devika 2008). Even with the ‘unexpected outcomes’ and ‘paradoxes’ of the various development models hailed across Kerala and West Bengal, it opened conversations regarding gender and sexuality, but all was not well within the analytical framework within which it was placed (UNIFEM 2007). As despite, conversation regarding gender and sexuality, there was a constant moralistic drive to drive certain sexualities on the margins. For more see Devika, J(2008) *Individuals, Householders, Citizens: Family in Kerala, 1930-1970*, New Delhi; Jeffrey. R, Politics, *Women and Well Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, Macmillan, 1992.

Sahayatrika, an activist group fighting for sexual minorities in Kerala, and by *Sappho for Equality* another activist group in West Bengal.

In this chapter, I attempt to analyse select documentary and fictional narratives around lesbian suicides along with representation of these cases across myriad newspapers and journals and how in turn these stories got articulated in the public sphere of post 1990s Kerala and West Bengal. These would also include cinematic representations such as Ligy Pullappaly's film *Sancharram* (2004) and Debalina's *Ebang Bewarish* (2014). By going through the newspaper coverage of the lesbian suicides and rereading of the cinematic representations, I would counter the general trend in the media where "a lesbian-life is reported as an 'isolated spectacle'" (Sukhthankar 1999, 15).

The focus of this chapter will be to unravel the erased and silenced history of queer sexuality in Kerala and West Bengal, which have been a concern for social scientists, queer scholars and journalists alike. This chapter deliberates on how the political discussions on double suicides by women in both states became a moment of interrogation on the idea of shared spaces (mostly homosocial) and intimacy that women share which Darshana Sreedhar writes, as, "spill over its excess, even within the panopticon-like space under which every action of women is kept under scrutiny" (Sreedhar 2011). The 'uncontainable excess' of moral diktats along with surveillance on same-sex intimacy led me to *Sahayatrika* (Kerala) and *Sappho for Equality* (Kolkata), one of the few registered NGOs working for LGBT community in Kerala and Kolkata.

The methodology for this chapter is multidisciplinary as it takes on the modes of enquiries from various branches of learning. The main idea is to highlight certain ideas which had evaded and were ignored by the larger heteronormative society with respect to sexual subjectivities of queer women vis-à-vis their claims within the public space. I have attempted to highlight various moments from the decade of 1990s onwards, specifically with the introduction of neoliberalism as part of new economic policy as well as introduction of HIV/AIDS discourse and how it in turn affected discussions around women and their sexuality. This decade was quintessential for the "formation of 'self-disciplined gendered subject' under the aegis of New India" (Sircar 2017). I attempt to access and highlight various newspaper reports (mainstream and alternative), articles from magazines, public

speech, interviews with human rights activists, NGOs working with sexual minorities, support groups and human rights forum which are known to transgress the middle-class bourgeois codes of morality and expectations.

I have attempted to look at the documents and media reports of the double suicides as well as contribution of NGOs in terms of fact finding reports published by them as well as other forums like various national and International film festivals with themes on Gender and Sexuality such as DIALOGUES (Sappho for Equality), Kerala International Queer Film Festival (KIQFF) et al, which had helped in many ways to frame an understanding of queerness through cinema to a larger audience.¹⁰⁷ In her work titled '*Early Cinema: Whose Public Sphere*', Miriam Hansen, drawing from works of Jurgen Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alexandre Kluge on public sphere writes, "a film either exploits the viewer's needs, perceptions and wishes or encourages their autonomous movement, finetuning and self-reliance" (Hansen 1983). I argue that Hansen's articulation of this complex spectator, who she views as her counter-public, opens possibilities of alternative spaces for cinemagoing and viewing experiences like the queer film festivals, which at times are breeding grounds of queer politics.

This I feel remains key in integrating and forming strategic alliances with the queer movement and has been built and sustained across diverse strands of informal networks. All this draws from the field work I have done in West Bengal and Kerala, over almost a year (July 2017 to July 2018), as I tried to contest the seemingly self-evidential nature of facts by placing it within specific contexts to lay out the meanings which they are open to.

Though one struggles while writing about NGOs as a channel to strengthen the civil society due to co-opting and corporatisation of struggles around gender and sexuality, one cannot ignore the role it plays as an alternative space for unconstrained discussions and certain degree of open-ended communication. Mobilisation around women's movement post 1990s

¹⁰⁷ Dearth of queer cultural spaces led to formation of various underground art house film circuits which would screen films related to queer sexuality for a selected audience. With the rise of LGBT collectives and support groups, film screenings became a regular feature as part of the meetings and seminars organised by groups like Naz Foundation, Humsafar Trust which helped in formation of film festivals like Nigah Media Collective, Bangalore Queer Film Festival, Kashish International Queer Film Festival among many other queer film festivals. With various film festivals organised in metropolitans as well as smaller cities, it provided an opportunity for documentary as well as alternative fiction films to have a larger audience, in addition to making them familiar with growing queer cinema culture around the world.

was primarily acknowledging the ‘need of the individual rather than the collective’ (Narain 2004). Debates and mobilisation on female desire, pleasure and most importantly unbridled recreative sex along with sexuality, sexual choices, recognition of sex work in the 1990s across the nation revealed cracks in the second wave and third wave feminist movement in India.

Despite varied ideological standpoints taken up by feminist groups (as discussed in Chapter-2), discussions on sexuality and sexual choices, opened an uncomfortable rift within the women’s movement. Most women’s groups have preferred to fall in line with the ideal notions of femininity and address discrimination against largely cisgendered heterosexual women whose rights are challenged by an oppressive hetero-patriarchal society. The focus of mainstream women’s organisations tend to focus on the livelihood issues of women and heteropatriarchal violence, as sexuality was considered to be an ‘upper-class urban phenomenon’. This was fairly evident during the time of the fieldwork as well, as most of the subjects interviewed as part of the research either had not heard of the word ‘lesbian’ or were uncomfortable with naming themselves as one, and resisted themselves from affiliating with an unknown identity category that was also a ‘sexual practice’.

NGOs like Sahayatrika and Sappho for Equality, hence, play a crucial role as it became a moment to engage with the contradictions that had engulfed the women’s movement. The fact-finding reports by these groups factored in the suicides of lesbian women from under-privileged backgrounds like Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities who had limited economic means and fewer opportunities to move out to urban centres in search of livelihood. These groups further attempted to create safe-space for women and document the violence faced by them on the basis of their sexuality among other reasons.

3.1 Looking back at Haunting Spectres

If one reflects upon the suicides rates combined from Kerala and West Bengal it touches one of the highest in India, almost a triple of the national average. One wonders, how these are the same states which are hailed for being “embodiment of social equality?” (Jeffrey

1992).¹⁰⁸ One is confronted by the statistics regarding the gender equality that serves as the model for rest of the country, as one sees the largest proportion of single women among the suicide victims which asserts on the need for enquiry and various remedial measures as well as need for interventions.

The trend of double suicides emerged from the late 1980s in India where women from the age group of 15-29 were committing suicides for reasons unknown. These suicides were covered in the mainstream media obscurely first and then were given a front-page lead cover story. Many of these suicides were suspected to be result of forced coercion by the natal families upon women to get married and hence separating them from their same-sex partners. The initial news articles never hinted towards same-sex desire as the cause behind these suicides. But it was in late 1998-1999, when K.C. Sebastian published a group of investigative reports for *Sameeksha* titled “*Lesbians Commit Suicide: About the Suicide of Lesbians in Kerala in the last two years*” for July 11- June 28, 1998 edition of *Sameeksha*. These news articles finally revealed that most of these women were in a same-sex romantic relationship.¹⁰⁹ Undercurrents of sensationalism marred most of the reports published by *Sameeksha* and reflected reporter’s biases that underscored his claim. Referring to the women who committed suicide, K.C. Sebastian writes:

“Same-sex love exists among women in hostels in the cities. But it is rarely that these women become inseparable and go to the extent of ending their lives together. Most of these suicides happen in villages which are far away from the cities. These women come from ordinary families and read *painkili*¹¹⁰ magazines.” (Sebastian 1999, 15).

¹⁰⁸ “Kerala occupies only 3.1% of the National population, but about 10% of the total suicides take place within the state as per the statistics of Kerala Mental Health Authority” (KMHA). <http://www.ksmha.org> Accessed on 3/15/2018. and Krishnakumar, R. (2000) State of Despair in *Frontline* Volume 17 - Issue 08, Apr. 15 - 28, 2000 published by The Hindu published on 15-28 April 2000, Accessed on 9/10/2019 <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1708/17080970.htm>

¹⁰⁹ K.C. Sebastian had approached many news organisations to get his investigative reports published until *Sameeksha* took it up.

¹¹⁰ Navaneetha Mokkal refers to “*Painkilli*, as a highly popular form of romantic writing which invokes vernacular sentimental and sensual romance, a narrative form through which Sebastian derives his analysis. But Sebastian sees it in a disdainful manner, as for him these writings indicates set of attitudes that are extremely sentimental. The literal translation of *Painkilli* is a ‘singing bird’ and as it entered into circulation in reference to the popular love story *Padatna Painkilli* (The Beautiful Bird that Does not Sing) by Mutathu Varkey, published in 1955. It is usually seen as a sentimental pulp narrative of lovelorn couples and consumed widely by women readers who are looking for alternative narrative within their moribund lives. There’s a complete delegitimization and disavowal of this popular literary form within high cultural circles due to its investment in the sentimental and sensational”. For more see Mokkal, Navaneetha (2019) *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work, and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala*, University of Washington Press, Washington.

This as well as many of the subsequent articles he wrote had the presumption of women as readers of titillating and sensational fiction (*Painkilli*) as opposed to men. Activists across India voiced their concerns over this kind of sensational and biased coverage, and “the epistemic privileging of men over women, and marked their protests in the ‘*Letters to the Editor*’ section” (Sreedhar 2011). All the reports published in Sameeksha featured same sex subjects as someone who can be easily lured into a consensual same-sex relationship which could easily evade the surveillance by the society (due to its homosociality) where even male-female interactions are discouraged. This was also seen as an effort to erase any attempt to view women as “sexual and political subjects”. They were instead turned into gullible victims of circumstances, whose autonomy and agency can be easily stripped.

An extract from the anthology published by K.C. Sebastian of his articles on lesbian suicides titled ‘The Loving Ladies’ showcases the use of sensationalism to cater to the ‘excess’ of non-normative sexuality that one searches for within these articles.

January 13, 1995: “*A 27-year-old tuition teacher and her 17-year-old student killed themselves. They would ‘study’ behind closed doors and windows at the pupil’s house. When the teacher got married, the pupil continued to visit her. After a month, they eloped and consumed poison in a State Transport Bus parked in a garage. The teacher died on the spot, while the pupil breathed her last, two days later in the hospital. Their suicide note stated that ‘they could never live apart’*” (Sebastian 1999).

December 31, 1997: “*A woman rubber tapper near Kottayam committed suicide by consuming insecticide after attempting to murder her niece, whom she loved, by slitting her throat. The niece, who had refused to end her life, survived after she got up screaming and was rushed to the hospital. She was in love with a boy and was going to marry him, when her aunt told her that they must commit suicide. The girl eventually married the boy*” (Sebastian 1999).

April 1, 1998: “*Three lower middle-class women-two sisters and a distant relative, who was a neighbour committed suicide. The elder sister had a relationship with the neighbour for eight years. When the girl’s parents found out, they sent her to stay at her mother’s parents’ house. In her absence, the younger sister fell in love with the neighbour. During a temple festival, the three went to see kathakali at night and never returned. Their bodies were found in the nearby paddy field. They had consumed fertiliser. The suicide occurred after one of the girls got a marriage proposal*” (Sebastian 1999).

August 6, 1998: “Two peasant girls hanged themselves on the island of Vypeen near Cochin. They killed themselves after one of them was pressured by her parents to marry a boy” (Sebastian 1999).

October 29, 1998: “Two college students killed themselves by jumping before a train near Calicut after a partner’s marriage was fixed. Their uncle reportedly said, “They lived like in the English movies” (Sebastian 1999).¹¹¹

Initially, these unspecified reports were tucked away in some corner of the newspaper and weren’t carried as lead story, but as the pattern continued it drew attention of various journalists and NGOs alike. Media coverage of these suicides was not devoid of sensationalism as they were published as ‘Special Cover Story’ with lead coverage as part of the marketing agendas and saw blatant use of photographs of the suicide victims stripping them away of any privacy. Photographs of site of suicide of Manju-Ragini¹¹² in Kerala and Swapana-Sucheta in West Bengal were given graphic details and the photographs of the dead bodies became one of the most televised and publicised events to discuss same-sex intimacy on a public media platform.

The different degrees and the extents of the reporting might show slight variations, but the fact was universally acknowledged that unlike an accident, murder, or rape which are ascribed with news values, these stories had the potential to ‘make news’ and sustain the interest of the viewers under the tag of “deviant sexuality”. Most of the stories were covered in mainstream newspapers such as *Malayalam Manorama*, *Matrubumi*, *Kerala Kaumadi* to *Anand Bazaar Patrika* in West Bengal to magazines such as *Vanita*, *Grihalakshmi*, *Arogya Masika* and magazines which have primarily yellow journalism¹¹³ which took up the issue of double suicide. These stories usually appeared as cover stories as well as exclusive columns and even incorporated within advice columns. One of the letters from *Vanita* follows:

¹¹¹ Cited in Mehta, Neha ‘No Woman’s Land.’

¹¹² From Sahayatrika Archives

¹¹³ Yellow Journalism or yellow press finds its tainted origins during the circulation battles between “Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World and William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal in America commencing from 1895 till 1898”. This type of journalism presents no legitimate facts in their stories and instead uses exaggeration of news events, scandal mongering, grapevine and gossips with heavy reliance on unnamed and unattributed sources. Most of the magazines mentioned, adhered to standards of yellow journalism as they used melodramatic narratives to appeal to the readers rather than objectively laying out the facts. The stylesheet followed by the magazines comprised of bold layouts with misleading banner headlines (covering all the six to eight columns of the page), heavy reliance on photographs and illustrations, at times fake interviews or interviews with pseudo-experts, and fear driven sensational crime stories.

“From childhood itself, if parents take care, situations which lead to such aberrations can be avoided...take care not to let relationships develop into closeness beyond the limits. From the beginning itself prevent the tendency of your daughter to sleep with her friends regularly...Girls from broken families can have more of a tendency to find deep relationships through homosexuality. Some women who have had no sexual satisfaction in marriage can become ‘addicted to homosexuality’ if they get pleasure from it”. (Safeguard your girls 1997)¹¹⁴

The repercussions of this kind of sensationalism had ripple effects. With binary of good-bad woman already in place, the media coverage of the double suicides added another dimension to it. The stories appearing in newspapers and magazines fuelled a paranoia amongst the parents who saw close same-sex female friendships as a threat to the ideal model of heteronormativity. This led to rise in cases of moral policing by parents and ideological state apparatuses such as schools alike, as for example in the unearthing of an informal gathering of school girls by the name of “*Martina Navratilova club*” (Dave 2012, 111). In 1992 national newspapers reported,

“The formation and forced dissolution of this group after three ‘Martinis’ were found indulging in alleged lesbian behaviour after school hours. The school authorities also confiscated a diary that then gave away names of other five members, except one, all the students were expelled” (Dave 2012, 111).

Reports in the newspapers stated that all, (eight) children came from broken homes of estranged lower and lower middle-class parents. A psychologist who was researching the case reassured the parents and the school authorities as well as readers across India that a “‘passing phase’ of adolescent lesbianism could be guarded against by not allowing girls to sleep or bathe together” (Dave 2012, 111-112). The journalist who reported this story later said, “if one grouping goes undetected, unsolved, it can spring forth so many other groupings, so we need to...sanitise. That sort of sanitising was what I was definitely trying to do” (Sreedhar 2011). Activists from across India responded by sending “letters to the editor of Indian Express who did the ‘initial expose’ and one to the school principal.”¹¹⁵ This response was initiated by Delhi based feminist group Jagori which came to “the aid of these girls and defended their choice of ‘sexual autonomy’” (Express 1992). They further suggested that these girls were easily targeted because they belonged to working or lower middle class, and the state was trying to police or control these young women’s bodies. The intervention by a

¹¹⁴ Vanita, ‘Safeguard your girls, July 1997.

¹¹⁵ The journalist who reported on the Martina Navratilova Club as an exclusive news item believes to this day in the moral earnestness inherent in his spoof.

group of social activists including members of Jagori filed a petition before the State Human Rights Commission.¹¹⁶ However, the plea to allow these girls to continue in the same school was rejected; but an order was given to admit them in different schools, with immediate effect.

This instance remains similar in West Bengal with reports of an incident of similar nature that appeared in various national and international newspapers and news portals in 2018. In South Kolkata's Kamala Girl's high school, students and parents have alleged that "twelve girls from ninth standard were threatened with expulsion over displaying 'lesbian behaviour'" (Lahiri 2018). This was followed by immediate suspension of these students and referral to psychologist by the school authorities to curb such behaviour. The State Education Minister Partha Chatterjee responded by condemning the incident and said, "(Bengal) will not inculcate the idea of lesbianism in schools. It is against Bengal culture" (Lahiri 2018).

In another case, Mini, a postgraduate student from Kerala Varma College, Trichur committed suicide when she was 'alleged to be a lesbian' over her friendship with another girl in the hostel. The report first published by K.C. Sreenivasan from Sameeksha did a detailed investigative story and follow up of the suicide by speaking to Mini's family as well as the college Dalit Students Association who demanded judicial enquiry into the circumstances that resulted in Mini's death. Sreenivasan in the report underlined the hostile manner in which the college administration handled the case. Accusation of caste-based discrimination by the family members and Dalit Student Association were highlighted with instances such as the "hostel warden checking Mini's bank account details to see if she was working as a prostitute" (Mokkil 2011, 395). Navaneetha Mokkil reflects upon this double bind of caste and sexuality further,

"If it was lack of a social support system and safe space and ostracization which pushed most of the women to commit suicide, in this case it was the accusation of being a 'lesbian' that made Mini take her life. The incident was further marred by the fact that her lower caste and class background was also accounted for the burden of transgressiveness" (Mokkil 2011, 395).

¹¹⁶ Case no. HRMB-3771, filed on December 5, 2002 by fourteen signatories including Kerala Stree Vedi, Sakhi, Jagori feminists like C.S. Chandrika, Mercy Alexander, Vijayan, social activists like Maitrayan, Dileep Raj et al.

Devaki Menon further discusses this case and observes, “what is noticeable here is the social norms that make a public accusation of being a lesbian strong enough to lead a person to commit suicide” (Menon 2004, 32). These instances of suicide laid bare the yearning of many of these women and their last traces of life. Leaving many questions unanswered, many of them made their exit from their pain ridden lives which pathologized their desire. Fact finding reports from various support groups and NGOs reflect upon the trauma these women go through which includes,

“Being subjected to shock treatment, aversion therapy, cognitive and behaviour therapy and at times lobotomy for normalising and curing their ‘abnormal behaviour’, to being disowned, disinherited, physically abused and confined by their natal families, most of the women lost faith in the available support systems” (Equality 2011; LABIA 2013).

What remains disturbing in all these cases of suicide is that “the formation of ‘lesbian subjectivity’ occurs after the ‘tragic act of suicide’, seen as dark act of ‘coming out’, where coupledom gets established by dying together” (Mokkil 2011, 392). What all these cases highlighted, as lesbian activist Ashwini Sukhthankar notes, “how the media relies on the cataclysmic aspects of lesbian lives as it focuses solely on cases of public scandal like same-sex elopement and suicide” (Sukhthankar 1999, 23) (emphasis mine), thus reiterating the image of the “homosexual as a tragic victim” (Sharma 2006, 38). All the news reports and media coverage highlight the general trend in the media where “a lesbian life is reported as an ‘isolated spectacle’ that consumes itself in its own sensationalism and leaves no traces of the life that was its context” (Sukhthankar 1999, 15).¹¹⁷

Having said that, I would refer to two films that deal with the ideas of non-normative desire and lesbian suicides as part of this chapter. The first film is a Malayalam feature film titled *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004) directed by Ligy Pullapally on a lesbian love story set in rural Kerala. It is one of the few instances where lesbian desire is given space in a largely

¹¹⁷ As indicated in Chapter-2, the media coverage about lesbian subjectivities or women who were in same-sex relationships in early 1990s painted lesbian women as constantly battling with the hetero-patriarchal forces within and outside the women’s movement. Unlike celebration around gay subjectivities with coming out stories of Ashok Row Kavi or Bhupen Khakar, one would see stories of forceful separation of lesbian lovers, amounting to suicides, even two women living together was seen as abrasion to norms of hetero-sexist society. There was a shame associated with calling oneself ‘lesbian’ as most of the media coverage ended up pathologizing and reprimanding women who desired other women, and at times bordered on calling them ‘hysterical’.

heteronormative filmic text. The second film is a docu-drama titled *Ebang Bewarish* (and the unclaimed... 2013) directed by Debalina. The film is based on the real-life tragic suicide of Swapna-Sucheta in 2011 in Nandigram, one of the interior villages in West Bengal. The film deals with the central question of non-acceptance of non-normative sexuality, and brings out the pain and desolation of these individuals who are 'unclaimed' by their loved ones and by the society at large.



Image 3.1: Reproduction of the picture of Manju-Ragini suicide



Image 3.2: Reproduction of Swapna-Sucheta suicide.

3.2 Reworking Language of Sexuality through Cinematic Representation of Queer Desire

In the last three decades, with economic liberalisation and the subsequent impact of globalisation on Indian culture, mass media forms like cinema evokes anxieties with that of the nation-state. Critics and Scholars have argued that,

“The cinematic form is marked by its ability to draw audiences from all sections of society due to its appeal to the ‘masses’, despite its critique of being a lower art form that could have corruptive influence over the masses” (Mokkil 2010, 41).¹¹⁸

The single screen cinema halls across India are often characterised as seedy spaces where there was unregulated contact between different classes and sections of society. According to Film scholar Neepa Majumdar, “Indian cinema’s historical status has been of a guilty pleasure and therefore of an unacknowledged cultural force in public life and a site of public and government disavowal” (Majumdar 2009). With the coming of multiplex culture in the late 1990s, and with the launch of multi-screen theatres like PVR, these earlier unregulated spaces of amorous desire got commodified, sanitised and nearly expunged.¹¹⁹

With globalisation, there has been a change in the socio-economic, political and cultural trajectories of India, and demand on the cinematic medium to fulfil certain pedagogic function, even as its entertainment increased. The historical accounts of Indian cinema emphasise on various genres at work from devotionals, socials, melodrama etc, but with

¹¹⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the prime architects of modern India and the first Prime Minister evoked this sentiment further, “I think it is perfectly correct to say that the influence in India of the film is greater than the influence of newspaper and books combined. I am not at the moment talking about the quality of the influence” published in *Film Seminar*, 1955 quoted in Ramachandran 1981. Mahatma Gandhi was much harsher in his critique of cinema and its commercial nature. In an interview to a *Bombay Journal* for a message on the occasion of the Indian Motion Picture Congress, Gandhi stated, “Even if I was so minded, I should be unfit to answer your questionnaire, as I have never been to a cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil it has done and is doing is potent. The good it has done at all, remains to be proved.” Gandhi not only read the influence of cinema as ‘evil’ but also seemed to be sceptical of its future. For more see Chowskey, J (2012) *Mahatma Gandhi and Cinema*, Mumbai, Morya Arts.

¹¹⁹ The privacy as well as the publicness of these single screen theatres were replaced by the constant surveillance of a classed and moral spectator who sought a wholesome family entertainment instead of a possible low brow solicitation, and sexcapades that these theatres were known for. Even the division of the theatre space was classed from the front row seats usually occupied by people from lower sections of the society engaged in daily wage activities. The middle section which would be a mix of couples as well as single men and women who would lurk in the shadows for soliciting sex, and finally the balcony which was clearly for heterosexual familial couples or families in general. The balcony also had a vantage point compared to the other two sections which allowed the viewer/spectator a ‘Foucauldian panopticon’.

politics of sexuality being laid out in the 1990s, there was a substantial increase in films being produced on topics related to gender and sexuality in last two decades both in mainstream media as well in independent cinema.

While most of the releases on issues of gender and sexuality were aimed for niche audience as Indian film industry continues to remain sceptical in giving cinematic space and time to such topics due to taboos associated with it, the cinematic landscape changed in many ways after release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998). The earlier disavowal by the mainstream filmmakers to address same-sex desire in their films due to fear of losing mass appeal within their heterosexist spectators, changed towards that of slow acceptance with rise of independent filmmaking in India.

One such filmmaker, Ligy Pullapally released *Sancharram* (The Journey) in 2004 and made an important political statement by portraying a lesbian love story set in rural Kerala.¹²⁰ *Sancharram* attempted to stake its claim in terms of representation of lesbian desire in order to counter violence against queer sexuality. *Sancharram* was labelled as the first Malayalam 'Lesbian Feature Film' and was celebrated as one of the first 'Indie'¹²¹ films on sexuality coming from India. The film received critical acclaim, screened across various film festivals across the globe and was hailed as an 'avant garde' in terms of initiating conversations regarding radical sexual politics within Malayalam cinema. The film depicted, two young women in love attempting to transgress societal pressure, which was the war cry at a time when radical desire tried making its place within the sexual liberation movement within the neo-liberal Indian setup.

¹²⁰ Ligy Pullapally, like Deepa Mehta who directed *Fire* (1998), is a diasporic filmmaker, a lawyer based in Chicago before embarking on making *Sancharram* in response to an email informing her about yet another lesbian suicide from her home state in Kerala. Pullapally's film was partly funded by the prize money she won from legal work on gender-based issues.

¹²¹ An Independent Film or Indie film is a "genre of either feature length film, short films or documentaries that are produced outside the major film studio system, directed, produced and distributed by independent entertainment ventures. Noted through their distinct content and style of filmmaking, most of the independent films are made with considerably lower budgets as compared to major studio films. Characterised by limited release, the screening of independent film is often done through film festival circuits (local, national or international) before their theatrical distribution or release on video on demand, subscription-based screening sites like Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Prime etc. In the recent times, independent film has attracted direct video on demand release, with Netflix and Amazon Prime producing tailor-made films and shows for the viewers. Independent films in the past have been known to rival mainstream studio film in its production and distribution". For more see Erickson, Mary, and Doris Baltruschat. 2015. *Independent filmmaking around the globe*.

Ebang Bewarish (2013) (and the unclaimed ...) directed by Debalina in collaboration with Sappho for Equality, a NGO based in Kolkata is a 62 minute Bengali documentary film. The film deals with the double suicide of Swapna-Sucheta in Nandigram, a district in West Bengal and refusal of the families to claim the bodies, with the bodies cremated by the police separately against their final wish stated in their suicide letter.

What is interesting about both the films is the process of production and target audience for whom the film is made. Though both the directors attempted to get their films screened for a larger audience, both of them were more of festival release than that of multiplex release. The audiences in metropolitan centres in India and West had an easier and earlier access to these two films than audience in the sub-urban and rural parts of India. It's in this context of production, circulation and lack of commercial release that also becomes a roadblock for larger access of the films.¹²² Despite this, both films centred itself within an International LGBT counter-cultural discourse, as both the films wore its queer identity politics on their sleeves and created a niche audience and circuits of circulation for their consumption.

With the issue of lesbian suicide at the centre, my examination of the cinematic texts of the two films i.e. Sancharram and Ebang Bewarish is firmly rooted in demands of the contemporary LGBT mo(ve)ment. With the attempts to visibilise the constitution of sexual subaltern, who would endeavour to become a solidified queer subject¹²³, the sexual politics of

¹²² While both directors informally identify themselves as Indie filmmakers, their intervention and styles are different. Chicago based director Ligy Pullapally works with one of the most popular genres in fiction feature length film, i.e. romance, while Kolkata based Debalina chooses documentary format of filmmaking. Sancharram was honoured with the Chicago Award from the Chicago International Film Festival, The Lankesh Award for India's best debut director and the John Abraham Special Jury award for Best Malayalam Feature film. It was lauded as "an incredible act of affirmation of queer desire" by gay rights activist Arvind Narrain (Narrain 2004). "It premiered in the Chicago International Film Festival and has been screened in film festivals across India and is a popular film in the Indie circuit as well many noted gay and lesbian film festivals in US, Canada, and Australia. This film located itself in the visible LGBT networks across India and abroad through publicity of the film, its places of exhibition and networks of circulation. The DVDs of the film is marketed by the US company, Wolfe videos, a well-known distributor of gay and lesbian films. This is one of few Malayalam films whose copies can be easily found in video rentals as well on streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Similarly, Debalina's *Ebang Bewarish* (and the unclaimed...2013) was screened in various LGBT festivals across India and abroad and received a Jury Special Mention in the Documentary section of SiGNS 2014, organised by the Federation of Film Societies of India, Kerala on 1st June 2014, and various other accolades across the globe". The film remains important in addressing the issue of sexual desire that manifested itself in public sphere of India in form of lesbian suicides.

¹²³ "The 1990s saw the emergence of queer subjectivities which were attempting to unshackle itself from the criminalisation and pathologisation from the law and the state. With liberalisation, most of the members of the queer community were suddenly recognised as 'active citizens and consumers' within the new economic policy. However, this recognition came on the basis of their investment in certain consumerism and lifestyle practices.

the 1990s challenges to transfigure the public sphere of Kerala and West Bengal in particular. The burden of the chapter is to move away from nostalgic driven narrative of ‘traditional’ vs. ‘modern’ desire; on the contrary, to speak about the complexities of desire and make it relevant with today’s time.

My analysis is driven by cultural production in the nineties and how it found cinematic representation in the new millennium. One observes the stark absence of narrative and representation of non-normative sexual relationships from the cinematic medium as well as other literary devices. I use this reading to re-examine the politics of visibility and role of various media devices such as cinema and newspapers etc. to critique and counter the linear narrative of hetero-normativity. Feminist and queer scholars who worked with issues of sexuality in India like Nivedita Menon and Arvind Narrain have observed “how 90s in India ushered in new era of sexual politics-based discourse” (Menon and Nigam 2007; Menon 2005; Narrain 2004).

The two films discussed in this chapter stage these gender struggles in negotiation with public sphere, and various challenges faced by queer activism in India. There is also an attempt to interrogate the acclaimed universal and somewhat ‘monolithic’ language of sexual politics. The dangers of valorising a singular model of politics, when the language of gender and sexuality is ever changing remains a dangerous trope, and hence it becomes important to acknowledge, recognise and employ multiple ways of forging alternative discourses around politics based on sexuality and its representations.

As discussed in the first chapter, there have been multiple sites of cultural production like literature, popular magazines, cinema in India where texts around sexuality is produced and marketed alike. But it is in the 1990s where one witnesses significant shift as a more formulated language of rights-based activism emerges and makes way for sexual identity-based discourse in public sphere of India. These developments in turn played an important role in engendering the queer rights movement in metropolitan India that further relied heavily on the language of the sexual politics emerging from the West.

Most queer scholars emphasised that the recognition of the queer subject as a queer citizen was driven by the economic decisions they were able to take while at times foregoing basic rights of citizenship such as access to livelihood (in case of lower-class gay men and women as well trans* community who at times have to resort to begging and sex work), access to healthcare, and legality of civil unions and right to same-sex marriages.

Reflecting upon the various limitations while setting the discourse on sexual politics based on the phenomenon of ngo-isation¹²⁴ and globalisation in neoliberal India of 1990s, Ashley Tellis observes:

“South Asians must forge a language and politics closer to our own contexts, a locally grounded politics closer to our contexts, a locally grounded politics that respects sociological particularities and our own languages. This would mean eschewing the identity politics that have led to widespread impasses, even in Western Europe and US where they were born” (Tellis 2008).

By analysing these films and their text with respect to the discourses circulating in the public sphere in terms of their reception as lesbian films, I attempt to open up possibilities of critical (re)imagination of queer politics in the following section.

3.2(a) Differing Scripts of Mo(ve)ments: Sancharram and Ebang Bewarish

The opening sequence of Sancharram depicts a steep, ominous cliff and a gushing waterfall below.¹²⁵ A young woman is placed precariously at the edge of the cliff suggesting her contemplating a possible suicide attempt. She holds out her feet as the sounds of temple drums (non-diegetic¹²⁶) can be heard in the background making this a climactic moment of suicide which the film returns again in the closing sequence of the film, as we see the girl choosing life over death.

¹²⁴ The growth of funded NGOs began in the 1980s and 1990s, and coincided with opening of India's markets to liberalisation. With the government moving towards privatisation and withdrawing funding from key sectors like rural development, energy, agriculture, public health etc., NGOs acted as a buffer and are in charge of social services that used to be fulfilled by the public sector under the aegis of the state. While some economists suggest that NGOs are able to provide social welfare to the most marginalised and vulnerable, there are many that question their accountability, as instead of addressing social problems, it often appears that NGOs themselves have become 'the problem'. Writer Arundhati Roy coins the term 'NGOisation', in her essay '*NGOisation of Resistance*', as she refers to the capacity of NGOs to depoliticise discourses and practices around social movements (Roy 2014). She further explains, "that reports from poorer nations make the people of those countries into pathological victims, hence in aid of Western nations, hence, completely delegitimising the local people's movement that have been known to be self-reliant" (Roy 2014). For more see Roy, Arundhati (2014) 'NGOisation of resistance' in *Revolutionary Frontlines* published on 2014-09-23 <https://revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/ngoisation-of-resistance-arundhati-roy/> Accessed on 6/8/2019

¹²⁵ The opening sequence of Sancharram share great similarities to cinematic adaption of Daphne De Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine.

¹²⁶ Non-Diegetic sounds refers to any sound whose source is not present or implied within the narrative universe. The most common use of non-diegetic sounds is in music or score to augment emotions, actor's or narrator's commentary or any added sound effects. Director Ligy Pullapally employs non-diegetic sounds like drums to augment emotions and indicating the moral dilemma faced by her protagonists throughout the film. For more on sounds, see <https://filmanalysis.coursepress.yale.edu/sound/> Accessed on 6/11/2019.

Sancharram (which means journey in Malayalam) opens with an imminent threat of suicide and then becomes a tale of self-discovery to attain and claim personhood with respect to contemporary events (lesbian suicides in Kerala) which the film responds to. Pullapally's film attempts towards a “political and conscious intervention in the field of available representations of same-sex female desire” (Mokkil 2011). Pullapally claims that she was inspired to make this film in response to the surge of lesbian suicides in Kerala. In an interview she says, “I hope my film helps young gay people consider the option of moving ahead with their lives, instead of taking the devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities, suicide” (Cheerath-Rajagopalan 2005, Interview).

Ebang Bewarish (and the unclaimed ...2013) directed by Debalina in collaboration with Sappho for Equality¹²⁷, an NGO based in Kolkata, opens with narration of double suicide of Swapna-Sucheta in Nandigram, a district in West Bengal. Nandigram was already reeling in political turmoil with the protests against the construction of Special Economic Zone, and subsequent armed agitation between the villagers and the then in power CPI(M); is when the news of Swapna-Sucheta suicide made headlines. The death of Swapna-Sucheta was followed by their subsequent degradation, with their families’ refusal to claim their bodies and finally the local police cremating their bodies three weeks after their suicide. The cremation of Swapna and Sucheta with the other unclaimed bodies was against their final wish which stated that they should be cremated together in their suicide note, is the subject of Debalina’s 62-minute Bengali documentary¹²⁸.

Both films stage gendered struggles while using the genre of romance (fiction) and documentary formats as there is a constant negotiation of staking their claim in public sphere,

¹²⁷ Formed in 1999 by a group of Lesbian women in Kolkata, “Sappho for Equality aims at a society free of sexuality-based discriminations, as it aims to, “go beyond the identity based politics to a politics of standpoint and provide a platform irrespective of gender and sexual orientation to question the organised workings of homophobia, hetero-sexism and heteronormativity.” The NGO aims at providing a safe space for lesbians, bisexual women and female to male trans*persons and runs a resource centre on sexuality called Chetana since 2005. They organise awareness programmes, poster exhibitions, sensitisation, self-empowerment residential workshops along with study circles to connect with the heterosexist society as well, and build formidable alliances. Sappho for Equality is a member of Maitree, a forum for Women’s rights in West Bengal and engages in networking and referral networking with other women’s groups, minority rights and LGBT organisations. It also publishes a biannual magazine titled Swakanthey (In her Own Voice) along with organising the National Queer Conference with Jadavpur University, a biennial event”. For more see <http://sapphokolkata.org/>. Accessed on 6/11/2019.

¹²⁸ Debalina along with several members of Sappho for Equality highlighted that the suicide note left behind by Swapna-Sucheta requested their respective families to cremate them together, so that they can be together in death, if not in life.

that resonates with the challenges faced by queer activism in India. The films work with various temporal differences and attempt to speculate with the different models of sexual politics available within Kerala and West Bengal. Creation of cultural text amongst the various modes of sexual politics, as activists and academics attempt to articulate (im)possibilities of non-normative sexual practices in post neo-liberal India. This is in the face of the concerns around lesbian suicides and other forms of violence that individuals belonging to the non-normative community have to go through on a daily basis.

Sancharram reworks the romance genre and narrates “the story of two young women Kiran and Delilah (Lilah) in village/small town rural Kerala whose friendship transgresses boundaries and enters the realm of the sexual” (Mokkil 2010, 153). The filmmaker chooses protagonists that the viewers can relate to with names and local habitations; and gives them adequate space (screen time) within the narrative of the cinematic medium to establish them in their own light. Instead of typecasting the women within the lesbian stereotypes of butch-femme, the director chooses characters because of their ‘ungroomed’ cinematic appearances to further strengthen the verisimilitude. For Pullapally, “Sancharram attempts to bridge the gap between politics of sexuality and desire in a country where girls ‘pass’ as straight and then tragically commit suicide in the immediate realities of the real world” (Cheerath-Rajagopalan 2005).¹²⁹

In the film, one of the protagonists Kiran comes from a prestigious upper caste Nair¹³⁰ household with a father who was a celebrated journalist and a mother who has an affluent inheritance. Delilah, on the other hand, comes from a conservative Christian (Catholic) family raised single-handedly by her mother after death of her father. The film shows the

¹²⁹ Responding to Deepa Mehta’s comments that, ‘Fire was not about lesbianism at all, and was instead about ‘choices’”; Pullapally’s Sancharram examines the emergence of lesbian desire as desire rather as a political tool for feminist to further the lesbian cause.

¹³⁰ The Nairs are a dominant Hindu caste groups from Kerala and have been known for their matrilineal practice within their households (tharavada) until the early 20th century, and the practice of matrilineality ended with British interventions in partnership with the Nair male elite, and finally eroded with the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. The Nairs were known for their military prowess and exerted influence in medieval Kerala as feudal lords (primarily land owners). Their social position allowed them to dominate military, civil and administrative positions in the pre-colonial era and have been known for their access to cultural and educational institutions in Contemporary Kerala. Throughout the history of the community, despite their matrilineal practices, the role of the women was confined to the aegis of the household. Historian Praveena Kodoth points towards this gradual dispossession of Nair women’s right to natal property due to newly emerging discourse around individual rights- where the rights of ‘wife’ was pitted against that of the ‘sister’; the subject of rights, of course, was never assumed to be Nair woman herself (Kodoth 2001). For more see Kodoth, Praveena. 2001. ‘Courting Legitimacy or Delegitimizing Custom? Sexuality, Sambandham and Marriage Reform in Late- Nineteenth Century Malabar’. *Modern Asian Studies*, 35(2)

budding friendship between the two girls as they study in the same school and share their quotidian lives. What starts as an innocent friendship becomes a ‘coming of age’ tale of two women who struggle to name and articulate their romantic and sexual desires towards one another.

Like in case of most of romantic narratives, the acknowledgement of love is followed by a crisis as one of their classmates, Rajan who desires Delilah chances upon them in an intimate moment and complains to Delilah’s mother. Due to fear of ostracization and familial pressure, Delilah reluctantly agrees to an arranged marriage to Sebastian, a medical professional who plans to take his bride to America, while Kiran is further ostracised by her family as well as in her school as grapevine around their ‘alleged relationship’ circulates across school and their village. While, Kiran repeatedly attempts to change Delilah’s mind to sever ties with her family and elope with her, Delilah refuses to do so. On the day of Delilah’s marriage, Kiran considers committing suicide but changes her mind in the last moment as she attempts to embrace a new life. At the same moment, in a dream like sequence, Delilah runs out of the wedding hall screaming Kiran’s name one last time as she refuses to enter this loveless marriage.

While the motif of a journey towards self-discovery remains the central theme for Sancharram, Debalina’s *Ebang Bewaarish* (and the unclaimed...) begins with one of the protagonists reading the suicide note of Swapna-Sucheta who committed suicide in Nandigram in 2011. The film follows attempt made by the filmmaker and fact-finding team from Sappho for Equality to retrace the lives of Swapna-Sucheta in retrospect after their tragic suicide. The act of ‘suicide’, according to lesbian activist and scholar Maya Sharma becomes the “dark act of coming out where coupledness of these women gets established by dying together” (Sharma 2006). Debalina (the director) along with the fact-finding group struggle to acquire information about these two women in an attempt to rearticulate their desires with the only document that remained after their death: the suicide note.

For many of the members of Sappho for Equality, this particular case remained an enigma with the kind of details that followed after the death of these two women. One of the constant discussions that takes place as part of the film is around the fact that sexuality and assertion of sexual desire is seen as a “Western phenomenon and not part of an Indian cultural

discourses” (Dave 2012). While, the characters from the film attempt to answer these questions, the film confronts the idea of queerness as a ‘monolith’ that circulates within the popular discourse, and how two women from rural West Bengal who might not be aware of the language or politics of sexuality attempt to define queerness in their own way. Unlike *Sancharram*, which gives a momentary wish fulfilment to the two protagonists, *Ebang Bewarish* doesn’t give any solution to the impending problem of lesbian suicides but attempts to start a dialogue around the idea of sexual desire and how it remains a work in progress.

Both the films through their textual politics, marketing and circulation strategies attempt to become part of the counter-public.¹³¹ Both films position themselves as a ‘queer film’ as they stake the claim for an expression of non-normative desires that goes against various societal norms. Pullapally and Debalina’s films end up weaving narratives of traditional family setups in a picture-perfect setting based in rural Kerala and West Bengal as a backdrop of a ‘queer love story’.

The films highlight the “contradictions and perversities inherent in the organisation of all publics” (Warner 2002, 81). Mokkil reflects upon Michael Warner’s argument and “points to the limits of positing a counter-public as an exclusive site of resistance” (Mokkil 2010, 156). Within the space of the counter-public also, the public-private¹³² distinction remains gendered, as this binary is employed to legitimise oppression on the basis of gender and used to regulate sexualities. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their essay *Sex in Public* (1998) draw on the “work of Foucault and Habermas in order to discuss the counter impulses within the discourses around sexuality and public culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998). Through various mechanisms in place, normative forms of sexuality are articulated and circulated within the public sphere. This could range from gender expressions that are deemed acceptable within the Indian public sphere to public display of affection that are at times frowned upon and morally policed. There is an erasure of the publicness of sex and

¹³¹ The idea of counter-public is then seen to be in contention with the dominant public discourse. Michael Warner argues, “a counter-public maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself of is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one” (Warner 2002, 86).

¹³² In her essay titled *Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces* (1996) Nancy Duncan “demarcates between Private and Public sphere”. The private sphere for Duncan, “is an ideal type and traditionally associated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, personal, intimacy, passion, sexuality, care, a safe haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence” (Duncan 1996). Similarly, Public is defined as, “an ideal type traditionally the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the market, the state, action, militarism and transcendence” (Duncan 1996).

sexuality as “it (sexuality) seems like a property of subjectivity rather than a publicly or counter-publicly accessible culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 560). These remain to be the constant negotiations one has to undertake within the public as well as private sphere, and becomes one of the quintessential elements of queer politics today. These questions get staged in various ways in both *Sancharram* and *Ebang Bewaarish*.

Sancharram locates the love and desire between women within the familiar realm of the home (private), unlike the publicness of suicide in *Ebang Bewaarish*. In *Ebang Bewaarish*, the protagonists have been displaced from their natal homes- and even after their death, their bodies are unwanted by their families. While *Sancharram*’s radical potential lies in taking the (un) familiar love home; *Ebang Bewaarish*’s necessitates natal home as a ‘site of violence’ if one displays any kind of deviant behaviour. The emotional and physical cost of maintaining heterosexist behaviour comes at the cost both natal and social ostracization for same-sex couples in both the films.

Sancharram foregrounds “the private/public debate as the couple articulates their sexual relationship, displaying them in private spaces at home and how it plays an important role in formation of coupledness” (Mokkil 2010). The film reads the (homo)sociality of the joint family as a point of origin as well as a bone of contention for (un)familiar queer desires. The mis-en-scene¹³³ of *Sancharram* first establishes the idyllic pastoral settings of Kerala and reiterates it time and again to reflect that queerness is radical. The film acknowledges the porousness of homo-sociality and locates it within the space of home which at times is the most common site of violence towards non-normativity. Natal homes for many queer individuals is not a refuge, but a place from where many seek refuge. *Sancharram* locates this lesbian coupledness within the space of home, one of the primary locations of queer desire and subjectivity. Queerness is often relegated to spaces one outgrows, for many, the familiarity of

¹³³ “The term MISE-EN-SCENE (also mise-en-scène) describes the primary feature of cinematic representation. Mise-en-scene is the first step in understanding how films produce and reflect meaning. It’s a term taken from the French, and it means that which has been put into the scene or put onstage. Mise-en-scene consists of all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior (meaning actors, their gestures, and their facial expressions). In addition, mise-en-scene includes the camera’s actions and angles and the cinematography, which simply means photography for motion pictures”

a home that grows up and leaves behind becomes the turning point in formation of their subjecthood.¹³⁴

This coupledness is addressed as a public construction within the cinematic narrativization in a mandatory song sequence that the couple in the film, Kiran and Delilah are fitted into. According to Mokkil, “They (the filmmaker) show the conventions of the making of the couple and reflect how cultural forms like cinema play a role in this construction” (Mokkil 2010, 160). Often in films, “compulsory heterosexuality is represented and repeated so often that it becomes the only naturalised and acceptable form” (Butler 1990). But when two women (as in case of Sancharram) are shown as a “couple performing the codes of heteronormative coupledness, it undercuts the assumption that heterosexual coupledness is the only established and accepted form” (Mokkil 2010, 160).

Pullapally locates this within the plot of her film, where Kiran and Delilah are surrounded by many fruitful as well ill-fated narratives of heteronormative love. While Kiran’s grandmother had abandoned her natal family for love of a poor soldier (lower class and caste status than hers) which brought her disrepute and social ostracization; Delilah’s grandmother has loving memory of her dead husband as she awaits reunion with him in death. The story invokes melodramatic plot devices that foretell the fate of these interclass, intercaste, interfaith, ill-fated same-sex lovers (Kiran and Delilah), as desire and love seems to have more tragic consequences for women, rather than men.¹³⁵

A comparative reading of both films exposes the various literary and filmic devices that make this ‘unholy’ coupledness palatable. For Mokkil, “Sancharram draws upon existing cinematic and literary conventions but seem to intensely remain private and subjective” (Mokkil 2010, 161). The space of the couple in Sancharram remains to be in an alternative universe or in a dream like scenario almost disassociated from the social or the public realm. The film heavily

¹³⁴ This usually takes place when the individual either acknowledges their queerness and decides to conform to the social norms which means death of desire or an acknowledgement of the desire, which means leaving home and moving on.

¹³⁵ Despite these plot devices, the director gives space to various other instances that serve as a premonition for any deviance from non-normativity. Two classmates of different faiths - one Hindu and one Muslim - elope from school only to be apprehended and coercively separated. Heterosexual love is also revealed to have more tragic consequences for women than it does for men, as in the story of another female classmate of Kiran and Delilah, who had been impregnated by a man she believed had loved her; however, betrays her and she is forced to have an abortion.

relies on visual and verbal discourse of romantic love where “expressions of sexuality becomes a property of subjectivity” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 560). The plot devices employed to “kindle romance between Kiran and Delilah is a familiar one, finding its roots in the already established Malayalam romantic and erotic genre dating to 19th century” (Mokkil 2010, 161).

One such instance is highlighted in the film where Kiran’s desire for Delilah is confronted by one of her classmates Rajan who asks Kiran to help him pen love letters to Delilah in order to woo her. Rajan says, “*I like her as much as Kunjakkobba Robban* (Malayali film actor) *likes Shalini in Aniyathi Pravu* (Adorable Sister)” (Mokkil 2010, 161), drawing inspiration from a popular Malayalam coming-of-age film to express his desire.

Rajan’s status as an outcast remains a precarious one as he is a man between two desiring women, and also, he is seemingly from a non-dominant caste background driving him to the margins unlike Kiran’s access to cultural capital. He struggles to speak in English and his language of romance comes from Painkilli (sentimental pulp) fiction. Even his romantic gestures are seen as “grand and over the top, as he approaches Kiran to pen a love letter for Delilah” (Mokkil 2010, 161).¹³⁶

The central protagonist of Sancharram fits the “frame of the modern agential ‘Kerala woman’” (Mokkil 2011, 396). She is career oriented, educated, comes from Nair lineage known for their intellectual capacity and creative faculty marking her as one of the promising citizens of the country. The cultural capital and markers of modernity are more readily available to Kiran as compared to Delilah as she attempts to break out of conservative Catholic upbringing. Kiran becomes the icon of rebellion in the film “as she expresses her desire with ease initiates the romance between the two women, and time and again refuses to be crushed by societal norms” (Mokkil 2010, 163). Even when Delilah agrees to get married and continues to have her relationship with Kiran, Kiran refuses to be part of this kind of deceitful relationship. Kiran proceeds to cut off her hair and starts wearing white clothes espousing to be an ascetic. The director suggests that Kiran will head towards a ‘life of celibacy’ opposite to the path that Delilah has been coerced into. Adoption of Kiran’s asceticism might be seen as her possible adoption of a ‘butch identity’, while she refuses to

¹³⁶ Access to class, language and questions of caste remains dominant paradigm throughout this research in terms of queer subjectivity.

renounce her Nair lineage. The film ends with Kiran choosing life over death and embrace this awakening on her own. But this sense of agency that film bestows on Kiran seems to be tied up to an essentialised Nair identity that the film constructs for her.

While desire as an emotion passes through various slippages and evoke this forbidden love between these two women, the fact that the existing social structures affect Delilah more than Kiran, evokes that she (Kiran) has more access to markers of modernity than Delilah. The film establishes Kiran possibly returning to Delhi after revelation of her torrid love affair becomes public, as she seeks advice on the phone from her uncle who is openly 'gay'. The access to the markers of modernity like "fluent use of English sets Kiran up as an individual who has access to upward mobility and can function outside the local setting" (Mokkil 2011, 396). Navaneetha Mokkil further adds,

"Ligy Pullapally's choice of social location of her main characters goes against the set patterns exhibited by the lesbian suicides documented by Sahayatrika and Sappho for Equality. Both the NGO's documented disturbing patterns where most of the women who were committing suicide were coming from the marginalised community, especially Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis. Many of the women were also coming from lower classes with limited economic means and fewer opportunities to move to urban metropolises in India" (Mokkil 2011, 396-397).

Hence, the film shifts its milieu from stories of suicide of marginalised women to a protagonist who is firmly placed within the cinematic narrative as an upper class and upper caste Nair woman, and doesn't cower to societal pressure. The story conveniently allows the protagonist to access the 'coming out' narrative i.e. denied to most. The narrative conventions of this film are interlaced with the "concept of a desiring woman as one positioned as 'agential'" (Mokkil 2010, 164-165). In another argument, Samedha Satapathy while analysing *Sancharram* assess,

"How the Christian woman in the film, Delilah, cannot become the protagonist of the film and can never be the 'voice' of the lesbian movement because its legitimacy belongs to the upper caste woman who is part of the identity politics that does not critique caste politics" (Satapathy 2006, 137).

While it remains to be a precarious task for a woman to lead a life of non-normativity in India, the ease with which woman can lead such life becomes possible if they belong to an upper class and upper caste strata, as then they can be presented as a self-sufficient

transgressive subjects. For Delilah, “the ‘other’ woman in the relationship who belongs to the non-dominant caste and class sections, her autonomy over her body is not a given and there is a scarcity of canonised narrative forms within which her story can be voiced” (Mokkil 2010, 165).

Delilah does not fit into the model of the agential Kerala woman the way Kiran does, and her ‘desire to desire’ does not find many “celebrated predecessors in narrative forms within which her story can be told” (Mokkil 2011).¹³⁷ Satpathy further reflects,

“Intersections of caste, class and gender limit the possibilities of transgressions available to Dalit women and how it is important to revisit the concept of transgression in terms of accessibility, as transgression has been acceptable only when those who can afford to transgress, transgress” (Satapathy 2006, 78).

So, it is essential to acknowledge that filmic rendition of this story is not a sheer coincidence that this love story would have been possible if the protagonist were from any other background than from the Nair community in Kerala.

If we take a look at the themes of the films, what stands out is the reference to “travel and movement”. For Mokkil, “Travel is a process through which the space is rendered mobile” (Mokkil 2010, 166). Sancharram embodies the sense of movement and journey within itself, while Ebang Bewaarish begins with a lesbian suicide and captures the stillness and silence accompanying death. Ebang Bewarish suggests the various ambiguities associated with language of sexuality and sexual politics and emphasis on the precarious nature of naming and subject formation. Both films attempt to capture the ““macropolitical unit of the nation’ while talking about sexuality” (Mokkil 2010, 165) but also refers much more to the local sense to refer to the particular geographical region in Kerala and West Bengal.

¹³⁷ News reports around caste-based violence remains to be prevalent in print media. From natal families disowning their children to blatant honour killings that claims the lives of many due to inter-caste romances or marriages to the classified matrimonial section that thrives on caste-based selection, caste remains to be one of the key struggles within identity politics. Even within the queer community, caste remains to be an important assertion when it comes to choose one’s same-sex partner. This was reflective of the advertisement published by Padma Iyer who was seeking a matrimonial match (groom) for her son. The “Groom Wanted” advertisement became a bone of contention within the queer community, while some activists saw it as progressive, others pointed towards the blatant casteism embedded within the queer community. For more see Inani, Rohit Mother Posts India’s First Gay Marriage Advert to Seek Groom for Her Son, TIME (May 21, 2015), <http://time.com/3891962/india-gay-homosexual-lgbt-rights-marriage-advert/>.

While the process of coming out and acknowledging non-normative desire remains key to Sancharram, Ebang Bewarish attempts to articulate desire of the two subjects posthumously which almost seems like stripping them of their last agential strand. It's important to acknowledge that while both protagonists from Sancharram have the safety of home (if they conform to the societal norms), that however is not available to Swapna-Sucheta. Both the films struggle with creation of space for the couple to express their desires as possibility of a 'safe space' is rendered unstable even before its creation. Here, De Certeau's defines space as,

“‘Space’ becomes distinct from that of ‘place’. For him place carries an indication of stability where every object has a specific location, where space does not have a stability of the “proper”, ‘space is a practice space’” (De Certeau 1984, 117)

The film exposes the space of the tradition within these very heteronormative foundations on which the matrilineal tradition is established as it relies on a “manufactured idea of the Nair tradition that is portrayed as timeless and eternal, and free from the neoliberal interference” (Mokkil 2010, 168). The blurb on the DVD of Sancharram reads, “In a land steeped in tradition...a secret love” (Mokkil 2011).¹³⁸ The construction of this space of nostalgia that remains frozen in time almost unspoiled by modernity as a device is used as a portrayal for Kerala in Sancharram. One review of Sancharram comments, “all this is filmed against the lush backdrop of Kerala, the histories and customs of tharavads, the strong women who run the houses in the matrilineal society” (Vikram 2004).

The film addresses the feminist debates circulating in Kerala since 1990s about “women’s lack of access to public sphere and the threat of physical violence against women in such spaces” (Jeffrey 1992). This remains to be an active debate amongst the activist groups based in Kerala. Deepa VK in her reflections around the responses of Sahayatrika, mentions that many of the women supporting the NGO did not necessarily identify themselves as “queer or women loving women” (Deepa 2005). Most of the NGOs were drawn to create political and social safe spaces where one could articulate issues and experiences of women’s sexuality freely. These responses to Sahayatrika highlights the “absence of locations where women can dissent the ‘patriarchal ordering of their bodies’ through their ongoing struggle to stake their claim on public spaces” (Deepa 2005, 192).

¹³⁸ Pullapally flounders like her predecessors such as Deepa Mehta in depicting lesbian romance by orientalising the East with the DVD blurb, and ends up presenting same-sex love as an act of subversion against heteropatriarchal traditions.

“As the film concludes, a new journey begins” states the synopsis of Sancharram with reference to the ending of Sancharram.¹³⁹ Ebang Bewarish begins where Sancharram ends; it actually sets the protagonists off on a tumultuous physical journey through the world. While *Sancharram* could have ended with a tragic suicide in the end but what the film captures is the journey or the process of coming to terms with one’s sexuality and acceptance that follows.

3.2(b) Lesbian as a Political Subject

“They were cremated as two unclaimed bodies...Probably they were together at that time”

--Ebang Bewarish (2014)

Narratives around lesbian suicides have been the foundational text for queer mobilisation around human rights in India. The process of remembering and grieving for lives that are no more, acquire a “sense of the political” (Butler 2004; Butler 2009; Mokkil 2010; Mokkil 2011). In this section, I attempt to examine the activist discourses on lesbian suicides in West Bengal with analysis of the cinematic rendition of Ebang Bewarish that documents the suicide of Swapna-Sucheta and opens itself to explore some of the following questions: What are the various discourses around representation of lesbian sexuality that has its centre within the event of suicide and the spectres of women whose lives could have been saved? What are the narrative tropes through which the figure of ‘lesbian’ surfaces in the public sphere in the post 90s India? How do the discourses on lesbian suicides in India complicates the governing modes of thinking about sexuality, representation and subjectivity? As my introduction to the chapter suggests, I highlight the narrative forms that frame non-normative lives of such representational politics.

As discussed earlier in Chapter-2, while juridical, pathological and governmental mechanism acknowledges the ‘role of gay male subject’, “there’s no acknowledgement given to female sexuality, and that is delegitimised further in case of formation of a lesbian subject” (Ghosh 2014, 166). In the post 1990s transnational public health discourse post the AIDS crisis, “the lesbian understood globally as zero risk demographic” (Dave 2006, 62). The mobilisation

¹³⁹ For see <http://www.thejourney-themovie.com/> Accessed on 6/15/2019

around “lesbian suicides across India also addresses this absence of the lesbian and complicates this assumption within the rights based political discourse, where inclusion of a subject is done on the basis whether the issue can be made political” (Dave 2006, 616).¹⁴⁰ This section remains to be a work-in-progress in terms of articulating lesbian subjectivity and the tensions that exist within the movement to consolidate the lesbian subjectivity into a stable identity.

The mobilisation of rights-based movement on lesbian suicides in India specifically from Kerala and West Bengal remains to be “a useful site to locate potentiality of region-based politics of sexuality that doesn’t necessarily ‘co-opt’ itself within the human rights and identity-based politics model” (Mokkil 2010, 190) (emphasis mine). Most of these regional interventions draw on transnational LGBT discourse and summon new challenges to the earlier unaddressed representations within the rights-based model of politics. The transnational discourse allows visibility of certain bodies where these bodies in turn have the ‘righteous claim’ to become the ‘agential’ subjects within the public sphere. In this section, I would borrow from Navaneetha Mokkil’s idea of “lesbian as a haunting spectre, where lesbian as a figure inhabits the shadow zone between visibility and invisibility and is constituted through multiple mediations” (Mokkil 2010, 190).

Mokkil’s usage of ‘lesbian haunting’ refers to “the transitive acts and practices which render vulnerable the regulatory norms of sexuality, but these practices are tentative and not solidified” (Mokkil 2010, 190)¹⁴¹. Through my analysis, I attempt to question the “idea of subjectivity as a mode of self-reflexivity tied to an ‘illusion of coherence’ and attempts to track this transitive process” (Khanna 2007, 169).

¹⁴⁰ As indicated in Chapter-2, the politics of sexuality that is deeply anchored in Urban India saw the attempts made in the 1980s and 1990s to build communities around lesbian subjectivities (emergence of groups like Sakhi and LABIA) along with mass media reportage of coming out narratives of Giti Thadani (founder of Sakhi). The release of Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* in 1998 in India was a significant ‘coming out’ moment for the lesbian community, and their recognition as political subjects. Even the political mobilisation around reading down of Section 377 of the Indian penal code saw lesbian participation.

¹⁴¹ Navaneetha Mokkil’s attempt to “understand lesbian hauntings foregrounds the various acts and strategies that question the rigid identity categories and various manifestations of strategies as part of rights-based activism” (Mokkil 2010, 190). Drawing from Terry Castle’s argument in his work *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993), where Castle “acknowledges the power embedded in the figure of the lesbian within the Western imagination and sees it as a project of recovery of bringing back into view, that which has been denied” (Castle 1993, 8), Mokkil seeks to question the NGO-isation of identity politics which sees identities as bracketed categories.

There will also be an attempt to analyse the relevance of the suicide note left behind in several cases of lesbian suicides to create the enigma around the idea of ‘lesbian hauntings’. These suicide notes also fuel the memory of the LGBT movement and seems like an unfinished tribute to the lives extinguished in their prime. The idea of ‘lesbian haunting’ is also derived from Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters and the Haunting of Sociological Research* (2008) where she persuasively argues that,

“Ghosts are not merely dead or missing people, they are ‘social figures’ produced at the site of violence and exclusion. To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories that implies ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects” (Gordon 1997, 17).

Gordon attempts to leverage the exercise of haunting to reach for a critical vocabulary in which the ‘spectres and excesses’ are often contained from the verge of transgression.

3.2(c) Language of Rights and Politics of Tears

“I can’t believe these words (from the letter) were written just before something like that happened (Swapna-Sucheta’s suicide). This letter would have taken a whole night to write, so many memories, recollection, tears, breakdown but all predetermined. The letter has no ill-will, no malice, no revenge, even before taking this drastic step they didn’t miss the language of love.”

--Dr. Anup Dhar in his cameo in *Ebang Bewarish* (2014)

The narrative of *Ebang Bewaarish* is soaked in “politics of tears” (Spivak and Cadava 2006), what remains are the remnants of memory of those departed and how their stories are reconstructed and narrated to the Sappho’s fact-finding team. Within West Bengal’s public sphere there are familiar forms that a political subject can claim. The close intersectional nature between feminist and the Marxist movement where “the feminist subject is deemed as one who is oppressed by hetero-patriarchal structures and has conscientized to progress from agents of victimhood to agential, resisting subjects” (Tharu 1999, 195). Mokkil further upholds Tharu’s notion by seeing, “Liberal feminism and Marxist feminism uphold the notion of the revolutionary political subject who demands autonomy and freedom” (Mokkil 2010, 203).

Feminist scholar Susie Tharu further raises a critical question,

“To what extent has the embodied and agential self-or a similar one-also been the body-self unwittingly affirmed and renewed by historical feminism? What does this mean for the feminist movement? The access into public sphere by women also demands a stripping of the excesses associated with the private sphere like romance and sentimentality” (Tharu 1999, 195).

This becomes a contentious issue in terms of labelling Swapna-Sucheta as ‘political subjects’, despite being visible victims of hetero-patriarchy, they never saw themselves as politically ‘lesbian subjects’. Lesbian politics within India has not taken a formidable shape of a global movement due to lack of a visible, autonomous subject/survivor/victim and the “fact the most of organisations working for sexual minorities themselves court anonymity for their own safety” (Mokkil 2010, 204).

Deepa V.N. in her contemplations of working of *Sahayatrika* opines,

“Entrenched criticism associated with the articulation of ‘language of rights’, even within the sexual rights movements and outside, as the discourse finds its origins in Western context and in taking a universalist approach negates the Indian queer subjectivity. But as one possible political language among many, it has been effective for raising awareness in the Kerala context as well as simply because it draws attention to the notion of ‘humanness and personhood that are popularly, politically and legally denied to lesbians and other sexual minorities” (Deepa 2005, 187).

These remain contentious impulses in this ‘political project’ of using the context of lesbian suicides as the driving force for the sexual rights movement. The use of ‘melodramatic love’ as a genre in Sancharram as well as the language of mourning, claiming of rationality and rights in Ebang Bewarish complicate models of political subjectivity. One of the important questions that these representations raise is who can be the political subject in contemporary India? Political theorists have claimed “political subjects as conventionally associated with contained rational behaviour and clarity of vision” (Mokkil 2010, 204). But one would find Eduardo Cadava’s call to imagine “a politics of tears” (Spivak and Cadava 2006, 7) compelling in context of lesbian suicides in India. Cadava argues that “if one looks at the world with tears, one realises that their vision is blurred” (Spivak and Cadava 2006, 7).

Eduardo Cadava phrases it as,

“When we usually think about acting politically in the world, we look at a situation, we analyse it, we evaluate it; and then on the basis of that analysis and evaluation, we decide what we think is the best way to proceed. This means that acting politically in the world is generally based on a model of vision. But when we are crying, we cannot see things clearly”. (Spivak and Cadava 2006).

Thus, pursues Cadava, a politics based on the “model of tears would be a politics that takes its point of departure from the presupposition that we always act without seeing things clearly, that we always act with tears in our eyes” (Spivak and Cadava 2006). A person melts and breaks down when he or she is crying and hence doesn’t fit the model of a ‘rational individual’, he further adds,

“A politics based on the model of tears therefore, would be a politics that takes its point of departure from the presupposition that we always act without seeing things clearly, that we always act with tears in our eyes. It is also important to note that tears that fall does so at the frontier between public and the private. The tear signals a kind of dissolution or melting of the self at the moment when one is trying to make this or that decision” (Spivak and Cadava 2006).

Navaneetha Mokkil sees these tears signifying bodily excess that threatens to produce an,

“unruly subject who deviates from the model of ‘rational containment’. This model of politics profoundly redefines the “self-knowing actor/activist as it opens up the possibility to recognise and make space for acts and deeds that are faltering and poised” (Mokkil 2010, 205) (emphasis mine).

Through the allegory of tears, it blurs the boundaries between the public/private and draws attention on how certain expressions of ‘affect’ may delegitimise a ‘good citizen’ into a ‘troubling one’.

3.2(d) Documenting Lesbian Suicides: A Case of Ebang Bewarish

Both Kerala and West Bengal continues to top the highest suicide rankings within India and since 1990s witnessed a series of newspaper reports of women committing suicide together. Most of the suicides happened after two women found themselves in intimate relationships and were separated coercively either through ‘act of marriage’ or threats of violence by the natal families. Deepa VN, the founder of Sahayatrika describes this as:

“Newspaper reports of double suicides among women companions who were unwilling to be separated are probably the most visible indicator of the difficulties

endured by women-loving women in Kerala (and rest of India). Other news stories have also appeared in the mainstream press of women asking the court for permission to live together, or students being evicted from schools or hostels for having lesbian relationships” (Deepa 2005, 182).

While Kerala saw one of the first investigative reports about these suicides conducted by K.C. Sebastian; Sappho for Equality, an NGO for sexual minority rights in West Bengal since 1997, started overseeing a series of fact-finding investigations of varied media reports on lesbian issues since its inception. This investigative style of fact-finding shaped itself into a cinematic presentation titled *Ebang Bewarish (and the unclaimed...)* released in 2014. The film is a poignant rendition of loss and remembering and attempts to eulogise the infamous Swapna-Sucheta suicide in Nandigram in 2011. The film became an ode to several other lesbian suicides that took place in the last three decades while acting as a piece of investigative journalism as well.

In February 2011, two young women, Swapna and Sucheta committed suicide by consuming poison; their dead bodies were found together. They were both from the Adivasi community living in Nandigram district of West Bengal. According to the media reports and the film, “Sucheta was making a living by taking tuitions and doing other menial jobs to support her family when she met Swapna, who came to her as a student. The families lived in a tight knit community” (Debalina 2014). The two women over the period of time became close and expressed their desire to live together that led to escalation of violence towards the couple, and finally Sucheta’s parents married her off to Bikash Mandal from the same village.

The film besides stating the facts regarding the suicide also opened up the realm of conversation around idea of ‘non-normative’ sexuality that doesn’t have to be ‘queer’ in nature. In most of the non-normative relationships, “there is always hint towards the gender expressions of one of the partners as they might not conform to the gender norms” (Deepa 2005, 185). This is dwelled upon by the fact-finding team as they went to investigate the incident. Swapna’s mother asserted in one of the interviews, “She (Swapna) would sometimes wear churidars and sometimes her brother’s jeans” (Debalina 2014). This assertion of autonomy by Swapna was seen as one of the many ‘transgressive acts’ she undertook to resist fitting into the heteronormative models of sexuality.

Gayatri Gopinath contends upon this,

“The use of ‘women-who-love-women’ framework to analyse suicides in which one of the protagonists is usually viewed as a gender non-normative partner due to the way the organisations, ultimately adhere(s) to a global LGBT and feminist based rights discourse that fails to sufficiently trouble the category of ‘women’” (Gopinath 2007, 346).

Gopinath’s critique of this “blind adherence by various global discourse might seem pre-emptive” (Mokkil 2010, 196). However, discourse around use of political terms like gay, lesbian, transgender, or women-who-love-women, does not make for an easy strategy of rights based intervention. The political discourses around rights-based politics becomes a double-edged sword for working of NGOs such as Sappho for Equality and Sahayatrika.

Swapna’s mother during the interviews with fact-finding team, time and again expressed her concern about how the NGOs and newspapers were colouring the incident by giving it a sexual angle to it. Swapna’s mother emphasised,

“There’s nothing wrong with them (possible response to the lesbian angle given to the suicide). They used to study together, one of them was married off, the other got depressed. Every girl wants somebody to hang out with, its natural. It was little more intense between them. They used to share food together, sometimes the other girl will come and sleep over in our house. Once Sucheta was married off, the husband’s family didn’t want her to talk to my daughter. It was the only problem that happened to her” (Debalina 2014).

The act of disciplining the young women proved costly as according to the fact-finding team, the two women finally decided to commit suicide. During the investigative field work it was unveiled that there is an ‘alleged possibility’ (off the record) that both the women along with Bikash (Sucheta’s husband) might have entered a suicide pact. Though never outrightly indicated by the family members of the deceased or by Bikash himself, it was indicated that few days before the suicide of these women, Bikash himself consumed poison to kill himself. When the fact-finding team interviewed him, he emphasised that he was coerced into this ‘loveless marriage’ (Debalina 2014).

What is interesting to note is that the interviews conducted by Sappho’s fact-finding team over a span of six months in Nandigram found several loopholes within the story that was reported in major newspapers to the biases existing within the narratives circulating within

the village. One of the glaring loopholes was unveiled when the dead bodies were found. Upon discovery of the dead bodies, Swapna was wearing jeans, but by the time her body was taken to be cremated, her outfit was changed into a churidar pajami. This disciplinary act by the police sheds light on the dominant narrative that was circulated and made available to the media. Any kind of transgressions in gender expressions or access to markers of modernity like wearing jeans can be seen as 'prohibitive' and the repressive state apparatus like police went on an all-out assault to oversee that any traces of it were removed even after their death.

Paul Connerton in his seminal work, *How Societies Remember* (1989) asserts on how memory of groups is conveyed and sustained across ages, and adds that "dominant narratives and memories are created with intersection of myth with ritual performance within commemorative practices" (Connerton 1989). Here I bring in this discourse, to establish how dominant narratives and memories were created and sustained within this particular case by expunging any traces of gender non-conformity. The fact-finding team were constantly meted with denial by the police as well as the villagers about whether these women were actually transgressing gender and sexuality.

In the transcribed notes about this incident, it is mentioned that, "several of the community and family members gathered around while we were conducting the interviews; so, these were not private interviews" (Debalina 2014). The list of people who were interviewed was quite exhaustive. This included immediate family members of the deceased, their friends, neighbours, coroners who conducted the autopsy and police officers who investigated the case. The police officials refused to make a statement on camera, those who did speak to the fact-finding team highlighted the "abnormality of this relationship and usual need for psychological or at times coercive methods like confining the women or getting them married" (Debalina 2014).

The SHO of Nandigram upon asking whether there might be a 'lesbian angle' to these deaths, called the individuals who are non-normative as 'diseased'. The fact-finding team were confronted by several villagers upon their visit six months later after the incident by allegations that they were propagating their 'agenda' around sexual awakening. One of the village elders demanded that the cameraperson stop filming, and remarked, "You have come here to disrupt the peace within our community, our girls are not like city girls, they don't

have short hair or they don't wear jeans, please stop putting ideas in their heads" (Debalina 2014).

Maya Sharma in her book *Loving Women* (2006), observes how, "women who came into the public gaze as a result of the sexuality issues were mostly women from the working class" (Sharma 2006, 15). This pattern can be witnessed in suicide of Swapna-Sucheta, as their bodies became the texts which are violently inserted into the public gaze. The driver escorting the fact-finding team from Sappho claims,

"When the death happened a huge crowd came there. The reason why such a crowd had gathered was mainly out of curiosity to see if there was any gender deformity in Swapna or Sucheta, and whether they were both women or not" (Debalina 2014).

Even after the discovery of the bodies, the dead bodies were kept for display for public viewing before they were removed from the site by the police. In the driver's recreation of the scene after the suicide, "the bodies were displayed before the public gaze to be objectively measured" (Mokkil 2011, 398) (emphasis mine). There was an attempt made by the by-standers to settle any "ambiguities of gender performances at the scene of death" (Mokkil 2011, 398). The body here becomes the text that is inserted within the realm of public sphere. Through the ethnographic interviews, the fact-finding team from Sappho for Equality attempted to produce and record narratives of the relationship between these two women, the negotiations they undertook and the events that led to the final act of suicide. The display of bodies for public viewing was a grim reminder and a forewarning within the community, "that this is how non-normative sexual behaviour ends" (Debalina 2014).

What comes as more of a surprise is the refusal of the family to mourn or cremate their dead. The differential distribution of "public grieving remains a political issue of enormous significance" (Butler 2004; Butler 2009). The democratic right to mourn the dead has remained a battleground from the time of Antigone to that in Palestine and Kashmir as citizens openly choosing to mourn the death of the martyrs (or militants as stated by the repressive state apparatus) goes against the sovereign law (Butler 2009).¹⁴² So, this regulation of 'grief and mourning' goes a long way in controlling who will be publicly grievable or not.

¹⁴² One of three Theban plays written by Sophocles, "Antigone is the tale of the protagonist of the same name who chooses to bury one of her brothers after his brutal death despite the decree passed by King Creone to not bury Polynices. It becomes reflective of the current political environment in most of the war-ravaged countries

Judith Butler's seminal work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) analyses the idea of "selective mourning" and "preciousness of life", where she asserts, "to say life is precarious requires not only that a life is apprehended as life, but also the precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended as living" (Butler 2009).¹⁴³ This is important as during the course of film, as the filmmaker hand overs the suicide note to a 'seemingly' heterosexual couple, and upon realising the fact that one of the victims was subjected to corrective rape by the family members, the man exclaims, "whether this kind of life is worth living, death seems a better option" (Debalina 2014). Interestingly, the act of corrective rape wasn't horrifying for him as much as the fact that the two women were same-sex lovers. His views along with non-verbal cues indicated inherent disgust and homophobia towards non-normative individuals. For him, lives of individuals who are non-normative is not worth recognising, let alone be living, as these individuals fail to adhere within the hetero-patriarchal norms set by the society and should coercively be punished.

But one wonders whether Swapna-Sucheta with their lack of access to markers of modernity and transnational politics, qualify them as political subjects? (Chatterjee 2018). Most of the characters from the film describe "the deceased through the lens of romance while simultaneously hailing them as 'accidental political subject'" (Chatterjee 2018) (emphasis mine). The deceased protagonists from the film move away from the "realm of linguistic and draw on bodily gestures of romantic love to describe their relationship" (Mokkil 2011, 398). When the bodies were uncovered, both the women were found with their sarees tied to one another similar to '*gatjhod or gatbandhan*' during a Hindu wedding ceremony.

The love story between Swapna and Sucheta is unveiled through detailed descriptions of their externalised expressions of love; it is such 'surface-level', sensory expressions of love that respondents focus on when they illustrate their relationship. The interviews conducted by

where the government seeks to regulate and control who will be publicly grievable or not". Judith Butler in her seminal work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) reflects on this precarity of 'selective mourning'. For more see Butler, Judith (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, Verso, London.

¹⁴³ "Precariousness' implies while living socially, the fact that one's life is always dependant in the hands of others. To say that life is precarious requires an aspect of what is indeed considered living, and whose life is to be worth comprehended as 'worth living'. In an ideal, utopic world, there ought to be more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognising precariousness and this should take form of concrete social policy regarding such issues such as food, shelter, work, medical care, and legal status" (Butler, Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence 2004). For more see Butler, Judith (2004) Precariousness and Grievability: When is Life Grievable published by Verso Books see <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2339-judith-butler-preciousness-and-grievability-when-is-life-grievable> Accessed on 2/10/2018.

Sappho for Equality team function as a rich archive which reflects on the limitations of global/queer/lesbian discourse and a dominant liberal feminist framework that are both invested with the concept of desire and affirmative action will lead to self-empowerment. These narratives have the potential to rupture political frameworks that recognise certain forms of loving and living and also point to the risks of what is lost and erased in the “normalising imperative of identity” (Dave 2010, 598).

REWRITING HISTORY

The publication of the news reports as well as fact finding reports is a crucial move to forge alliances between the feminist and sexuality movements in India as it attempts to etch the ‘act of suicide’ in the collective memory within the larger public discourse operating within Kerala and West Bengal. The reading of available narratives within print, oral as well as cinematic universe becomes not only an ethnographic but historical project that attempts to document and further rupture the widespread heteronormative narrative circulating and set new possibilities for the future.

This constant process of history making and rewriting history from collective as well as commemorative memory remains a largely mediated process which goes through thorough gatekeeping from the largely heteronormative community. The interviews done in the process of writing the chapter counter the general trend in the media where “homosexual is either made invisible or hyper visible due to their aberrant behaviour” (Russo 1981). The protracted, daily struggles as well as negotiations as of these women are reconstructed through “collective memory instead of focusing only on the spectacle of death” (Mokkil 2010, 224) (emphasis mine).

This particular historical moment plays a pivotal role in remembering the ‘figure of lesbian’, at times paying ode to the ‘ghostly presence’ that holds a mirror to the “hegemonic social structures” (Butler 1993, 16). The attempt was to create a moment of ‘self-reflexivity’ within the larger women’s movement in its “failure to acknowledge that only some lives counts as lives and only certain bodies matter” (Butler 2004; Butler 2009). The memories of these suicides and the circumstances within which it happened exposes the largely heterosexual foundations of hegemonic structures even within the women’s movement. This brings one

back to the realm of 'abject' as Butler points in terms of "precarious lives, which questions the accountability of human existence and which are the lives worth living and grieving for" (Butler 2004; Butler 2009).

By undertaking 'grieving' as part of the method, I attempt to counter the denouncement and devaluation of queer and non-normative bodies and lives. I do so by holding onto the "memories of lost struggles, resistances and transgressions that the 'figure of lesbian' poses forge a different futurity" (Mokkil 2010, 225). Lesbian hauntings are not only tied to "dark act of death and dying but also to 'vision and remembrance' and the necessity to forge relevant modes of politics" (Mokkil 2010, 226). My attempt at close reading of these representational practices was also against the common activist standpoint which predominantly circulates to feed into the immediate political cause. The analysis remained an attempt to demonstrate that both activist and academic endeavours remain essential and can co-exist to shape the politics of sexuality. There are no neat resolutions in this attempt as what emerges is the blurred ways of seeing the world. Rewriting history while retracing history primarily requires unruly trajectories of looking at these 'lesbian hauntings' as a trope of revisioning the largely monolithic sexual paradigm within India.

Chapter-4

Performing Spectacle: Gendered (Queer) bodies as sites of Protest, Celebration and Mediatisation in Pride Parades

Introduction

“It is my body that marches in demonstrations, my body that goes to the polls, my body that attends rallies, my body that boycotts, my body that strikes, my body that participates in work slowdowns, my body that engages in civil disobedience.”(McLaren 2002, 116)

Margaret McLaren articulates the quintessential question, “What besides bodies can resist?”, and then swiftly answers with the above quote. Bodies can become a taken-for-granted vehicles used to transmit political action. It is a rarity that the “‘protesting body’ is made explicit despite its centrality to collective action” (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003, 379-382). The real gendered body in its entire physicality at times also evades its exploration and scrutiny. Though, there have been scholarly writings on the body through various disciplines like literature, history, sociology, political theory etc, there remains a dearth of literature with respect to ideas of embodiment, mediatisation of the actor’s/performers’ body in motion etc. It would only be appropriate to begin this chapter by interrogating and understanding the reconstruction of gendered body through various spatial metaphors. Invisibilised oppression in the form of heteronormative patriarchy gives rise to transgressive texts which further aids in creating language of resistance. The chapter attempts to explore the role of gendered body in queer pride parades, its representation within mainstream media and how media makes a spectacle out of the gendered body in protest.¹⁴⁴

Bodies become central to “power struggles and the body itself becomes the locus of resistance” (Foucault and Gordon 1980). To study the ‘gendered’ and ‘sexed’ body in movement is useful for number of reasons, the most powerful perhaps as “site of resistance” (Butler 1991). ‘Body protests’ (as would be discussed in case of Queer Pride parade) are potentially important source of knowledge for performance of the protest and its movement.

¹⁴⁴ Sections of this chapter have been published as a research paper titled *Performing Pride/Performing Protest: LGBT Activism Post Recriminalisation of Section 377* in Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (online journal) in the edition on LGBT/Queer studies (Volume VI, Number 1, 2014, ISSN 0975-2935).

Bodies in protest embodies within itself a political text, but also the one that facilitates the protest.

Another way through which queer sexuality finds coverage in the mainstream media is through its representation during the annual queer pride parades. This chapter aims to address role of queer pride parades as one of the unique sites of protest and celebrations and how the mediatisation of gendered (queer) bodies takes place in this site of protest/celebration by the mainstream media. The queer pride parade which happens annually across various metropolis as well as small towns in India is known for transgressing gender and sexuality norms set within the larger heteronormative social construct. The space becomes not only as one of the few spaces for the queer community to achieve more visibility but it also challenges the production of everyday space as “heterosexual” (Valentine 1993).

The chapter investigates various representations of queer bodies within the so-called ‘safe space’ of queer pride parades and the various representations of these bodies that are available in the mainstream media. The parade becomes the ‘site of spectacle’ (Enguix 2009; Ghosh 2014) for varied representations due to its seemingly blatant overtones and capture images of the participants flaunting their sexuality through acts of masquerade¹⁴⁵, drag¹⁴⁶,

¹⁴⁵According to Merriam Webster dictionary, Masquerade refers to “an action or appearance that is a mere disguise or show” (Masquerade 2019). This might include “covering one’s face with paint or mask to wearing costumes to gender bending. It is an attempt to pretend to be someone that one is not, or to put a deceptive appearance”. For E. Gargano, “the practice of masquerade is to create anonymity and liberation from restrictive social norms, thereby facilitating expressions that are otherwise suppressed” (Gargano 2007). Masquerade remains to be a popular feature in “Queer Pride Parades where individuals employ tactics to reify their gendered expressions and defy the surveillance of the state”. For more read Gargano, E. (2007). The masquerader in the garden: Gender and the body in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*. *Women’s Studies*, 36, 57-78.

¹⁴⁶Drag as a term has become popular after shows like “Rupaul’s Drag race that was first aired ten years ago on LOGO channel and have gained mainstream popularity and streamed on video on-demand platforms like Netflix. The history of DRAG can be traced back to Shakespearean times, where only men were allowed to take part in the theatrical productions, to fill the void of female characters, male actors would dress up as women. Since, the costume dresses would drag across the floor and were wore by men, it found the acronym ‘Dressed as Girl’ or DRAG. Drag queens are performers mostly female impersonators where the performers perform celebrity impersonations. A drag queen can be a self-identified man who may or may not be gay, straight and trans* etc. Within the genre of drag, there’s a strong emphasis on accentuating or at times ridiculing hyper femininity and satire of prescribed female gender roles and stereotypes operating within a heterosexist society. The scathing caricatures are directed towards absurdness of gender roles associated with women. Drag Queens usually impersonate comic or tragic, strong, rebellious women icons from popular culture such as Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Marilyn Monroe, Cher, Lady Gaga among many others and employ use of hyperfeminine facial expressions, make up, gestures to capture these characters”. For more see Scheiner, Jessica Strubel (2011) *Gender Performativity and Self Perception: Drag as Masquerade in International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 No. 13 http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_1_No_13_Special_Issue_September_2011/2.pdf

Accessed on 6/18/2019

camp¹⁴⁷ etc. Hence, the attempt would be to read various representations within/of pride parades as it becomes a space of spectacle, resistance, and defiance against all normatives of the ‘real’ world- a world forbidden to subaltern counter-publics.

The chapter endeavours to understand the theatricality and performance of gendered body protests, and how media intervention creates a spectacle out of the gendered body in space with the aid of technology. With the use of technology along with knowledge of bodies in protests, there would be an effort to understand performance of protest itself. In the information era, performances of protest can be taken as a construct which results from the relation between the biological as well as technologically mediated bodies. The idea of “*mediatisation*” can be understood when two bodies become blurred and merged into one as they are neither disengaged nor distinct. In that sense, the notion of mediatised gendered performance acquires new implications different from what authors and performance studies theorists like Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander suggest for understanding bodies in terms of mediatised performance. This section tries to understand the relationship between the body and technology in field of performance by reflecting on the idea of liveness. While the starting point remains the reinstatement of ideas raised by Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan, I would like to bring in the much talked about idea of Spectacle by authors like Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and media theorists like Douglas Kellner. In current production of these gendered performances, technology plays a significant role, where the creation of performance text is in tandem with the idea of liveness.

According to Peggy Phelan (1996), *liveness* can only take place when there is no mediation when it represents a situation in the ‘here and now’ and only depends on the presence of performers (organic) body. This becomes the ontological condition for the existence of the

¹⁴⁷Camp as a term finds its historical relevance in 16th century France, during the rule of Louis XIV, where it meant certain “theatricality, impersonation and masquerade”. In Victorian England, it became associated with queer subculture, where men would cross-dress as women. Writer Oscar Wilde defines Camp as, “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis used by persons of excessive want of character. In 1964, cultural critic Susan Sontag wrote the seminal essay, ‘Notes on Camp’ to emphasise on its key elements such as, ‘taste for the androgynous, failure to adhere to gender normativity, artifice, frivolity, naïve, middle class pretentiousness, love of the unnatural, the exaggerated, the excess, parodying and self-parodying of self.’ This practice is now primarily associated with queer subculture and popularised by filmmakers such as Jack Smith, George Cukor, John Waters to singers like Madonna, Cher, Lady Gaga to drag performers like Dame, Edna, Divine, Rupaul etc. For more read Sontag, Susan (1964). "Notes on Camp" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrer Straus & Giroux and Cleto, Fabio, editor (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

performance, *“Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies”* (Phelan 1993 (2001), 48). Philip Auslander disagreed with Peggy Phelan’s definition of liveness by creating another conception of presence and mediation. Auslander doubts *“very strongly that any cultural discourse can actually stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction or should expected to so”* (Auslander (2008) [1999], 197). He believes that “live” and “mediatised” coexist in a close relationship and he notes that even the notion of liveness could only emerge after performance becomes mediatised.

This relationship of liveness with the body and how technology mediates and mediatises various performances including various protests cum performance interventions, where technology becomes the extension of the body can be seen with the use of microphones to amplify the sound of the activist/performer to other technological aids to help in making mediatised performances for the various media platforms. Also, the environment, in which the performance happens, is also embodied by the individual, who becomes inseparable from the technology mediated environment and vice versa. The relationship between bodies and protest is very much gendered, as one witnesses overwhelming presence of protesting bodies of women. The way in which we approach body and protest- how we value it, attend to it, gaze at it remains gendered. It is much less common to see explicit connections being made between men’s bodies and protest, with the exception of HIV/AIDS and gay rights activism (as discussed in the section on Pride parades). To make explicit male bodies in movement, to move beyond connecting bodies and protest to women and women’s issues then, also disrupts body/mind, female/male dichotomy that current association reproduces.

Another ostensibly obvious utility to study body in protest relates to the idea of state-surveillance and how individuals transgress various state-sanctioned repressions to organise sustainably. Campaigns of resistance which are regularly subjected to police brutality are forced to engage in discussions about the strengths and limitations of the activist body. Such conversations, however rarely find space in the broader discourse on social movements. A focus on bodies should further our understanding of the limitations of strategies and tactics. The protesting body is never static and is capable of changing at various points in time and in different contexts. As a researcher documenting feminist and queer protests for six years, where direct action tactics are widely used, my ability to commit to such campaigns has

changed dependent on various states of physical, emotional (dodging burnouts), and economic well-being. Also, the constant threat of representation that live performances and actors deal with becomes one of the entry points to look at these protest performances through their projection as mediated events. It is interesting to observe that these protest performances are not only dependent on the activists/performer's bodies but also on various multimedia technological aids, which aims to bridge the gap between individuals participating in these protests and the viewers/readers/spectators of these events. Over the course of this chapter attempt would be made to read, understand, analyse and discuss the pride parades as a key public protests and performances in urban landscape of Delhi (post 2009) and other metropolitan cities, which provides us with new theoretical basis and understanding of performance, its strategies and consequences.

The phenomenon of queer pride parades which was devised as a mean to occupy major public sites which are deemed heteronormative most of the time. The section attempts to read into the strategies employed within the parade by the members and the participants of the parade, and how they employ their bodies along with various technological aids to enhance the experience of 'queering the space.' The idea of working on the queer pride parade was also in an attempt to understand neo-liberalism as a phenomenon, which brought these clandestine queer sub-cultures into mainstream. While third wave feminism saw departure of 'collective' to respecting the 'individual choice' which made events like these possible. With neoliberalism, sexuality became more of 'choice' than being socially driven phenomenon, making events like queer pride parade a reality. Queer pride parades which wouldn't have been imaginable a decade ago are now one of the state-sanctioned spaces for celebration and dissent.

4.1 Of Law and Criminal Sexuality: Desire in the Times of Section 377

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was introduced as a remedial measure by Lord Thomas Macaulay, as part of the British education and legislature, to keep a check on the "deviant activities amongst the colonised natives" (Bacchetta 2002; Puri 1999; Vanita and Kidwai 2001). Till its recent decriminalisation in September 2018, it existed as "a draconian law due to its idea of 'victimless crime' having more social consequences than legal" (Narain 2004). To fight this archaic law, several NGOs and collectives were formed in the early 1990s, to

work towards HIV/AIDS prevention, acted as support groups for sexual minorities, while actively mobilising support to fight state-sanctioned violence towards sexual minorities. These organisation included support groups and NGOs such as,

“AIDS Bhedbhav Virodi Andolan (ABVA), along with initiatives and support groups like Voices Against 377¹⁴⁸, Alternative Law Forum, Lawyer’s Collective, Humsafar Trust, Naz Foundation, Sangini, Sangama, LesBit, Good as You (GAY), Sahayatrika, LABIA, Sappho for Equality to name a few” (Ghosh 2014, 165).

These support groups besides working on legal rights-based initiatives, worked towards mobilisation around Section 377, and worked towards creating extensive documentation on the violence faced by the members of the community.¹⁴⁹

For me the “question of criminality of the queer (male) subject remains to be an interesting diversion at this point. The decriminalisation of Section 377 turned the formerly “‘criminal sexually active queer male’ into a ‘non-criminal one’”(Ghosh 2014, 165). As Arvind Narrain implies that the “new found visibility of the earlier ‘criminal’ performer has different meaning making capability” (Narrain 2004, 7). Narrain sees the queer subject as:

“hypervisible subjects of criminal law, figures worthy of derision in the media or pathological subject of medicine, this effect of social intolerance is the reconfiguration of the ‘absence’ which becomes presence when it comes to being object of criminal law”(Narrain 2004, 7).

¹⁴⁸The civil society initiative had its origins in the first National Level Community Consultation on PIL organised by NAZ India and Lawyer’s Collective in 2003. The main intention of the coalition was to engage in public debates to counter government’s position that public morality will be affected if Section 377 is not retained in all its entirety. Several other organisations which were part of this coalition includes Amnesty International India, Anjuman (Queer support group from JNU), Breakthrough, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), Centre for Child Rights, Jagori, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, Nigah, Nirantar, Partners for Law and Development (PLD), Protecting Rights of Indian Sexual Minorities (PRISM), Saheli, Sama, Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues (TARSHI) and included activists and academicians like Gautam Bhan, Lestley Esteves, PonniArasu, Pramada Menon among many others. For more see <http://www.voicesagainst377.org/who-we-are/>

¹⁴⁹Human Rights Watch, ‘Epidemic of Abuse: Police Harassment of HIV/AIDS Outreach Workers in India’ July 2002; People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Karnataka, ‘Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities in India’, February 2011; People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Karnataka, ‘Human Rights Violations against Transgender Community’, September 2003; Sappho for Equality, ‘Vio-Map: Documenting and Mapping Violence and Rights Violation Taking Place in the Lives of Sexually Marginalised Women to Chart Effective Advocacy Strategy, 2011; Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gendered identities, a study by LABIA- A Queer Feminist LBT Collective, 2013. For more see Ghosh, Priyam (2014) Performing Pride/Performing Protest: LGBT Activism Post Recriminalizing of Section 377 in Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Special issue on LGBT and Queer Studies, Vol. IV, Issue 1, Kolkata pp 163-176. http://rupkatha.com/V6/n1/16_LGBT_Activism.pdf

Thus, the reading down of Section 377,

“legitimises sex between two consenting adults which made gay men, kothis, hijras and men who have sex with men (MSM) due to penetrative nature of the sexual intercourse, the most viable subjects of this reformatory judgement. However, the reading down of the Section 377, had little or no relevance for the lives of queer women, as the nature of sexual intercourse between two women is deemed non-penetrative in nature, and hence never acknowledged by the law” (Ghosh 2014, 165).¹⁵⁰

This imagining as well as silencing of queer women’s experience as ‘non-sexual’ beings is deeply disturbing as the representation of queer women within cultural spaces or in the media is anyways abysmally low. With the decriminalisation of the Section 377, there was a rampant visibilization of privileged queer men, MSMs, gays, bisexuals and trans* members from the community in public spaces. This chapter attempts to look at these disputed discourses within the larger queer movement. While, my starting point is the 2009 judgement, I would extend the time period till the recent developments, which resulted in various dialogues, debates, celebrations as well as demonstrations played out in public domain and its representation in the media.

4.2 Performing Queer: Pride Parade as site Of Protest and Celebration

(a) Negotiating Heterosexual streets during Queer Pride Parade in Delhi

“Public spaces are very importantly, *spaces for representation*. Public space is a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen. In public space, political organisations can represent themselves to a larger population. By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public”.

(Mitchell 1995, 115)

Public space can be used as a site for the “*destabilisation of unarticulated norms*”, or as Elizabeth Munt calls it, the “*politics of dislocation*” (Munt 1995, 124). Post 1990s, “the neo-

¹⁵⁰ While Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was formed to punish sodomy of young boys, the absence of penis (phallus) in a woman leads to a stipulation that sex between two women is homoerotic and since there is no penile penetration between them, the act of sex is not possible. This was the failure of the state to address the question of sexuality and desire in case of women, beyond the set heteropatriarchal logic. It was also the inability of women’s movement to articulate upon the idea of sexuality as well, as it was deemed as ‘urban and elite’ phenomenon. Even, within the HIV/AIDS based approach to queer rights, women remain ‘non-viable’, low-risk subjects, almost like unspoken and forgotten outlaws of the queer community.

liberal Indian state exhibited its liberality by encouraging and sponsoring performances around queer sexuality in public spaces”(Ghosh 2014, 166). This served as an entry point to critique the neoliberal city scapes of India, which are increasingly touted in the world market, as the “new exhibitory space narrating the progress of capitalist success”(Ghosh 2014, 166). Robert Aldrich in *Homosexuality and the City* (2004) describe cities as,

“the modern, multicultural, capitalist city scape provides not only anonymity to the sexual dissidents, but is responsible for production and ‘manifestation of gendered and sexual identities’ through enormous deployment of technological apparatus to stage everything from street theatres, to queer pride parades and slut walks” (Aldrich 2004).

The category of ‘protest as well as site of celebratory spectacle’, which I address in this chapter, demonstrates its significance in the enormous deployment of protest marches and celebratory processions in the post 2009 scenario. The queer pride parades have become a means of political activism, along with deployment of various transgressive as well as assimilationist performance strategies, to visibilise gendered and sexual identities, which have been largely missing from heteronormative spaces. The queer pride parade is seen as annual reclamation of “*who we are*”, as it is largely based on two themes: “celebratory coming out” along with reaffirmation of the idea of “proud to be gay” (Enguix 2009, 18). June is celebrated as the Pride month across the world, with various countries hosting their queer pride parades in the month of June. Cities around the world hold various events and marches to commemorate the day in memory of the Stonewall Inn riot- which was one of the first protests against police brutality and discrimination against the police in 1969.¹⁵¹

The phenomenon of pride parades reached India around a decade into neo-liberalisation. Cities across the country hold pride march, some in June itself, while others host it in different months across the year. The queer pride parade had humble beginning in India, and was largely a reaction towards the hetero-patriarchal homophobic state, with its state-sanctioned harassment of effeminate gay men, hijras and lesbian women on a daily basis. Two petitions and public interest litigation were filed one by *AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi*

¹⁵¹In the early hours of June 28, 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village in New York City. The raid sparked a riot among bar patrons and neighbourhood residents as police roughly hauled employees and patrons out of the bar, leading to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar on Christopher Street, in neighbouring streets and in nearby Christopher Park. The Stonewall Riots served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world. See <http://www.history.com/topics/the-stonewall-riots> accessed on 05/06/2017

*Andolan (ABVA)*¹⁵², and by Naz (India) to decriminalise Section 377. Interestingly, prior to taking the legal recourse some members of ABVA resorted to organising a demonstration in front of the police headquarters in Delhi and Kolkata. The protest was held against wrongful detention of some members of the community on the charges of ‘alleged lewd homosexual behaviour in public’ (Arroyo 2010). This march was a low-key affair but received media attention as it was first of its kind. One newspaper description went as:

“the protestors were carrying banners with striking slogans in English or Hindi like, ‘Gay is normal’, ‘Down with section 377’, or ‘Arrest AIDS not Gays’. Songs alluding to “speaking out and breaking silence” also speak for the defiant tone of demonstrators. Human rights activists, social workers and gays and lesbians participate in the demonstration, which turns out to be a landmark for the formation of a common spirit and queer conscience. This symbolic public act constitutes an open declaration of sexual rights, an expression of visibility, and, therefore, the confirmation of political existence” (Arroyo 2010, 84).

This was a one of a kind protest, with merely 10 gay men holding hands declaring their dissent towards state, and the misuse of Section 377 by law enforcement authorities. A protest of similar kind but of much larger scale was launched as a counter-attack on the violent, Hindutva inspired protests after the release of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire*. For the first time several women organisations like NFIW¹⁵³, AIDWA¹⁵⁴ backed lesbian and gay rights groups like LABIA¹⁵⁵, CALERI¹⁵⁶ etc were vehemently protesting the banning of the film by the censor board, and attacks on cinema hall by Shiv Sena cadres where the film was screened. Words like “*Indian and Lesbian*” first appeared in placards, and were carried forth in peaceful protests held outside various cinema halls that were screening the film. These two events acted as the predecessors for the queer pride parade which made its debut in 2008, with only few hundred people participating. It was with the decriminalisation of Section 377 in 2009 that the pace of the queer pride parade really picked up, and so did the performative acts and gestures embed within the site.

¹⁵²*AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA)* was formed in 1988 in Delhi and since then has been campaigning against AIDS discrimination but also defends marginalised groups of men and women in prostitution, blood donors, gays and lesbians, immigrants or anyone vulnerable to AIDS issue. It held conferences, demonstrations and seminars, and networks abroad too. For more on ABVA see Gupta, Anuja: *Sodomy Law Challenged*”. Bombay Dost. September-October 1994.

¹⁵³National Federation for Indian Women

¹⁵⁴All India Women’s Democratic Association

¹⁵⁵Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action formerly known as Stree Sangam.

¹⁵⁶Campaign for Lesbian Rights in India.

For Herdt and Boxer, “Pride Parades symbolise the shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft¹⁵⁷, from gay community to gay culture nationally” (Herdt and Boxer 1992). The aim of the Queer Pride parade is largely to rid taboos around non-normative sexuality, and elevate the queer community from “*stigma to pride*”, whilst turning “*homosexuals into gays*”, these parades become symbolic spaces for protest and celebrations through mass mobilisations.

The Delhi Queer Pride Parade which happens annually in November, is known for transgressing gender and sexuality norms. Covering the distance between “Tolstoy Marg to Jantar Mantar Road (part of Lutyens Delhi), it is the most common distance travelled by the participants of these marches or protests”(Ghosh 2014, 167). The parade often looks like a mob, with hundreds of people marching, dancing, singing and whose centre, one could hardly locate. People donning colourful outfits and costumes take centre stage to politicise agendas from decriminalising Section 377 of Indian Penal code to demanding recognition of same-sex marriage, civil unions to criticising government inaction towards violence against the queer community. According to Munt,

“by appropriating the streets (and surrounding transport system, buses, metro etc. along with car parks, pubs, parks, shops and so on) and filling them with queer men and women for one day, marchers attempt to pierce the complacency and reclaim the space which is largely appropriated by heterosexuals” (Munt 1995, 123).¹⁵⁸

Like gender, sexuality is often regulated within the binaries of private and public. There is an assumption that sexuality remains confined to private spaces, as heterosexuality is responsible for making any non-normative sexuality in public spaces nearly invisible to the straight population. Surveys across America, Britain as well as India have shown that majority of respondents have no objection to homosexuals as long as they “do not flaunt their sexuality in public” (Herek 1988). “What they do in private is nobody’s businesses”, is a

¹⁵⁷Coined by German Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in his book by the same name, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (1887) are German words where, Gemeinschaft means Community, and Gesellschaft signifies Society. For more read Tönnies, Ferdinand, 1855-1936 (1957). Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft). East Lansing :Michigan State University Press.

¹⁵⁸While describing gay pride parades in New York and San Francisco, Sally Munt describes this spectacle as “fifty thousand homosexuals parading through the city streets, of every type, presenting the other of heterosexuality, from Gay bankers to Gay Men’s Chorus singing “It’s Raining Men”, a carnival image of space being permeated by its antithesis”. For more read Munt, S (1995) The Lesbian Flaneur in (eds) Valentine, Gill. and Bell, David. *Mapping desire : Geographies of Sexualities* , Routledge London ; New York

commonly heard, well-intentioned expression. However, as Gill Valentine puts it, the idea of homosexuality as appropriate only to private spaces,

“This is based on the false premise that heterosexuality is also defined by private sexual acts and is not expressed in the public area...This therefore highlights the error of drawing a simple polar distinction between public and private activities, for heterosexuality is clearly the dominant sexuality in most everyday environments, not just private spaces, with all interactions taking place between sexed actors” (Valentine 1992, 396).

For David Bell and Gill Valentine, “pride parades not only inscribe streets as queers, but they actively produce queer streets” (Bell and Valentine 1995). During queer pride parade, the parade goes not only the occupy the streets that they walk on, but also strategically occupy the pavement/sidewalk, parks as well nearby shops, cafes, restaurant, as they cease to remain an ‘asexual space’, but becomes highly gendered and sexed. These streets which are usually frequented by the heterosexual counterparts, does not hold the kind of embedded violence within it, unlike it does for the gender non-conforming, non-normative individuals, who can be harassed for not fitting the normative trope.¹⁵⁹ The streets therefore are commonly assumed to be “naturally or ‘authentically heterosexual” (Bell and Valentine 1994). In the same way the heterosexing of space becomes a performative act naturalised through repetition and regulation’ (Bell and Valentine 1994).¹⁶⁰

This takes many forms; from heterosexual couples holding hands and showing public display of affection as they walk down the street, to advertisements and billboards displaying images of contended heterosexual ‘nuclear families’; these acts produce “a host of assumptions embedded in the practices of public life about what constitutes proper behaviour” (Valentine 1993, 145). These repetitive performances of heterosexualities, also produce a varied assumption about what constitutes “proper behaviour/ dress in everyday spaces which congeal over time to produce the appearance of proper heterosexual space”(Valentine 1993, 145).

¹⁵⁹ The act of ‘loitering’ safely within public spaces becomes a litmus test for issuing measures towards safety of both women as well as non-normative individuals. While men navigate public spaces with much ease, despite being prone to more physical violence due to their sheer numbers and incidences of road rage etc.; incidences of violence of emotional, physical and sexual nature are much higher in number for women, trans* individuals, effeminate gay men, butch lesbian as they do not fit the societal norms. Hate crimes and harassment as well as brutal incidents of rape and murder are much higher against women and members from the LGBT community than any other demographic.

¹⁶⁰ Judith Butler has famously argued in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* that: ‘gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (Butler 1991, 33).

A number of statutory and common laws have been used to criminalise public display of same sex desire on the streets. Although these laws are also discriminatory towards heterosexual counterparts (reign of terror induced by the anti-romeo squads in Uttar Pradesh recently and Bajrang Dal during Valentine's Day), but they are often interpreted and applied in an extremely discriminatory way against sexual dissidents. Public order laws, for example, anti-obscenity laws like Section 294 of IPC¹⁶¹ have been invoked to threaten heterosexual couples exhibiting any forms of 'public display of affection', and have been used to obtain a conviction for 'insulting behaviour' against individuals caught indulging in similar acts. Often, anxious straight citizens don't wait for the police and law enforcement authorities to intervene, and themselves act as moral guardians by unleashing violence on unsuspecting couples, as they "step in and stabilise the heterosexuality of the street, and regulate it through aggression" (Herek 1988)(emphasis mine).

The narrative of violence is similar for the queer citizens as they are either viciously attacked or constantly morally policed. Whilst gay men and trans* persons are predominantly attacked by other seemingly straight men, the perpetrators of violence against queer women include not only men (alone or groups with other men and/or women), but also women who (alone and in groups) at times encouraging men in their household to indulge in practices such as 'corrective rape'¹⁶².

¹⁶¹Section 294 of the law that is weaponised by the moral police states that, "whoever, to the annoyance of others, a) does any obscene act in the public place, or b) sings, recites or utters any obscene songs, words or ballads, in or near any public place, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description to a term which may extend to three months or with fine, or with both." For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/594493/>

Accessed on 8/31/2018

¹⁶² Corrective rape is phenomenon in which "one or more individuals are raped or at times gang raped because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The intention of this heinous act by the perpetrator is to turn the victim/survivor heterosexual or to enforce gender conformity, and seen as act of 'disciplining the victim' in order to cure homosexuality". The term corrective rape was initially coined in South Africa after well-known cases of corrective rapes of lesbians such as Eudy Simelane (who was murdered in the same attack/ and Zoliswa Nkonyana became public. In India, this phenomenon is becoming rampant as more and more testimonies of rape survivors are coming to light about how parents are sanctioning the child's sexuality by using corrective rape therapy in their natal homes. Corrective rape typically happens in order to protect the family name, to avoid shaming from religious communities and to present abnormal perception surrounding the community. According to statistics with the crisis intervention team of LGBT collective in Telangana, there have been 15 reported instances of corrective rape that have been reported in the last five years. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Parents-use-corrective-rape-to-straighten-their-gay-kids/articleshow/47489958.cms> and <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/parenting/Victims-of-corrective-rape-speak-up/articleshow/47602170.cms> accessed on 6/7/2017.

There have been reports of gender disparities in case of homophobic assaults- where queer women report more violent encounters not only in their ‘natal homes’¹⁶³ but also in the streets, whereas gay men, are more likely to be “victimised in cruising areas, or gay identified neighbourhood” (Comstock 1991). Most of the homophobic violence directed towards queer women were not because they were articulating their desire or sexuality in public places, but rather because they were not performing their assigned gender roles in an appropriate heteronormative fashion (as discussed previously in case of Swapna and Sucheta in Chapter-3). In most cases of homophobic violence, one doesn’t have to just look like ‘one’ (non-normative individual) to be seen as threat to the heterosexuality of the street. The seemingly ‘heterosexual streets’ comprises of omnipresent oppressive and regulatory regimes for anyone who doesn’t fit the heteronormative norms. Through heterosexual looks of disapproval, whispers and stares of the passers-by, one is made conscious of their ‘performance of gendered identities and madeto feel ‘out of place’ in everyday spaces. These subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, in turn “pressurise many queer women into policing their own desires and sexualities, hence reinforcing the appearance that ‘normal space is straight space’” (Valentine 1993, 148).

Hence, the queer subject is constantly made aware of the performative nature of identities and spaces as they are constantly policed, or have to self-police their behaviour and desires to avoid confrontations and physical threats of violence. It is because of such constant oppressions that queer pride parade is seen as an ‘outlet and respite’ in a largely confining heteronormative structures.

Hence, through the Queer Pride march the queer subjects attempt to break out the heteronormative binaries violently imposed in daily life; and also achieve more than just visibility, it also implicitly and explicitly challenges the “production of everyday spaces as heterosexual”(Valentine 1992; Bell and Valentine 1995). The importance of this space has particularly been seized by the queer activists. The space not only becomes a space for voicing protest, but as well as, for the public celebration around various sexualities and

¹⁶³ For more on these documented incidents of violence of queer women, see Vio-Map: Documenting and Mapping Violence and Rights Violation Taking Place in the Lives of Sexually Marginalised Women to Chart Effective Advocacy Strategy, 2011; Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities, a study by Labia- A Queer Feminist LBT Collective, 2013.

gendered expressions. What is interesting to observe is the aesthetics of the pride parade and, performance embedded within it.

The participants of the parade don colourful outfits, masks, while waving the rainbow flag and walk under strict surveillance of the law enforcing authorities. Most of the police officials on duty view the parade as an,

“Act of deviant behaviour though they are time and again instructed by their immediate superiors as well the organisers not to engage in lewd and lactiferous behaviour with participants. Some of the constables deployed at the site of the parade, “carry portable video cameras to capture the event as a police record and documentation of the event, which is then used as document to arrest homosexuals on the basis of suspicion if a complaint is launched under Section 377.¹⁶⁴ The law enforcement officers are also there to police certain acts which are still deemed illegal and immoral under Section 292¹⁶⁵ and Section 294 under IPC, though kissing, holding hands, making out is smiled upon on the day of the pride (Ghosh 2014, 68).

However, most of the cops are on the lookout for participants which include several sex workers who might pick up clients, while cruising the site of the parade.

(b) Hypervisibilisation and Mediated Images Of ‘Other’ In Pride Parades

“... No matter how comfortable the homosexual sits within the skins of his/her own identity, he/she never ceases to an unnerving, unstable, ultimately alterable confusion of roles and identities”

(David 1996)

One of the key stakeholders during the pride parades are not only members of queer community and their allies, but rather media personals who flock the parade to photograph the parade goers, and take their interviews. The media portrayal of the LGBTQI individuals as discussed in Chapter-2 have seen several variations and evolution from extremely homophobic attitude towards the community in the late 1980s and 1990s to an increased

¹⁶⁴The footage captured during the parades have also been used as a tool to identify and harass gay men and extort money from them, the latest episode of harassment was by couple of police constables at Surat who harassed and sodomised a gay man after watching his video, as a participant at Surat’s first queer pride parade. The victim of this brutal assault was unable to file a police complaint fearing repercussions under newly recriminalized Section 377.

¹⁶⁵Section 292 in the Indian Penal Code states, “a book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting, representation, figure or any other object, shall be deemed to be obscene, if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect, or (where it comprises two or more distinct items), is if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt person, who are likely having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.” For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1704109/>

Accessed on 8/31/2019

acceptance. The print and electronic media are increasingly engaged in highlighting issues and concerns that plague the community, as well as in emphasising on works of exemplary individuals who have struggled to bring attention to the community.

However, representation of LGBT community during queer pride parade becomes the real litmus test within the media spaces as media personnel's fall back to the gender stereotypes attached to the community. Although lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are perceived to be distinguishable from their straight counterparts, most of the photographs or video manufactured by media for mass consumption ends up depicting these individuals as 'visibly and behaviourally different'.

In a first-person account of media bias comes from Suknidh Kaur, a 19-year-old student who published a series of tweets reflecting on the stereotyping of the LGBT community by the media houses and narrated her ordeal, while doing a photoshoot with Bombay Times in January 2018. According to Sukhnidh in an interview with Neil Murphy, "They (Bombay Times) demanded that the subjects of the photoshoot on queer lives should *'look gay'* and rescheduled the photoshoot after instructing the participants to wear more flamboyant clothing and make up to appear gay"(Murphy 2018). She further wrote,

"They (The Bombay Times) said that the models for the shoot didn't have appropriate clothing, i.e. they did not look 'gay' enough for the photoshoot. They (Bombay Times) asked a crossdressing individual to come back with his costume; asked a gay man to come back wearing more 'stylish' and 'branded' clothes, because his shirt was not flamboyant enough for a queer person and finally asked the women present to look more butch/androgynous"(Murphy 2018).¹⁶⁶

This kind of behaviour is typical during Pride parades as well, media also plays its part in highlighting the event by showcasing "blatant sexual overtones and captures the images of the participants flaunting their sexuality" (Ghosh 2014). Since the parade comprises of participants in thousands, there's constant media coverage, with photographers and videographers photographing and video graphing the participants. However, some of the

¹⁶⁶Indian Newspaper Allegedly Sent LGBT Interviewees Home Because They 'Didn't Look Gay Enough' For Photoshoot published in Attitude on 27 January 2018

<https://attitude.co.uk/article/indian-newspaper-allegedly-sent-lgbt-interviewees-home-because-they-didnt-look-gay-enough-for-photoshoot-1/16950/>

Accessed on 14 November 2019

participants who do not want to disclose their identity as queer men and women, device tactics to remain anonymous by wearing masks. This saves them from facing blatant homophobia within their family and their workplace in case their identity is revealed during such ‘unconsented photographing’ during the event. Interestingly the participants who wear the masks are photographed more than the ‘out’ participants by the media present during the event. One might wonder why there’s a blatant violation of consent, since there have been several cases where first time paradegoers have been ‘outed by the media’ to their family and friends and have faced severe repercussions of the same. Upon inquiring photographers present during the Delhi Pride Parade held in 2018, one of them said,

“while looking for possible news stories around events, one is looking for ‘news values’, human-interest stories as well as bizarre events, both qualifies as news values. Pride parade is a space which is a culmination of both”.

(Interview with Delhi Times Photographer on December 2018)

The act of masquerade is achieved by the walkers or the performers at the pride parade by wearing mask and crossdressing which requires camping of attire and at times going through body extensions like breast implants and sex reassignment surgery etc. Through these strategies, participants at the pride parade pass as normative law-abiding ‘heterosexual citizens’ in their daily lives (and thus unnoticed) rather than seen as “other” (and constantly surveyed by the upholders of the normative).

The space of the pride parade give the walkers/performers the hypervisibility i.e. further employed as a method of appropriating the largely heterosexist spaces. This is what media picks up, and accentuates for further consumption by their listeners/viewers/readers. Though some of the participants especially kothis, panthis, hijras and trans* men and women admire and envy the so-called ‘normal’ body which follows the strict gender binaries as it escapes political surveillance. It is the lack of visible physical features which doesn’t adhere to the normative forcing them to employ ‘masquerade’ not only during pride parade but in their daily lives as well. The desire to enhance one’s own physical body so it closely imitates and confirms to the ideal model of normative beauty and homogenisation is what most of the participants attempt to do in their quotidian lives before ‘coming out’ and celebrating the divisive and inclusive nature of bodies and sexuality at queer pride parade.

The desire and sexuality of the participants/walkers can be worked out through the “carnavalesque body” derived from Bakhtin(Bakhtin 1968), and the “idea of abject” derived from Kristeva(Kristeva 1982). The men and women who cross dress or appear in drag, according to Mary Russo, “*Masquerade and make a spectacle of oneself*”(Russo 1986). Hence, thepride parade resonates the “idea of grotesque and carnivalesque” by visibilizing the “already marginalised body of the abject (hijras and trans*men and women) in the purview and create a heterosexual enigma and anxiety around it”(Case 1988; Russo 1986) (emphasis mine).¹⁶⁷For theorists, Mikhael Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, along with Mary Russo, notion of female grotesque becomes, “One that focuses on the transgressive aspects of the body’s cultural significations- the excessive, the uncontained” (Bakhtin 1968; Case 1988; Ponder 2001;Kristeva 1982; Russo 1986). The various bodies in motion in the space of protest hence reflects the element of grotesque for an outsider, as they are either viewed with anxiety or laughed upon since they fail to adhere to the heteronormative ideas of gendered bodies.

Most of the hijras, trans* men and women try to adhere to heteronormative gendered identities on a daily basis, buton day of queer pride parade, it celebrates the uniqueness of their sex and gender to the fullest. This trademark of swinging between invisibility to hypervisibility due to their bodily presence and gendered norms brings quite an interesting perspective for reading andunderstanding these parade performances. The shaking of invisible breasts or augmented breasts on the face of the *dholwalas* or cops who stand there for ‘scopophilic pleasure’(Freud 1949; Mulvey 1975) describes the constant ‘othering’ of these performers and the element of carnivalesque which the performers employ toattain hypervisibility.

The act of lifting their shirts or tops off, shaking their hips, tongue wagging to flipping¹⁶⁸can be categorised as “overtly sexual and in-your-face display of sexuality” for not only the parade participants but also for the entertainment of their spectators as well as for the media present. The pride parade attracts an enormous number of spectators by employing both

¹⁶⁷Sue-Ellen Casein explains, “How Mary Russo took Joan Riviere’s idea of ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ and derived the idea of carnivalesque body from Bakhtin. Hence, reliance on the male author Bakhtin and the socialist resonances is the reason perhaps Russo omits Lesbian or gay strategies with the grotesque body. Instead, Russo is drawn to depictions of the pregnant body and finally to Kristeva’s sense of the material, which defines the banality and grotesqueness of the body in everyday space” (Case, 1988: 13)

¹⁶⁸Both have overtly sexual connotation, while tongue wagging is seen as a sign of the act of oral sex, flipping yourmiddle finger means fuck you or screw you.

gestural and verbal acts and dealing with the body rather than the person. This space also becomes a space of rift causing ideological differences between the parade goers and the spectators for the overt display of sexuality and sexualisation of the whole parade with witty posters to participants camping their attires like wearing bridal trousseau to s&m outfits¹⁶⁹.

The parade can also be seen through a gendered lens as a space for parody and artifice. This gender play is operative according to Peggy Phelan as,

“more than crossdressing, as the stakes are higher than most theoretical speculation around gender generally allows, the driving mechanism of these performed identities is the notion of ‘the real’. “Realness is determined by the ability to blend in, to not be noticed” (Phelan 1993 (2001), 96).

The social construction of gender through repeated stylisation which Butler emphasises in her seminal work is employed in the film as the walkers employ body modifications like sex reassignment surgeries or breast implants to pass off as woman (Phelan 1993 (2001)). Though Phelan sees it as creation of *mis-en-abyme* i.e. fetish of woman, which sees painful and at times misogynist removal of the construction of woman. The subject behind the act changes and is re-appropriated, packaged, and innovative methods are employed, where through body modifications and extensions, the image of a woman is created through precise imitation of stylistic mainstream (Phelan 1993 (2001)).

The term “*realness*” that Phelan also uses connotes the world of the balls in “*Paris is Burning*”- an ethno-documentary by Jennifer Livingstone on Harlem Balls. In the documentary, viewers are introduced to categories such as,

“‘executive realness’ (suit, briefcase, horn-rimmed glasses) and ‘schoolboy/school girlrealness’ (loafers, tartans, notebook clutched against the chest), while other young men are shown strutting about in military dress. The ultimate measure of success for the walkers remains the fact that if they are able to walk out of a ball and into the crowd on the street without being identified and gay bashed” (Phelan 1993 (2001)). The ability to bind outside the system of surveillance which seeks to patrol it. So the ‘in jokes’, ‘the secret codes’, the iconography of dress, movement, and speech which can be read by those within the community, but escape the interpretive power of those external to it, can create another

¹⁶⁹S&M stands for sadomasochism, which is a fetish and involves a variety of often erotic and sexual practices or roleplaying involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and other related interpersonal dynamics.

expressive language which cannot be translated by those who are not familiar with meaning of this intimate tongue” (Phelan 1993 (2001), 97).

Phelan emphasises on the idea of ‘passing’ where the “sexual deviant can ‘pass off’ as a heterosexual, so nobody suspects that they are gay, lesbian or queer once they exit the space of the parade”(Phelan 1993 (2001)) (emphasis mine). Like the Harlem Balls,

“the queer pride parade employs various mechanisms to create consumption of queer desires and manners of being that can restructure the largely heterosexist space into a queer space for one day .One of the ways it is done is through, distribution of rainbow flags, batches, masks to the participants, the walkers/participants also engage themselves in subtle signifier of queer identity such as pinki rings, labis earrings for lesbian and trans* women to rainbow, ribbons, dresses etc. The giant rainbow flag measuring around 20 feet is carried and waved by the participants” (Ghosh 2014, 71-72).

One of the key features of the queer pride parade is the interaction between the parade goers and the spectators. Spectators constantly enter the space of the parade to sing or dance with the participants, asking them for badges and balloons that they can flaunt for their social media handles. Rainbow flag is unfurled over bodies of participants and spectators alike, as for that particular moment, all frontiers are diluted and everyone co-exist in that particular time and space, despite their varied sexual orientation and gendered identities.

The space of the pride parade besides being frequented by the myriad of participants and spectators from all classes and backgrounds, also becomes a space for small business transactions carried out by mostly kids from lower classes who make their living through begging for alms. Most of these kids flock to the site of pride parade to see ‘the sexed other’, and at times describe most of the participants as ‘chakka’, ‘beechka’¹⁷⁰, ‘dhandewale’¹⁷¹ etc. Their understanding of gender and sexuality nuances is fraught by societal norms as they replicate the common misconceptions towards deviant sexuality. These kids usually collect or ask the participants for alms, which is most of the times refused, so they resort to asking them for balloons, masks, flags, badges etc, which they try to sell back to participants or to passers-by.

¹⁷⁰Chakka and Beechka are derogatory terms used for hijras or people born with intersex variations.

¹⁷¹Derogatory term for sex workers

The organisers also hire percussionists commonly known as *dholwalas*, who would accompany the participants through the distance of the parade. Use of percussion instruments like dholak and daflī by the hired percussionist add rhythm to the performance of many trans* men and women, who shake their belly's and bosoms and occupy the middle of the street, where they dance. This action signifies a powerful moment, where these participants reclaim the public space where they are often ridiculed, harassed, victimised and punished by the state surveillance and hetero-patriarchal society on a daily basis for not fitting into the gender normativity that the society usually passes off.¹⁷²

Most of the parade participants especially the ones who significantly transgress the gender norms and visibly not deemed normative are requested to pose for photographs. There's a 'homosexual enigma' as well as panic that is induced in the parade space for most of the heterosexual spectators who watch this carnivalesque performance and try to understand the gender transgressions happening within the space (see image 4.10) These aggressive '*in your face*' tactics both raise the visibility of the queer communities but also rupture the taken-for-granted heterosexuality of these spaces by disrupting the repetitive performances at other spaces like malls and particular shopping street as heterosexual places and (re)imagining/ (re)producing them as queer sites. According to Munt,

“the queer identity is constructed in the temporal and linguistic mobilisation of the space as we move through space, we imprint the utopian and dystopian moments upon urban life. Our bodies are vital signs of this temporality and intersubjective location. In an instant, a freeze frame, a queer man or woman is occupying space as it occupies him or her” (Munt 1995, 125).

The implicit in these 'other' performances is a recognition that control over the way that space is produced is fundamental to heterosexuals' ability to reproduce their hegemony. The 'straight' bystanders often attempt to police such “in your face display of sexuality” during the parade by non-verbal cues, jeers and at lengths physically threatening the parade goers or involving law enforcement agencies due to the alleged 'immoral behaviour' displayed by the parade participants.

¹⁷²Whilst gay men and trans* men and women are primarily attacked by other men, the perpetrators of violence against lesbians include not only men (alone and in groups with other men/women), but also women (alone and in groups). There are gender differences operating within the geography of homophobic assaults-lesbians report more violent encounters in the 'heterosexual street' than gay men, who are more likely to be victimised in cruising areas such as Nehru park, Deer Park, Moolchand flyover etc.

These performances continue through the route of the pride parade which is designed to go through the heart of the capital, most famously known as the Lutyens' Delhi which houses many historical monuments like Jantar Mantar, cultural vistas such as Lalit Kala Academy, Sangeet Natak Akademi, National School of Drama and many premier educational institutes along with corporate houses and shopping markets hence becoming one of the busiest business centres of the city.

According to Ghosh, "one of the fascinating aspects of the parade is the colourful and innovative posters on display and how the same ideas of sexuality and freedom are used to voice dissent during such protests"(Ghosh 2014, 168). In my years of documentation of Pride parade, few posters stood out, these include,

"Posters such as '*Nach nach kar kranti layenge*' (we will bring the revolution through dancing) resonated first-wave feminism tag-line, 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution' given by American writer and feminist Emma Goodman.¹⁷³ The poster also resonated with the earlier women's movement protest rally in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To protest against rising food prices to anti-rape and dowry movement, the women strategized by employing performative gestures like beating utensils with spoons as a direct critique of rising food prices at that point. The space of pride parade remains a contested terrain, which witnesses, the coming together of many student organisations, women's NGOs, women wings of the left political parties and human rights lawyers, this space was further explored once the idea of 'gender, sexuality and desire' entered the public imagination and domain.¹⁷⁴ Performance of plurality and exploration of various gendered nuances that tried breaking the normativity of gender binaries was witnessed in these spaces and raised through the posters" (Ghosh 2014, 168-169). Some posters emphasised on freedom of choice, equality, human rights to critiquing the state sanctioned surveillance post-recriminalisation of Section 377. Posters such as, *Genders are diverse not disordered* and *Be straight not narrow* was strong criticism for the hetero-patriarchal and normative understanding of viewing gender in set compartments. Other posters included but entrenched criticism of the retrograde judgment delivered by the Supreme Court, like *Went to bed in 2013, woke up in 1860*, 'Supreme Court stop peeping in my bedroom' etc" (Ghosh 2014, 169).

¹⁷³The full tag-line goes like

'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!

If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution!

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution,

A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having.

If there won't be dancing at the revolution, I'm not coming.

¹⁷⁴The first time woman's sexuality was discussed in a national conference of the women's movement was in 1990 in Calicut, in an evening capsule on 'single women'. There was a quiet 'coming out' and lesbianism was heard of in hushed tones and hesitant whispers. In the next conference in Tirupathi 1994, massive convulsions were precipitated by a lesbian group's proposal to have a separate session on the issue. In 1997, the convulsions resolved to give way to a session organised by *Stree Sangam* at the Ranchi conference.

These strategic modes of defiance however lead to disagreements within the activists, parade goers, spectators, allies within the movement. Questions like if pride parade were becoming too political, hence driving the allies and parade-goers away or one needs to see it as a celebration or siesta' arose from already fragmented queer movement. The next section would emphasise on various intersections of gender, class, caste, sexual identities and whether pride parade becomes the contested grounds for all such intersectional identities.

(c) Articulating Intersections of Gender, Class and Caste In Delhi Queer Pride

“What links queer people to couples who love across caste and community lines is the fact that both are exercising their right to love at enormous personal risk.”

- Nivedita Menon in *Seeing like a Feminist* (2012)

There have been several arguments made that the queer struggles in India while celebrating transgressions ends up promoting ‘geographies of exclusion’, which states that the struggles of symbolic meaning of space are inseparable from the materiality of the space” (Binnie and Young 2006). The neoliberal cityscape enables a unique liberation for assertion of varied identities, but also enfolds within itself discriminatory nature. Features such as anonymity and absence of immediate social control allows non-normative sexualities to be materialised within the cityscapes. However, the same space upholds differential access to various social and political subjects. This is reflected by the various hierarchies and discriminations that this visibility in turn permits and reproduces. The queer subjectivities are enmeshed with intricacies of intersectionalities of class, caste and gender, which are deeply influenced by the neoliberal cityscape.

While reading performance strategies of the queer pride parades, it is also important to note the “hierarchies of class, caste and gender operating within the space of the parade. While gay men take the centre stage, they are followed by lesbians and trans* and at the periphery would be the hijras and kothis” (Ghosh 2014, 167). Ashwini Sukthankar notes that the “hijra discourse is radically different from queer discourses due to intricacies of class, caste, gender and language of the struggle” (Sukthankar 2005). Apart from lack of class privilege that plagues the hijra community, “the hijras also lack the choice to ‘pass’ as normative unlike their other queer counterparts, deeming them more vulnerable” (Sukthankar 2005, 166). This

space becomes an 'inclusive space' only in terms of gay men and lesbian women who can 'pass off' as straight even as they exit the space of parade.

While walking the distance of the pride parade, most of the gay men, bisexual men and women, as well as queer women are simply uncomfortable marching alongside hijras and kothis, due to their seemingly socio-cultural, class, caste and gender divide. This in-turn becomes a failure on behalf of the queer community to recognise and address inclusivity. According to Alok Gupta, "there is absolutely no recognition of similar struggles and aspirations, at least in context of sexuality between hijras, kothis, gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women" (Gupta 2005, 139).

This inability of the pride parade to cater to claims of inclusivity was elicited by one of my respondents Bittu, an academician and member of Delhi Queer Pride Committee. For Bittu, the attempt at intersectionality seemed like a 'forced intervention' and an extension of 'affirmative action' as far as trans* visibility is concerned. For Bittu, there was an inability of the trans* particularly hijra participants to align with the celebratory mood of the pride. They note,

"for majority of hijras as well as transgender population who belonged to working class and resort to sex work and begging for livelihood, there's very little to celebrate and it's a long road to struggle. Even within the space of pride parade, they are targeted by affluent gay men and further harassed by police".

(Bittu, interviewed on 24 November 2018)

Another issue that has been plaguing the Delhi Queer Pride parade is their inability to align itself with caste-based politics that is practiced by some of the active participants of the parade. Akhil, former member of Delhi Queer Pride Committee, who had raised issues regarding the functioning of caste-based discrimination within the organising of 2015 pride, had faced criticisms from several activists who accused him of attempting to dilute the larger queer movement by interlinking caste with sexuality. Similarly, religion as well as nationalism remain disputed terrains as there have been instances in both Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata pride parades, where organisers lashed out on the participants carrying posters on Kashmir, Palestine, Bastar, or any anti-right-wing cause, for trying to trivialise the queer issues.

One of the reasons for this backlash have been the fact that most of the participants of the queer pride parade do not want to associate themselves with making any kind of overt political statements or protests and view the space of parade of that of a ‘fiesta’. There’s a constant reference to the binary of “protest vs. celebration”. Many of the interlocutors whom I interviewed in the course of this thesis emphasised on this ideological standpoint, where activists emphasised on the idea of political consciousness, and saw the march as a demonstration rather than a parade. This, however was not case with most of the parade goers and spectators, as they saw it as “a space of celebration”. As one of the interlocutors responds disdainfully,

“Why do we need a Gay Pride Parade? We should be visible every single day, and then, maybe, we will be taken seriously”.

(Interview with S, November 25, 2018)

The narratives of my interlocutors point towards the need of a correct model of representation, in terms of how the community should present itself to the larger heterosexual masses. The following section would reflect upon this age-old debate of representation of pride parades in terms of a protest demonstrations or fiesta.

4.3. Whose Pride is it anyway?

The last couple of years have seen the emergence of ‘queer’, as it became part of the media vocabulary with pride marches becoming a regular event across India. Queer pride parade means different things for different people, for some individuals it is a celebration of their sexual identity in face of rampant homophobia, for others it is an uphill battle for recognition of rights and against systematic oppression by repressive state apparatuses. The day of the pride is marked as a day of temporary respite for some, to truly be who they are themselves without the fear of judgement or ridicule. But recently, one is witnessing a strange phenomenon, where various questions have been raised, such as, whether pride parade is needed at all since heterosexual counterparts don’t have pride parades, whether pride should take corporate funding, to pride parades being deemed too ‘vulgar and flamboyant’ in turns not being taken seriously by queer and heterosexual counterparts alike.

The identity of pride parade and the places it occupies, along with the identity of individuals are “frequently driven with internal tensions and conflicts” (Massey 1991, 276). While there can never be a homogenous queer movement, similarly pride parades cannot be homogenised and this is true for the events that have transpired in the last couple of years. The pride parades held in Mumbai in 2014 and Pune in 2017 were mired by controversies. One of the concerns that remains is a constant struggle of the queer community with ‘internal homophobia’ within the community, which usually masquerades as “what impression are we giving to the heterosexual counterparts?” The nature of the space of pride parade is assumed to be heterosexual, so there is always this assumption by the heterosexual counterparts that as the queer community occupies the space, it needs to be as ‘straight acting’ as possible and should not transgress the gender norms.

Authors like Chetan Bhagat and Shobha De have criticised the Indian Queer Movement and the phenomenon of pride parades. Chetan Bhagat in his article titled, “*Section 377 is our collective sin*” (Bhagat 2014) writes,

“Accepting gay rights is only being sensitive to the genuine needs of a discriminated community. On that note, I would have one suggestion for the gay community. We live in a conservative country that needs to change, but change happens slowly. Any breakthrough in gay rights should not spill out on the streets, in the form of Western inspired gay parades or anything that presents being gay as being somewhat fashionable or cool. While you have the right to do so, please note that we have to nudge a conservative, almost hostile society towards change. If we freak them out, they will only withdraw further” (Bhagat 2014).¹⁷⁵

The above statement is not only patronising but also incredibly homophobic coming from an acclaimed liberal novelist, as the statement ends up catering to the majoritarian point of view. But what is even more surprising is when organisers of the pride parade themselves concede to the majoritarian morals and put up restrictions regarding what one can dress up in and come for the pride. When the organiser also puts up a disclaimer that the parade goers must refrain from raising political slogans and must not criticise Supreme Court’s decision regarding recriminalizing homosexuality is seen in bad taste. Can it still be called pride, when pride is stripped of its protest elements and is seen as a “mere photo opportunity”?

¹⁷⁵Bhagat, Chetan (2014) *Section 377 is our collective sin* in The Underage Optimist, Editorial Section, The Times of India published on September 6, 2014 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/The-underage-optimist/section-377-is-our-collective-sin/>

Accessed on November 14, 2019.

The Pune Pride Parade in 2017 found itself in a quagmire of controversy when Bindhumadhav Khire, head of Samapathik Trust which is responsible for organising Pune Pride parade issued diktats on how parade goers should fold themselves in cloak of respectability by thinking twice about what they wear, say or do at the parade. The Pune Pride parade organisers came up with following rules for participants to adhere to. These were:

1. “One must wear decent clothes and behave themselves.
2. No Crackers, bands, percussions like dholaks, pipanis etc. will be allowed during the march.
3. No sloganeering and protests during the march.
4. No indecent or controversial posters will be allowed” (Singh 2017).¹⁷⁶

These rules were widely contested by individuals, parade goers and activists from within and outside the community in Pune who called out the fascism of the organiser and violent blow to the already oppressed individuals from the queer community. This is not the first time that Pune Pride has put up such restrictions on the participants. A similar incident happened in 2014, as the organisers were concerned that parade became a space for solicitation by sex workers. In fact, in one of the instances, the organiser threatened the parade goers that he would personally handover people to the police if one was to “misbehave”. The action was justified in terms of the fact that Pune is deemed as a conservative city.

It is interesting to observe, organisers of Pune pride parade compared pride marches in other cities with ‘*nanga naach*’ (nude dancing), and insisted on measures to create a ‘sanitised pride’ without any controversies. Debates across the queer community regarding the appropriate ways to ‘celebrate’ or ‘protest’ reflects on the efforts by the organisers to largely ‘self-control’ and present a ‘respectable model’ that believes in non-confrontational and assimilationist behaviour. The Queer Pride parade has become a space of dilemma for the activists, organisers and parade-goers who are at logger-heads with one another in deciding

¹⁷⁶Whose Pride is it Anyways? Beyond the Hashtag Wars, Pune Pride Raises Important Questions We Need to Answer by Sukhdeep Singh in Gaylaxy published on June 9, 2017 <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/whose-pride-anyways-beyond-hashtag-wars-pune-pride-raises-important-questions-need-answer/#gs.ge88r7> accessed on 14 November, 2017.

whether queer pride parade owing to its history of transgression, should remain a site of protest or become a celebratory spectacle.

One of my interlocutors, Keshav (25), a professional in TCS, Hyderabad was critical of the pride parades held in metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai as he complained,

“Not all gay men are effeminate as represented by the media platforms. But one wonders, where does media finds such representations? These representations of gayness are emblematic of the recent phenomenon of pride parades witnessed across India. Gay men wearing skimpy clothes, wearing tiaras and feathers walking the streets, holding hands and kissing in the space of the parade. What these brats (sic) don’t understand is that they fuel stereotypes and make lives of thousands of gay men who are not ‘out’ difficult. How do I explain to my parents that I am not like the gay men they see on TV?”

(Interview with Keshav, 25 November 2018)

Such narratives solidify claims made by Bindhumadhav Khire who views the pride parades as space for ‘*nanganaach*’. Another respondent, Suresh (20), student in University of Delhi exclaimed,

“The problem is not how we or they dress (referring to parade goers); the problem is that it becomes representative of the entire community; in fact, media only highlights the bizarre (sic) by showing images of skimpily dressed gay men, butch lesbian and hypersexualised trans* persons.”

(Interview with Suresh, 21 November 2018)

In contrast, some interlocutors have emphasised upon the relevance of employing ‘in your face’ tactics while walking the queer pride parade. Sid (24), a student in Ambedkar University, Delhi emphasised on the need for subversion as,

“The queer pride parade is a festivity celebrated once in a year and people who participate in it have the right to wear costumes and enjoy the masquerade! I find it ridiculous (sic) that we (gay men) have the obligation to justify our act of celebration. Would anybody question heterosexuals dressing up for Halloween in India?”

(Interview with Sid, 21 November 2018)

This paradox has become prevalent over the last few years, between “dialectics of ‘*symbolic annihilation of heteronormative order*’ vs. ‘*assimilation within normative order*’, and refusal of many individuals from within the community to choose between the two and attempting to

create space for both to exist” (Enguix 2009). In India, these tensions between radical confrontational stances and assimilation-based politics can be traced through participation or exclusion from the ‘official’ Pride Parades to radical breakout groups organising ‘alternative pride parades’.

This practice was observed in the Queer Azaadi Movement (QAM) Pride which is held each year in Mumbai in March. Queer feminist group LABIA (Lesbian and Bisexual in Action) was almost prevented from attending the QAM 2015. LABIA carried posters such as, “*‘Homos hate BJP’, ‘Beef Eater, Man Lover’, ‘Right to Dissent or Gender, Sexuality, Dharm: Where I am respected, that is my ghar’*” which were seen as inflammatory and political; and hence not acceptable” (Shah and Mahajan 2015). Queer Azaadi organisers later came out with a statement alleging LABIA as a seditious hatemongering break out group from QAM, and denied any relationship with the queer feminist group claiming that terms like ghar wapasi etc. were not discussed in any of the meetings and QAM doesn’t support them either.

Various reasons have been cited in favour of both Pune and Mumbai pride parade organisers for their high-handed approach in shutting down acts of ‘subversion or dissent’. One of the common reasons was obtaining police permission for organising pride parades in smaller towns, as for many it qualifies as an “excruciatingly tedious process”, where organisers of such events put themselves at risk of extortion and harassment by Police while attempting to get the permission to organise the parades. It is ironic to say the least that pride parade which started as a riot against police atrocities, now depends on repressive state apparatus for protection. This is despite the fact that police atrocities range from extortion to at times sexual assaults/violence towards visibly queer individuals like effeminate gay men and members of trans* community. How do pride organisers in the name of inclusion and assimilation forget state sponsored homophobic violence upon the abject and criminalised bodies of such individuals for the rest of the year and make them the parade marshals only for the day of the pride?¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷There have been several essays about how the first pride parade was a riot led by queer and trans persons of colour (QTPOC) like Sylvia Riviera and Marsha P. Johnson, individuals who are most invoked during the pride month at times becomes akin to tokenism or lip service, as an attempt to pay homage to these individuals in incredibly sanitised and at times straight-splained history of the pride movement. After all, “no matter their iconicity, Riviera, Johnson and many trans* persons of colour who fought the police and other repressive state apparatuses died lonely (at times took their own lives) and almost anonymously. It is on their dead bodies pride

One realises that an inability to present a cohesive, homogenous, united front for the queer movement in India becomes difficult and provides a moment of self-reflection for the activists, organisers, parade goers and media personals alike. These questions presented themselves during the recent Pune Pride which took place amidst celebration and criticism, had everything from dancing and singing and colours and certain disciplined flamboyance. The history of pride parades is embodied and etched by gender non-conforming individuals and trans* folks who risk their lives to access right to livelihood, healthcare, housing etc.; their lives and autonomy, however are appropriated and celebrated to the extent of fetishization within the queer politics as well as in media. One wonders, why there is a stigma regarding making the battle political and making pride one of the platforms to raise and highlight concerns regarding police violence, livelihood, accessibility to housing and medical facilities for the community members. How does '*sanskaari pride*' as seen in the case of Pune pride, answer to political climate of various restrictions and bans? Is self-censorship and self-control the way forward?

Do we read the performative and political gestures in these protest cum performances as mere 'assimilation' to the discourses of global capital or do we read them as further 'democratisation' precisely *with the aid* of the 'tactics' of assimilation? How does an individual or a collective per say transcend the state-sanctioned surveillance through various counter-tactics and make their presence visible? The access to public spaces comes with the deeply entrenched threat of violence which women or queer community face on a daily basis, is there any other space where through performative aids they can make their mark? The next chapter tries to explore counterstrategies employed by feminist and queer counter publics by using the cyberspace as one of the active sites of dissent.

parades are celebrated. Recently, black lives matter (BLM) movement have picketed and protested at the sites of pride parade invoking the same reasons including presence of police in these parades, as police brutality and deaths due to systematic atrocities against black population have increased many folds. BLM demonstrations have been time and again booed on such occasions as bringing negativity to otherwise joyous occasion like the pride parade and police have arrested protestors". For more read Solerna, Rob Has Pride sold out by inviting Toronto police back to the parade? Published on 10/29/2018 and accessed on 8/31/2019

<https://nowtoronto.com/news/pride-toronto-police-black-lives-matter/>

Gays stage friendship march

By Chitra Siddhartha
The Times of India News Service

CALCUTTA: "Don't think straight, think people" was the message a motley group of information technology professionals working with multinationals, journalists, art students, interior designers and writers wanted to send across as they walked the streets of Calcutta.

Dressed in bright yellow T-shirts, 15 men from different parts of the country, walked together to help the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community emerge from the closet and be accepted.

"We are a small group out in the open but there are millions with us. They just need to know they are not alone," said Humsafar Trust chief Ashok Row Kavi.

On Friday, LGBT-India, a 'communication centre' for gay groups in the country, joined the international community, for the first time, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Stonewall riots which broke out in June 1969 in Manhattan, United States as an expression of gay rights.

"We believe in non-violence. So we are walking for friendship," Mr Kavi explained.

LGBT-India in association with two city-based alternative sexuality groups — Counsel Club and Integration — organised the walk to generate understanding about homosexuality and related issues. "Homosexuality is just not about orientations. There are larger issues



LGBT-India members marching through Calcutta on Friday.

of health, STD and AIDS associated with it. We need to be better educated," continued the Humsafar chief.

LGBT members visited various NGOs working with street children, the Human Rights Commission and the Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Committee, a forum for sex workers.

"Everywhere we went, we tried to make people realise how closely related health issues and homosexuality are," said LGBT-India convenor Owasi Khan from Bangalore.

"We are willing to walk but are not too comfortable about our names being printed because our

families are not aware of our orientations," said two men from Darjeeling. For Aditya Mohnot, Calcutta, the walk was a novel way to let his family know of his orientation. "Though I have been very open, my parents have never asked me. Maybe, now they will and I can finally tell them," he smiled and said.

For Ranjan and Pawan of the Counsel Club, "the most vibrant and mainstream Indian LGBT group," the walk was years of hard work paying off.

"It is great that such a movement began here. We are planning to make this an annual event, to be commemorated countrywide," they said.

Image 4.1: File photograph and report of the first gay friendship walk held in Kolkata on 2nd July, 1999. Source: <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/News3.jpg>



Image 4.2: File photograph of dancing at LGBT pride parade, 2011, creating a homosexual enigma around the act of kissing and embracing. Most of the participants at times pose for the photographs. Source: Hindustan Times, 3rd July, 2011.



Image 4.3: One of the posters at Delhi Queer Pride 2013, Date: 25 November 2013.
Source: Personal documentation.



Image 4.4: Various posters on display, during protests after recent recriminalisation of Sec. 377. Date: 25 November 2014. Source: Personal documentation.



Image 4.5: A participant at the 4th Delhi Queer Pride Parade engaging in lascivious behavior accentuating his sexuality by wearing a pink boa and a mini skirt (not seen in the picture) but simultaneously wearing a mask to cover his identity. Source: India Today <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/gallery/delhi-queer-pride-parade/1/5934.html>



Image 4.6: Founder of Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava association holds placard during Queer Azaadi March, Mumbai in 2013. Source: Gaylaxy Magazine www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/whose-pride-anyways-beyond-hashtag-wars-pune-pride-raises-important-questions-need-answer/#gs.lw8hv7



Image 4.7: A participant carrying poster of 'Homo Wapsi', a political poster based on the GharWapsi campaign in Delhi Queer Pride parade 2016. Source: InuthNovember 28, 2016
<https://www.inuth.com/beyond-the-headlines/lgbtqi/india-delhi-queer-pride-parade-2016-poster-homosexual-gay/>



Image 4.8: A political poster critiquing the government over recriminalisation of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code in Delhi Queer Pride 2016. Source: InuthNovember 28, 2016
<https://www.inuth.com/beyond-the-headlines/lgbtqi/india-delhi-queer-pride-parade-2016-poster-homosexual-gay/>

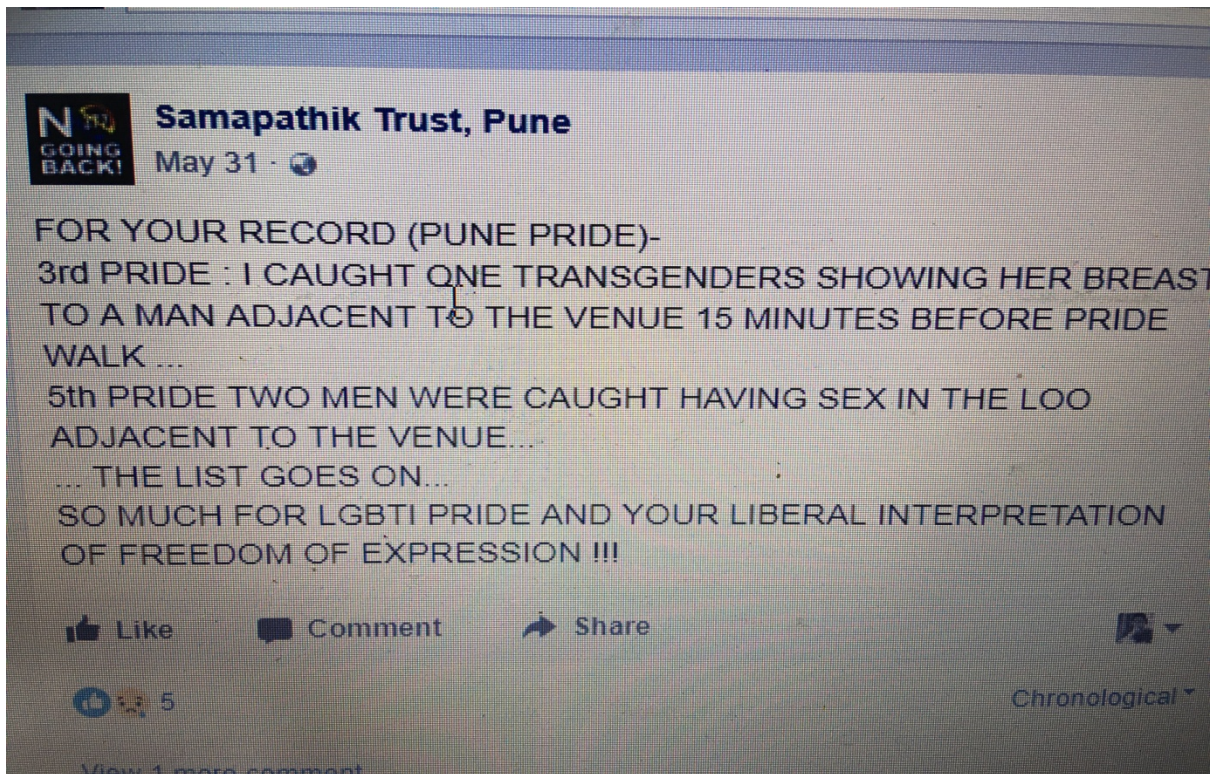


Image 4.9: Screenshot of the Facebook status put up by Samapathik Trust.

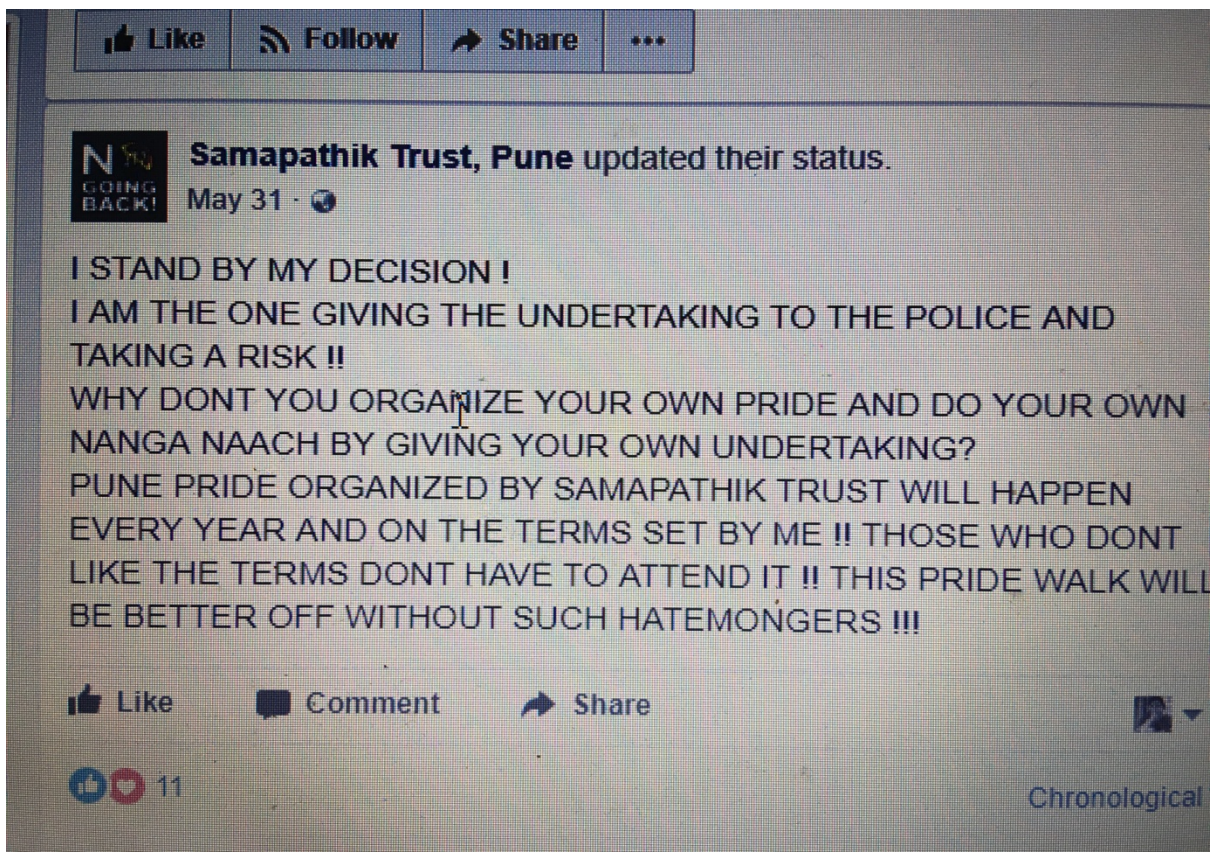


Image 4.10: Screenshot of the Facebook status put up by Samapathik Trust.

Chapter-5 Negotiating the ‘sexed other’: Performing Sexuality on Queer Dating Websites

Introduction

The human desire to communicate and forge friendship, love and companionship is a universal phenomenon as the civil society’s development is based upon this basic need for connectivity between one another. The previous chapter discussed the spaces of public protests and resistance that highlighted the voices of non-normative sexualities, which in turn became the forefront to discuss issues regarding recognising sexual identities, their rights which include right to companionship, and equal protection under the law.

From time immemorial human beings have had the urge to communicate with their peers and also seek romantic affiliations and relationships with members of both same and opposite sex. With arranged marriage still prevalent in South Asia, but particularly in India, there is a tradition- millennia old, of romantic courtship arising not only from familial setups by friends and family or chance encounters, but also third-party intervention (Coontz 2005). The resources available to these third parties remained the same for most of the millennium: social networks, strong opinions about sorts of people who belong together, and the willingness to apply those judgments to the constitution of actual couples (Ahuvia and Adelman 1992). But with neo-liberalism, the societal cultural norms disintegrated and gave rise to individuals, who accessed at times forbidden spaces with the help of capital. Sexuality and sex became tangible items available to those who could afford it. Both straight and gay dating remained a contentious subject, and with the majoritarian logic governing questions of morality, spaces of non-normative sexuality remained fraught with violence.

With multiple online dating applications available for the user to choose from, these norms of dating and courtship have changed. This chapter makes an attempt to highlight the discourses of gender and sexuality that operate around the idea of abhorrent, or invisibilised queer bodies in popular online queer dating websites and applications (henceforth apps) like Planet Romeo, Pink Sofa, Gaydar, Grindr, OkCupid etc available for Indian users. The chapter also

looks at the role of class, caste, gender, language within the queer discourses operating within these online spaces¹⁷⁸.

Drawing from queer ethnographic research conducted among queer men and women over multiple locations such as New Delhi, Kolkata and parts of Mumbai, along with virtual ethnography on digital spaces (such as Facebook, Planet Romeo, Grindr and Tinder), the chapter investigates various practices and discourses operating within the digital dating culture that has permeated and became an “integral part of queer social life across India” (Dasgupta 2017, 1). These dating sites enable the members of the queer community to gain some understanding of queer lifestyle as a subculture and queer performances as acts of resistance. This discourse of gender and sexuality and politics of visual imagery circulating on various queer and non-normative offline spaces which at times act as a safe space for non-normative sexual minorities.

It is also important to clarify at the very outset that I have chosen queer men and queer women (as my subjects, as my research participants chose to identify themselves as gay or queer with very few identifying themselves as trans* and non-binary). The queer community in India is far from being a “homogenous group” (Narain and Bhan 2005); with issues such as gender, class, caste, religion, language playing an important role in defining the social grouping of this community. Here, I see the word ‘queer’ as a way of self-identification for my research participants.

The rise of queer subculture and visibility is intrinsically linked to notions of neo-liberalisation. As indicated in the earlier chapters, India’s social and economic policies heralded in an era of globalisation with the growth of middle class (Castells 2009; Dasgupta 2017, 21). As indicated by Roy (2003) and Shahani (2008), the queer community were amongst the “first to dive into the digital folds of social interaction” (Roy 2003; Shahani 2008). The digital media allowed the queer community across India, a new way of “imagining and experiencing themselves in the imagined communities within the digital space” (Dasgupta 2017, 2). In this chapter, I argue that with coming of new media, social

¹⁷⁸ Sections from this chapter have been presented as research paper and published as conference proceedings titled ‘*Swipe Right for Love: Understanding Online Queer Dating Apps and Other Subaltern Counter publics*’ as part of the conference proceedings of 1st International Conference on Digital Media with the theme Changing Face of Media, Content and Marketing in Mobile First World published as collection of essays in book. ISBN: 978-93-85777-59-2

networking sites and queer dating apps and websites, became an integral part of the emerging digital culture in India. The platform allowed queer individuals to negotiate their daily life within the online worlds of Facebook along with apps such as Tinder, Grindr and Planet Romeo.

This chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine the various representations and experiences of Indian queer community within digital spaces of networking for friendship as well as romantic liaisons such as in case of online dating. Most of the interlocutors selected for this research spoke and understood English and lived in the urban metropolis of New Delhi, Kolkata and parts of Mumbai. This chapter relied on two year of ethnographic research on virtual sites along with field trips to Kolkata and Mumbai to understand digital queer cultures within metropolitans in India.

Through my fieldwork, I engaged with apps like Grindr, Planet Romeo, OkCupid, Pink Sofa and Tinder. This was done via various semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with my research participants, followed by participant observation and lurking¹⁷⁹ around on these apps. Through ‘Lurking’ (Mowlabocus 2010, 121) as a method, I would join various online groups, forums, dating apps, observing the communication on these platforms but rarely participating. In addition to ‘Lurking’ as a method, the data for this chapter was collected through participation, observation, informal interactions as well as semi-structured informed consent-based interviews, instant chats or messaging, emails etc.

The names of all the participants used in this chapter are pseudonyms unless they are well-known scholars or public figures, in which case, it is explicitly mentioned. This is done

¹⁷⁹ As a methodology, Lurking falls somewhere between participant-observation and what some authors call "complete observation" or "non-participant observation." "The key difference between lurking and casual observation is that the lurker very self-consciously locates himself at the periphery of a social setting, pays strict attention to his degree of obtrusiveness in the situation, and classifies evidence thus obtained as *specific* to the anonymity of public or quasi-public behaviors. The data are not, in other words, taken primarily as clues to the subjective values or attitudes of the people observed". For more see Strickland, Donald and Lester Schlesinger; *Lurking as a Research Method* Political Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. <http://www.sfaajournals.net/doi/abs/10.17730/humo.28.3.t056036u16021201?code=apan-site&journalCode=humo>

Accessed on 12/15/2017

primarily to protect the identities and privacy of my research participants. Along with pseudonyms, I have provided the username handles of my participants which they use on various websites in lieu of their real names.

This chapter through queer online ethnography and further through case studies and interview-based method will emphasise on varied representations of performance of gender and sexuality in a seemingly ‘safe’ cyberspace. The cyberspace is at times “hailed as a ‘safe space’ for the queer denizens who would express and share their views/lives without being subjected to ‘real’, ‘physical’ violence which is often lived and faced by the queer community”. This chapter attempts to study these lives, performances, personalities within social networking sites along with queer dating sites and apps on cyberspace. The virtual world then becomes the space of resistance where queer individuals risk ostracization in their attempt to find friendship, love or even a casual hook up¹⁸⁰. These dating apps in turn, act as living archive of queer identities, expressions and sharing of a constantly evolving defiance against all the normatives of the real world—a world forbidden to queer community.

Websites like www.planetromeo.com, www.pinksofa.com and www.gaydar.com as well as Facebook pages like Queer Campus etc., have attempted to extend the terrain of safe space from real to virtual. This chapter examines discourses operating on various websites that are used by queer or non-normative communities whose invisibilised bodies gets a space to express desire and sexuality without constant surveillance of the state. The chapter would explore and include analysis of the role of social networking sites like Facebook which hosts queer forums such as Queer Campus which serves as a platform for queer individuals where they could express their desires without imminent threat of violence. However, these so-called liberal spaces hold within itself implicit class, caste, gender, sexual and language based biases, which I would reflect upon with the aid of various ethnographic interviews with my interlocutors.

Another section titled ‘Dating Sites and Applications as a Methodological Tool’ attempts to understand the potential of dating apps as a tool for collecting data for queer online ethnographic research. The section on User Interface of Dating Apps explores the various visual aesthetics and representation politics at work on Grindr, Tinder, Planet Romeo and

¹⁸⁰ Hook up/Hooking up is a colloquial term referring to casual sex.

Pink Sofa etc.; and how visual aesthetics of queer male dating apps differ from that of queer female dating apps.

5.1(a) Social Networking Sites and Queer Subculture in India: A Case of Queer Campus on Facebook

In a conversation with leading queer rights activist Sonal Giani from Mumbai, Giani articulates that,

“Being queer in India has entered a new realm of imagination where queerness has moved away from popular cruising grounds to digitally mediated screens across India”

(Interview with Sonal Giani, June 2018)

The story of Indian queer life online began in 1993, when Devesh Khattu, a man of South Asian descent met Marty through their tenure as students in University of Texas. Since, both identified as gay men, they realised the difficulty gay men of colour (person of colour or POC) face in finding a sense of community in countries where homosexuality was criminalised. They worked together to develop what is known as ‘*Khush list*’¹⁸¹ - a Canadian queer South Asian online web forum for gay men to interact upon in 1992 (Shahani 2008, 85).

As Internet gained popularity in India in the latter half of 1990s, more people started accessing these websites and using chat rooms such as Yahoo or MSN messenger etc. Since, personal computers were then very expensive, most of the individuals would flock to local cyber cafes. Most of the early online queer groups and forums were created on these websites as it was easier to create and maintain the same. Similarly, one of the first e-groups established in India was ‘Gay Bombay group’ in 1998 (Shahani 2008, 85). This group as Parmesh Shahani notes, was a “symbol of radical change that has swept across gay and lesbian Asia (especially India) due to emergence of the Internet” (Shahani 2008 , 27). Gay Bombay, since its inception, provided support to several members across various metropolitan cities in India, and aided several other such e-groups and online networks to emerge.

¹⁸¹ The word *Khush*, which literally means ‘gay or happy’, is also a colloquial term used by South Asians to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer identified individuals (Bhaskaran 2002; Dasgupta 2017).

Online forums like Khush list and Gay Bombay allowed cyberspaces to be co-opted as ‘public space to form community’ and serve as ‘private spaces for intimate, romantic and sexual encounters’ for the earlier invisibilised and oppressed queer community across India and abroad (Dasgupta 2017, 28). Emergence of the internet has led to significant changes in the media representation of the queer community within India post 1990s. Post-liberalisation and IT-boom in India, social networking sites have emerged not only as active sites to propagate news and information but also act as ‘media filters’, which at times functions as a collective gatekeeper to spread news and other important forms of information. Drushel (2010) points out that:

“Online social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook, in the few short years have grown immensely popular among teens and young adults especially. They present the possibility of providing a virtual social support function in an environment which appears non geographically restricted” (Drushel 2010).

For Gajjala and Mitra, Queer Online spaces in India can be “mapped as a vast terrain of digital sites that range from gay blogs like *Gay Bombay and Khush list* to listservs¹⁸² created specifically for queer individuals” (Gajjala and Mitra 2008). Their work reflect upon the various attempts made by the earlier stigmatised queer community to create safe spaces for themselves. This acknowledgement and celebration of new found identity with the aid of cyberspace required a delicate balance for many queer Indian bloggers between their ‘national identity (Indian) and sexual identity (being LGBT)’ (Gajjala and Mitra 2008, 98).

In this section, I examine the role of Facebook¹⁸³, which hosts one of the groups- Queer Campus, and how the group reaches out to the queer community in an attempt to politically mobilise queer men and women as well as act as an active forum for interaction and friendship. Most of the members of Queer Campus comprise mostly of students across various schools and colleges across Delhi.

¹⁸² Listserv is similar to a web-based application that distributes messages through mails to subscribers on an email list.

¹⁸³ The global reach of Facebook is unparalleled with over 2.38 billion users worldwide as of April 2019. Set up in 2004 in United States by Mark Zuckerberg and company, it reached India in 2007, with India recording the second highest number of Facebook users (currently 300 million users), after United States. Facebook is also known for hosting virtual support system, with special interest groups and societies, including queer groups from India.

For more read Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 1st quarter 2019 (in millions)

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

Accessed on 6/24/2019.

There are two primary reasons to analyse the Facebook group Queer Campus. Firstly, Queer Campus becomes a key example of the ways in which an online queer community gets appropriated within a mainstream site like Facebook, blurring the divide between “queer space as space that is either occupied by self-identified queer people or those who are defying and contesting power and heteronormativity” (Oswin 2008). Secondly, because of the nature of its existence (offline/online), the Facebook group allows an opportunity to study an online forum as Queer Campus without having to demarcate the physical and the virtual existence of its members. This interdependence and support across Internet is built upon a sense of affirmation and solidarity between queer men and women on the basis of their ‘commonality’ (Dasgupta 2014). I argue in this section that despite various commonalities, the queer community across India is far more stratified than it meets the eye, at times concealing various contentions that provide a perception of an ‘imagined community’(Anderson 1991).

There were several ethical dimensions that need to be foregrounded at the outset in terms of the methodology adopted for this section. For the access to the group one has to request membership to join, which is further approved or disapproved by the two members. Once I accessed the group, I realised that most of the members are not anonymous, since they use their real Facebook account to access and participate on the forum. I had to therefore seek permission from the group administrators for conducting the research on Queer Campus, as well as informing the members about the lurking in the group.

I have used pseudonyms to disguise the name of my participants, whereas posts have been quoted in verbatim. The anonymity of the participants as well as that of their posts was of utmost importance knowing that they were fully aware that their posts were analysed. I had little or no intrusion, and the members were aware of my presence since they had met me at one of the events held in Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2014. If I did intervene or facilitated in any of the discussions on the forum, I made sure that the data was discarded and not used for the purpose of analysis, as it may reflect biases on the researcher’s front.

Queer Campus grew out of a need to create safe social space for queer students on the basis of common interests and make internet a space where various subversions of identity, sexuality, caste, class, gender, race, ethnicity can operate without heterosexist bias. It was imagined as a queer safe space for students to engage in debates as well organising various

awareness raising events across various schools and colleges in India. What is interesting about this collective is that though weekly physical meetings have more or less discontinued; the online forum is still active.

Queer Campus, lays down its objective as:

“Queer Campus is an independent Queer student and youth collective active since 2010. We use the term Queer to refer not just to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people but to any identity or outlook that questions stereotypes. We provide a comfortable space to meet new people, discuss everything and anything—from coming out to break-ups, the latest queer films to plans for changing the world—or offer a shoulder to cry on and friends to celebrate with. Queer campus organises events which are free and open to all”(Gupta 2012).¹⁸⁴

Queer Campus via Facebook makes it possible in “connecting people from different networks on the basis of common interests as most of the members share jokes or promote political and social causes” (Gustafson 2009, 36). The administrative setting on Facebook is made public, allowing the group members to upload links to media content, post it to one’s personal profile or to a group, or forward it to the contacts in one’s networks.

During my virtual ethnography on Queer Campus, I witnessed that most of the members of Queer Campus belonged to upper middle-class English speaking strata and posted status messages and links ranging from personal to political, sex-laced humour and favourite videos, which at times was sexist, racist, casteist and incredibly misogynist (QC comprises of largely gay men and have handful of queer women and even fewer trans* identified individuals). According to Queer Scholar Ankush Gupta, “The group operates on a rather interesting mix of activities where at times certain kind of language gets ‘*normativised*’, the accessibility of the space and show certain identities are performed through the use of it”(Gupta 2012, 52).

I observed that there is a considerable bias amongst the members of Queer Campus towards allowing queer as well non-queer members to be part of the group, on the basis of how active they are in posting videos, comments, links etc. Use of English and how well versed is one with current affairs and handling of technology, also becomes the criteria for judging, liking,

¹⁸⁴ <https://queercampusonline.blogspot.com/2010/12>
Accessed on 12/12/2017

and commenting on certain posts which invites certain class biases. For example, one of the instances which saw viral sharing on Facebook wall of Queer Campus in 2014 included, heart-wrenching moment of granting of same-sex marriage rights in New Zealand and subsequent breaking out in Maori love song by members of the New Zealand Parliament. Most of the members then favourite the video url link on YouTube page, posted it on their Facebook walls for public viewing opening it up for comments by their Facebook friends.

Each member of the Facebook group especially the administrators of the page, then take turns to assess whether they think the material posted is worth sharing on the Facebook forum as well as their respective Facebook profiles. Someone with technical expertise might “edit the footage, adding music, snippets of other clips, texts, thereby creating a ‘mash up’¹⁸⁵, a new piece of media which in turn might be passed around” (Gustafson 2009, 36). Different tools allow the members to discuss and see how other members have interpreted and rated the media content. In the end, depending on the popularity of media content and depending on the number of shares on the members’ Facebook page, it might become a viral video thereby creating a Facebook loop between different forms of media. In effect, social network provides a media filter, passing on media content that are found to be especially interesting.

Henry Jenkins defines viral sharing as “getting the right idea into the right heads at the right time” (Jenkins 2006, 206-207). The features required for any media content to go ‘viral’ are mix of evocative images along with music, song, commentary or voiceover and whether it has any relevance to the current world views in the minds of the audience and users. By spreading media content and disseminating information within their personal network, individuals mark their commitments to the existing beliefs and at times move closer to the political action. A group like Queer Campus doesn’t only become a space for discussing friendship, love, romance, hook ups, break ups but it is “used quite actively by political entrepreneurs’ who advance a social or political cause by inviting members of queer community to participate at pride parades, protests etc” (Gustafson 2009). Most of the members of Queer Campus are able to access information about various offline public events via the group page.

¹⁸⁵ A mashup (also known as mesh, mash up, mash-up, blend, bootleg and bastard pop/rock) is a song or composition created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another. To the extent that such works are ‘transformative’ of original content, they may find protection from copyright claims under the ‘fair use’ doctrine of copyright law. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mashup>

Most of these administrators can be viewed as *temporal elites*¹⁸⁶ who rely on viral politics, as their links or posts directly affect certain events or phenomenon. One can see this operating in Queer Campus as the group became quite active after recriminalisation of Section 377. Other groups and organisations such as Sappho for Equality, Naz Foundation, Nigah etc. post various information on Queer Campus. Various political parties such as Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), United Progressive Alliance (UPA), National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Communist Party of India (Marxist) etc. used this platform to release their party manifesto which emphasised on scrapping Section 377.

According to D Miller,

“The concept of temporal or political elites becomes quite an interesting antithesis to the concept of democracy, though it plays an important part of well-functioning democracy, where the electorate is seen passive choosing between political alternatives depending on their track records or promises, legitimating political representatives to rule between elections”(Miller 1983, 134).

He further adds, “A small group of political leaders with perhaps an intermediate section of more active citizens, who transmit demands and information between mass and leadership” (Miller 1983, 134).

In a group like Queer Campus, the members invest a large amount of time in a political or social cause. These individuals become the core of the temporal elites associated with the cause in question. While most of the Facebook members do like, share and subscribe the information posted on the Queer Campus forum, the time invested by the members on a particular Facebook feed remains subjective with some choosing to invest more time than others. Despite the highly political nature of the group there are various issues that are faced by the members of Queer Campus on the basis of various intersections of class, caste, gender, sexuality, language biases. The next section would be reflecting upon similar issues that has been plaguing both online and offline community of Queer Campus.

¹⁸⁶ Temporal Elites is a term founded by Nil Gustafsson, ‘most of the political entrepreneurs’ who contribute to a social campaign of viral politics form together with temporary supporters of the cause to be found in interconnectedness, social networks, a temporal elite who have necessary knowledge, skills and perhaps above all the motivation to promote the cause.”

5.1(b) Language and Class-Based Identification in Queer Campus: Tales from a Fractured Community

Groups like Queer Campus hold an incredible sense of subversive potential as they work with topics such as class, caste, gender, sexuality, assimilationist politics etc. However, Queer Campus rigidly protects ‘hierarchies of class’ and becomes a space where dialogues between two individuals or even a discussion would be constantly policed and moderated not only by the administrator of the group but also by Facebook administrators. Most individuals using these forums and threads discuss issues related to religion, marriage and sexuality in India.

I would be referring to a particular instance where issues of class and caste created a rift between the group members in 2016 through an act of class-based profiling at a gay party organised by Queer Campus. Joshua, a businessman working in Delhi, and also a Queer Campus member commented on a thread reporting incident of profile screening at a local gay party, where some partygoers despite paying the high entry fee¹⁸⁷, were not allowed in the club, because of their attire.

Joshua wrote:

“I don’t understand what’s the big deal here, if PnP¹⁸⁸ wants to be elitist, it’s their choice. They need to maintain certain ‘class’ and gentry in terms of allowing patrons. I mean, this has nothing to do with homophobia and transphobia, if you want to party,

¹⁸⁷ With the decriminalisation judgement in 2009 by Delhi High Court, the hospitality industry moved towards raking up the pink rupee by organising gay parties across the city for the upper middle class and upper-class public in spaces like Kitty Su in The Lalit etc. Gay parties are being organised by gay men with an attempt to accommodate all kinds of people from the community. The ‘class-consciousness’ is being re-emphasised once again (with entry fee for these parties going up from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 10000) through such re-orientation of desires. Many gay parties are being held throughout the city and people belonging to all different class, geographical spaces, age, and ‘type’ participate in these parties with the main purpose of cruising or ‘hooking up with someone’ or ‘casual one-night stands’. These parties are therefore organised at places which become convenient to the participants. Various discotheques have claimed that they are not transphobic, but most of the “Terms and Conditions of the party plays out on the class factor and visible gentrification implemented in the respective spaces. ‘TERMS & CONDITIONS/* ENTRY WOULD BE ‘STRICTLY’ FOR ‘WELL DRESSED PEOPLE ONLY. It’s a request to you to be sensitive to the comfort level of others and to behave and dress up accordingly. Chappals, shorts and free casuals are not allowed. /* RIGHTS OF ADMISSION RESERVED./ ** No sex on the premises; if found indulging in any “hanky panky” you shall be asked to leave the party/** CLICKING PICTURES FROM ANY DEVICE (i.e....mobile phones, cam...etc) IS PROHIBITED./ **PLEASE TAKE CARE OF YOUR BELONGINGS. MANAGEMENT WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY THEFT OR LOSS./ **During and after the party, please DO NOT gather outside the venue. The management has requested us to ensure that, in the middle of the night.”

¹⁸⁸ Pegs n Pints, a famous nightclub known for hosting gay themed events on every Tuesday, attracted the gay crowd of the capital.

you should be dressed well. This is how clubs function; they handpick who they want as their patrons. Leave it to gay men to blow trivial matters out of proportion”.

(As posted on Facebook on 21 November 2014)

There are various layers to Joshua’s statement that are open for interpretation. Joshua does not recognise himself as one of the members who were denied entry to the party venue. His seeming class privilege makes it difficult for him to register the difficulties subaltern queer voices might face (specifically trans* folks) from within and outside the community. Joshua’s own elite queer position (which was evident from his Facebook profile)- an acceptable face of neoliberal queer India and defendant of Pegs N Pints’ position in terms of class- indicates upon the different forms of marginalisation at work.

This thread mostly comprised of narratives of individuals who spoke on behalf of those who were denied entry to the event and the one’s defending the stand of PnP. Ashish (20), a student in Delhi University, was one of the individuals who was denied entry to the club, agreed to speak to me and narrated his version of the story:

“I went to the club with another friend. I had never been to Pegs n Pints, but heard a lot about it so saved some pocket money to attend the Tuesday party (it was 1000 rupees per person). But as we reached the gate, the manager scanned us up and down and pointed to the sign which read, ‘we reserve the right to refuse entry’; as we tried to reason with him, he called the bouncers and threatened us. I was embarrassed and ashamed as I could see other individuals from the Queer Campus group entering the venue but none intervened. We went away feeling utterly humiliated.”

(Interview with Ashish on 10 December 2014)

On being asked why did he not share the entire incident on the Queer Campus group thread and take the matters to the group administrators, he said that this incident reflected on his own (class) background. Ashish is a lower-middle class migrant studying in the capital, and due to limited economic means is not able to live up to the class identity of the other group members. He had not read Joshua’s comment and upon revelation didn’t look surprised and reaffirmed why he didn’t put forth the concern on the group in the first place. His statement is reflective of his recognition of his apparent discomfort with his class identity and the vulnerability that comes with it.

Similarly, another manifestation of class visibility has been afforded to those group members who are fluent in English. It is not surprising that most of the gay men who were members of Queer Campus forum were educated at university levels and largely belonged to middle-class and upper middle-class strata of society and spoke fluent English. The ability to speak and write in English is frequently related to class in India¹⁸⁹, and its elevation has remained a distinct feature for the social fabric of India. A Facebook group like Queer Campus has not laid out any rules regarding which language can be used as a medium of communication. However, every time there are posts in vernacular languages by non-English speaking members, there's an instant admonition by Rishabh, the group administrator:

“Please only comment in English (sic). It's an English forum, so do write in English, if possible, let's have some class (sic)”.

(Comment posted on Queer Campus on 29 December 2017).

The group administrators are aware while writing this post that the member they are referring to might not be proficient in English and clearly makes a remark about their ‘classed and language capability’. The language divide on this forum is a reflection of the broader social, cultural and language divide within India, and indicative of the group administrator's own class subjectivity on how he views the class status of individuals that he is addressing and critiquing. Most of the individuals I interviewed from Queer Campus were of the consensus that the group catered for a narrow English speaking, middle-class, upper-middle class elite segment of the queer population in Delhi. Most of the interviewees were happy with the class stratification that existed within the group. As Rishabh (25) a student in Ambedkar University, Delhi and also the administrator of Queer Campus in an interview pointed out:

“Call me elitist, but everyone has a choice to hang out with people of their own status quo. QC was made for the purpose that individuals from all backgrounds can access it and use their own discretion about who they want to speak to or not. It is difficult to filter out membership requests as we end up getting some of these LS (low society/low standard) people, who use vulgar language and spoil the ambience of the group.”

(Interview with Rishabh* on 17 November 2019)

¹⁸⁹ The history of English language in India has a colonial legacy with Lord Macaulay drafting the ‘Minutes on Education’ 1835, where the “funding for Indian languages was reduced and funds were allocated for development of Western subjects including English, which was deemed as the language of instruction by the colonisers. The underlying motive was to create ‘a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and opinion, in morals and intellects’” (Macaulay 1835, 2004, 313)

Cooper and Dzara (2010) have argued that “most of the queer users of Facebook seek to form a sense of community and companionship through shared interests by joining groups that cater to such interests” (Cooper and Dzara 2010). Queer Campus becomes one such space for socialising and forging connections. However, the functioning of the group is dependent on silencing voices of individuals like Ashish while Joshua and Rishabh’s class entitlement make them the dominant voice of such groups. P. McIntosh in her seminal essay, ‘White Privilege and Male Privilege (1988), argues that “white people are impervious to recognise their class privilege that comes with being white”(McIntosh 1988). This is similar in case of Joshua and Rishabh’s stance, as they both fail to recognise their class privilege that allows them accessibility and affordability in terms of class and language.

Shambhav who is also member of Queer Campus finds it hypocritical that administrators of such groups instead of laying ground work for open conversations around class, caste, sexuality etc, end up acting as gate keepers and morally police the content that gets posted on such forums. He writes:

“Everyone has this, ‘holier than thou’ attitude. Our tabooed sexuality brought us together on such forums but nobody wants to talk about it and instead engage in mundane and banal conversations. I agree that posts need to put up in a language understood and accessed by all, but Facebook does provide translation, if the post is in a language other than English, than what’s the point of targeting vernacular language speaking members. ”

(Interview with Shambhav on 20 November 2014)

This becomes an important insight because for many of these participants Queer Campus is the only space where they can articulate their erotic and sexual desires/fantasies that they are compelled to hide from their families, colleagues, peers, and their social surroundings. These online forums, chatrooms etc despite its public setting allows a sense of privacy outside the domestic space of the family. Unlike narratives circulating across cyberspace, these spaces allow for direct communication where intimacy plays a crucial role.

Hence, forums such as Queer Campus aids in search for potential friends and sexual partners, via online to offline spaces. Mowlabocus (2010a) points out that “there are no clear lines between the online and offline and they seep into each other seamlessly” (Mowlabocus 2010). One key moment that arises from lurking on these sites that I witnessed was a constant

negotiation that members have to go through in terms of dealing with internal homophobia and this constant sense of guilt and shame. Interestingly, the forum becomes a space for seeking advice on mental health issues as it serves as a platform for peer support as well. This can be analysed also through posts made by men who succumb to societal pressure and marry people of opposite sex. The thread below has detailed conversations regarding the inability to come out and live a life that is directed by societal norms. One of the users posted:

“I can’t take it anymore. I gave in all the time, killed my desire, married according to my parents whim. But I have these urges to be with a man. I cheat often on my wife, and then get consumed by this overwhelming sense of guilt. I try to love myself but hate my sexuality.”

(20 December 2017)

Looking at the above Facebook post, one can understand how important these forums become as spaces of discussions, building of kinship and providing a sense of solidarity between queer individuals across the country whose only means of communicating is through cyberspace. The fight against Section 377 is constantly based on the idea of right to love and privacy¹⁹⁰. But, right to love is constructed within the private domain and is only accessible to privileged few, and hence remains a class issue. The very fact that Queer Campus’s online activity is much higher than the offline meetings is indicative of both of the failure to address certain class issues as well as constant attacks by hackers which forced the original administrators to delete the group. It currently has under 1000 members as compared to 5000 when it was started in 2010. Queer Campus laid out an important ground for disparate voices to debate and challenge various issues within the queer community. In the next section I would continue to explore the various tensions and inequalities within these digital queer spaces especially queer dating apps and how representations of class, caste, gender and sexuality operate within such spaces.

¹⁹⁰ On 24 August 2017, in a landmark unanimous ruling, India’s Supreme Court asserted that right to individual’s privacy remains an “intrinsic” and fundamental right under the country’s constitution. The ruling in-turn brings a glimmer of hope in India’s LGBT community, which uses privacy as one of the arguments in the hope of decriminalising same-sex relationships between consenting adults.

5.2(a) Dating Sites and Apps as a Methodological Tool

With the coming of World Wide Web and further development of applications based on global positioning system (GPS) within smartphones, the field of online dating expanded. Early prototypes of dating sites and applications such as www.mingle2.com, www.pinksofa.com, www.gaydar.com were developed to make dating easier for members from the queer community. Accessing these apps however remained a herculean task due to requirement of smart-mobile phones along with internet connectivity, a luxury afforded by few in early 2010s.

Queer dating apps in India made its mark in 2010, with apps such as Grindr and Planet Romeo catering to the gay men; and websites such as okcupid.com and pinksofa.com catering to the female clientele. Post the decriminalisation of Section 377 by Delhi High Court in 2009, more users logged into these sites for hook ups and friendships etc, as for most of the members, the judgment granted them legitimacy; a queer citizenship of sorts. A new realm of possibilities opened up for the members as they were being able to remotely and anonymously search through one's area looking for prospective matches. The dating app allowed the users to browse through profiles of prospective matches, scan through available pictures, and the option to chat with those who found you equally attractive. All this became possible with a touch of the button from the comfort of one's own home.

For my research, I rely heavily on Anya Evans seminal work *Tinder as a Methodological Tool (2017)* as my method for queer online ethnographic research. This work emphasises the need to realise the untapped potential of dating apps as a tool for collecting data. Evans notes, "while there has been considerable discussion on how one uses social media within anthropological circles, little attention have been paid to Tinder and other dating apps as a tool, whether personal or professionally" (Evans 2017).¹⁹¹ Tinder and similar GPS (global positioning system) based apps are mostly appearance-based apps which allow the users to present themselves to the world and this kind of research aids the researcher to remotely

¹⁹¹ Evans, Anya (2017) *Tinder as a Methodological Tool*, published on 11/21/2017 <http://allegralaboratory.net/tinder-as-a-methodological-tool/> Accessed on 12/30/2017.

contact specific users. However, such open access in a seemingly romantic or sexual context raises key ethical and methodological questions. How does one harness popular social media dating platforms for research purposes? How does a researcher draw the line between using them personally (for pleasure based romantic or sexual purposes) and professionally? What are the ethical ramifications of using dating apps as research tools?

Apps such as Tinder, Grindr, OkCupid, Pink Sofa also became an alternative platform for the queer individuals to connect with each other. Tinder and Grindr functions similarly by accessing user's geographical location via GPS positioning and showing various users on the basis of age, gender, and distance preferences. However, Tinder is more stringent with its interface and database as it only allows users to be approached when both the parties have chosen each other or 'swiped right'. Unlike Grindr, which is hailed as a 'gay hook up' application in India, Tinder has been developed as primarily a dating app for both heterosexual and queer counterparts. Upon browsing, one does find a lot of queer men and women as users, hoping to meet prospective matches. In this section, I attempt to dwell into the problems and possibilities of conducting a queer ethnographic study of the queer men and women who are accessing these sites or mobile apps in an attempt to understand the subculture within queer communities in a country like India where Section 377 was a daily reality for many till its decriminalisation on September 2018.

The research attempts to understand everyday negotiations of the members of queer community in a largely heteronormative and homophobic country like India, where members who are non-normative on the basis of their sexuality are ostracised and forced to remain 'in the closet'. At the outset I would like to highlight and acknowledge that being able to navigate through public spaces as well as online dating spaces come as a privilege available to few. My privileged position as an urban, upper caste, middle-class English-speaking queer woman is denied to many other (potential) users of these apps. In a city like Delhi, studying the usage of the app becomes even more important due to the migrant status of most of the inhabitants.

Ever since smartphones have become ubiquitous than personal computers in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata etc. it has brought with itself a promise of independent

and private internet usage.¹⁹² This has led to a growth of interpersonal (and private) communication between users, which includes romantic as well as sexual liaisons on various popular messaging apps such as Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, Hike, Viber etc. which are known to provide instant messaging features for individual on contact list. However, apps such as Tinder, Grindr, Planet Romeo opens the possibilities of communication through smartphone based dating applications between strangers with an explicitly romantic and/or sexual interest.

Being an insider to a vibrant yet secretive queer community in Delhi gave me access to quite a few offline spaces which were part of my research but online spaces were a different battlefield altogether. I created profiles on various queer dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, OkCupid, Pink Sofa, Planet Romeo etc. with pictures of me in various locations with neutral background. I included my age, gender, sexual orientation and institutional affiliation as my details in the short bio note that is required as part of opening an account on these sites/apps. Among all the apps, Tinder was the only app that works only when linked with your Facebook profile and selects your information and display photograph accordingly. Most of my profiles include a short introductory bio note in English explaining my interest and reasons for being on these apps (I also mention that I am a lesbian-feminist who is conducting a research on understanding queer dating apps). Applications like Tinder gives the users the option for choosing age limit for prospective matches (anything between 18-55 years) and distance of these matches within a radius of 150 kilometres.

While Tinder caters to both men and women as well as members from the trans* community, it is marketed as a popular heterosexual dating app in India, which did throw in some roadblocks for my research. Tinder's user interface is built in such a way that it gives you the illusion of choice i.e. to choose between men and women which doesn't necessarily equate to finding queer men and women as matches, so it works on the equation of 'trial and error'. One has to swipe through hundreds of profiles before coming across selected few, out of

¹⁹² Statistics shows the number of smartphone users in India from 2015 to 2022. For 2017, the number of smartphone users in India is estimated to reach 299.24 million, with the number of smartphone users worldwide forecast to exceed 2.3 billion users by that time. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/467163/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-india/> Accessed on 15/10/2017.

which most of the profiles are fake¹⁹³, and even if I find handful women swiping right on my profile, most of them are heterosexual, and end up not fitting my criteria.

Another limitation while conducting my research was that most of my subjects on various dating apps are most likely in pursuit of romantic and/or sexual liaisons, and most of the conversations at times would be flirtatious, sexually forward; as most of the subjects would attempt to present a more attractive and accommodating version of themselves. Most of my prospective research subjects that I would attempt to contact via Grindr, Tinder, OkCupid would often digress from my attempt to interview them as part of my research and direct the conversations towards more informal and at times romantic gestures, such as trying to get my phone number or asking me out for dates or inviting me for hook ups.

Accessing my research subjects through online dating apps allowed me to multitask ethnographically and travel to meet matches who suited my criteria. But, despite maintaining honest relations with my subjects or matches from across Grindr, OkCupid as well as Tinder, there remained at times this internal conflict as well as guilt, despite using data with their informed consent, as if their narratives or experiences were somehow not legitimate anthropological knowledge. Evans (2017) further interrogates:

“Ethically, we must wonder if it is acceptable to meet potential research subjects in a dating and romantic context when you might have no intention of becoming involved with them romantically, or alternatively, is it ethically acceptable to meet potential research subjects in a dating and romantic context when you have the intention of becoming involved with them romantically?” (Evans 2017).¹⁹⁴

As a researcher, I did state my intentions at the onset of each conversation but this didn't help from people's feelings being hurt, or at times worse. While in a conversation with an OkCupid, Tinder or Grindr match, I informed my matches about my research, and that I am not accessing these sites for dating or other purposes. While, at times there were outright rejection and conversations ended abruptly, there were instances when I ended up having

¹⁹³ My account on Tinder is set in a way that it only chooses the option of women (as I gathered enough gay men and trans* persons as subjects from sites such as Grindr and OkCupid). So, when I said fake profile, it primarily comprises of accounts of men pretending as women by sharing fake pictures and information, and upon swiping right, may reveal their true identity upon chatting or even worse when you do meet them in real life setting, something akin to catfishing.

¹⁹⁴ Evans, Anya (2017) *Tinder as a Methodological Tool*, Published on 11/21/2017
<http://allegralaboratory.net/tinder-as-a-methodological-tool/>
Accessed on 12/30/2017.

long conversations and further meeting interesting subjects who fit my criteria. Also, prior to meeting anyone I put my subjects through a thorough background check as part of basic screening to make sure they are reliable, before meeting them. I would send my location details to a close friend as well as my subject's picture (to enable them to track my location), make sure I have an elaborate conversation on Facebook messenger or any other social networking app before I divulged my real phone number or Facebook profile. I Googled their name, at times deciding the venue of the meeting depending on the comfort, to ensure that in case of a hostile situation, I can leave the place easily.

The adoption of GPS location based social networking apps has a significant impact in how one conducts ethnographic research. However, while conducting this research, safety was a key agenda for me as an ethnographer as well as that of my subject's. The contentious nature of the internet and the possibility of catfishing¹⁹⁵ remained one of the key concerns, as well as safely building relationships without arousing suspicion and accidentally outing¹⁹⁶ someone by revealing the identity of my subjects has been extremely difficult. As Wilson and Kulick discuss with regard to female researchers being solicited by potential interlocutors:

“This kind of encounter takes on a special urgency, because the impulse to respond to them as one might at home can conflict with the anthropologically distilled awareness that one is dealing with culturally grounded interactional forms that one may not fully understand, and therefore any reaction might be interpreted as socially destructive over reaction”(Kulick and Wilson 1995, 7)¹⁹⁷.

This has in turn affected the way ethnographers also conduct fieldwork, as it is easier to connect to prospective subject but becomes difficult to separate ourselves from our friends, companions, and family members when we are researching in places other than our hometown. While I created a profile on each of these applications including Grindr (which is primarily a gay men dating app) to find prospective subjects for my research, I was constantly subjected to cyber bullying as well as harassment where queer men and at times men who

¹⁹⁵ A catfish is someone who pretends to be someone they're not using Facebook or other social media to create false identities, in order to pursue deceptive online romances. This is a common phenomenon on online dating apps, and now are counted as a cybercrime.

¹⁹⁶ Outing is an act of disclosing gender identity or sexual orientation of a person who may or may not recognise themselves as part of the queer community. Outing raises issues regarding privacy, choice etc. especially in a country like India where Section 377 exists, as individuals can be ostracised from their family and workplace on suspicion of being gay or lesbian.

¹⁹⁷ Evans, Anya (2017) Tinder as a Methodological Tool, published on published on August 30, 2017

<https://allegralaboratory.net/follow-up-tinder-as-a-research-method/>
Accessed 12/30/2017.

identify as MSM (men having sex with men) subjected me to unsolicited pictures of their genitals even before sending in courtesy greetings¹⁹⁸.

Certainly, I was aware of such conditions as well as risks before I embarked on this research. There were times when queer men who fulfilled my research criteria exposed me to bodily threats and harassment that led to abrupt halts during interviews. While in online spaces conversations can easily be halted or a subject can be blocked if he/she misbehaves; the same doesn't go for face-to-face interviews where one can potentially be subjected to bodily harm, extortion, bullying etc. While success is often measured by "ethnographers ability to get people to 'open up'" (Kulick and Wilson 1995); one has to traditionally learn to "objectify sexed and romantic lives or others" (Malinowski 1929; Mead 1935). However, there is value in "exploring our own romantic and sexual practices especially as they change and alter to life in the field" (Evans 2017).

Desire remains to be a "powerful aspect to be contended with by which an ethnographer when it comes to sexual identity-based research explores one's position as a transitioning, transgressive, gendered, sexed, cultured self" (Evans 2017). As Dubisch points out, there is a "disciplinary disdain for personal narratives" (Dubisch 1995, 3). This is especially true, when it comes to "women's experiences, which are often termed as 'inappropriate', indicating at times 'lack of professionalism', or 'abusive' of the unavoidable power relations experience between ethnographer and their subjects"(Manderson 1997) .

Through my use of these queer dating apps, I was able to gain some insights into various gendered, sexual and transgressive practices of a highly discriminated community, as they try to navigate the tricky terrains of online dating scenario and through the method of 'lurking' as well as various conversations with prospective subjects. The next section would highlight issues of representation as well as politics one witnesses as one browses through queer dating sites and apps designed for men such as Planet Romeo and Grindr.

¹⁹⁸For why men including Men who have sex with Men send unsolicited pictures of their genitals; See Why Men Send Pics of Their Junk in Psychology Today by David J Ley <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/women-who-stray/201602/why-men-send-pics-their-junk> Published on Feb 18, 2016, Accessed on 9/16/2019; and What makes men send dick pics? By Moya Sorner in The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/08/what-makes-men-send-dick-pics> Published on January 8, 2019, Accessed on 9/16/2019.

5.2(b) User Interface and Visual Aesthetics Operating on Queer Dating Apps

“The absence of physical body in electronic space and the anonymity this offers have a liberating effect on repressed social identity, as ‘electronic technology’ becomes ‘a tool for the design of freely chosen identities’.”

(Nourai-Simone, 2005:61-62; Emphasis added)

Two of the sites that my research participants especially queer men often used is Planet Romeo and Grindr. Both Planet Romeo (henceforth PR) and Grindr becomes an ideal entry point in gaining understanding into various politics of representation and the silencing of voices embedded within gay dating apps that are hailed as ‘safe spaces’ for expression of sexuality. I would like to understand politics of representation and self-representation mediated with the aid of new media technologies in this case dating apps like Planet Romeo and Grindr. Planet Romeo’s homepage cites, “a place for dating, sex, making and meeting friends, sharing ideas and offering mutual support” (Planet Romeo website). Currently accessed by 3.4 million males as of November 2017. Set up by Jens Schmidt in 2002, Planet Romeo was a Germany based social networking and dating mobile based application for queer men. However, owing to complicated nature and strict provisions of the German Act for the Protection of Young Persons and Minors, the venture moved to Netherlands in 2006. Planet Romeo merged with Guys4Men in 2009, which had a considerable presence across Asia (particularly India).

Similarly, Grindr released on Windows, Android and iOS based platforms in 2009 is considered to be one of the world’s largest gay social network site for men was designed for dating, friendship and sexual encounters. Working with GPS based tracking, the app allows users to view nearby users of similar tastes and liking and provides user options of chatting and sharing pictures. It is a free application, however upgrades comes with paid subscription which users can avail by paying upgradation fee annually. The upgraded version allow users to apply filters to chat and hook up with users of their liking creating an ‘illusion of choice’. Grindr currently is available in over “200 countries and used by 5-6 million users monthly and 2.4 million users daily from India itself” (Dasgupta 2017).

“Well-hung stud, top, masculine, wanted for a night of passion. Call 98XXXX967.”

(Profile on Planet Romeo on 27 November 2017)

The above description is taken by profile descriptions of gay users on websites like Planet Romeo. While most of the profile descriptions on both Grindr and Planet Romeo are sexually explicit, they usually are accompanied by images of male genitals usually of the user. One might mistake these websites with that of pornographic websites or apps due to its attention to sexually explicit details and imagery, but these are the usual visual aesthetics embedded within a gay dating website which usually might be censored on a social networking website like Facebook due to excessive nudity and graphic contents. Online spaces like these enable queer subjects to engage with various discourses and taboos associated with sex which would be frowned upon or denied in offline spaces.

This section explores the various discourses constituted by various queer and non-normative organisations and collectives to connect within the community members. These websites include dating sites like www.planetromeo.com, www.pinksofa.com, www.gaydar.com along with Facebook pages like Queer Campus etc. The attempt would be to describe how online queer spaces function as sites where performance of gender and sexuality happen on a daily basis and it also becomes a “so-called” safe space to voice dissent.

These sites comprise of images of gay, bisexual and trans* men which features explicit photographs of gay men who are semi-naked or nude and at times flashing their privates (which goes for the profile of gay men on the website). The focus of research into queer groups and internet focuses on the way the medium enables the community to transcend the homophobia and heterosexism of mainstream Indian culture and practice queer sexuality in a safe way. These websites have a unique appeal for queer men and women unlike other disfranchised or marginalised groups. Gay men from the community continue to engage in the practice of urban gay (male) cruising¹⁹⁹ as well as meeting at traditional venues such as night clubs, gay bars, various gay cultural events along with saunas that illicitly serve as bath houses for gay men and MSM. These spaces remain to be one of the popular sites for soliciting sex and romantic partnership.

¹⁹⁹ Cruising for sex, or cruising, is “waiting or driving about a locality in search of a sex partner, usually of the anonymous, casual usually one-time affair. The term now corresponds to use of technology to find casual sex using internet sites, mobile applications or telephone service. Cruising in public spaces remains of critical significance in gay men’s and MSM lives. It not only utilises the spatial as well as temporal domain but also creates a subculture within the neo-liberal India”.

With the increase of technological advancement within public domain, the riskiness and adventurous nature of cruising no longer holds the thrill for most of the respondents, as most of them are wired into the world of cyberspace and connecting to a much larger global audience. This has led to shrinking of public spaces, from physicality to technicality. One has now adapted themselves to access technological slangs, abbreviations and emojis. Words like top, bottom, ASL (age, sex, location), kinky, WP (with place) are used with the same motives while one explores the cyberspace for sexual desires. Especially during the brief decriminalisation of Section 377 post 2009, cyberspace became a popular venue for gay men for networking. In this section, I emphasise on aspects of gay and lesbian dating websites like Planet Romeo, Gaydar, and Pink Sofa etc. and performance of sexuality by its users/subscribers, as well as the visual aesthetics of these websites.

Most of the queer, specifically gay dating websites feature some clips of sexual scenes or trailers which is accessible freely to users who are using the 'free service' but one has to upgrade their membership to premium membership, if one wants to watch or access full videos. Most of the dating websites for availing advance membership ask for,

“Membership type or payment type or other kind of personal information such as First/Last name, zip/postal code, country, email id, membership type (basic, advance, premier etc, which also include trial period of 3 days or more), and payment type (credit card, debit card, check etc)”(Şat 2009, 18).²⁰⁰

The discourse of sex operating on these websites is initially marked through the text and images on the sites home page. The sites home page becomes a window for unadulterated desire and sex and comes with a disclaimer to keep underage users at bay, *‘The site contains sexual content and graphic nudity. You must be 18 years or above to enter’*” (Şat 2009, 18) The home page also offers users “promises of friendship, intimate encounters to casual sex” (Şat 2009, 18). These websites features images of men and women suggesting exhibitory display of highly sexualised images which remains the leitmotif of this commodified erotic spectacle²⁰¹. The website comprises of images and at times avatar of semi-naked men and

²⁰⁰ For more information visit websites like www.brazzers.com, www.pinksofa.com, www.gaydar.com etc.

²⁰¹ These websites would seem to break the idea of controlling male gaze, which is discussed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. The users/subscribers of the queer dating websites comprise of both men and women, where both the genders are commodified for display for same-sex as well as opposite sex.

women doing strip-tease²⁰² and pin-ups²⁰³ to entice the users into a world of possibilities and imagination. The websites rarely contains photos of individuals (except websites like Planet Romeo which usually have extremely muscular models usually doing erotic poses on the home page of the website), except while viewing personalised profiles of the users and subscribers of the websites.

Prateeq (25) is a fashion designer based in Amsterdam. I met him in 2012, and developed an interesting friendship with him. At that time, he was pursuing fashion designing from a reputed private institute in Delhi and was living with his parents. He is ‘selectively out’ to his friends and colleagues but is yet to come out to his family. He spoke at length about navigating the tricky terrain of online gay dating apps such as Grindr and Planet Romeo to meet other queer men in New Delhi at that point of time. He emphasised about the first impression that apps such as Grindr, Gaydar and Planet Romeo leave on the first-time users. As a regular user of gay websites www.gaydar.com and www.planetromeo.com, Prateeq noticed:

“*Gaydar* and *Planet Romeo* [...] have a new picture on their home page every day, one of the pictures on their homepage is six guys in the same shot, you know, holding, caressing, kissing each other or whatever. It is hardly ever one guy it’s usually two or more guys, like holding each other or being intimate (refer to fig 5.1). So, I think it promotes that [...] look we’ve got six hunky men with no tops on and that in one shot, looking for a gang bang, you know. Use your imagination.”

(Interview with Prateeq on 15th July 2017, New Delhi)

Vikki Fraser (2009) sees this user interface on dating apps as an invitation into a world full of possibilities, she adds “Users are invited, through texts and images on the home page to participate in the types of interaction represented” (Fraser 2009, 60). The options comprise of individual chat rooms, group chats, private messages etc. and indicate the upfront overtly sexualised nature of conversation which is legitimised within the space and invite users to participate in sexualised behaviour online. An important feature of each of these images is the

²⁰² A striptease is “an erotic or exotic dance in which the performer gradually undresses, either partly or completely, in a seductive and sexually suggestive manner. The person who performs a striptease is commonly known as a “stripper” or exotic dancer”. For more see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Striptease>

²⁰³ A pin-up girl, also known as a “pin-up model, is a model whose mass-produced pictures see wide appeal as popular culture. Pin-ups are intended for informal display, e.g. meant to be “pinned-up” on a wall. Pin-up girls may be glamour models, fashion models, or actresses. Famous pin-up girls include Betty Page, Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable, Dita Von Tease and many more”. For more see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pin-up_girl

breaking of fourth wall²⁰⁴ by maintaining an eye contact between the models who exhibit themselves on the site and the site users. Eye contact ‘initiates invitation to further participation’ (Fraser 2009, 60).

Vikki Fraser’s analysis of an image on the popular male website *Gaydar.com* (and various other gay dating websites, and applications) is particularly useful to understand aesthetics as well as politics of queer representation on these websites. She writes,

“Usually one of the two men would be standing in an embrace. Sometimes one man stands with his back to the user, or would be engaged in an intimate bonding. The user’s presence has interrupted this act and the figure making eye contact acknowledges user’s presence. Though the embrace is noteworthy, the image is somewhat voyeuristic (and at times scopophilic). The body language of the models posing in the embrace appears to be inviting the user to enter the world of desire and multiple possibilities. The multiple images of bodies hovering on such sites offers the users’ proximity, welcoming them into further interaction”(Fraser 2009, 60-61).

Prateeq also emphasised on the fact that why he preferred an app like Grindr over Planet Romeo. For him, Grindr is the answer for instantaneous hook-ups with men who were available in close proximity. He recollects instances where he had been in public spaces such as Shopping Malls or Airport and just logged on to Grindr to get dates or hook ups. Also, he reminiscence about days when Grindr was not accessible for anyone and only people with ‘class’ would have a profile on it. He elaborates:

“There would be days when I would wander into shopping malls out of boredom and turn on Grindr before I know it, my inbox would be filled with messages from men looking for discreet fun in washrooms. It truly was wham bham, thank you ma’am. Now, I am filled with disgust to see the class of people who have downloaded and accessed Grindr. The standards have really gone down.”

(Interview with Prateeq on 19th August 2017)

Prateeq demonstrates the privileged nature of such interactions on applications such as Grindr, which remains a smartphone application that can be accessed only on Android and iOS platforms and “caters to a particular ‘classed’ and ‘privileged’ community” (Dasgupta

²⁰⁴ The idea of fourth wall is a popular theatre and performance convention, where an invisible wall separates performers/actors from the audience. There are instances where actors break out of their character and directly engage with the audiences, hence breaking the illusion of them being looked at and becoming active participants.

2017). Several queer scholars across India have reflected upon the failure of queer movement to present a united front,

“Queer politics in India remains fragmented and at times elite, despite attempting to present a united front on days of Pride parades on grounds of class, caste, gender and sexuality, but these factors hardly substantiate to reality especially when it comes to daily interaction between the members of the queer community”(Narain and Bhan 2005).

For men like Prateeq, class still matters, and while an application like Grindr do not have such screening measures which makes him use terms such as presence of ‘riff-raff.’ Discrimination on the basis of class, caste, gender, sexual identities and roles remain an everyday reality for queer men who seek romantic relations, intimacy or even casual hook ups while using application like Grindr and Planet Romeo. While Grindr users are able to conceal identities such as class, caste, religion, etc, doesn’t mean that users of such apps put up disclaimers such as “only Brahmin men or no Muslim men” on their profiles promoting rampant classism, casteism, islamophobia and xenophobia that one witnesses in their quotidian lives in India.

The interface of Grindr includes a homepage that displays a number of profiles (usually up to 50 for free users and up to 200 for premium upgrades) within user’s vicinity, with +/- 20 feet accuracy. The interaction remain private between two users by clicking on available profiles of users who are online (at that time) or offline as well. Unlike Planet Romeo which has chat room and forums, users on Grindr cannot engage in public conversations, so all interactions remain private. Following is an example which is typical of what transpires on a private chat. Prateeq* gave me permission to use the chat he had, on the condition of keeping the identity of the other person anonymous:

Prateeq* : Hey
Hot Jatt 9’’ inches: Hi
Prateeq* : Looking for?
Hot Jatt 9’’ inches: Send pics
Prateeq*: Sent
Prateeq*: Looking for?
Hot Jatt 9’’ inches: Hot, discreet fun. Do you have a place thn w cnhv full nght [hot, discreet fun, do you have place then we can full night]
Prateeq*: I live with my parents
Hot Jatt 9’’ inches: Oh, sorry, I hv no place [oh, sorry, I have no place]
Prateeq* : Too bad, bye.

(Grindr chat as on 15 October 2017)

Most of the conversations begin with greetings such as Hello/Hi/Hey and then move straight to the point about photos, sexual roles (top, bottom, versatile), the kind of activity they seek (dates, conversations, hook ups) and most importantly whether one has a place to host.

Prateeq adds,

“The biggest constraint to my sex life is lack of personal space (as I live with parents), most of my potential sex date conversations ends abruptly when the other person finds out that they or I don’t have a place.”

(Interview with Prateeq on 15 October 2017)

Shiv (35), who works as a language interpreter in Alliance Française, Mumbai, stressed upon the same point,

“The idea of having a place is a privilege, because privacy remains a privilege afforded by some, so, if you own a room of one’s own, one can afford to have fun. If one doesn’t have a place, there’s no point carrying on the conversation. Everything depends on when my parents plan to leave the house to myself. Only when I make sure I have a place to myself I would invite someone.”

(Interview with Shiv on 18 November 2017)

The cyberspace becomes at times an active site of Cartesian duality where the “disembodied self holds a virtual avatar to support itself” (Dasgupta 2017). Despite the “supposed disembodied nature of ‘chatting’ the user’s body is constantly brought up during conversations that are intimate in nature” (Mowlabocus 2010). The body’s virtual imagery is created through display photographs along with use of textual descriptions followed by exchange of photographs of intimate nature. Following conversation on Shiv’s Grindr profile becomes an example of the same:

Visitor: Hey, new in town. Are you up for a date?

Shiv: Sure, where are you based?

Visitor: Staying in a hotel near Kasba

Shiv: Cool

Visitor: Body stats, dick size?

Shiv: 32 waist, 36 chest, 85 kg weight, height 6ft

Visitor: Hot. Sounds doable. Send nudes (send nude pics)

(Interview with Shiv* on 26 July 2017)

Subjects like Prateeq and Shiv and many others accessing these sites or apps are sexually objectified, measured, rated and filtered on the basis of their physical characteristics through their profile and statistics that is described within their profile descriptions. The fear of ostracization due to recognition of family and peers drive a lot of queer men on Grindr to not put up their display picture and just have their disembodied naked torso on display. Mowlabocus (2010b) argues that “these images operate as a culturally important resource that offers a specific for identity formation and what it means to be a gay man in contemporary culture (body types, looks etc)” (Mowlabocus 2010).

Grindr and Planet Romeo for most of its users offer an ‘illusion of intimacy’ for earlier criminalised identities by addressing ‘queer sexual and romantic desires’ something that could not be exhibited in public. The illusion of safety and anonymity that cyberspace presents allows men like Prateeq and Shiv to negotiate intimate details of their lives with complete strangers. This kind of navigating and negotiating intimacy is different when these men would be cruising in physical spaces that are fraught with possibilities of confrontation and physical/verbal harassment.²⁰⁵

With coming of apps like Grindr and OkCupid demarcations between virtual and physical intimacy have blurred. While applications such as Grindr and Planet Romeo are primarily seen as hook up apps, the user interface and algorithm works in tandem to mediate and create a sense of intimacy further aiding possibilities of romantic and sexual interactions. Sometimes one of the parties, to verify whether the person they are chatting with are genuine or not, may initiate chat or video sessions via Facebook Messenger, Skype etc. This in turn can lead to “online intimate video sessions which at times one’s affective presence and transform a technologically mediated space into a zone of virtual intimacy” (Dasgupta 2017, 48). The immersive attributes of the user interface as seen in Planet Romeo and Grindr offers users such as Prateeq and Shiv, “a sense of closeness to other users both geographically and on an intimate level” (Dasgupta 2017, 48).

²⁰⁵ Apart from this, there are many cybercrimes that go unnoticed where gay and bisexual men have committed suicide, or have to lose their job, or land up in divorce, or have been disowned by the family. The National Crime Record Bureau also authenticates the cases of gay bashing under the figures of ‘other motives’. The data doesn’t specifically point to Section 377 anywhere, except in Juvenile crimes.

Z. Patterson in his article *Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in Digital Era (2004)* describes “the experience of viewing pornography similar to browsing through various profiles on sexually explicit gay dating websites”. He writes,

“This (experience) suggests not only that the habits of looking at Internet (for pornography and dating websites) are as constitutive of the viewing experience as the images themselves but, likewise, that these habits of looking insistently participate in inscribing power relations directly on to the body of the subject through gestures and repetition” (Patterson 2004, 104).

Images such as these work in the “rhetoric of socialisation in important ways”(Fraser 2009, 61). The inviting nature of the imagery allows users to freely interact and socialise with possible romantic and sexual partners without the fear of physical violence, extortion and harassment that practices like cruising holds. However, images such as the one on the dating apps work in tandem to demonstrate the “ways in which a discourse of sex is used to control the legitimacy of queer bodies online”(Fraser 2009, 61).

E. Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* adds,

“A subset of cyberporn industry is devoted to the categorisation and classification of these images and Websites, these sites present categories of images laid out in tables or allowing so-called key term searches. The ‘click here if you’re gay!’ button, like the ‘s/m’ button indicates a technology of desire both productive and regulatory” (Grosz 1994, 80).

A willingness to participate in various sexualised behaviour becomes one of the markers of legitimised queer behaviour and subjectivity in online space. However, such markers at times actively work to exclude subjects whose participation is marked aberrant and not confining to the norms operating on such dating sites. According to Vikki Fraser, “such enforcement of sexualised queer subjectivity through language works to legitimise understanding of queer as sexual and mark as abhorrent queer subjectivities that are not willing to participate in sexualised behaviour” (Fraser 2009, 61). Users who identify themselves asexual or gender-nonconformist trans*men and women are shunned for not conforming to so-called gender and sexual conformities within the queer circuits, sometimes set by upper class gay men who frequent such sites. According to an asexual queer interview participant Shambhav:

“All the users want to do is talk about sex or just want to have sex, there’s lack of meaningful interaction. Asexuality is a taboo and people will refuse to accept your friend request or have a conversation which is devoid of sex. Sites like *Gaydar* and *Planet Romeo* actively foreclose the possibility of interaction outside of sex. Further the site’s silent representation of self that are not sexual through the lack of non-sexualised language”

(Interview with Shambhav on 17 December 2017)

As a result, subjects like Shambhav are intrinsically represented as “markers of queer subjectivity necessary to recognise them as queer, destabilising and removing them from such spaces” (Fraser 2009, 61). However, while sites like Grindr and Planet Romeo unknowingly remove users like Shambhav from the site as much as they are removed from offline queer space, it is still interesting to observe how these users besides transgressing the norms are actively engaging and trying to reclaim the site. By reporting and ‘coming out’ as asexual, Shambhav was able to disrupt dominant understanding of asexuality and particularly the legitimisation of sexualised behaviour rampant on the site. As such, he disrupts the “closeting process of the website and creates the possibility of other understandings of sexuality and legitimacy” (Sedgwick 2008).

While dating apps such as Grindr and Planet Romeo are thriving with possibilities, the same is not true when it comes to online dating experiences for queer women. Interactions between user and site are quite the opposite for female dating and friendship websites. Websites like www.pinksofa.com that serve ‘female clientele’ usually operates on the classic and at times heteronormative ideas of love and monogamy etc (Ghosh 2016, 58). The images that circulate on the home page are that of two women in embrace (see fig.5.4), breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging with the viewers gaze. Both the women are smiling indicating the ‘possibilities of finding happiness and a possible soulmate’ (Ghosh 2014, 102). One of the pop ups²⁰⁶ on the website reads as: “*Write a good profile and get a good girlfriend.*”²⁰⁷ The members unlike on the gay (male) websites seek approval and legitimacy for their relationship or even friendship on the website. Also, Pink Sofa unlike Gaydar or

²⁰⁶ Pop-up ads or pop-ups are often form of online advertising on the World Wide Web intended to attract web traffic or capture email addresses. Pop-ups are generally new web browser windows to display advertisements

²⁰⁷http://www.pinksofa.com/members_entry.asp?uid=0.5730402&istrialonHold=0&istrialmember=0&isheld=0&isBasicandExpired=0&isPremiunAbout2Expire=0&isexpired=1&ismemnew=0&isphotoapproved=1&memexpiry=13/12/2014&age=25&membasic=False&showphotoalert=1

Accessed on 5/2/2014

Planet Romeo has strict membership codes which includes uploading decent profile photograph and frowns at nudity and profanity in user's profile description.²⁰⁸

While interacting with several queer women during the course of this research, I could sense disappointment and disillusionment when it came to matters of developing intimacy on dating apps. 25-year-old Nina who works as a hotel manager in one of the five-star restaurants in Delhi, spoke about her daily negotiations with finding dates on various sites. She said,

“Firstly, unlike men who have exclusive dating apps such as Planet Romeo or Grindr, queer women hardly have any exclusive dating app, we are still stuck dealing with dated prototypes of dating apps such as Pink Sofa, Women Only, OkCupid etc. where most of the profiles are fake.”

(Interview with Nina on 20 November 2017)

Preeti, 20-year-old psychology student in Delhi University expressed her disdain adding to Nina's experience further:

“Imagine putting all the effort to make your profile on dating apps such as Pink Sofa, OkCupid, Tinder and then being constantly flooded by messages from profiles which are actually fake and have men running them. On Tinder, I have matched with several profiles which had profile photographs of women, and the moment you start chatting up, most of the time, the other person confesses that he is a man. I have come across profiles who have told me *lesbian kuch nahi hota hai, humare pass aao hum theek kardenge* (there is nothing called a Lesbian, come to us, we will cure you). Hence, the age-old adage of what all lesbians need is a good screw to turn them straight. I have uninstalled most of the apps after being constantly catfished.”

(Interview with Preeti on 20 November 2017)

Unlike Grindr and Planet Romeo, Tinder works with the algorithm that only when both parties have swiped right (to show interest) then only one can initiate the conversation. The users have the option to choose their preference i.e. whether they are looking for men or women. But, the user interface haven't been developed enough to narrow down on only queer matches which means that even if a queer woman selects her preference to women only, it would also flood her screen with heterosexual women, and won't be able to only screen queer women matches, which then defeats the whole point of finding matches.

²⁰⁸ Most of the profile pictures and description on gaydar.com and planetromeo.com thrives on graphic nudity, not only on the homepage but also encourages users to upload hot and eye catchy photographs. PinkSofa like Facebook, put the profile for 24-hour inspection or takes down user's profile and issues a warning to the user, against the use of sexual or mature content.



Image 5.1: One of the images on the popular gay social networking website www.gaydar.com. An image like the above is widely used to open possibilities from one-on-one intimate encounters to gang-bang.



Image 5.2: Screenshot from the famous gay dating and social networking website www.planetromeo.com, with one of its template depicting solo photograph of a white model on its homepage, seen from India.



Image 5.3: Gay men posing for their profile pictures for the gay dating application Grindr.

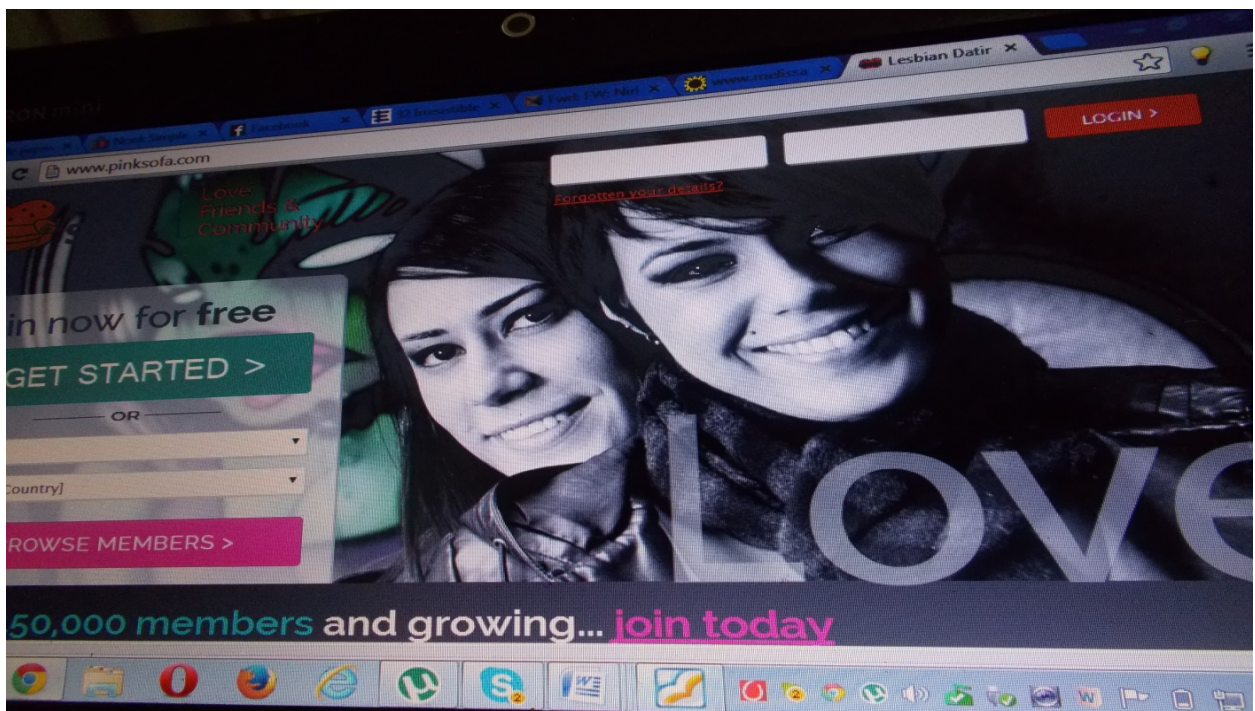


Image 5.4: Screenshot of the image that appears on www.pinksofa.com, suggests love and conjugality, and not in overt sexual imagery, as visible on most gay dating websites.

5.3(a) Queer Performativity and Representation of Bodies through Language

Sex discourses on queer dating websites and applications such as Planet Romeo, Grindr and Pink Sofa at times works to legitimate class, caste, race, gender, ethnicity in ways that create “fetishes and remove queer subjectivity in dominant placement within the space” (Fraser 2009, 61). Most of the images circulating on queer dating websites clearly marks the globalised referents and comprise of images of famous ‘white’ models as well as Bollywood and Hollywood actors whose photographs are put up as profile pictures on these sites to conceal real identity of the users. Sometimes, users just put photographs of their naked upper torso which creates the body as anonymous and abject.²⁰⁹ This is also done to titillate the other users on such sites to visit profiles of other such members, descriptions of the profile comprises of:

“23 year old Male, gay, effeminate, bottom looking for lovers, partners, hook ups for one night stands, friendship, relationship etc; ideal date should be romantic candle light dinner followed by wild passionate lovemaking. I would love to go out with a saphiosexual gay man, who makes me cum with his words alone.”

(Profile description on Grindr)

*28 year old Harayanvi Jat boy, buffy, hairy, top, looking for boys for fu**.*

(Profile description on Grindr)

Most of the participants/users on these apps belong to the middle-class and lower middle class strata of society. The profile bio note of the app users might comprise of sexual jokes to favourite songs, simultaneously also brimming with racism, sexism, regionalism and sometimes extreme misogyny (in apps like Grindr, there are scarcely any cis gendered women, and only handful of trans* persons). However, there is an interesting point to notice here: how a certain kind of language “normativises” the accessibility of this space, and hence how identity is performed through certain kind of bias towards it can be easily seen.

²⁰⁹ The phenomenon of hypersexualization and under sexualisation is most common while viewing profiles of gay men on various dating websites. While African men are shown as hypersexualised, as Frantz Fanon added in his classic work, ‘Black Skins, White Masks’ (1952), “Black man is viewed as a penis symbol, actually he is the penis.”; this statement further propagates the racism and stereotypes operating within such dating websites. Orientalist notions about Asian men shows the under sexualisation of their bodies, due to the inherent asceticism provided to their nature, are usually seen as passive sexual partners on most of these websites. For more see Fung, Richard, Looking for my Penis (1991) in Bad Object-Choices (Eds). How do I Look? Queer Film and Video, pp 145-168. Seattle Bay Press.

Following is an example of a chat from the website Planet Romeo,

[ABC]- Ok so I died laughing after reading this message from some random guy on PR

From: [ABCDEFGF]

When: 26 June 2014-18:03

Hi dear,

I m here

and u r there

but don't care

far or near,

we can share

happiness and tear

come here

thoda or near

sit on chair

listen with care

I MISS U Dear.

#PRjokes...²¹⁰

A post like this is common on most of the profiles on Planet Romeo and is constantly criticised for lack of use of British English or any deviance for the matter. The language obsession has reached a level where the term ‘grammar Nazi²¹¹’ is widely used on this forum now, and even during serious discussions, people come in with ‘spell checks’. According to Ankush Gupta,

“An etymological reference is a clear example of how language plays an important role in the premise of interaction on Planet Romeo or Grindr. In order to interact on this forum, thus, it is not ‘just your sexual identity’, but also your linguistic capacity- as a signifier of one’s status (as this becomes a mean to claim one’s superiority over the other in a virtual space) plays an important role. Language here becomes a performance of class” (Gupta 2012).

²¹⁰ Reproduced with permission of Ankush Gupta from his dissertation *Pink Nights: The Queer (Male) Discotheques of Delhi and Music as the Site of Performance*. New Delhi, Delhi: Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

²¹¹ Grammar Nazi is a person who habitually corrects or criticises the language usage of others.

Interestingly, on *Planet Romeo* and similar websites, it is usually the lower class and caste queer subject that is framed in this way, abjected and objectified. The aforementioned images on *Planet Romeo* and *Grindr* mark queer lower class and caste subjects as objects to be “fetishized, desired and possessed rather than as agentic and desiring queer” (Fraser 2009, 62). The photographs and profile description on these applications work in tandem to make profiles more attractive for the users. However, it is interesting to see how there is inherent bias and various modes of discrimination within the members of the queer community on basis of language, body types etc.

Marginalisation on the basis of sexuality along with discourses of caste, class, language and ethnicity is another area in which “online and offline queer spaces overlap and intersect in the production of legitimised queer subjectivity” (Fraser 2009, 62). The most visible of the queer community members on online dating sites and apps in India remain the upper and middle class, upper-caste gay men. Offline queer spaces like that of pride parades, queer meetings, cruising areas etc are entrenched with the idea of class and caste which are often seen online. Images or even profile of lesbian women are seldom available, however, it is slowly changing, with the coming of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and various other lesbian or bisexual women targeted dating sites and apps.

Dating applications around the world, now involves a new language of communication with its own language, norms, etiquette, slangs, abbreviations, emojis which vary across different chat rooms and websites (Brown, Maycock and Burns 2005, 7). Internet-based communication on these dating websites has become a stage for ‘actors’ to act out their sexed, gendered expressions and sexual desires, while assessing each other’s visual (the profile photographs actually becomes bait for reeling prospective matches) and textual cues. Gay dating websites and apps like *Grindr* is designed in such a way that it emphasises on the looks of the user rather than profile descriptions. Hence, there’s a hedonistic display of self-profile photographs now famously known as selfies²¹², as most of the users and members indulge in taking selfies over and over again, picking out details about their eyebrows, skin,

²¹² “Selfie is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smart phone for uploading it on a social media website”. See <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/selfie>. Selfies have become a huge trend in social media and psychiatrist and mental health workers are linking them to mental health conditions related to narcissism and person’s obsession with their looks. According to psychiatrist Dr. David Veal, “Two out of three of all the patients who came to see me with Body Dysmorphic disorder, since the rise of camera phones have a compulsion to repeatedly take and post selfies on social media sites. See <http://www.collective-evolution.com/2014/04/07/scientists-link-selfies-to-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness/>

noses, smiles, teeth, chest hair etc, all in an attempt to find the perfect angle and to upload the perfect profile picture (See image 2.3). This form of “gay hedonism further became evident when two gay male vloggers Mark E. Miller and Ethan Hethcote set the Guinness book of world record for most selfies i.e. 355 selfies in one hour”.²¹³

Neel Sharma describes such hedonism displayed by users on Grindr as:

“Grindr demands supreme body confidence-row upon row of glistening torsos (some with heads attached, others cut off just above the Adam’s apple) for your perusal. Nobody on show means there’s nothing worth seeing or your subject is shy. Six-pack after six-pack dance before jaded eyes.”

(Interview with Neel Sharma on 25 November 2017)

Neel’s assertion on the hedonistic pleasure derived from uploading images of self on social media sites as well dating sites is similar to Erving Goffman’s *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Erving Goffman’s (1959) *Theory of Presentation of Self* becomes useful in understanding various roles that the users assume while facilitating interaction for political promotion along with, in online spaces. For Sannicolas, “all computer mediated communication tools used on dating apps have “become a stage for ‘actors’ to act out and communicate about sexual behaviour and attitude in sexual ways” (Sannicolas 1997, 2). As part of this communication, the users assumed various gendered, sexual, social roles and interacted with users on these websites and apps on the assumption that they fit the roles that they themselves desired. The site and app users are mostly influenced by their personal desires to navigate the site for both online as well as real-time interactions. If the members/subscribers of these apps feel safe and confident enough, they venture for offline meetings or dates for face-to-face interaction. However, no amount of online measures can ensure safety in offline spaces, as queer men and women are either subjected to threats of physical violence or harassment, or denigration due to their non-normative behaviour. The next section would reflect upon the phenomenon of Effeminophobia that has become a common phenomenon on dating websites and applications.

²¹³ For more see Gay vloggers set world record for most selfies in an hour. See <http://www.towleroad.com/2014/05/millerselfies.html>

5.3(b) Effeminophobia and Denigrating Non-Normativity

The last decade in Indian subcontinent saw global queer assimilation with the coming of neoliberalization in the 1990s. This was followed by alignment of queer subculture and politics with Western ideas of ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan 2003). However, this configures some queer men as masculine subjects replicating ideas like ‘toxic masculinity’ while completely obliterating any feminised/ non-normative gender positionalities. Duggan defines *homonormativity*’ as,

“A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2002, 50).

The idea of homonormativity gets replicated both within physical spaces of pride parades as well as on online spaces; dating websites are no exception to this. Any kind of gender transgression especially within gay male community that is not masculine is denigrated and becomes a subject of ridicule within these spaces, where certain section of gay men are categorically shunned and rejected if they identify with effeminate subject positions. This ‘effeminophobia’, as Sinfield (1994) so eloquently points out is “borne out of sense of ‘misogyny’”(Sinfield 1994, 15). Misogyny which attributes to hatred and contempt towards women also inherits within itself hatred towards the ‘idea of femininity’. Effeminophobia works with the idea of effeminacy or men displaying effeminate tendencies and moving away from the societal notion of gender roles; that attributes masculine behaviour and manliness to men and laxity and weakness to women. Richardson (2009) argues,

“homosexuality is still identified as gender transivity and effeminacy. This stereotype, stems from tradition of assuming that the gender binary (masculine/feminine) is the scaffold of sexual desire and that anyone who is attracted to man, must be by definition, feminine; while anyone who is attracted to a woman must be masculine”(Richardson 2003, 528)

Hence, these further conflate the kind of gay/queer representations across media. In this section, I would be highlighting experiences of queer men on Grindr and Planet Romeo when it comes to dealing with effeminate subject positions within online queer spaces.

As discussed in the first chapter, there has been a lot of work related to production of masculinities in postcolonial India. The indigenous population of India was seen as a threat to the Victorian and chastised British men in terms of their virility. So, the Colonisers devised ways in which the indigenous population is emasculated and effeminised and this was done through the context of Bengali Bhadrak²¹⁴ (Sinha 1995). Various stereotypes were attached to the Bengali Bhadrak including their effeminate and emasculating nature; to justify colonial rule. Hetero-patriarchal Victorian rule effaced ideas of Indian masculinities, and gave rise to hegemonic ‘toxic masculine cultures’ across India.

In terms of ‘hegemonic masculinities’, the “idea of effeminate subject position are assimilated within femininity” (Dasgupta 2017, 99). Judith Halberstam (2008) notes that, “the effeminate man is seen as traitorous to the ‘politics of virility’ as someone who betrays patriarchal fraternity existing within heteronormative men” (Halberstam 2011). This is further illustrated by Edelman (1994) who explains,

“Relationship between ‘sexual passivity and gender: ‘getting f***ed...’ connotes a willing sacrifice of the subjectivity, the disciplined self-mastery, traditionally attributed only to those who perform the active or penetrative and hence, masculine role in active passive binarism that organises our cultural perspective on sexual behaviour” (Edelman 1994, 98).

The idea of gender in India operates on various levels. On one hand there is invisibilisation of non-normative sexuality and on the other hand there’s hypersexuality of predatory nature in terms of masculinity, so concept of effeminisation of Indian male end up being in the former. This burden of emasculation and effeminisation is carried forth when it comes to interaction on cyber spaces as well. The masculine subject’s position within online gay dating apps and sites gets valorised over other gender non-conforming subjectivities. I went through various profiles on both Grindr and Planet Romeo in which the users described themselves as ‘straight acting’²¹⁵ due to the manifestation of internalised homophobia. Recent scholarship

²¹⁴ Historically, the Bengali Bhadrak class was a group of tax collectors and clerics who occupied some of the highest position in the colonial hierarchy. It is closely aligned with the Bengali renaissance, when the introduction of Western education led to the growth of a new class of intelligentsia.

²¹⁵ ‘Straight acting’ as a term refers to a “set of attributes that are commonly associated with heterosexual men, which include ‘manly’, ‘masculine’ and ‘butch’ in opposition to other gay attributes such as ‘queen’, ‘femme’, ‘camp’”. “Straight acting’ is different from being masculine; it implies a level of performance and more pragmatically it might need to be discreet-to be able to easily pass a heterosexual male”. For more read Payne, (2007) *Str8acting: Social Semiotics*. 17(4), pp. 525-538. <https://www.academia.edu/444999/ Str8acting>

from India acknowledges the growing divide between “gay-identified groups and MSM (men who have sex with men) due to public effeminacy and gender variance” (Dutta 2012). The effeminate man is either mocked or feared and is placed at the margins of an already oppressed community. To overcome the stigma of effeminacy, straight-acting as performance tactic is employed by the individuals in real life as well as on their online profiles. R. Payne (2007) indicates, “act of naming the self or the other as a ‘straight acting’ subject or object of desire” (Payne 2007, 526).

On his Grindr profile, Prateeq describes himself as

“an accomplished fashion designer who loves an ice-cold beer, is into Bollywood action films, loves tennis and at times indulges in occasional chick-flicks or tearjerker, into other str8acting men, no dad bods (dad bodies), sissies²¹⁶ and pansies²¹⁷.”

(Interview with Prateeq, 27 July 2017)

Similarly, Luking4fuk makes it clear that “he is into other straight-acting men, no trannies, gayboys or sisters”.

(Grindr Profile, accessed on 26 July 2017)

During my digital ethnographic research for this chapter on queer dating applications such as Grindr and Planet Romeo, ‘straight-acting’ was one of the most used keywords on Grindr profiles and used in profile descriptions of men who identified themselves as ‘straight-acting’ or sought ‘straight-acting men for romantic and sexual liaisons’. Descriptions like straight-acting along with sexual roles like top, bottom etc. are mentioned in dating profiles along with hegemonic masculine attributes like ‘into watching sports’, ‘drinking beers’ was common in the gay male dating profile descriptions. Straight-acting appeared as a highly valued attribute and any gender-conformity is looked down upon as one can see in various profile descriptions.

Hence, such profiles reaffirm and reinforce Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2001). As Payne (2007:526) argues,

“the difference here between simple adjective (masculine) and the grammatically complicated ‘straight-acting’ signifies a shift in ontological certainty: a difference

²¹⁶ Sissy is a derogatory term used for an effeminate boy or man, implying them of being homosexual or cowardly.

²¹⁷ A derogatory term similar to Sissy for effeminate men and homosexuals.

between self as being and as becoming. Straight acting thus becomes a way of being masculine, a substitute for what wants to become” (Payne 2007, 526).

Mowlabocus (2010a:78) explains that “the identification of homosexuality continues to be preoccupation for both the mainstream and the margin, and secondly that being seen to be gay continues to be problematic for gay people”.

Grindr screenshots like that in image 5.6 and 5.7 highlights an irrational fear of effeminacy in men. This can be viewed as misplaced ‘misogyny’. When profiles on gay dating apps highlights choices like “only straight-acting, no trans*, no femmes, no fairies”, it is internalised misogyny and homophobia within the members of the community. Thus, for many queer men accessing such sites there is dissociation from effeminate subjectivities and conforming to existing heteronormative behaviour and hence, giving space for homonormativity and in larger sense opening gates to assimilationist politics and homonationalism.

5.4 The Way Forward

Online space is lauded for the possibility of safe interaction compared to face-to-face environments where simultaneous experience of distance and intimacy is created (Hillier et al, 2001) which allows individuals safety in conveying their sexual aspirations without having to risk face-to-face rejection or harassment (though this is now deeply contested with cases of cybercrimes, identity thefts and gay men and gay dating portals are targeted by religious, moralists groups in several countries). Despite all the apparent criticism and danger inherent in cyberspace, it is seen as the facilitator that encourages upfront discussions either on public forums like Facebook or through slightly private queer dating websites like www.gaydar.com, www.planetromeo.com or www.Pinksofa.com etc, which resulted in shared expectations and possibly increasing the sense of safety or control.

But what remains one of the contentious issues is the matter of visibilisation which most of the subaltern counter-publics have to grapple with even in the virtual space. As Sandip Roy Chowdury notes in case of queer websites along with the use of Facebook by queer community to make themselves visible, ‘what some activists fear that even as it (internet) allows men to find friends, boyfriends or tricks, the Internet will put them in a giant virtual

closet.’ Chowdhury in turn raises an important issue, ‘where while attempting to create safe spaces for the queer community, are we pushing them back into the closet? Have we crossed some thin, invisible line between being supportive and being overprotective which becomes detrimental to any kind of visibility at all?’ (Gupta 2005:139, emphasis mine).

Hence, though the premise remains that growing proportion of political communication is changing its base to virtual space, and the political occupation of online spaces are happening in terms of not only building solidarities for common causes but also for finding love and building intimacy through kinship. The next chapter seeks to explore various representational politics at play within the neoliberal capitalist mainstream media while broadcasting the ‘cosmopolitan queer consumer/subject’, all the while claiming sexual citizenship for these queer subjects by taking into account product-based advertisements released since the 1990s.

The attempt would be to highlight upon assimilationist politics embedded within the larger narratives of advertisements made for television and social networking sites like YouTube, Instagram etc. This is in view of various landmark judgements such as recriminalisation of Section 377 in 2013, NALSA judgement in 2014 and finally decriminalisation of Section 377 in 2018 and the advertisements released post these judgements attempted to assimilate the queer subjects and limits the possibility of transgressiveness of the queer subject.



Common Gay Boy

@CommonGayTweets

“EQUALITY” scream the white gays
with LEGALIZE GAY across their
shirts & “NO BLACKS NO ASIANS
NO FEMS” across their grindr
profiles

6/30/14, 11:17 PM

Image 5.5: One of the many tweets from one of queer activists on Twitter that shows the hollowness of the queer movement.



Image 5.6: Screenshot from Instagram shows profile from Grindr, shows the biases of users when they are looking for dates.



Image 5.7: Str8acting becomes preference for a lot of men, in the above profile the user states he is not into chubby, transgender, crossdressers and older people.

Chapter-6

Sexual Citizenship and Transgressions in Indian Advertisements

Introduction

“What happens when queers become democracy’s ‘favourite minority’ championed by the capitalists, the liberals, the conservatives, and the leftists, all singing in the language of rights?” (Sircar 2017).

The Neoliberal India of reform instituted with economic liberalisation in 1991, intensified India’s encounter with global capital. This has led to celebration around India’s new-found state as a confident and ambitious nation ready to take on the global stage. According to Mokkal, “The 90s era saw a departure from the ‘prudery of the pre-1980s’ period with many mainstream media newspapers and magazines reiterating upon the now ‘sexually permissive’ nature of new generation of Indian citizens” (Mokkal 2010, 1). Aditya Nigam and Nivedita Menon in their work *Power and Contestation: India since 1989*, contend that “new found economic liberation paved way for unabashed desire and sexuality through unshackling of the imagination” (Menon and Nigam 2007), due to various economic, political, media and technological shifts in the post 90s period.

This chapter seeks to explore various representational politics at play within the neoliberal capitalist mainstream media while broadcasting the ‘cosmopolitan queer consumer/subject’, all the while claiming sexual citizenship for these queer subjects by taking into account product-based advertisements released since the 1990s. One of the key moments following the liberalisation of India was the launch of Kamasutra condoms print advertising campaign by Lintas (now Lowe Lintas) in collaboration with JK Chemicals in 1991. The ad campaign caused shockwaves across the country and launched several public debates around sexuality, censorship and nation-state. William Mazzarella in his seminal work *Shovelling Smoke: Advertising and Globalisation in Contemporary India* (2003) asserts that, “Kamasutra campaign ushered in a new era of consumer choice and service, liberating the Indian consumer from earlier economic policies that paid homage to Gandhi’s swadeshi boycotts” (Mazzarella 2003, 5).

The Kamasutra advertising campaign along with several other advertising campaigns (which would be discussed in this chapter) in the following decades post neoliberalisation, ushered in a new era of consumer choice and sexual citizenship leading to anxieties around nationhood and idea of citizenship due to shifts in national culture and identity. As Breckenridge suggested, “the explosion of the Indian middle classes and the advent of consumerism have created an anxiety” (Breckenridge 1993, 6-7). Mazzarella further asserts, “that while Nehruvian India envisioned product-based advertisements as ‘remedial rather than aspirational’, advertising in India is now seen as “agentive in transforming ‘*citizens into consumers*’” (Mazzarella 2003).

This chapter examines the relationship between sexual subjectivity of the newly empowered queer subjects under the aegis of liberalisation in contemporary India. This includes rise of ‘new cultures of consumerism’ in post neoliberalised India and how changing class positions along with ‘narratives of sexual citizenship’ aided in the process (Mazzarella 2003) (emphasis mine). The chapter would highlight case studies of selective product-based advertisements including Kamasutra Ad campaign in 1991 that opened realm of conversation around recreational sex to Myntra’s Bold is Beautiful campaign with one of the advertisements titled ‘*The Visit*’ (2015) that depicted lesbian romances. Similarly, other case studies include promotion of public service videos titled, *The Welcome* (2014) launched under the ‘Free and Equal’ Campaign by the United Nations in support of LGBT rights in India in the aftermath of recriminalisation of Section 377 of IPC by Supreme Court of India; and *The Seat Belt Crew* (2014), a public service advertisement created by Ogilvy and Mathers in collaboration with Channel V, as part of a road safety awareness raising campaign employing ‘transgenders’, post the NALSA judgement in 2014.

This chapter is trying to deconstruct various representational as well as assimilationist strategies of the mainstream Indian media in the wake of recent political developments. These include the infamous Supreme Court judgement of 2013 that saw the reversal of the Delhi’s High Court’s judgement on Section 377; Supreme Court’s verdict on recognition of transgenders as the third gender in 2014; and finally, the historic judgement of 6 September 2018, which overturned the earlier Supreme Court judgement, reading down Section 377. Through these case studies, I attempt to establish the complicity of state and the media in its patronising impulse to ‘assimilate’ the queer subject into the hetero-patriarchal structures of

‘kinship’, ‘family’, ‘marriage’, and in turn how the state machinery effaces the transgressive possibilities that queer entails.

Through this chapter, I attempt to (re) trace key events in advertising history of India and examine the modes of representation of sexual citizenship through queer identity within them. What are the various means of queer participation within neoliberal capitalism? What is the kind of resistance it encountered? How do queer consumers establish and reify their sexual identities via consumerism? Is there a co-opting, assimilation via consumerism within the larger hetero-normative narrative? Is there a resistance to it? Is queer consumerism segregated along lines of gender, race, class, caste etc.? Have the marketing and advertising strategies towards queer populations changed over the last few decades, and in what ways?

The chapter also aims to understand the emerging intimacies between queer politics, consumerism and neo-liberalism, and how invisibilisation and hypervisibilisation of the queer politics has been co-opted within a larger narrative of a growing queer nationalism²¹⁸. The methodology of this chapter delves into various case studies to offer alternative strategies of reading queer subjectivities developed within image-based media within popular culture that work with queer subjectivities being produced in a climate of neoliberal consumer and lifestyle practices that have shifted the ways in which sexual citizenship is produced and denied.

²¹⁸ Queer nationalism is a term given by an “LGBTQ organisation titled Queer Nation founded in 1990 in New York City by HIV/AIDS activists from ACT UP”. According to ACT UP manifesto, “Outraged by the growing homophobic violence against LGBTQ population on the streets and prejudiced representation of the community within media, the group devised confrontational, in-your-face tactics to occupy mostly heterosexual public spaces. The term ‘Queer Nationalism’ was one of the terms present in their Queer Nation manifesto, as part of the LGBT liberation movement and worked with the idea of nationalism. The aim of the group was also to make territorial claims to establish a safe haven for LGBT population where they can live without fear of being killed. However, queer nationalism’s idea of a militant, anti-assimilationist and inclusive nation remains a utopia. With coming of concept like Homonationalism, issues such as xenophobia, heterophobia and racism within the LGBT community was reflected upon and the fact that LGBT politics was used to fuel xenophobic, racist and anti-immigration stance within the LGBT population by now rising far right political movement across the world”. For more read <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/queernation.html> Accessed on 8/11/2019.

6.1 Sexual Citizenship and Dissidence in India

While it is imperative to place the emerging queer political discourse and queer movement within the socio-political context of postcolonial India, it nonetheless remains a ‘complex task’ (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007, ix-xxxii). The binary of hetero-normativity and homophobia created during the “colonial regime fueled and sustained moral panic over non-normative sexual behaviour” (Kugle 2002, 40) which further highlighted ‘orientalist hypersexualisation of Indian culture’ (Srivastava 2013, 2). Questions of sexual and gendered identities are complex to begin with and become more so when “challenged by national specificities” (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007, X).

According to Dasgupta, “The creation of ‘ideal’ citizen has been a key component for the nation building exercise, though remaining a contested entity amongst critics due to factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, caste, disability etc.” (Dasgupta 2015, 204). These differences further impact on how people ‘experience citizenship’ (Bachcheta 1999, 141). Paola Bachcheta uses the term “‘*xenophobic queerophobia*’ implying on a particular kind of homophobia that is justified by constructing the queer individual as an individual outside the nation” (Bachcheta 1999, 141). This in purview of the fact that most Indian nationalists viewed queerness as ‘non-Indian’, placing queerness as a ‘western import’, which was rooted in ‘anti nationalist, sexually promiscuous and materialistic sentiments’ (Bachcheta 1999; Bose and Bhattacharya 2007; Nandy 1983; Narrain 2004).

Sara Ahmed argued that, “the figure of the queer individual exists within a heterosexual, patriarchal monoculture, where it confronts and unsettles the normative” (Ahmed 2004, 132). Holloway Sparks in her work *Dissident Citizenship: Democratic Theory, Political Courage, and Activist Women* (1997) characterises this as, “the practices of marginalised citizens who publicly contest prevailing arrangements of power by means of operational democratic practices that augment or replace institutionalised channels of democratic opposition when the channels are inadequate or unavailable” (Sparks 1997, 75). Dasgupta further concurs with Ahmed’s argument and Holloway Sparks definition and states,

“There remains a constant discord between the dissenting ‘queer’ citizen and the state, giving rise to queer activism in India. At the heart of this struggle remains the dissident citizen and the notion of dissident citizenship. A Dissident queer citizen of India is the one who continually challenges the law through their very public existence. This is done by imagining

and critiquing new queer political practices and confronting public perceptions around queerness” (Dasgupta 2015, 205).

This includes practices such as rearticulating of queerness in representational practices within mass media.

The concept of ‘Sexual Citizenship’ was first coined by David Evans in 1993 to work upon “rights of sexual minorities, various identities within the queer community and the practices linked to the state” (Evans 1993). Evans through his work highlighted the hetero-patriarchal nature of citizenship and how the state completely fails to acknowledge varied gendered and sexual identities and practices (Evans 1993). This has been critical for framing discourses around sexual rights and aiding in the rise of queer movement in India. Jeffrey Weeks in *The Sexual Citizen: Theory, Culture and Society* (1998) argued that “all new socio-sexual movements are characterised by two mo(ve)ments-citizenship and transgression” (Weeks 1998, 45).

Articulation of the idea of sexual citizenship is premised on the recognition of the ‘state as the ultimate powerful entity’, and through various ‘ideological and repressive state apparatuses’ reforming and controlling the subject’s position (Althusser 1971; Evans 1993). Any resistance from the citizens in lieu of the non-recognition of their rights and choices is also an indictment of state’s failure to recognise the same. Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler have pointed out:

“The state is supposed to service the matrix for the obligations and prerogatives of citizenship. It is that which forms the conditions under which we are juridically bound. We might expect that the state presupposes modes of juridical belonging, at least minimally, but since the state can be precisely what expels and suspends, modes of legal protection and obligation, the state can put us, some of us, in quite a state. It can signify the source of non-belonging, even produce that non-belonging as a quasi-permanent state” (Spivak and Butler 2011, 3-4).

Dasgupta reflects upon this further, stating,

“Spivak and Butler are undoubtedly correct about the limitations that the state imposes on citizenship. The crucial role of the State, in creating a dialectic, demarcates and reflects the complexity between the transgression of (sexual) norms by citizens and the legal and moral standpoint of the State” (Dasgupta 2015, 205).

Both Spivak and Butler draw attention to the limitations on the part of the state when imposing citizenship, drawing upon Hannah Arendt's theories of 'statelessness' to argue that "the nation state produces the stateless and non-belongingness upon minorities" (Dasgupta 2015, 205). Jeffrey Weeks further identifies themes that contribute to the making of sexual citizen, "democratisation of relationship, new subjectivities, and the development of new (sexual) stories. The sexual citizen is simply an index of the political space that needs to be developed rather a conclusive answer to it" (Weeks 1998, 48).

The change in politics in the West brought in new anxieties, moral panic and possibilities, which was further accentuated with looming AIDS crisis followed by neoliberalisation of Indian economy in 1991. With the new economic policy emphasising on the quality of life, the earlier criminalised sexual citizen living in India was recognised as the new consumer-citizen. However, for many, this concern with the quality of life goes against the "Indian nationalist tenet of 'good sexuality' being concerned with the family and reproductive rights, and 'bad sexuality' pertaining to sexual enjoyment" (Srivastava, 2013: 5).

Several scholars have pointed towards a rise of 'moral panic' with respect to rise of various gendered, sexual, religious, class and caste-based subcultures across nation. Much of the criticism against the decriminalisation of Section 377 adheres to the 'moral panic' of majoritarian heterosexist society. This was due to the popular belief that the verdict (decriminalisation of Section 377) would alter the social fabric of a largely 'hetero-sexist' and 'hetero-patriarchal' society in India and would lead to decline in morality of the nation (Gomathy and Fernandez 2005, 197-205). Sanjay Srivastava's reads this moral panic in context of India where the "institution of marriage and heterosexual family planning would be affected due to decriminalisation of Section 377" (Srivastava 2013, 11).

Rohit Dasgupta further reflects on the state of the queer population in India and writes,

"The status of homosexuality and queerness in India, especially its representation within social movements that aspire to state power (legal recourse led to momentary reading down of Section 377 in 2009, its immediate recriminalisation in 2013 followed by much celebrated decriminalisation in September 2018) indicates the struggle of sexual minorities to exist within a temporal space of the nation" (Dasgupta 2015, 205-207).

This is further asserted in 2013 Supreme Court's verdict where Ram Murti, one of the petitioners argued, "The population of these people (queer citizens) is 0.2% and 99.8%, the

entire nation gets affected...this is a serious problem for our culture and core values”²¹⁹ (Koushal 2013).

Ram Murti’s statement is synonymous to the majoritarian heterosexist sentiments where LGBT community fails to fit within the idea of ‘entire nation-state’. The moralistic sentiments of the 99.8% heterosexist population trumps human rights of the 0.2% and hence a failure to recognise the “queer citizen/individual as part of the nation” (Dasgupta 2015, 207). Srivastava see this as, “the complex location of sexuality within national and nationalist histories is primary a site for enhancing the reproductive capacities of the Nation” (Srivastava 2013, 15). Therefore, sexual and non-normative communities in turn threaten the ‘nationalistic imagination’ by defining sexuality for pleasure (recreational sex) and not necessarily reproduction (procreative sex). Thus, the critique coming from ‘miniscule minority’ of 0.2% threatens the peace of a largely heterosexist nation, and fuels the ‘moral panic’ of the likes of Suresh Kumar Kaushal (the petitioner against the Naz verdict), Ram Murti and most of the heterosexist population further explaining the exclusion of the queer citizen from the nation.

This ‘moral panic’ gets reflected and represented within mainstream media where queerness is seen as an ‘aberration’ and any expression of gendered and sexual transgressions are depicted and received within negative connotations. The next section represents various tropes appointed by media to depict queerness within the media formats of print advertisements, televisions advertisement as well as on social media platforms. This would include ideas of ‘symbolic annihilation’ to trends like ‘metrosexuality’ and ‘queerbaiting’ the audience to develop interest and add to the revenue generation by the means of advertising. The next section would also highlight the rise of the phenomenon of *Queer Cosmopolitan/Consumer citizen* with the coming of neoliberalisation in 1991 and how it affected the representation of unbridled sexuality as well as queerness in mainstream media.

²¹⁹ So, far there is no census done for the LGBT population living in India, however, the government of India upon enquiry of Supreme Court submitted figures in 2012, according to which, “there are about 2.5 million LGBT people living in this country. In the 2018 Supreme Court verdict, the five judge panel acknowledged presence of estimated 8% of India’s population – 104 million people – might be LGBT”. For more read Safi, Michael Campaigners celebrate as India decriminalises homosexuality in The Guardian published on 9/6/2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/06/indian-supreme-court-decriminalises-homosexuality#targetText=The%20judges%20accepted%20estimates%20that,Tsuch%20populations%20in%20the%20world>.

Accessed on 9/28/2019

6.1(a) Between Symbolic Annihilation and Hypervisibility: Making of Queer Cosmopolitan Consumer/Citizen

With coming of neoliberalisation in India and invasion of Satellite television within Indian middle-class households, the Indian audiences were given the first taste of foreign television formats. These formats included suggestive displays of uninhibited sexuality to an earlier unaccustomed and highly moralistic Indian audiences which caused a new-found anxiety and moral panic amongst Right wing nationalists. Dasgupta sees this as “shifts brought forth by the communication revolution followed with rapid technological advances created new locations of power, with consequences for both social and political sphere” (Dasgupta 2017, 23). However, any representation (in this case of sexuality) as seen on media is “neither objective nor neutral and driven by specific ideologies in constructing the messages they disseminate” (Athique 2012; Hall 1995). Post 1991, the media was responding to the neo-liberalisation that brought forth both cultural and socio-economic and political changes.

This section highlights upon the various tropes available in media with respect to representation of queerness within the media formats of print, television as well as on social media platforms post neoliberalisation. Ideas of ‘symbolic annihilation’ to trends like ‘metrosexuality’ and ‘queerbaiting’ the audience to develop interest and add to the revenue generation by the means of advertising. This section would also highlight the rise of the phenomenon of *Queer Cosmopolitan/Consumer citizen* with the coming of neoliberalisation in 1991 and how it affected the representation of unbridled sexuality as well as queerness in mainstream media.

The early representations of queer characters in mainstream media which included newspapers, magazines as well as films were usually dealt with negative connotations. The characters were portrayed as either ‘*villains or victims*’ (Russo 1981). Vitto Russo in his seminal work *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) reflects upon this and asserts,

“The character appears as a problem due to their sexual deviance from the heteronormativity that needs solving, and there is a clear reflection of gendered stereotypes with gay men as ‘effeminate’ and lesbians or queer women as ‘masculine’ or a biased representation of the trans* characters as malevolent villains” (Russo 1981).

The conditions deteriorated with the AIDS epidemic and ushering of neoliberalisation in India, as television and film producers across India used “‘gay men’ as beacons of this deadly disease and hence subjected them to further discrimination and homophobia” (Gross 1991). AIDS epidemic became a ‘symbolic divine punishment’ meted to the LGBT population for their promiscuous and deviant behaviour and media went to all lengths to prove the same (Gross 1991). The only way that queer spectators in post 1990s India were able to find their own representation on television was through gay subtexts in popular English fiction shows such as Star Trek and Batman, which were broadcasted by cable television that made its appearance post neo-liberalisation (Gross 1991).

Larry Gross in his essay, *Out of the mainstream: Sexual minorities and the Mass Media* (1991) states,

“Visibility of gays and other sexual minorities were rare in the early history of the mainstream media. Minor gay characters did appear from time to time, but usually only as short-lived plot devices slated to be eliminated as soon as their usefulness to a particular storyline was served” (Gross 1991).

Any variation in the popular narrative was meted with protest from the largely heterosexual audiences. Larry Gross terms this as ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Gerbner and Gross 1976). This symbolises how the mediated representation of powerless groups (in this case sexual minority) swing between ‘relative invisibility’ to ‘annihilation’ (Gerbner and Gross 1976). Several scholars indicated towards the rise of queer visibility in the 1990s corresponding with the AIDS epidemic which changed the representational politics around queerness. Larry Gross states,

“The evolution of this (queer) identity was not towards greater diversity as well as inclusivity within the community. The representation of the community was rather restricted to two broader trends, ‘*the fight for LGBT civil rights*’ and ‘*the increasing awareness towards a gay market*’” (Gross 1991).

Mass Media formats specifically advertising contributed largely to the standards with which queer community was addressed by the larger mainstream heterosexual community and aligned itself with socio-political progress, and saw gays as a possible target audience in the newly emerging neoliberal economy.

With neo-liberalisation, there was an acknowledgement towards growing needs of the individual rather than that of the collective. This lay groundwork for organisations to target population whose per capita income was higher and so was their buying and spending capacity. This phenomenon pointed towards the earlier untapped queer population in India and their consumption patterns. Queer population identity was suddenly interwoven within a neoliberal capitalist arrangement that has earlier had its crux within a heterosexist construct, allowing these new-found economic identities a chance towards upward economic mobility. Historian John D’Emilio sums this up in his essay *Capitalism and Gay Identity* (1983; 1996),

“As the wage labour spread and production became socialised, it became possible to release sexuality from the [heterosexual] “imperative” to procreate. In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organise a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex...it has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity. Hence, the emerging gay market or the pink rupee²²⁰ chose the ones with higher income as their target audience” (D’Emilio 1996, 467-475).²²¹

Despite being acknowledged due to their spending habits and aiding to the post neoliberal economic growth in India, the ‘moral panic’ around queerness remained in the society. Katherine Sender argues that anxieties about gay men’s sexuality in two stereotypes- one being ‘*gay men’s hypersexuality*’ (e.g. possibly pedophilic desires) and other being the ‘*promiscuous gay AIDS victims*’- shaped the constitution of ideal gay consumers (Sender 2004). She further points out that “contrary to the popular belief that ‘*sex sells*’, the advertisers continue to be notoriously conservative, when it comes to potentially alienating a segment of their existing market” (Sender 2004).

However, all this changed with emerging queer sexualities and subjectivities with broader discourses of ‘*queer cosmopolitan consumer citizenship*’ (Bell and Binnie 2000; Berlant 1997; Binnie and Young 2006; Cossman 2007; Evans 1993; Warner 2002). Most of the

²²⁰ Pink Economy or Pink Money derives its name from the practice of labelling homosexuals with pink armband in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Pink Economy thrives upon spending habits of the LGBT population and any non-heteronormative group and sees them as potential clientele for new marketing campaigns which rely upon LGBT population as their target audience due to their disposable income. In some cases, the target audience qualify as DINK (Double income, No Kids) which is one of the most favourable clients for the burgeoning economy under neoliberalisation.

²²¹ According to M.V. Lee Badged, “there is a flaw in marketing survey resulting in survey samples only considering the well-educated, well-off gays and lesbians”.

members from the queer community were recognised as citizens only on basis of their spending in neoliberal consumerism and lifestyle practices. This has been responsible for presenting various contested, revised, and preconceived ideas around ‘sexual citizenship’. Most of the scholars working on sexual citizenship emphasised,

“On the representation of the queer citizen as the ultimate ‘cosmopolitan citizen/consumer’ willing to forego basic rights of citizenship, such as equal protection under law, access to healthcare, equal protection within same-sex relationships including the right to marriage” (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Cossman, 2007; Evans, 1993; Warner, 1999, 2002).

With Neo-liberalisation, cosmopolitanism became the need of the hour as being ‘cosmopolitan’ meant being “open and able to interact with a variety of different ‘world cultures’ becoming seemingly more diverse, more international, more worldly” (Hannerz 1990). For Beck, “Cosmopolitanism also encompasses within itself political economy which also defines cultural and consumer practices and govern what it means to be a cosmopolite” (Beck 2004). Cosmopolitanism becomes a marker for the qualities or characteristics of the cosmopolitan citizen, their processes, practices, and technologies.

In the past decade, being ‘queer’ has become synonymous with being cosmopolite in India. The first decade of the millennium saw the rise of discourse around pink economy which framed LGBT population as a “large, homogenous niche of consumers with high level of disposable income and leisure time” (Burns and Davies 2009, 177). Queer scholars Burns and Davies sees this as

“The assumed social and spending priorities have located them as part of a particular urban ‘creative class’ whose sensibilities or ‘tastes’ are seen as exemplarily diverse and inclusive. These cultural tastes as well as aesthetic sensibilities are constantly used to validate queer subjects as respectable sexual citizens, they are also highly consumable attributes” (Burns and Davies 2009, 177).

In the introduction to the edited collection, *Cosmopolitan Urbanism* (2006), Jon Binnie, Julian Holloway, Steve Millington, and Craig Young assert that being a “‘queer cosmopolitan citizen’ is a ‘classed phenomenon’ linked to various tenets of cultural citizenship” (Binnie and Young 2006, 8). They further emphasise,

“[Cosmopolitanism] is bound up with notions of knowledge, cultural capital and education: being worldly, being able to navigate between and within different cultures, requires confidence, skill and money...(A) cosmopolitan disposition is most often associated with transnational elites that have risen to power and visibility in the neoliberal era” (Binnie and Young 2006, 8-9).

Binnie and other scholars argue while making connections between cosmopolitanism and class that,

“To become a cosmopolitan citizen one has to come with an access to certain bodies of knowledge, particular socio-cultural-political norms, access to cultural capital, experiences of urban living specific types of consumption, a certain level of education (not literacy) and so on” (Burns and Davies 2009, 178).

This analogy is used to represent queer sexual citizen as ‘*ultimate cosmopolitan consumer*’ and a contributor to Pink Capitalism or Rainbow Capitalism. *Pink Money or Pink Capitalism or Gay Capitalism or Rainbow capitalism* involves the phenomenon of incorporating queerness along with LGBT rights-based activism, and targets “inclusion of the LGBT community for consumption of products and services in order to capitalise upon their purchasing power” (Bell and Binnie 2000; Berlant 1997; Binnie and Young 2006; Cossman 2007; Evans 1993; Warner 2002). It is seen as a marketing move by many corporates under aegis of neoliberalisation to market themselves as queer friendly or as queer allies to build LGBT consumers as their target audience to buy their products and services. This exercise is often invoked in both developed and developing nations where economic contributions of LGBT community at times decides their legal status as citizens.

Pink Capitalism also thrives on a particular section of the society which comprises of “white, gay, cisgender men while erasing many queer Person of Colour (POC) due to their inability to be ‘socially acceptable’ in terms of consumption” (Bell and Binnie 2000; Berlant 1997; Binnie and Young 2006; Cossman 2007; Evans 1993; Warner 2002). India is witnessing the rise of Pink Rupee after decriminalisation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code on September 2018. The decriminalisation allowed an entire sub-economy to thrive with business ventures ranging from queer friendly restaurants, pubs, hotels, bookshops, spas, saunas, health clubs to customised gaycations (gay vacations) specially designed for gay couples.

What remains contentious is that while queerness found itself in mainstream media through its emphasis on ‘Pink Economy’ in India through advertisements (which would be discussed later in the chapter) and subscription based streaming channels like Netflix, it only acted as an interruption to largely heteronormative programming. Anna McCarthy identified this as “same-sex desire playing a deeply agonistic rule in the unfolding of temporal structures associated with television’s modes of (auto) historiography- the media event, the television schedule, the season run, the final episode” (McCarthy 2001).

The audience of cable television and subscription based streaming channels are invited to consume diverse content that cuts across class, sexuality, race when viewing international content which is carefully orchestrated for cosmopolitan setting. This however is glaringly missing when one views Prime time television shows on Indian cable television with passing references to queerness and mostly blatant homophobia being displayed on part of the producers regarding the queer community. Critiques of visual texts remain concerned with the “questions of representation especially with narrow portrayal of queerness in visual culture. The emphasis remains in evaluating the quality of effectiveness of image text against series of predetermined binaries operating on television i.e. good/bad, effective/ineffective, realistic/unrealistic, political/apolitical, queer/straight etc.” (Burns and Davies 2009, 175).

The next section would examine historical moments in the decade following neoliberalisation which saw various modes of representation of queerness in mainstream media through means of advertising. This would include the now (in)famous Kamasutra ad campaign (1991) along with arrival of India on the world platform, with the launch of Alisha Chinai’s pop music video ‘Made in India’ (1995) which seemingly introduced the ‘idea of metrosexuality’ in form of male model Milind Soman.

6.1(b) Early Representation of Queerness in Advertising in India: Rise of New Metrosexual Man

“In the twenty minutes that the generic, urban, modern man has spent in front of the mirror, he has managed to: cleanse his face with a soap-free plant-based gel; eliminate every whisker with a triple bladed razor and cool-blue foam; shape his wet-look highlighted hair; clip, file, and buff his nails; smother the musk of his shaved armpits with aerosol deodorants; tweeze stray hair from his once uni-brow; and apply an under-eye gel, cream, or serum for wrinkles and dark circles that he will not have for another twenty years.”

- Diepiriye Kuku in *Queering Subjectivities* (Kuku 2013, 209-210)

The above grooming routine summarises consumer’s relationship with their bodies in the last two decades following neoliberalisation in India. The fashion industry now has expanded its demographic from women only product and services to reach out to their male counterparts. Post globalisation, men’s relationship with their bodies have seen a significant change as marketers as well as product-based marketing have recognised and taken great interest in the aesthetic inclinations of contemporary men. This has created a niche for products and services targeting men (especially straight men) as their target audience. With the aid of both print and electronic media products and services targeting men’s health and fashion needs are fielded.

This section would deal the idea of ‘metrosexuality’ coined by Mark Simpson in an article titled *"Here Come the Mirror Men"*, in the UK newspaper *The Independent* in 1994 and its implications which were responsible in creating a niche of metrosexual men in India post neoliberalisation in 1991. *Made in India*, a music video by Alisha Chinai introduced viewers to the concept of metrosexuality²²², by introducing Milind Soman, who with other male models found themselves under the media gaze were referred as ‘New Metrosexual Man’ (Simpson 1994). According to Rowan A Chapman,

²²² In November 1994, British writer and cultural commentator Mark Simpson wrote an article entitled “Here comes the Mirror Men” in the UK newspaper *The Independent*. In his article, he made references to “a growing segment of style conscious young men being targeted by men’s fashion magazines”. Simpson coined the term ‘metrosexual’ to describe “these narcissistic young men sporting fashionable clothes and accessories.” Simpson outed this “new breed of young, style conscious men including footballer David Beckham and actor Brad Pitt as metrosexuals”. For more see Simpson, Mark. (1994) "Here Come the Mirror Men." *The Independent*. 15 Nov. *Factiva*. McLennan Library, Montreal, 28 October 2003 <http://global.factiva.com> .

“The new man acted as [a] potent symbol for men and women searching for new images and visions of masculinity and a breadwinner ethic. The new man was characterised by his enthusiastic embrace of female roles and qualities, this involved being emotionally aware and available, as well as playing active role in family and life and awarding a significant amount of attention to his appearance” (Chapman 1988, 227).

Chapman further suggests that “the figure of this new man was initially represented in two lights, as *‘nurturer and narcissist’*. The new man as nurturer placed an emphasis on hedonistic consumption and style-consciousness” (Chapman 1988, 228). This variation of new man was seen as a rebellion against the traditional hetero-normative roles set for men from time immemorial, however despite all that both textual and visual representations were framed in a heterosexual context, in an effort to ‘disavow the potential of homoeroticism’ (Chapman 1988).

Edward Peitsch summarises this category of men as,

“The term 'metrosexual' has been widely accepted to describe a new breed of straight-identifying men who possess a heightened aesthetic sense. Metrosexuals are characterised by a penchant for fashionable clothing, the use of high-end products for body and hair, and an interest in so-called 'feminine' activities, such as shopping and the arts. The metrosexual endeavours to be an object of desire for others, welcoming attention from women, as well as other men. Although metrosexuality is especially prevalent amongst male celebrities, the term is being used to describe the growing segment of style-conscious men in urban centres around the world” (Peitsch 2004, 5).

These adoption of traits for style conscious masculine subjectivities were coded as feminine. Peitsch further elaborates,

“Male figures such as the metrosexual have often been portrayed in the media as representing a softer, pro-feminist version of masculinity. The metrosexual's stylish flair is said to be accompanied by a greater sensitivity and respect towards women. The metrosexual's heightened aestheticism and flirtatious nature may have positive implications for the antagonistic relationship with homosexuality that has long characterised masculinity” (Peitsch 2004, 5-6).

Metrosexuality saw its emergence in India post globalisation in 1991. With the rapid spread of satellite television as well as new media technologies, there was a formidable transformation in the “cultural practices of the urban Indian middle class” (Srivastava 2013).

Srivastava sees this transformation as “the endless diversity of images welcomed with excitement along with apprehension and anxieties due to increasing popularity of television and the ever-expanding space being devoted to the expressions of transgressive sexuality” (Srivastava 2013). This was meted with a greater call for stringent legislation and censorship by Right wing nationalists and various other organisations who saw representation of sexualness as ‘distasteful and detrimental’ to the morality of the society.

One of the first media debates around sexuality and metrosexuality was sparked in the autumn of 1991, when a company called J K Chemicals had launched a ‘premium brand of condoms’ named Kamasutra in India. The launch was accompanied by an advertisement campaign comprising of print advertisement as well as television commercial spot. The campaign managed by advertisement guru Alyque Padamsee who was working with Lintas India oversaw “one of the most acclaimed and controversial advertising campaigns till date and ended up outwitting the censors while challenging the public morality in India” (Mazzarella 2003).

William Mazzarella highlights two disparate set of narratives regarding the significance of Kamasutra advertising campaign,

“First one saw Kamasutra as the harbinger of a thrilling new erotic sophistication in public communications; the second, however, suggested that Kamasutra was a model for a whole new approach to public service, confronting the stagnated aims and methods of centralised state planning with the alleged efficacy of the consumerist agenda” (Mazzarella 2003, 60).

In terms of the advertising industry’s point of view, “this campaign provided the social basis of a new and potentially profitable regime of *consumer spectacle*” (Mazzarella 2003). According to Mazzarella,

“One of major reasons of resistance was created by this widespread impression that the free and subsidised condoms distributed by the government under the brand name Nirodh (which means to stop or detain) had been responsible for this massive hostility towards condoms” (Mazzarella 2003, 60).

One account narrates it as:

“In the beginning there was Nirodh, a non-lubricated...government manufactured condom that was as thick (and sensitive) as rhinoceros hide. Its sickly yellow color... that was enough to put anyone off sex forever-no wonder that even today condoms are a good substitute for balloons in rural areas” (Kankanala 1991:52).

This remained a major marketing obstacle: “how does one create a need let alone a desire for a product that was universally thought as an aberrant or an anti-aphrodisiac” (Mazzarella 2003, 60). The Kamasutra condoms campaign was responsible for reshaping and reimagining discourses around desire and sexuality and moved away from the dominant heteronormative state family planning advertisement campaigns.

The 1990s also saw several controversial advertisement campaigns besides the Kamasutra. In 1995, model cum actor Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre posed nude for a print advertisement to promote an apparel brand called ‘Tuff shoes’. The advertisement was known for its erotic and sexed nature, as we see the models in a close embrace, their bodies tangled with a python wrapped around their shoulders wearing nothing but Tuff shoes. The advertisement was deemed highly controversial and as a repercussion, the social service branch of the Mumbai police registered a case in August 1995 against Soman and Sapre. The two were charged with “provisions of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986 for ‘obscenity and corrupting public morality’ after appearing nude in an advertisement” (Mazzarella 2003).

Another case was filed under the “Wildlife Protection Act against the publishers and distributors of two magazines that featured the controversial advertisement, the advertising agency, the two models and the photographers were also accused” (Mazzarella 2003). The case was heard for 14 years after which the courts acquitted the accused. This moment saw culmination of new discourses around the idea of masculinity and spectatorship as the model cum actor, Milind Soman became the object of desire and cinematic gaze for many gay men within the queer community.²²³

²²³ During the course of this research which involved many participant interviews of both queer men and women, one name that was most referred to was that of Milind Soman. For both queer men and women, he was seen as ‘the metrosexual man’, as one respondent went forth to say, “Soman is the stuff dreams are made of...his raw sexuality, machismo made him an instant icon within the queer community. He was a breather at a time when cinema was directed towards heterosexual male gaze, he (Soman) provided a respite for the largely ignored queer community”. Interview with Ravi* (18 July 2019).

Milind Soman was hailed as the harbinger of metrosexuality in India making his television debut with Alisha Chinai's pop music video *Made in India* in 1995.²²⁴ For Shanti Kumar and Michael Curtin (2002),

“Chinai's video somewhat became a cultural icon for many Indian men and women, for its rich provocative text that still occupies a unique place in contemporary Indian culture and dealt with complex issues of nationality and cultural differences that emerged with neoliberalisation in 1991” (Kumar and Curtin 2002).

The music video was also responsible for creating idea of 'Indianness' as well as introducing the new 'metrosexual man' in the form of Milind Soman. 'Made in India' foregrounds a young woman's desires that are at once “local, global, national; as she sways between tradition and modernity; hegemonic and subversive” (Kumar and Curtin 2002). The video also represented the arrival of India as a possible consumer of desires that neoliberalisation brought with itself. Alisha Chinai in the video croons about her attempts to find love, as she breaks into a song with Hindi lyrics as,

देखि है सारी दुनिया
जापान से लेकर रुस्सिआ
ऑस्ट्रेलिया से लेकर अमेरिका

“I have seen all the world...
From Japan to Russia...
From Australia to America.” (Translation Mine)

But what this princess is searching for is a soulmate that's *Made in India* (Kumar and Curtin 2002). As global suitors from China, Africa, Persia and Europe attempt to win her over she remains nonchalant. She desires 'one true love', as now Alisha sings,

तन गोरा हो या काला
पर हो सच्चा दिलवाला

²²⁴ In April 1995, Alisha Chinai's Hindi pop music video 'Made in India' premiered across “the Asian subcontinent on the Hong Kong based Star TV satellite network, accompanied by a music album of the same name. It quickly raced to the top of the national sales charts in India, establishing both the singer and the satellite network as objects of fascination and public discourse. It was the first major hit of the emerging pop music scene, and sold 2 million copies, rivalling the sales of the best film soundtracks of the year”.

चांदी नहीं, सोना नहीं, कोई हिरा
एक दिल चाहिए दैट्स मेड इन इंडिया

“Dark-skinned or light, it doesn’t matter,
but he should have a heart that is pure,
she needs only a native soul made in India
an authentic soul that is made in India.” (Translation Mine)

As she grows weary of her attempts and the parade of suitors, she summons a sorcerer whose fervent incantations over a burning cauldron reveals a steamy apparition of a handsome man of her dreams. A montage of shots reveals broad shoulder, chiseled face, and erotic poses of his naked torso that titillate Alisha and the viewers alike. Alisha orders her soldiers to at once find this man and bring him to her.²²⁵ She gets her wish, as the soldiers now parade in the palace with a wooden crate-with ‘Made in India’ written on it, and out of the crate springs the man of her dreams. The audience is introduced to Milind Soman, naked from the torso, gazing deeply into her eyes and literally sweeping her off her feet. Kumar and Curtin sum up the video as,

“The moment of closure is followed by Alisha playfully turning to the camera as she offers a smile to the audience as the image cuts to a closing shot of the final page of the story book that reads as most of the fairy tales do, “and the handsome prince carried the princess away, and they lived happily ever after. The End” (Kumar and Curtin 2002, 357).

This music video was transgressive for its time as for the first time the audience is introduced to the idea of ‘female gaze’. In visual and cinematic theory, female gaze is hardly addressed as women are not seen as desiring and sexual subjects. The video acknowledges this and highlights this female desire where “one desires the spectacular displays of male bodies, and moves away from the gaze that is constructed as masculine, which silences the female desire” (Mulvey 1975; Mankekar 1999). Purnima Mankekar (1999) in her analysis of Indian media during the early 1990s argued that, “female characters rarely exercised or exhibited any explicit form of agency in matters of romance and sexuality. The containment of female

²²⁵ The music video comprises of various symbolisms, as the shot following the steamy apparition of Milind Soman, reveals a snake slithering through satin, which can be interpreted as the Freudian idea of phallic desire that the snake represents or the gift of knowledge passed on to Eve by the serpent (which in many interpretations represent sexual awakening) in the Garden of Eden in New Testament as well in John Milton’s classic *Paradise Lost* (1667).

desire remains a narrative trope in myth, legend and popular acts in India and is also pervasive part of everyday life” (Mankekar 1999).

The actor Milind Soman’s presentation as ‘*spectacle for female gaze*’ is another area where imagery clearly draws upon the homoerotic aspect. In the music video, one sees Milind Soman performing in an item number which reverses the usual filmic trends, and initialising the trend of the ‘Item boy’ (Mankekar 1999). For several film scholars Milind Soman’s comfort in performing for female gaze creates a rupture in the existing models of idealised masculinities, as scholars see this as,

“Overt threat to masculinity of the actor but throughout the video one sees Soman delivering direct male gaze to the camera, and performing masculine roles by chivalrously sweeping off Chinai off her feet, something that heroes in Indian films take pride in. These expectations towards film actors to demonstrate their masculinity by possessing and executing qualities of this Indian cinematic ‘lexicon’ and being ‘heroic’ remains necessarily for most of the formulaic Hindi films” (Ganti 2004, 137).

For many gay men as well, this was a moment of transgression and formation of desire as they move away from the search of homosocial and homoerotic subversive narrative that is rarely found in Indian media. Milind Soman captured the imagination of the gay population and directly move to the realm of desire, where his metrosexuality fills the gap between heterosexuality and homosexuality. For scholars like Kumar, Curtin and Gill, “‘Made in India’ seemingly inverted the cultural and representational norms by transforming the male body into a sight of spectacle and opened up the realm of desire for both male and female audiences” (Kumar and Curtin 2002; Gill 2010) (emphasis mine). The act of fantasising has such “subversive implications that many gay men desired being literally swept off their feet and restore some faith in semblance masculine dominance in this counterhegemonic fantasy” (Gill 2010).

The 2007 released short film *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, anthropologist Harjant Gill however “reconstructs his own desires alongside other South Asian gay men, as many forge pathways of gendered performance, when he sets his eyes on the Indian model and Bollywood actor Milind Soman” (Gill 2010, 87-88). Gill’s desire for Milind Soman is similar to an “adolescent’s infatuation for an unachievable celebrity, but his desire represents the queer connection many gay men made in 1990s with Soman” (Gill 2010, 87-88). Gill in his

film appears nude, accompanied by projections of Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre from the Tuff shoes advertisement. According to Gill,

“Soman’s eyes pierces through the screen, inviting the viewers to join them in this transgressive sexualness, as in an alternative narrative, it is Soman and Gill’s eyes that meet. It doesn’t matter that Soman is holding a woman, as the filmmaker imagines himself in Soman’s arms, traversing between signifiers of ‘obscene’ corporeal (hetero)sexuality and the projected texts of Indian Penal Code regarding “obscenity” (Gill 2010) (see image 6.5 and image 6.6).

Gill further asserts,

“Media representations of men were dominated by this idealised version of soft masculinity, replete with images of devoted fathers, loving partners and handsome narcissists. Such images were accompanied by the proliferation of erotic nude and seminude images of men, which found space in magazines and newspapers, as celebration of new masculine ideal. Arrival of Milind Soman amplified these images further” (Simpson 1994, 4; Gill 2010)

This ambiguity and passivity of male on display effectively troubled notions around traditional masculinity, which Mark Simpson argues as,

“Men’s bodies are on display everywhere but the grounds of men’s anxiety everywhere is not just that they are being exposed and commodified but that their bodies are placed in such a way as to passively invite the gaze that is undifferentiated: it might be female or male, hetero or homo. Traditional male heterosexuality, which insists that it is always active, sadistic and desiring, is now inundated with images of men’s bodies as passive, masochistic and desire” (Simpson 1994, 4).

For mainstream advertisers, the eroticised male body became a bait for attracting possible consumers, the gay male spectator could also now appropriate images that usually exclude him as an audience, as most mainstream representations of men displayed male bodies in highly eroticised and sexualised ways which is further consumed by both male and female audience. This blurring of heterosexuality and homosexuality in contemporary advertisements are perhaps most suggestively visible in the figure of the metrosexual men that Milind Soman embodied. The next section would be emphasising upon the phenomenon of Queerbaiting and how Indian advertisers capitalised on this phenomenon, through two case studies of major brands, Tata Docomo’s Virgin Mobile ad campaign (2008) and Pepsi’s Youngistan Ka Wow ad campaign (2010) which used queerbaiting for their brand placement.



Image 6.1: Print advertisement of Kamasutra advertisement campaign in Debonair magazine in 1991. Source: <http://8ate.blogspot.com/2009/10/controversial-indian-ads-from-90s-nsfw.html>



Image 6.2: Milind Soman (right) and Madhu Sapre (left) in the Tuff shoes advertisement were charged with obscenity and corrupting public morality' after appearing nude in the advertisement. Source: <http://8ate.blogspot.com/2009/10/controversial-indian-ads-from-90s-nsfw.html>



Image 6.3: Milind Soman in Alisha Chinai's Music Video 'Made in India'. Source: Why is Milind Soman the hottest man on the planet?

<https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/story/milind-soman-indian-hot-supermodel-ironman-triathlon-50-year-old-283674-2015-07-21>

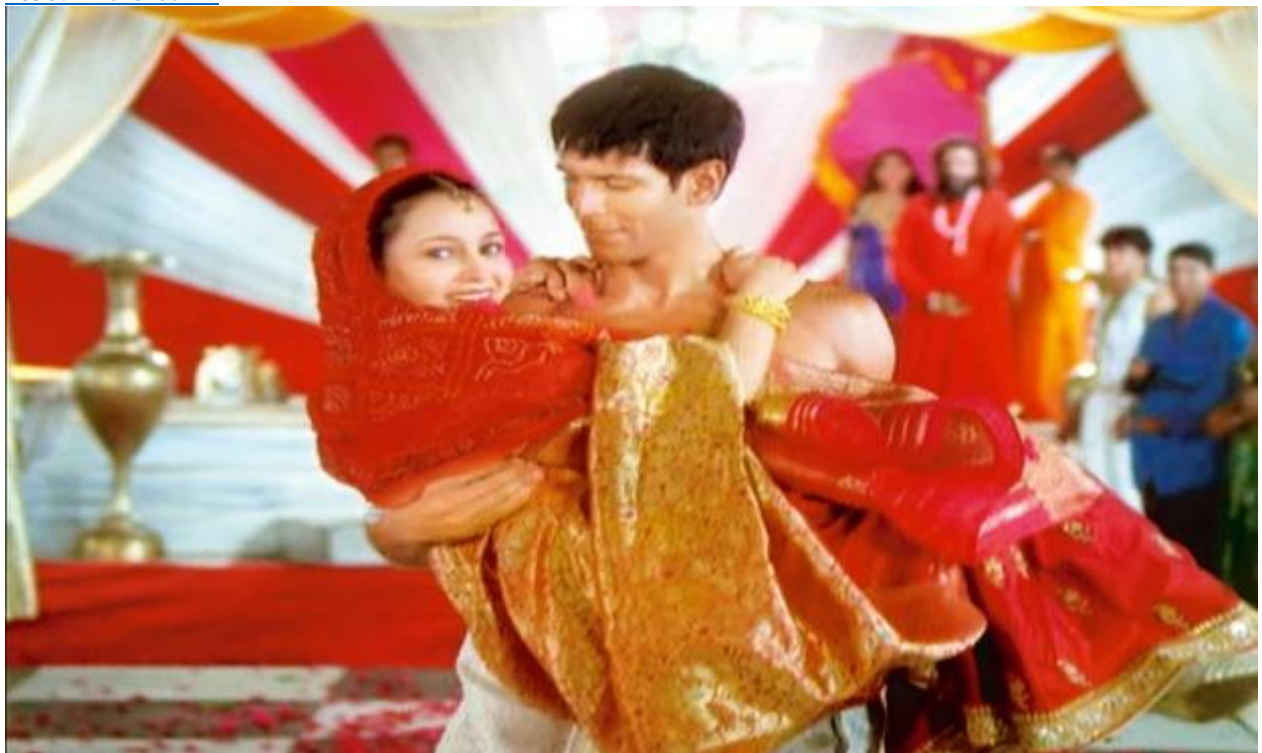


Image 6.4: Milind Soman stars with Alisha Chinai in Made in India and marked India's encounter with metrosexuality. Source: Why is Milind Soman the hottest man on the planet?

<https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/story/milind-soman-indian-hot-supermodel-ironman-triathlon-50-year-old-283674-2015-07-21>

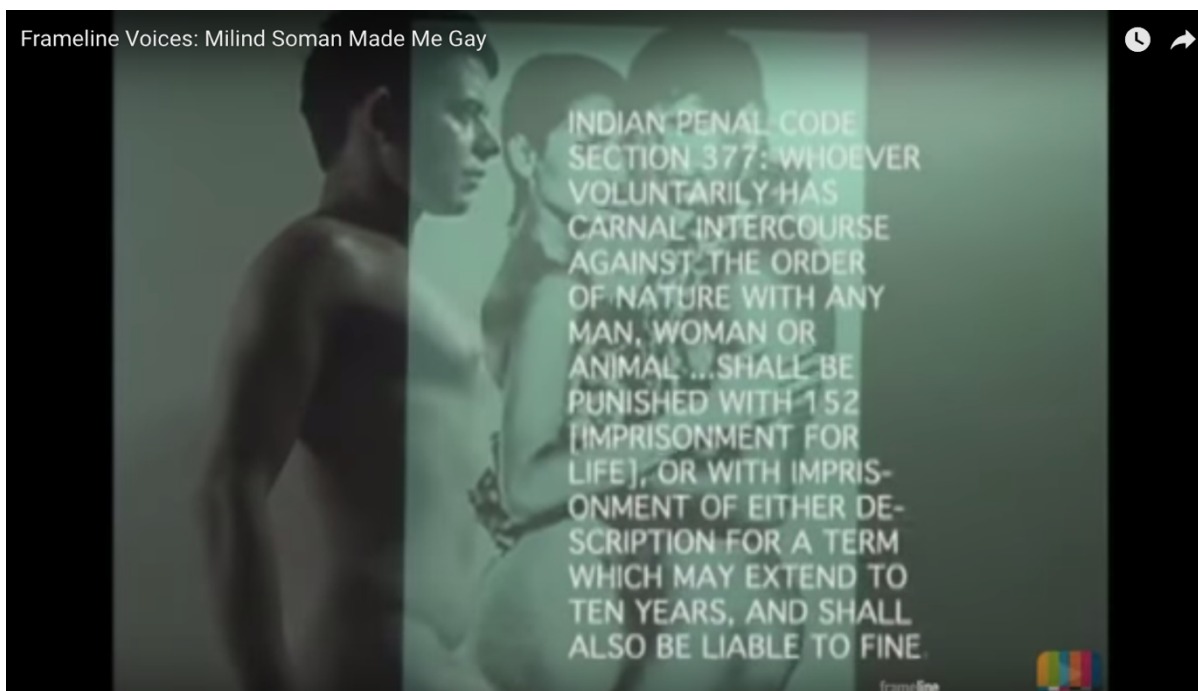


Image 6.5: A nude Harjant Gill juxtaposes himself with the projection of Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre along with projection of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, from a still of his short film Milind Soman Made me Gay. Source: Screenshots from 'Milind Soman Made Me Gay'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0dVB4M1FEc>

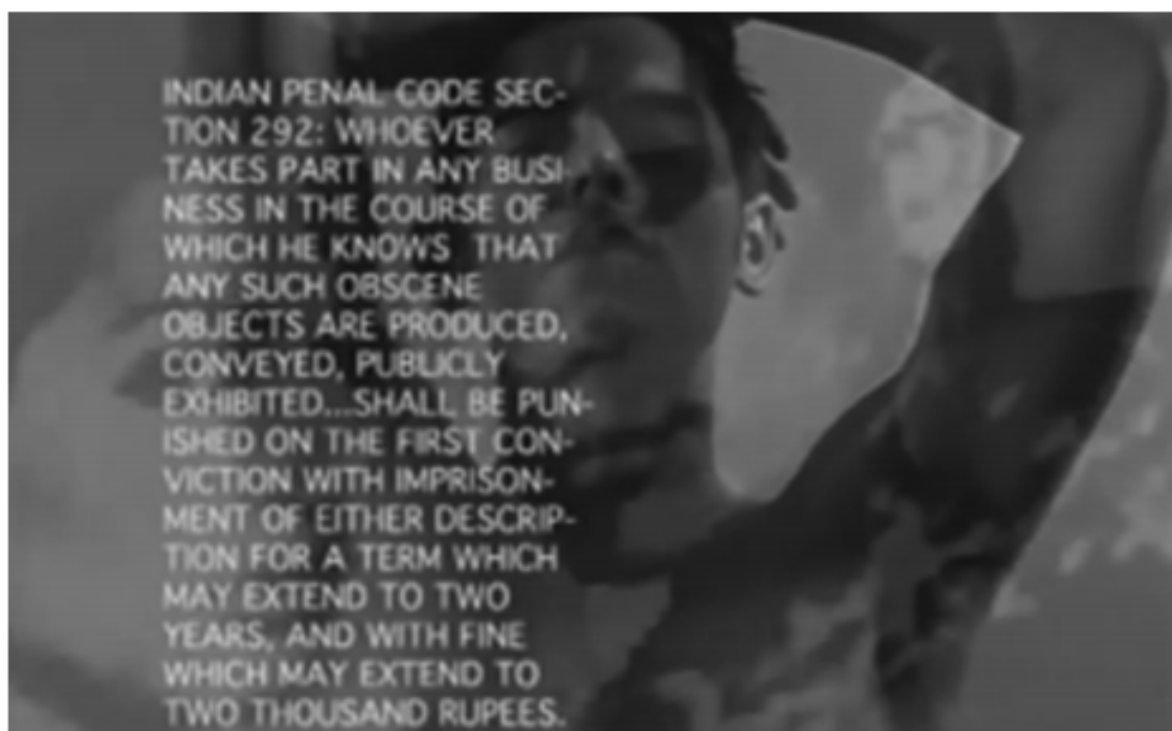


Image 6.6: Harjant Gill reimagines and foregrounds his desire to be with Milind Soman at cost of being criminalised under both Section 377 and Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code in the stills from Milind Soman Made Me Gay (2007). Image Source: Screenshots from 'Milind Soman Made Me Gay'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0dVB4M1FEc>

6.1(c) Queerbaiting the Audiences

The word ‘Queerbaiting’ remains a contentious term within both electronic media and online spaces and found its way to mainstream television and advertisements in early 2000s in India.²²⁶ It refers to the “practice of adding homoerotic subtext between two characters, usually the leads of the show without ever intending to give the subtext to the main plot, thus elevating the relationship” (June 2013). According to Rose June,

“It (Queerbaiting) remains to be one of the oldest methods employed by authors, writers, showrunners and directors, to play up with the tension between two same-sex characters for drawing attention of the queer counterparts, while not losing the straight audiences. This was deemed as one of the inclusionary ways to allow queer people to feel welcomed within a largely heteronormative narrative” (June 2013).

Larry Gross sees Queerbaiting as a failure of inclusionary practices within media, he writes,

“As media grew more aware of their exclusionary attitude towards queer community, queer characters found themselves at the fringes of the plotline, with the constant fear by the networks that floating queer characters within a show would not be welcomed within the religious, family friendly narrative and would invite backlash from advertisers alike” (Gross 1991, 24-27).

If a queer character did find its way into a narrative, it would then be given the classic ‘Bury your gays’ treatment. Considered as one of the oldest televisions and movie trope, ‘Bury your gays’ follows the “logic that gay characters are not allowed happy ending, and most of them are killed off in tragic accidents, murder or suicide” (Cameron 2018). This trope remains common specifically in a story which would mainly have “hetero-normative leads and for their story to progress, any distraction needs to be removed and, in this case, killed off” (Cameron 2018).

Queerbaiting was then seen as a welcome change by showrunners and audience alike who were starved of queer content or a happy ending, but they quickly found out that their

²²⁶ In 1981, Lawrence Goldyn wrote his article “Gratuitous Language in Appellate Cases involving Gay People: Queerbaiting from the Bench” on how homosexual individuals were addressed in the US court. Goldyn uses the word “queerbaiting as a description of the verbal abuse and the homophobic and discriminating rhetoric that was used in these cases to justify punishments. Another example that differs significantly from Goldyn’s definition is the use of the word by Nadine Hubb’s usage of it in the article, “Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography” from 2009, where she compares it to red baiting and uses it to describe the attempt to expose and purge homosexuals in the US during 1950s and 1960s”.

celebrations are short-lived as many queer television viewers realised that while many people see the blatant queer analogy, the writers and show heads can't/won't acknowledge that intentional subtext openly for fear of alienating bigoted fractions of their fanbase. A writer with Livejournal in a posting called "How do we solve a Problem like Queerbaiting? (2013)" comments:

"Queerbaiting...when they give us [the LGBTQ viewers] just enough to keep us interested, but not enough to satisfy us and make us truly represented. But what does that mean exactly? Some interpret 'queerbaiting' as just about any subtext; others say that it has to include some sort of 'no homo' joke, a clear acknowledgement that, despite the obvious chemistry, it's never going to happen and characters are straight[...] [queerbaiting] may not be homophobia per se which, besides being a (necessarily) loaded term amplifies fear or malice towards homosexuality, hence the unchecked assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and anything else is the other" (June 2013).

However, for a practice like queerbaiting to work, one needs to understand the spectatorship patterns existing within the film and cultural studies context. Shohini Ghosh in her article *The Closet is Ajar* (2005) contends, "Texts as well as visuals carry different meanings for everybody as factors such as viewers location, history, predisposition of the viewer plays an important role in interpreting and reading the images" (Ghosh 2005). All images made available to the viewer are largely ambivalent in nature and can be read subjectively. For film scholar Andrea Weiss, "queer spectatorship is inherently contradictory as it embodies a desire to see while being perpetually invisible. It resembles a love-hate affair, which involves anticipation, seduction, pleasure, disappointment, rage and betrayal (Weiss 1994 (2004), 44-57). Hence, explicit depictions of queerness remained absent from popular media forms like cinema, tv shows etc. where queerness would be introduced as "minor subplots, comic relief or transitory suggestions" (Ghosh 2005).

Queerbaiting as a practice found its way in India in the late 2000s, with showrunners, filmmakers and advertisers, queerbaiting the audience and making innuendos about queer sexuality. Filmmakers like Karan Johar and Tarun Mansukhani who made box office hits like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2002) and *Dostana* (2008) respectively were considered progressive by audiences and critics alike. The films feature star personas such as Shahrukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan in *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2002) and John Abraham and Abhishek Bachchan in *Dostana* (2008). These actors in both films play young, agential mobile carriers of India's new globalised modernity abroad (both films are based in United States of America). Both the

films rely on the genre of buddy (male) film where the plot revolves around male bonding, “celebrating the seemingly asexual, homosocial companionship among men as the pivotal concern of a narrative logic that defines ‘masculinity’ as norm and power” (Muraleedharan 2010, 153). In R. Raj Rao’s genealogy of Hindi Cinema, “the male best friend replaces the heroine in the Amitabh Bachchan era starting in the late 1970s” (R. Rao 2000, 300). Within the cinematic universe of Hindi cinema, male characters occupy the larger cinematic text, as Eve Sedgwick sees this male homosociality keeping the “agential and subject status between men when women are involved in transactions between men” (Sedgwick 1985, 25). Aneeta Rajendran in her work titled *The Old Boys Network and Heterodominance in (Un)familiar Femininities: Studies in Contemporary Lesbian South Asian Text* (2015) sees this phenomenon as,

“When romantic competition between two male protagonists to win affection of the female lead is not happening, their friendships underline the plot. Buddy films of this genre can take the high road in characterising this friendship as the purest, noblest human tied, such as in *Dosti* (1964), or explore ironically how male friendships are a component of masculine self-fashionings, as in *Main Khiladi Tu Anari* (1994) does; still others like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2009) are self-conscious and ambivalent about male homosociality’s intersection with male homoeroticism even as heterosexual arrangements are negotiated. Almost all of these films at least suggest that these powerful homosocial relationships with their undertow of homoeroticism are in a fierce, anxious struggle with the normative heterosexual relationships whose establishment these narratives are centered around; in other words, the buddy film is an interesting site of tension where earlier heteropatriarchal forms of male bonding are being challenged by and sometimes replaced by ideal romantic (heterosexual) love and coupledness, followed by the production of ideal nuclear families” (Rajendran 2015, 305-306).

However, these films turned any hint of ‘queerness as a comic relief’ (Ghosh 2005). While neither *Kal Ho Na Ho* nor *Dostana* could legitimately lay claim to the mantle of the first gay film in Indian cinema, their “popularity and mainstream success made, them one of the first” (Ghosh 2005). Interestingly, *Dostana* (2008) utilised queerbaiting to its advantage by marketing itself at the ‘India’s Fashion Week’ in 2008 with apparel brands Pantaloons launching a ‘*Dostana Collection*’ range of apparel. The *Dostana Collection* by Pantaloons comprised of “flamingo colors, floral prints and kitsch garments” (Editorial 2008). With brand ambassadors such as John Abraham and Abhishek Bachchan promoting Pantaloon’s new found gay aesthetics, the audiences/consumers became more open to adopting the same. Article titled *Dharma production ties up with Pantaloons for Dostana Collection* (2008)

wrote, “Inspired by the underlying theme of the movie, which is youthful and stylish...the styling captures the individual style statement of its characters” (Editorial 2008; Baker 2008). This trend was visible in terms of the pink rupee infiltrating the neoliberal market with queerbaiting as an aid for the same. Steven Baker mentions this phenomenon in Bollywood as,

“One needs to look no further than Bollywood to find icons of the pink rupee crowd if the promos for Tarun Mansukhani’s *Dostana* (2008) are anything to go by. Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham are about to extend their lead further as poster boys of gay India” (Baker 2008).

Following sections comprises of two cases studies of queerbaiting employed by two well-known brands to sell products and services, to straight and queer audience alike.

6.1 (c1) Virgin Mobiles-Think Hatke Campaign (2008)

Launched in 2008, Virgin mobile brand was marketed in India with collaboration with NTT Docomo. Close to the launch of the brand, the advertisement campaign was also released in 2008 and targeted the urban Indian youth within the age-group of 15-24. Bates David Enterprise, the creative agency for the campaign developed three Television Commercials in collaboration with Virgin Mobile’s international communication. The underlying message of the advertisements, exhorted the youth to ‘*Think Hatke*’ (Think Differently), and constantly challenge social sanctions with the aid of humour and wit, but all of the TV ad spots that ran over a span of a year had an underlying subtext of misogyny and homophobia embedded within it.

One of the advertisement spots that ran on television stood out for its blatant use of ‘queer baiting’ as well as using homophobia for creating a humorous affect. The advertisement begins with a sit-down between parents and their daughter. The girl reveals to her parents, “माँ डैड मुझे आपसे कुछ कहना है” (*Mom Dad, I need to tell you something*). They ask her what’s the matter and are meted with a response from the daughter, “मुझे लड़को में कोई इंटरैस्ट नहीं है” (*I am not interested in boys*), as the parents are dumbfounded at the reveal as it hints toward the girl’s homosexual tendencies. This reveal is immediately followed by parents blaming each other for their life choices, from sending her to an all girl’s school which might have caused

this deviancy to barring their daughter to have interactions with the male neighbours of the building.

The conversation between the parents is interrupted by a call on her Virgin mobile phone, as she hastily responds and hangs up. Upon enquiry by father as who the caller was; she curtly replies just a friend (suggestively male friend) from MBA class, who was planning a trip to Goa, she brushes it aside and says that she is not interested. Upon the realisation that the daughter might be lesbian, the father insists that she must participate in ‘extracurricular activities’, a half-hearted attempt of *‘praying the gay away’*.²²⁷ Both parents fall victim to one of the oldest stereotypes about homosexuality that “most of the college students experiment with their sexuality and have ‘gay-till-their married phase’”.²²⁸ The mother responds apprehensively but the person is called ‘Tensing’, hence there is a doubt about the gender of the person. But the father rebukes that it sounds like a boy’s name, thus will be good. The TVC ends with her calling up her male friend and saying ‘Tensing’, “*Goa is on.*” The tagline goes like, “जब लाइफ दिलाये झटके थिंक हटके” (when life gives you lemon, think differently).²²⁹ Here in, while there is a play around her sexual preference, the advertisement ignites a paranoia driven by homophobic colonial laws assimilated in the minds of Indian middle-class family of finding out that their child might be ‘gay’ and how media exploits that paranoia and taboos to mint money.

²²⁷ Pray the gay away is one of the “oldest practices of Conversion therapy that involved psychological or spiritual interventions in an attempt to change an individual’s sexual orientation from being homosexual or bisexual to heterosexual. This practice is still in prevalence in various religious communities to purge an individual of their deviant sexuality, despite no reliable evidence that sexual orientation can be changed and medical association across the world have warned that conversion therapy is ineffective and potentially harmful”.

²²⁸ Lesbian until Graduation (LUG), Gay until Graduation (GUG) and Bisexual Until Graduation (BUG) remain popular slangs used to “describe men and women primarily in high school or college who, for personal or logistical reasons decide to be lesbian, gay or bisexual till they graduate, experimenting or adopting a temporary identity for the sake of convenience. Seriousness of this varies between officially identifying with a particular identity which includes elaborate process of ‘coming out’ to not labelling oneself and simply using it for one’s benefit”. This term was appeared for the first time in a 1999 article in the Seattle Weekly by writer A. Davis, where she related “her experimentation with same-sex relationships, and how as a result she experienced hostility from her gay and straight friends alike, with some of her lesbian friends pushing her to identify herself primarily as bisexual, despite the fact that Davis identified herself as heterosexual and briefly experimented with women in college”. For see A. Davis (1999) Confessions of a College Lesbian, Republished on 10/9/2006 Accessed on 1/30/2019 <http://www.seattleweekly.com/news/confessions-of-a-college-lesbian/>

²²⁹ Virgin Mobile India Think Hatke Funny TV Commercial Ad #1. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FUlqPPIMd0>



Image 6.6a: Screenshots from Virgin Mobile: Think Hatke campaign (2008). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PCuJzED3is>

6.1 (c2) Pepsi-Youngistan Ka Wow (2010)

Carbonated soft drink brand Pepsi came up with an advertisement campaign meant for Television and Print featuring actor Ranbir Kapoor as their brand ambassador in 2010. As one of the advertisement spots for television as part of the campaign, we see a young woman arguing with her parents and is shown upset as her parents insist on her meeting a prospective groom in a traditional arranged marriage set up. As the two families settle down to have a conversation in the living room with various condiments, one sees a bottle of aerated drink Pepsi on the dining table. Just when the guests are about to take a sip from their drinks, Ranbir Kapoor barges into the house and reveals that this marriage cannot happen. As in classic melodramatic genre, one expects him to be the old lover of the girl, as the families look at the girl in suspicion, but Ranbir (re)directs his attention to the male suitor and lands a peck on his cheek.

The guy is completely startled, the parents shocked, and the girl is beyond amused. The situation escalates further as another man appears claiming to be the male suitor's ex-lover. The marriage negotiation is suggested to be broken off, as we see the three friends relaxing drinking Pepsi revealing that it was just a ploy, as the girl profusely thank her friends. Ranbir Kapoor claims, "They were doing it for the Pepsi and not for her." The TVC signs off with the tagline, "*Youngistan Ka Wow.*" The TVC received praise across the advertising industry for cheekiness as various advocates of the advertisement defended it and claimed that it was not homophobic at all, and homosexuality was not used as a bait to attract attention of the viewers.

However, the advertisement plays out on the existing essentialised stereotypes about gay men as there is an underscore of polyamorous nature of homosexuals within the advertisement. While the underlying subtext of the advertisement is that the millennials will go to any lengths to assert themselves, there is a disapproving commentary on the promiscuous nature of gay men and this is used as 'bait to show the fact that the youth is not scared of experimenting with their sexuality'. For the youth, desires are no longer confined to the material realm of food, fashion or gadgets, but also extends to the emotional and the sexual. Establishing the male suitor as a 'closeted gay men' also played upon the fears of Indian parents dissuading them from pushing their daughter into a loveless marriage, or that their son might be gay.

One can see that although gay characters and themes have been presented onscreen before, no actor in Indian film industry have come out as 'queer'. Straight cisgendered male actors such as Ranbir Kapoor in this advertisement use "queerness as a foil for comic relief or to portray queerness as deviancy" (Gross 1991). There remains a scarcity of actors willing to perform gay roles in theatre or cinematic medium, as they would risk the rejection of an idealised heartthrob as well as intertextual synthesising of the real and reel within the industry and potential implications to one's career with one's association with gay roles. The audience while watching Pepsi's advertisement are constantly aware of Ranbir Kapoor's heterosexuality and the fact, he was in a high-profile relationship with another Bollywood actor Deepika Padukone, that enabled him to take on this role as a 'closeted gay man' in the advertisement. For Gayatri Gopinath this advertisement is quite contrary to the alleged gay identity presented onscreen, "The potential of queerness infiltrating home space is foreclosed by solidifying queer identity on the body of a supporting male character" (Gopinath 2005, 127).

There were stock characterisation and usage of stereotypes done in the Pepsi advertisement as well as queer representations that followed in Hindi films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2002) and *Dostana* (2008). One of the most common indicative patterns being the "feminising of the gay male character and representing gay men as contra-masculine" (Dasgupta 2017). This kind of queer representation didn't draw the ire of public and far right alike, something that was witnessed during the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998) where most of the public saw "queerness as an alternative way of life, threatening to dismantle the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage" (Dave 2012). The Indian media industry used queerbaiting to its own advantage, and gave opportunity to actors like Shahrukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, John Abraham, Ranbir Kapoor etc. for being '*Gay for Pay*²³⁰' for particular projects, adding range

²³⁰ 'Gay for a Pay' is a phenomenon where "male or female actors who primarily identify themselves as heterosexuals get paid to act or perform as homosexuals professionally. This practice not only applies to actors but also pornographic actors, sex workers etc. This term has also been applied to other media professionals who queer bait both gay and straight demographics" (Leap 1999, 62). In the pornographic industry particularly the term 'gay for pay' refers to "actors who identify themselves as straight but also engage in same-sex sexual activities for money or sexual gains" (Leap 1999, 62). Scholar Camille Pagila declared that, "seduction of straight studs is highly erotic motif in gay porn", anthropologist William Leap adds, "as in most gay male settings, the young, muscular, and familiar are more sought". For more see Camille, Pagila (1994) *No Law in the Arena: A Pagan Theory of Sexuality*, in *Vamps and Tramps*, Vintage, p.87 and Leap., William L. 1999 *Public Sex/Gay Space*. Columbia University Press; p. 62.

to their acting careers, while they end up playing heterosexual male hero leads for rest of their lives.



Pepsi's Youngistan Ka Wow!
Click here to play

Image 6.6 b &c: Ranbir Kapoor acts in 'Gay for Pay' advertisement as part of the Pepsi's Youngistan ka Wow advertisement campaign. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD4qv7pAoN4>

6.2 Rainbows and Transgressions: Cases of Queer Advertising in Neoliberal India

In the previous section, I discussed various tropes media adopted to reach out to the newly empowered queer community across Indian sub-continent. With the recent changes brought forth by the judiciary in terms of recognising queer subjects as citizens of India (specially with respect to the September 6, 2018 judgement), the rainbow industry expanded its consumer demographic to the newly empowered and legally recognised queer community. As Rainbow industry and Pink Rupee infiltrated the Indian subcontinent, it exposed various chasms, following the adoption of a neoliberal framework where “LGBT rights are presented as an exception site of struggle somehow divorced from the intersections of race, gender, sex, class, caste, ethnicity, sect and nationality”. The Neoliberal framework allowed extensive networks of NGOs and rights-based discourse reframe realities and narratives of ‘queerness’ allowing only certain empowered group of ‘anglicized, English educated, urban, cosmopolitan queer’ elite to continue strengthen their control over the sexually disfranchised groups.

This section would be discussing recent examples where representational politics within a neoliberal consumerist mainstream media when broadcasting the queer subject and linking it to a larger context of claiming sexual citizenship by taking into account recently released product based advertisements as well as a Gay matrimonial advertisement published in 2015. Selective product-based advertisements such as Myntra’s *Bold is Beautiful* campaign with one of the advertisements titled *The Visit* (2015) were shown depicting Lesbian romances. Similarly, recent launch of public service videos titled – *The Welcome* (2014) brought by the ‘Free and Equal Campaign’ by the United Nations in support of LGBT rights in India and *The Seat Belt Crew* (2014) created by the Ogilvy and Mathers in collaboration with Channel V as part of a road safety awareness raising campaign deploying ‘transgenders’. Queer scholar Rahul Sen sees this as, “The collusion of state and the media comes across most prominently in its patronising impulse to ‘assimilate’ the queer subject into the hetero-patriarchal masculinist structures of ‘family’, ‘marriage’ or the state machinery by effacing the transgressive possibilities that queer entails” (Sen, 2014, 10). These advertisements were employed to create narratives of homonationalism hence pinkwashing the gender injustice faced by the members of community after recriminalising of Section 377 in December 2013;

and how the scenario for the LGBT community changed post the NALSA judgement in 2014 and reading down of Section 377 by Supreme Court of India on September 6, 2018.

6.2(a) Caste no bar but ‘Iyer Preferred’: A Curious case of Gay Matrimonial

Matrimonial advertisements, or matrimonial are a type of communication that appears in the Classified section of newspapers. The prima facie of these advertisements is to facilitate matchmaking within a heterosexual arranged marriage set up within Indian society. According to Ramakrishnan, Matrimonial across newspapers, magazines and tabloids appear as

“Formulaic texts of identity that follow a specific schematic structure and are replete with culturally nuanced lexical items referencing caste/sub-caste, patrilineal descent, and planetary positions at birth. Matrimonial are a sub-genre of the classified advertisements, and may be interpreted through the Matrimonial Ads Register, which explicates language use in the textual discourse of matrimony in terms of functionality and simplicity as read against sociocultural norms and ideologies” (Ramakrishnan 2012, 432).

Matrimonial advertisements remain a common social practice in India since arranged marriages continue to be widely accepted social norm practiced in India (Ramakrishnan 2012, 432-433). Matchmaking and matrimony has traversed from being arranged by the local priest or matchmaker and the natal family to print media classified matrimonial advertisement to online spaces with matchmaking websites like www.shaadi.com or www.bharatmatrimony.com. This section attempts to understand the representational politics behind the first gay matrimonial advertisement published in India in 2015.

Classified matrimonial advertisements in India have long been known for its vitriolic sexism, racism, casteism and general hypocrisy. There’s usually unabashed openness when one seeks fair skinned, well-educated but would give up their employment post marriage to become the ideal wife, and for grooms who earn more than their wives, who belong to a certain caste and class. These classified advertisements have remained to be an uncharted territory for LGBTQ individuals, so imagine the surprise upon the sight of a ‘Groom Wanted’ advertisement put out by a concerned mother of a gay son.

Hailed as India’s first gay matrimonial advertisement that Mid-Day published in May 2015, this advertisement was inserted by Padma Iyer, mother of Harish Iyer, a prominent gay

activist and media personality.²³¹ Through this advertisements, Padma Iyer was seeking a match (groom) for her son. The “Groom Wanted” advertisement came as a pleasant surprise in an otherwise homophobic India, however the text held its own story,

“Seeking 25-40, well-placed, animal-loving, vegetarian, Groom for my son (36, 5’11”) who works with an NGO, Caste No BAR (though Iyer preferred)”²³²

This became a watershed moment in the history of queer activism as there was a clear divide in the movement regarding this advertisement as for few it became the marker of the New India acceptable of queer men and women seeking matrimony under the aegis of the Indian state while others were astonished by the casteist nature of the advertisement. What remained astonishing was Harish Iyer’s response in *The New Minute* towards the criticism towards the advertisement:

“There are many objections to the fact that my mom wrote ‘Iyer Preferred’. If you look at matrimonial ads in all leading newspapers, they mention all sorts of things such as wheatish skin, fair skin etc. Some ads even specify the type of figure they want a woman to have. It’s so common to see all these discriminatory things in the papers. And suddenly, the people are offended by the fact that his mom wrote ‘Iyer Preferred’”.²³³

What remains interesting is the “act of solicitation of gay marriage within the ambit of Brahmanism, as Iyers are Tamil Brahmins belonging to middle classes, but also amongst the top hierarchies of Hindu castes and endogamy legitimated within the Hindu religion” (Fuller and Haripriya 2014). “These hierarchies that have been propagated from time immemorial within the huge heterosexual matrimonial market was now fully embraced by the queers as well” (Banerjee and Lafortune 2013). As social media erupted with celebrations around this ‘progressive’ advertisement, there was this constant surge of criticism around how while activism remains to be a liberal idea, the failure to acknowledge the lack of intersectionality with other caste, class and gender based struggles within the queer movement remains rampant, as for some, queer struggles remains to exist in what Harish Iyer displayed is a

²³¹ Inani, Rohit Mother Posts India’s First Gay Marriage Advert to Seek Groom for Her Son, TIME (May 21, 2015), <http://time.com/3891962/india-gay-homosexual-lgbt-rights-marriage-advert/>.

²³² Ibid

²³³ Borges, Andre This Guy’s Mom Wanted to Find Him a Husband, So She Placed India’s First Gay “Groom Wanted” Ad, BUZZFEED (May 19, 2015, 12:42 PM), <http://www.buzzfeed.com/andreborges/first-gay-matrimonial-groom-wanted-ad#.erywMDn6W>.

‘holier than thou’ attitude, where the ad as well his justification screamed, “My activism for gay rights is caste no bar but Iyer preferred. This is the norm so we followed it.”²³⁴

It is almost ironic that in a later conversation with the Editor of Mid-Day, Sachin Kalbag, didn’t notice the casteist overtones of the advertisement in the quest of being liberal. Responding to the furore around the advertisement on Buzz Feed, he said,

“A marriage is a meeting of minds, of souls. At Mid-Day, we believe that human rights should be applicable to all, regardless of religion, caste, colour, sexual orientation etc. Therefore, a mother seeking a union for her gay son is perfectly normal. Why should it be any different? In fact, why should we even be talking about it? In an equal society, while we all strive for, this should be routine.”²³⁵

With various narratives in place, one can witness an ‘interdependence’ of the *jajmani*²³⁶ (traditional socio-economic system) which function according to Leela Dube, “at the level of the family and fixes gender to caste through marriage and respectability, while fixing caste to an individual’s economic sustainability” (Dube 1997, 3). Harish Iyer’s inability to move away from the heteronormative kinship network, and sustained pressure faced by him and many other members of the queer community is symbolic of the inherent struggles within the queer community in India. However, Iyer’s position as an upper caste, upper class, LGBTQ activist at times obligates him to take a clear stand despite expected conspicuous gender identity or expressed ‘alternative’ desire. The idea of queerness itself intends to disrupt both heteropatriarchal gender and caste norms, while fighting a constant emulation of homonormativity which is no more liberating for same-sex couples attempting to divest and digress from heteronormative oppression, while recreating their own models of oppressive structures.

Is it possible for the newly emerging urban, middle-class, upper-caste, educated woke Savarna Hindus to choose to ignore intersectional prejudices at play when one fights the good

²³⁴ Ibid

²³⁵ Ibid

²³⁶ Jajmani system find its origin in the pre-industrial socio-economic system prevalent in rural villages of India, where a Jajman or Yajman (patron) who are from the upper caste landowning families availed services from the lower caste community in exchange of giving them grain or other goods in return. Harold Gould describes this system as an “inter-familial, intercaste relationship pertaining to the patterning of superordinate-subordinate relations between patrons and suppliers. For more see Gould, H. (1964). A Jajmani System of North India: Its Structure, Magnitude, and Meaning. *Ethnology*, 3(1), 12-41. doi:10.2307/4617554

fight? The next section would analyse three YouTube based advertisements to reflect upon various biases at play while acknowledging queer cosmopolitan consumer citizen and ignoring other non-normative bodies at play.



Image 6.7: Matrimonial advertisement placed by Padma Iyer for her gay son Harish Iyer in Mid-Day which generated a lot of controversy. Source: Mid-Day rejects a gay matrimonial ad: What explains its U-Turn on LGBT rights? <https://www.newslandry.com/2015/09/29/mid-day-rejects-a-gay-matrimonial-ad-what-explains-its-u-turn-on-lgbt-rights>

6.2(b) The Welcome: United Nations Free and Equal Campaign (2014)

Celebrations around the historic ruling around same-sex marriage judgment passed by the Supreme Court of United States of America in 2015 had its reverberations across the world.²³⁷ In fact, with the legalisation of same-sex marriage, the LGBT communities across the globe attempted to make themselves more mainstreamed, with exclusive queer events, pink spaces and larger section of the community attempting to be assimilated in the larger mainstream narrative and not to be ghettoised. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in April 2014 launched the “first ever Bollywood-style UN music video at a press conference in Mumbai to promote its Free & Equal campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality” (OHCHR 2014).

The two-and-a-half minute video, titled ‘*The Welcome*’ stars former Miss India turned actress Celina Jaitley. Jaitley who is known for her activism for LGBT equality, “makes her musical debut in the video, singing a new version of the 1979 Bollywood classic, *Uthe Sab Ke Kadam*” (OHCHR 2014). According to Office of United Nations High Commission in their press release give further details,

“The song was recomposed and remixed by Neeraj Shreedhar of the Bombay Vikings, and produced in association with the music company Saregama India. The dance moves in the video were choreographed by Longi – the choreographer for *Slumdog Millionaire* – who worked on the project pro bono, as did the entire cast. The concept for the video was developed by creative agency Curry Nation”²³⁸ (OHCHR 2014).

The launch of the advertisement was limited to YouTube and social networking websites such as Facebook but it garnered positive reviews across India and the world.

But as one delves into analysing the concept and choreographing of the video, one encounters deeply embedded issues within the advertisements and the politics that it attempts to cater in

²³⁷ *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) is a landmark civil rights case in which the “Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The 5–4 ruling requires all fifty states to perform and recognise the marriages of same-sex couples on the same terms and conditions as the marriages of opposite-sex couples, with all the accompanying rights and responsibilities”.

²³⁸ For more see UN “Free & Equal” campaign launched in India with release of first UN Bollywood music Video published on 4/30/2014, Accessed on 11/25/2018.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14551&LangID=E>

a longer run. One needs to remember that this advertisement came post Kaushal judgement in 2013, when Supreme Court overturned the High Court judgment of 2009 making homosexuality a criminal offence again. The advertisement's attempt was to change the mindset of the masses by using one of the popular and recognisable entertainment formulas of song and dance sequence which is very much associated to Indian film industry and has a larger appeal to the masses.

The advertisement begins with shots of the open skies as the camera pans up and now down to a man talking on his cellphone about his employer and a special guest (possible romantic interest) who would be introduced to family. There is a sense of celebration and revelry as we get a glimpse of the chaotic nature as everyone is running around to create an ambience of celebration to welcome the so-called 'prodigal son' and his mysterious guest, who is probably his romantic interest, a very much '*guess who's coming for dinner*' kind of set up.

The video gives a glimpse into the "private space of a bourgeois joint family, where the decors resemble something close to the fantastical with swimming pools and luscious garden and various other possessions symbolising upper class status of the family" (Kapur and Pendakur 2007). What remains interesting is this new image of an extended family—"open to fun and consumption but still having an overwhelming aura of authoritarian and constraining nature disciplined for production" (Kapur and Pendakur 2007) (emphasis mine). However, instead of patriarch, there is a figure of matriarch, who is watchful of everyone and feared and respected by all. Interestingly, within this realm, there is a clear divide between the private and the public "as the men are absent from the space of revelry, as one would assume that they are busy running the family business, as the women, children and grandparents revel in an endless celebration of rituals and merrymaking" (Kapur and Pendakur 2007) (emphasis mine).

The Welcome (2014) draws parallel to the genre of 'family melodrama' of 1990s, with filmmakers like Sooraj Barjatya, Yash Chopra, Karan Johar invoking a 'sense of nostalgia' for the joint family among the cinemagoers, while also showing the struggle between tradition vs. modernity in age of neoliberalisation.²³⁹ This aestheticisation also reveals within

²³⁹ The film that brought the Hindu joint family into the collective imagination of the masses through Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Apke Hai Kaun* (How are we related? ; 1995)

itself “elements of camp, through depictions of kitsch imagery and an exaggerated sense of melodrama” (Kapur and Pendakur 2007). Dudrah (2006) comments on this distorted representation of Hindi cinema,

“What needs to be noted that it was the camp, kitsch and fun aspects of Bollywood as safe commodification that was overplayed in a lot of the images and written text that accompanied the celebration and appropriation of Hindi cinema in last few years. This is evident in terms of most of the world perceiving Indian cinema within the genre of musicals, which then automatically signifies them as ‘camp’” (Dudrah 2006, 118).

Most of these film’s narrative is centered around a Hindu wedding and fueled the “middle-class imagination of conspicuous spending around new rituals around marriage” (Kapur and Pendakur 2007). Jyotsna Kapur and Manjunath Pendakur in *The Strange Disappearance of Bombay from its Own Cinema* (2007) claim this phenomenon as,

“A curious case of the invention of tradition! In this genre loosely characterised as the romantic family melodrama the household with its various relatives and servants live happy, self-absorbed lives, each in their assigned places in the patriarchal hierarchy-so busy celebrating Hindu rituals that they have no desire or time for any public engagement” (Kapur and Pendakur 2007, 48).

This is very well seen in the video as the family is shown indulging in revelry and merrymaking, as you have Celina Jaitley swaying to a popular Bollywood number. In its apparent glitz, glamour and elitist settings, the camera then shifts back and forth between the preparation by the family and a well-groomed man getting ready to meet his family. As shots proceed, one can clearly see the markers of class identity; this man wears expensive clothes from brands such as Manyavar known for ethnic wears²⁴⁰, he has a chauffeur driven SUV, as the viewer is given a sense of fact that he might be the head of a business organisation and clearly doesn’t belong to working or middle class. The family is shown awaiting with baited breath as the man steps out of the vehicle but their smiles soon disappear, as another man steps out of the car and holds his hand indicating their status as same-sex lovers. The situation intensifies as the family is joined by the matriarch, and she is shown as shell-shocked by this reveal.

²⁴⁰Manyavar is a men's ethnic wear brand founded by Entrepreneur Ravi Modi in 1999 under his company Vedant Fashions. It offers Sherwanis, Kurtas and indo-western wear for men.

As it happens in most of the Hindi films the situation is soon diffused with a song sung by Celina Jaitley as she reworks the verses to fit the situation, she sings,

रंग नया है, रूप नया है
जीने का तोह देखो यहाँ ढंग नया है
किसे क्या फ़िक्र, इन्हे क्या पसंद
प्यार के जहाँ में बस हम और तुम
तुम हम बन गए, ऐ सनम बेधड़क
मेरे घर आया करो

*(It's a new look, it's a new attitude
You might wonder where the old way of living is gone
But who is worried about who likes what
As long as in the world of love, two people
Want to be with each other
You and me. Me and you. The new unstoppable
So please don't hesitate
You are always 'Welcome' to my home)* (Translation Mine)

Everyone waits with baited breath as the matriarch finally accepts the same-sex couple as they touch her feet (a Hindu custom), and the video ends with all the family members dancing to the song and celebrate this newfound acceptance. The UN webpage offers a subtitle to the video which reads: “Love is a family value” (OHCHR 2014), as everyone resumes their joyous revelry.

What is most striking is the site that is chosen for this ‘ceremonious coming out’ as well as the process of ‘coming out’ that is contested and challenged by several queer theorists and activists alike and how the concerned grandiose further problematises it. If one truly goes into history of queerness and apparent attempts of coming out by queer individuals, it is meted with violence from their natal families as well as their friends, peers, co-workers etc. Not many queer individuals get an opportunity or afford to ‘come out’ in such a ceremonious fashion as indicated within the video. The video summarises the criticism within the queer movement as well as from outside where it is considered elitist, classist, bourgeoisie as well as exclusionary for giving the ‘pedestal of privacy’ to chosen few while ignoring the rest.

Celina Jaitley’s attempt to convince the old, stern matriarchal dadi (grandmother) by saying ‘*it is a new look, it is a new attitude*’ shows the preconceived notions with which UN Free and Equal directed this campaign. The video completely ignores the “rich homoerotic cultural

past that records gender variance and the fact that the audience might already be aware of the same and not be as homophobic as imagined” (Vanita 2002). The video ends up erasing the rich queer past of the country, and replaces it with the much talked about ‘Global Gay’ syndrome. The video also unveils the possible dangers of homonationalism as well as hegemonic pinkwashing that is known to negate class, caste, gender, sexuality and race through complete homogenisation and overbearing consumer culture.

There is a strange interplay between sexual identities and expenditure as the newly emergent ‘gay subjectivity’ is marked by confluence of business and what role they can play in the consumer market. At the first view, “the video came across as elitist, exclusionary, patronising and parochial in appeal” (Sen 2014). Upon another viewing, one realises that “the video ends up eliminating the queerness from its discourse” (Sen 2014). There is a deliberate choice made by the United Nations ‘Free and Equal’ campaign to champion the ‘LGBT equality’ and not ‘queer equality’. Also, there is clear gender based hierarchisation that is visible within the campaign as it seems that the “campaign targets and foregrounds the sole prerogative of gay men” (Sen 2014) (emphasis mine). UN deliberately leaves out women and trans* folks as their autonomous sexual subjects of this transgressive act, and chooses to portray two upper class, upper caste men.

The advertisement aligns the “role of gay men and capitalism and emphasis on the gay consumer in maintaining their status quo of acceptable homosexuality i.e. an image of respectable ‘gayness’” (D’Emilio, 1996). The advertisement reaffirms on the maintenance of status quo- with the sole image of upper middle class, upper caste men with financial stability who would flourish under the burgeoning economy. In this advertisement, the gaze reserved to a heteronormative male patriarch is replaced by female matriarch as she oversees the recontextualisation of performances of gender and sexuality within the traditional familial framework allowing the gay male couple to produce themselves as part of a homo-normative framework. As Cossman (2007) notes,

“Normalisation is a strategy for inclusion in the prevailing social norms and institutions of family, gender, work and nation. This strategy for inclusion neutralises the significance of sexual deviance, particularly of those subjects who in every other way, reproduce ideal citizenship” (Cossman 2007).

This example of the family and the state playing a powerful role in not only patronising identities but also producing them. These mediated images reshape and program queer content, produces queer subjectivities and draws attention to the discriminatory measures employed by the family and state along with ideals and values of neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism. The gay male couple pass as ‘acceptable queer citizens’ because of their performances of gender become acceptable with the aid of heterosexual cosmopolitan matrix. For this couple despite their sexual identity, the institution of family comes first, no matter how regressive and oppressive it is.

For many queer theorist and activists alike, traditional heterosexist family is an incarnation of heteropatriarchy and those who identify themselves as ‘queer’ often seek to dismantle the institution of family, and do not wish to be merged in these heteropatriarchal structures of oppression that erases any transgressive possibilities of dissent or resistance. The couple’s adherence to heteronormative core family values in the video situate them within a critique of this discrimination in the context of neoliberalism and its attendant practices of cosmopolitanism and consumerism. This allows a new set of tools for studying available queer image-based texts in mediated cultures. The UN video ends up into a self-defeating note as it unknowingly champions (in)visible patriarchy instead of going against the grain.

Alexandra Chasin addresses this as, “confluence of political mobilisation, assimilation, and socio-economic status in gay society by filtering these ideas through proliferation of advertising and marketing directed specifically at the gay community what can be termed as ‘niche marketing’” (Chasin 2000, 80). She further argues that “gay’s divorcement from mainstream society, and their status as moral and sexual deviants, created a pregnant imperative for their manipulation through consumer products and images” (Chasin 2000, 80). She further adds,

“Exclusion from the mainstream culture is cast in political terms, but the solution for it is offered in the market... characteristically consumer culture offers redress for the disenfranchisement of those who have traditionally been cast as ‘other’ on the basis of their- ‘identities’” (Chasin 2000, 39).

Hence, there is an innate symbiotic relationship between the gay consumer and the corporate identity (largely hetero-normative). The rights-based approach suffers a serious blow in the hands of gay consumerism as it renders gay lives as superficial within the context of socio-

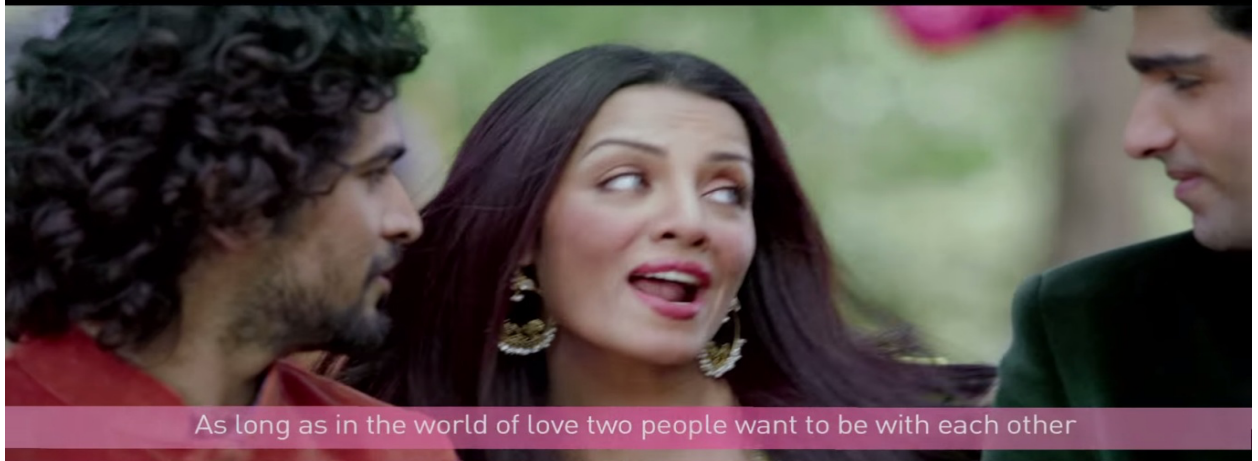
political movement and interaction. These consumption patterns come at a price of larger exclusion within the stratified sociosexual communities, as advertisers and marketers rely on stereotypical, narrow subset of the population for increasing their own revenue by pushing a specific image or ideal.

Lisa Henderson links “class and queer visibility and observes that in commercial popular culture, the class spectrum remains compressed” (Henderson 2013). Representation of wealth remains out of proportion. The emphasis remains on representing the space of the family while lower middle classes and poverty stricken queers are limited to public service announcements and are absent from the space of mainstream commercial media. There is a constant undertone of how upward mobility is rewarded to ‘ideal queer subjects’ who in turn become ‘ideal citizens’.

The next section reflects upon two advertisements that were released on YouTube and attempt to locate articulation of queer emancipation within the homonormative familial set up. Both Myntra’s *The Visit* (2015) and Channel V’s *Seat Belt Crew* (2014) utilises aesthetic and mediated tropes that are used to fashion narratives of emancipation for ‘chosen few’, while reinforcing class, caste, gender, sex and religious hierarchies.



The Welcome - United Nations Free & Equal



As long as in the world of love two people want to be with each other

1:51 / 2:43



Image 6.8,6.9 and 6.10: Screenshots from The Welcome (2014) advertisement displaying the decadent lifestyle of the rich, façade of liberal acceptance around queerness. Source: United Nations goes 'Bollywood' in latest effort to promote LGBT rights. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2014/04/united-nations-goes-bollywood-in-latest-effort-to-promote-lgbt-rights/>

6.2(c) Anouk's Bold is Beautiful Campaign: The Visit (2015)

Second instance of another advertisement was a video launched as part of the *Bold and Beautiful* campaign for the ethnic apparel wear *Anouk*²⁴¹ launched by Myntra²⁴² and was deemed as 'India's first lesbian ad' in 2015 (Johri 2015). One of the advertisement spots from the much acclaimed and radical advertising campaign launched on video sharing platform YouTube featured two queer women in an apparent live-in relationship and became an internet sensation across the nation for being seen as 'trail blazing lesbian theme'. Various online news media platforms ascribed to the "lesbian" identity and lauded Myntra for breaking new grounds.

The advertisement opens with a young urban same-sex lesbian couple, relaxed and confident in their skins, living in a tastefully decorated home with posters of cinema classics such as 'A Clockwork Orange' and 'Pulp Fiction' adorning the wall as the mis-en-scene gives an experience of softness through the advertisement. The class dynamics within the advertisement is well-established at the outset as the couple converse in English since one of the women's mother tongue is Tamil and hence English becomes the language of communication between these cross-cultural lovers. The advertisement attempts to capture the nervousness, excitement and anxiousness as one of the women prepares herself and her partner to meet her parents, and reveal about their romantic relationship. The couple 'coming out' marks an important occasion as we see both of them wearing Anouk apparels. Oishak Sircar reflects upon the video as he writes,

"The video builds a sense of calm anticipation of their 'coming out', as the couple prepares themselves to reveal their romantic relationship to their parents. One of them asks, "Are you sure about this?" The one whose parents are visiting responds: "I am sure about us, and I don't want to hide this anymore". The video fades out with the words "*Bold is Beautiful*" on the screen, as the couple holding hands walk out of the frame to meet the parents, who are not shown in the video" (Sircar 2017, 9-10).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick dwells upon the

"Role of television (new media) viewer as an active and agential consumer of the visual while highlighting the limited capacity of media texts to adequately represent queer bodies and lives. No doubt everyone will have a wish list, I would like to order up some characters with body hair, ungleaming teeth, subcutaneous fat, or shorter

²⁴¹ Anouk is an ethnic wear apparel brand by Myntra.

²⁴² Myntra is an Indian fashion e-commerce company headquartered in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

than-chin length haircuts. Oh, and may be with some politics” (Sedgwick 2004, 10-11).

Sedgwick critique of queer women’s “representation comments upon the lesbian embodiment, sexuality, lifestyle, community and politics that are emblematic of the representation of queer lives in mainstream media” (Sedgwick 2004). She also revokes the various stereotypes associated with the queer community which is also glaringly present in the Mynta advertisement, as it is unable to represent the ‘real’ lesbian subjectivities and ends up playing with the butch-femme aesthetics. The emphasis within the advertisement is on “evaluating the quality or effectiveness of the image text against a series of predetermined binaries of butch/femme, good/bad, realistic/unrealistic, political/apolitical etc.” (Burns and Davies 2009, 175).

In the advertisement, one woman is represented as butch with short hair while the one who is getting ready to welcome her parents is shown clearly as femme.²⁴³ While queer-feminists have critiqued the butch-femme aesthetics for replicating the essentialist hetero-normative model of sexuality, for advertisers as well as media personnel’s, this remains one of the most common methods of mass appeal amongst the queer as well as straight population. Queer feminists such as Sue Ellen Case, Teresa deLauretis, Madeline Davis, E.L. Kennedy emphasise on the construction of lesbian representation in the popular culture.

Sue Ellen Case in “*Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic*” (1988) begins her article with a critique of the feminist argument, particularly popular in the seventies and early eighties, that “butch-femme role playing among lesbians belongs to an “old” pattern of heterosexual behaviour which should be discarded in favour of a new identity as a ‘feminist woman’” (Case 1988 (1993)).²⁴⁴ Case further counters with the critique that,

“This feminist devaluation of lesbian butch-femme roles not only dismisses the importance of these roles for working-class and other marginalised women, but also

²⁴³ Butch and femme are terms used in the “lesbian subculture to ascribe or acknowledge a masculine (butch) or feminine (femme) identity with its associated traits, behaviors, styles, self-perception, and so on”.

²⁴⁴ This argument is built on the “assumption that what is oppressive about heterosexual roles is the emphasis on difference, which necessarily implies hierarchy, and that equality depends on the elimination of difference in everything from appearance to sexual roles” (Case 1988(1993)). For more see Case, Sue-Ellen. “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic.” *Discourse* 11 (Winter 1988-1989). (reprinted in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. 1993. eds. Abelove et al. New York: Routledge, 294-306)

fails to see in such role-playing the subversive potential of exposing all gender roles as masquerade” (Case 1988 (1993)).²⁴⁵

For Case, butch-femme roles are “not replicas of a heterosexual pattern which disempowers women and deprives them of subjectivity, but are, in fact, anti-heterosexual in their ability to empower women in either role by allowing them both to occupy the subject position” (Case 1988 (1993)).

However, with more identities being added within the umbrella of queerness, there is a failure in part of the media to acknowledge anything besides a gay, lesbian and trans* narrative. This uncritical imposition is visible in both *The Welcome* (2014) and *Myntra* (2015) advertisement, as it is rooted in the unnuanced assumption that all cisgender men and women in same-sex relationships are by default gays and lesbians. This simplicity drives other marginalised sexual identities further to the margins.

Business, Not Politics (2004) authored by Katherine Sender focuses on the fiscal motives of business which creates a greater divide within the LGBT community. She argues,

“Marketers are invested in producing and maintaining gay difference. The real dangers of marketer’s constructions of gayness lies in how they produce this difference. Limiting what is imaginable as a recognisably gay citizen: usually male, affluent, discreetly sexual, apolitical, gay subjects” (Sender 2004, 76).

Sender acknowledges this with gays as participants in the capitalist structure which in itself is decidedly hetero-normative and heterosexist. She adds,

“By adopting heterosexual, professional-class norms of respectability, affluent gay and lesbians can construct a habitus somewhat protected from the more vilified associations with (particularly male) homosexuality. The taste culture that gay marketing helps to produce allows privileged gays to unhitch along lines of sexual solidarity and express class solidarity with heterosexual professionals instead” (Sender 2004, 76).

There is a constant homogenisation of the queer struggles when diversities within the queer community is ignored, and to make these connotations comfortable for the non-queer

²⁴⁵ Whereas the dominant culture has naturalised heterosexual roles as innate or essential, butch-femme role playing exposes them as constructs with a specific agenda, which then lends agency and self-determination to the women who actively choose, rather than passively accept, these roles. Ibid 300

population. The two seemingly cisgendered women portrayed in the Myntra advertisement demonstrate their earnestness to be visible to the larger masses and gain acceptance as lovers. This eagerness to assimilate oneself in the structure remains detrimental to many queer individuals having deeply marginalised identities, as they are deprived of their right to visibility and recognition. This straightjacketing of identities within the queer movement works as an advantage for the field of advertising and marketing within this deeply consumer driven economy. With these advertising campaigns, the mainstream media pats itself on the back for its altruism and inclusivity while it reinforces exclusion. There is a complete stripping of one's agency, when sweeping generalisation about queer individuals and communities are circulated as it injures queer people's sense of self. Even subversive attempts to queering representation end up being assimilated within a larger heteronormative narrative.

According to Burns and Davies, "these are successful subjects of neoliberalism and model cosmopolitan consumers who are able to negotiate their economic well-being regardless of their personal circumstances" (Burns and Davies 2009, 179). By ensuring their future through the market individuals are encouraged to line "as if making a project of themselves" (Rose 1996, 157). There is a "complete lack of engagement with political debates relevant to the everyday lives of queer people" (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006) and its "lack of concern of the complex ways in which race and class are signified within the queer community" (Sedgwick 2004).

In other words, the focus is to delve in how politics of sex, gender and varied intersections between issues of class, caste, race, gender and sexuality are produced within "models of cosmopolitanism and consumer citizenship and how these function with respect to media's intervention" (Sedgwick 2004). Ulrich Beck (2004) maintains that "cosmopolitan citizenship feeds on the economy of excess that depends on the fetishization and consumption of the other" (Beck 2004). He writes,

"Cosmopolitanism has itself become a commodity; the glitter of cultural difference fetches a good price. Images of an in-between world, of the black body, exotic beauty, exotic music, exotic food and so on, are globally cannibalised, re-staged and consumed as produced for mass markets" (Beck 2004, 150-151).

In the *Welcome* and *Myntra* advertisement, this is clearly visible as the desire to be more cosmopolitan. As Beck sees it as “the ability and desire to ‘being worldly’ is about making consumer choices- travelling to certain ‘exotic places’, eating in certain ‘exotic places’-that overlook the expectations of power and give sexual minorities access and power to consume majoritarian politics, and being assimilated in it” (Beck 2004; Burns and Davies 2009, 182).

In the advertisements discussed above, the characters are placed as key cosmopolitan consumers in a climate of neoliberalism in which “consumption is seen to represent the liberties that come with both heteronormative and homo-normative citizenship in India” (Sircar 2017). Access to ethnic, class, caste difference is thus always bound to consumer and lifestyle practices that ends up fetishizing some bodies over the other and leads to making of a normative or model cosmopolitan sexual citizen. As David Evans (1993) argues, “the progressive sexualisation of modern capitalist societies is primarily shaped by the complex interrelated material interests of the market and the state” (Evans 1993, 1).

There is a sense of pseudo-political commentaries within these advertisements with issues such as inter-cultural, inter-generational, same-sex relationship etc. The subject matter is always mediated within a storyline and setting that normalise elite and exclusive consumptive practices. While both advertisements locate normalisation of queer liberation within a domestic monogamous conjugality-which remains a dream for many, “this remains to be a public assertion to challenge the compulsory heterosexuality and institution of the family” (Sircar 2017). The queer identity is navigated through varied romantic and sexual assertions while conversations around class, caste, and endogamous marriage is completed glossed over, which is similar to the idea of “epistemic violence” which is now signified by the idea of New India.



Image 6.11, 6.12 and 6.13: Screenshots from Anouk's The Visit (2015) ad campaign showing neoliberal cosmopolitan queer women awaiting their parents and their eventual coming out moment. Source: Myntra Bold is Beautiful: The Visit (2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef27m5ocK6Q>

6.2(d) Formation of Trans* as an Identity: NALSA judgment (2014) and Seat Belt Crew (2014)

While the euphoria surrounding the July 2009 judgement by Delhi High Court in partial reading down the Section 377, with the Supreme Court judgement reversing it in 2013, another judgement that came after the Kaushal judgement deserves a special mention here. In a historic judgement in *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) vs. Union of India*²⁴⁶, the Supreme Court of India recognised the transgender persons as the ‘third gender’ and ordered that their fundamental rights to identity in Part III of the Indian constitution needs to be upheld and protected under “right to decide their self-identified gender” (Sircar 2017, 17).

As part of the judgement, there was a direct order to the central and state governments to treat transgender persons,

“As socially and educationally backward classes of citizens and extend all kinds of reservation in cases of admission in educational institutions and for public appointments (to them). The decision was “hailed by human rights activists and media alike for its albeit progressivism and was unanimously welcomed by political parties” (Sircar 2017, 17).²⁴⁷

The pathbreaking judgement raised valid contentions regarding how while Kaushal judgement was deemed regressive and a blow to human rights of the sexual minorities within India, the same Supreme Court ended delivering such an affirming judgement in favour of India’s sexually and culturally marginalised.

Oishik Sircar notes,

“All three judgements i.e. Naz (2009), Koushal (2013) and NALSA (2014) were concerned with violence faced by the non-normative population due to various societal prejudices, while one primary distinction between the former was the legitimacy of non-procreative sex; rights of a culturally identified sexually marginalised group as well as right to dignity in latter. No matter how progressive the NALSA judgement remained with Kaushal judgement in place, it completely

²⁴⁶ National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, available at <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/193543132/>.

²⁴⁷ This judgement was never implemented as a much regressive bill by the name of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016 was introduced in August 2016 by the Central government which seek to reverse all the gains and dignity and the equal rights that the community had collectively championed for the past several decades.

delegitimised transgenders as ‘sexual beings’ and saw them subjects of social welfare, and were treated akin to a constitutionally designated groups such as ‘Other Backward Classes’, who are considered to educationally and socially backward” (Sircar 2017, 17-18).²⁴⁸

Even the act of granting citizenship²⁴⁹ with recognising of ‘third gender’ is done by framing transgender persons as ‘uncontainable subjects’- keeping a safe distance from heteronormative institutions such as marriage, family, property ownership etc., hence avoiding the moral panic of the sex phobic Right-wing nationalists. Unlike the two advertisements discussed earlier, NALSA judgement becomes “a seamless fusion of tradition (with several references to presence of transgender persons in Hindu mythology) and modernity (taking a cue from Universal Declaration of Human Rights on gender identity and sexual orientation)” (Sircar 2017, 17-18). NALSA’s recognition of the rights of transgender persons “frames their identities and lives as ‘devoid of procreative capabilities’ and thus “constitutes themselves as bio political subjects for care and management by the state” (Dutta 2015).

Following NALSA judgement in 2014, in May 2014, television music network Channel V produced a music video in collaboration with advertising giant Ogilvy and Mather titled ‘*The Seatbelt Crew*’, featuring “a particular social and cultural group of transgender women referred as hijras promoting road safety in India” (Seervai 2014). The video begins with a voiceover that describes hijras as creatures blessed by gods and their blessings are offered in exchange of money as they beg at traffic signals. The narrator adds, since this is a public service advertisement regarding road safety, the hijras are willing to exchange their blessing with those who abide by the rules of wearing a seatbelt while driving. According to Sircar,

“The video shows a group of Hijras, dressed in identical blue sarees and purple blouses almost similar to a cabin crew attendant, carrying out a safety drill at a traffic signal to educate drivers of four wheelers to always wear seatbelt while driving” (Sircar 2017, 19).

²⁴⁸ The Tiruchi Siva Bill 2014 was able to implement it immensely well. As it proposed two percent horizontal reservation to transgenders in education and employment and sought affirmative actions in the present system due to their historical struggle with violation of rights and sexual entitlements.

²⁴⁹ By giving equal legal status to transgender persons established on fundamental legal principles of International human rights, the NALSA judgement secured the full moral citizenship and the right to dignity, and at the same time opening the doors for the legislature to codify those substantial legal principles to law.

What remains interesting is the use of a liminal space like a traffic signal which is known to have the maximum footfall of many hijras who could be seen begging or soliciting for sex to earn a living in other public places like on trains etc., and are “often ridiculed and subjected to harassment and physical and verbal abuse in their conduct of these precarious livelihood practices” (Sircar 2017, 19). They are constantly on the “receiving end of violence and harassment from the law enforcement bodies like police, whose acts are legitimated by various public decency laws” (Sircar 2017, 19).²⁵⁰ Sircar highlights the quaint nature of this advertisement as he reflects,

“Hijras’ mere public presence is considered as a nuisance despite the perverted sacredness bestowed upon them to give away blessings at occasions like marriages and birth. In Hindu households, hijras are called to bless the birth of a child or the newly married couple so that they absorb any possibility of reproductive sterility that they are thought to have already been cursed with” (Sircar 2017, 19).

He further analyses,

“The video seems to take its cue from NALSA judgement to represent Hijras through a liberal rights based perspective that for many meant to make them the ideal and respectable subjects, if not citizens, who engage in activities other than begging and soliciting for sex at traffic signals. These are coming-of-age respectable subjects: neatly dressed, pleasantly feminine creatures, with stripped down make up, not indicating the drag element in their gender performance, and completely stripped of their publicness of sexuality which is usually embodied upon their bodies” (Sircar 2017, 19).

The compact of heteronormativity as well as homonormativity within this class-caste-gender-sexuality narrative in the video narrates,

“A story of remediate measures that attempt to offer a sense of responsibility and respectability by turning Hijras into educators and not as mere recipient of state welfare but also successful subjects of rehabilitation and affirmative action, while

²⁵⁰ Subsection of 36A of Karnataka Police Act, 1963 under “Power to regulate [undesirable activities] - The Commissioner, may, in order to prevent or suppress or control undesirable activities of eunuchs, in the area under his charge, by notification in the official Gazette, make orders for,- (a) preparation and maintenance of a register of the names and places of residence of all [persons] residing in the area under his charge and who are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or emasculating boys or of committing unnatural offences or any other offences or abetting the commission of such offences, (b) filing objections by aggrieved [persons] to the inclusion of his name in the register and for removal of his name from the register for reasons to be recorded in writing; (c) prohibiting a registered [person] from doing such activities as may be stated in the order. (d) any other matter he may consider necessary.” For more see THE KARNATAKA POLICE ACT, 1963. [http://dpal.kar.nic.in/pdf_files/4%20of%201964%20\(E\).pdf](http://dpal.kar.nic.in/pdf_files/4%20of%201964%20(E).pdf) Accessed on 12/25/2018

remaining captive to the traffic signal and not moving beyond” (Sircar 2017, 19-20) (emphasis mine).

Unlike monogamous gays and lesbians who have entered the domestic private space with the aid of privatised conjugality as suggested by the *Welcome* and *Myntra* advertisements, hijras are locked out of these imaginative domestic spaces due to their non-procreative role in the realms of the family and non-productive role in terms of the burgeoning neoliberal economy. With the implementation of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016 in December 2018, transgender emancipation seems to be contingent upon public performances of respectability and not abhorrent, abject, non-normative sexuality and sexualness as perceived to be exhibited by transgender population.



Image 6.14,6.15 and 6.16: Screenshots from the Seatbelt crew sees formation of trans* subjectivity with respect to Nation state. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muCU6_Y_Kyo

6.3 Homonationalism and Pinkwashing: Assimilation of a movement

The rise of Right wing extremists in India with National Democratic Alliance coming in power in 2014 and Narendra Modi emerging as the new Prime Minister of India who promised change and *'ache din'* (good days), also saw what Rahul Rao (2015) calls, “a simultaneous rise of the neoliberal and Hindu queer subject who performs *homonationalist* and *homocapitalist* practices in their ostensibly chic upper class queer lifestyles” (Rao 2015; Sircar 2017, 21). In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Jasbir Puar examines,

“The way acts of terrorism and the image of the terrorist have become entwined with the idea of homosexuality within the United States and post September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the U.S., there is a surge in the performance of jingoistic nationalism and patriotic activities amongst the queer publics as well” (Puar 2007).

Similarly, the new upper class, upper caste, Hindu subjects who were responsible for Modi's coming to power as most of them believed that “Hindu India was always open to non-normative sexualities, but it was the Muslim invaders plundered India that India's tolerance with sexual diversity took a plunge” (Johri, 2016). This is a narrative that is perfectly compatible with that of the right-wing extremists, as versions of which have been propagated by many right wing queers through WhatsApp forwards, allowing the Right wing extremists to Brahmanise India's erotic pasts through the creation of the imagined evil Muslim homophobic outsider.

Post 2018 judgement which decriminalised Section 377 of Indian Penal Code, there is seemingly an acceptance amongst the right-wing extremists regarding non-normative sexuality. As within its developmentalist avatar, some of the cadres within BJP have started supporting queer rights and sees neoliberalism as their way forward. The acceptance comes at the cost of inherent bigotry towards religious minorities as well as caste, class and gender based. Queer poet and scholar Akhil Katyal offered a trenchant reading of an emergent queer subject that he calls “the Homo Pathetic.” It is useful to quote Katyal at length:

“What strange twist of fate in our times brings on this convergence of war brouhaha and modern queer politics, of war flags and rainbows? Is it that strange after all? In these times of the Homo Pathetic (THP), I suggest it is not. [...] On his way to the Holy Grail of gay rights [the Pride March], he is the victim better than any other. He is the most tortured being on earth. No one's suffering; no one's pathos equals his. All women, Dalits, black folks, the poor, the droned-out war-refugees, and half those

LBT's all add up and produce a quantity of pain that is not even enough to sugar the morning tea of the Homo Pathetic. He out-victims them all. And in order to do something about his pain, he will use any war-justifying, bloodshed-glorifying, trench-beautifying god-damn image of American exceptionalism, if that is what it will take to bring him two inches closer to his goal of gay rights" (Katyal 2015).

This response was also in terms of the hue and cry in immediate aftermath of the Kaushal judgement in December 2013, as it was "followed by media outrage as well acknowledgement by several corporate lifestyle brands coming out with advertisements celebrating 'love' and 'queerness', clearly indicating their affection for the neoliberal elite queer consumer" (Nashrulla 2013). While many saw this response as progressive, though it appealed to a specific class of queer consumers (or the one's seeking upward mobility) "experts in the act of self-conduct, which becomes the deciding factor for who can afford these products" (Nashrulla 2013). The advertisements discussed in this chapter are indicative as well as reflective of an environment where only a select queer cosmopolitan consumers could enjoy the corporate benevolence at a time of political turmoil. While these advertisements do end up raising their sales, it's a packaging of old wine in a new rainbow wrapper.

Rahul Rao identifies this analysis and draws parallel between economic growth and end of homophobia in India as,

"Queer visions of the good life become mortgaged to limitless growth, which is itself further insulated from environmental, equity, and other critiques. Beholden to capitalism, the prospects for a queer green or a queer indigenous politics become increasingly remote. In the political context of the (world) bank's work in India, the Bank's overtures to queers should invite us to interrogate the queer movement's relationships with other social movements-those of farmers, fishworkers and adivasis (forest dwellers) to name a few- that have struggled against the effects of Bank led policies for decades [...] It is sobering to imagine what queer adivasis might make of a bank project that hailed their participation (as queers) in the very processes that are destroying their lifeworlds (as queer adivasis). That the intersectionality of queer and adivasis is virtually unthinkable in the imaginary of the Bank and possibly the mainstream of the queer movement in India begs important questions" (Rao 2015).²⁵¹

Within the global, neoliberal, consumer friendly market, the new queer ally initiates new narratives of progress that at times aligns most comfortably with right wing extremism. UN's

²⁵¹ Rao, Rahul (2015) Global Homocapitalism in Radical Philosophy
<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/global-homocapitalism> Accessed on 11/19/2018

Free and Equal *The Welcome* (2015) which “supports marriage equality along with other advertisements becomes the narrative of human rights while sanitising itself of any queer transgressive politics, as it enters the mis-en-scene of New India’s new queer politics” (Manayath 2013). Nitin Manayath in his article *Why Marriage may not be that equal* (2013) reflects upon the demand of several fractions from the LGBT community for same-sex marriage recognition in India. He writes,

“So, we seem to want same-sex marriages to protect the legal rights of urban middle-class gay or lesbian identified men and women who might want to contract a legal marriage to ensure that they are able to access corporate and state benefits that accrue to couples. This urban minority, and its desire for a global LGBT identity, is increasingly the focus of much of LGBT legal rights work, even as it claims to speak for all people expressing transgressive erotic desires. This subsuming of the hijra into the global language of LGBT rights is reflective of the many ways in which legal LGBT activism in the country directs itself” (Manayath 2013; Sircar 2017, 27-28).²⁵²

One might celebrate the successful assimilation of the queer politics by the Indian media but one needs to constantly address whose rights are they talking about? What is the class that is usually depicted in these advertisements? While most of the advertisements clearly makes arrival of the neoliberal cosmopolitan queer subject in India, the idea remain incredibly reductionist and short-sighted. One can argue that most of the advertisements discussed invisibilises a population of queers in India, who are at the receiving end of a combination of class, caste, sexuality, gender, religion as well as language-based oppression.

²⁵² Manayath, Nitin *Why Marriage may not be that equal* (2013) in Tehelka Published on May 3, 2013 <http://old.tehelka.com/why-marriage-equality-may-not-be-that-equal/> Accessed on 11/29/2018.

CONCLUSION

To a Dream Deferred: A Way Forward

“What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun
Or does it explode?”
-Langston Hughes

The work I undertake as part of this thesis is entangled with my own political and intellectual growth as a researcher. The links that I attempt to establish between mediated representation of non-normative sexualities, politics of subjectivities, and transgressions made by the queer community is placed within the public sphere of neoliberal India. I was drawn towards this thesis project because of my inquisitiveness with regards to the endorsement of India as a ‘coming of age’ nation post neoliberalization in 1991. Initially my focus was only to examine the role of ‘neoliberal state’ in creation of new found sexual identities, but as the project developed, it became organised around politics of representation of non-normative sexuality through the idea of ‘others’.

I found it productive to examine various cultural representations, mass mediations and practices through which non-normative sexual figures are represented in mass media and perceived within the public imagination. The thesis tracks varied representations as well as transgressive practices of non-normative sexualities, as indicated by use of ‘gerunds’ in my chapter titles such as ‘representing lesbian suicides’, ‘performing spectacle’ and ‘negotiating the sexed other’.

Chapter One on “Early Representations of Sexualities in India”, traced the emergence of queer sexuality in India through various mythological, historical and literary texts and artefacts. With the help of various pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial archival practices, I mapped various representations of queerness and provide documentation that challenge any framework that sees same-sex desire as an import from the West. Ruth Vanita refutes any claims by stating, “most twentieth century texts that represents same-sex desire, strive to reinforce an imagined, pure Indianness of manhood and woman” (Vanita 2002, 127). The chapter provides an overarching glimpse in order to insist that while narratives of same-sex desire existed before colonial rule, it was indeed the colonisers who introduced the idea of ‘homophobia’, which was further endorsed by nationalist leaders during freedom struggle.

Chapter One asserted that the earlier models of identities and sexualities were neatly reconstituted to fit the colonial norms of heteronormativity as well as ‘nationalist rhetoric’ (Dasgupta 2014, 667). Nivedita Menon asserts that, “normalization of heterosexual identity (is) a part of the processes of colonial modernity” (Menon 2005, 38). The anxieties of a newly independent nation was multiplied manifold, with ideas of homoeroticism and queer sexualities circulating within the public sphere, as witnessed from the “demonstrations around films like *Fire* by the right wing extremist groups” (Ghosh 2007; Ghosh 2010). The chapter was an endeavor to lay out foundation to not only evidences of same-sex desire but also highlight modern day homophobia that is inherently connected to ideas of nationhood and modernity, in an attempt to “deter any claims of history of homosexuality within Indian tradition” (Dasgupta 2014, 667).

Chapter Two on “Print Media and Imagined (Queer) Communities in Neoliberal India”, established the various attempts, made by mainstream English language print media in the 1980s till the late 2000s, to highlight issues surrounding homosexuality. Reworking with Anderson’s “idea of nation as an imagined community” (Anderson 1991), I formulated the emergence of gay and lesbian networks through the nexus of HIV/AIDS network, newly emerging queer subjectivities and sexuality movement of post 1990s neoliberal India. The chapter attempted to chronologically capture important narratives appearing in mainstream English media, which was then circulated and read by anglicized readers across India.

The presence of English speaking population in India attributed itself to Macaulay’s vision in his *Minutes on Education* (1835), where he envisions, “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 1835, 2004). This colonial vision, however, aided in publication and circulation of news articles and features about gay cultures, LGBT liberation movement, and LGBT lifestyle of the West in the 1980s till late 2000s, as it saw English speaking readers as consumers of changing mediascape in post neoliberal India in 1990s. As most of my interlocutors noted, to see one’s own representation in media validated their own struggles for existence and made them feel less lonely.

As mapped and analysed in Chapter Two, the media coverage varied from stories around ‘Being Gay and Lesbian in India’ to ‘Coming out Stories’ of individuals like Ashok Row

Kavi, Giti Thadani, to many Indians who chose anonymity while speaking to media about their queerness. These news stories became the first step towards self-affirmation, and acceptance, for many within the community who struggled with their sexual identities. The English language press though not always publishing positive stories, attempted to be supportive to the 'gay cause' with few exceptions of biased reportage.

Media covered myriad issues that reflected upon various societal concerns such as rise of lesbian suicides across India, various conferences around LGBT activism, changing public perceptions towards sex and sexuality etc. Interestingly the much detested Page 3 reportage along with tabloid journalism came to the aid of creating a 'gay cause' with its sympathetic and at times prejudiced reporting, and made it part of everyday urban conversations. English language magazines such as India Today, Outlook, The Sunday Magazine along with newspapers like The Indian Express, Mid-Day acted as representatives of the queer cause for the upper and middle class Indians.

This attempt by English language press enabled 'homosexuality to be pushed out of the closet' and led to formation of several queer support groups and collectives, that attempted to further the queer cause across India. These included Bombay based Humsafar Trust (that registered itself as an NGO), Stree Sangam aka LABIA: A Queer Feminist LBT Collective; and Delhi based SAKHI (a now defunct lesbian and bisexual support group). These collectives and support groups (barring Humsafar Trust that registered itself as an NGO) struggled to operate autonomously, fighting co-option within the growing discourse of HIV/AIDS funding and NGO-isation. Women across India reached out to these collectives in the 1990s via letters, sharing their dreams, hopes, aspirations and despairs. NGOs like Humsafar Trust, and autonomous collective like LABIA, came out with their own publications such as Bombay Dost and SCRIPTS respectively, to reach out to the queer population across the country, hence solidifying the idea of once imagined queer community.

Chapter Three titled, "Lives Worth Grieving For: Representation of Lesbian Suicides in Print and Cinema" was focussed specifically on how media covered news of lesbian suicides from Kerala and West Bengal. These two states saw the highest number of double suicides by same-sex women lovers from late 1980s to early 2000s. This chapter examines the representations of these suicides in various investigative reports filed by journalists across the

two states, as well as the fact-finding teams of two NGOs namely, Sahayatrika in Kerala, and Sappho for Equality in West Bengal.

Through this chapter, I reflected upon the sensational representation of these ‘tragic acts of suicide’ within the news reports, and the failure of mainstream media to tell these stories of suicide, without grossly misrepresenting them. Through the process of remembering and reiteration of cultural memories that existed within the public sphere of Kerala and West Bengal, I have attempted to recreate historical accounts in which sexual excess are written out. For me, the cinematic rendition of tragic same-sex love stories in Ligy Pullappaly’s *Sancharram* (2004) and Debalina’s *Ebang Bewarish* (the unclaimed...), remains a failed project to eulogise these lives lost in an effort to be together. No news report or cinematic homage can bring the real-life protagonists from *Ebang Bewarish*, Swapna and Sucheta, and countless others back to life. The lives led by these women become more recognisable in their ‘cataclysmic act of suicide’, that lend these deceased subjects, ‘accidental’ political mileage to be co-opted within the larger narrative of sexuality politics, than their struggles, whilst when they were alive.

The chapter relies heavily on various vernacular cultural archives, to re-create the past through accessing archives of Sappho for Equality and Sahayatrika. This chapter highlights various limits of representation through circulation of popular narratives such as “homosexual as tragic victim” (M. Sharma 2006, 38), along with failure of HIV/AIDS discourse to recognise “queer women as viable subjects” of larger rights based politics (Gopinath 2007).

Chapter 4 on “Performing Spectacle: Gendered (Queer) Bodies as Sites of Protest and Celebrations in Pride Parades” demonstrates various strategies adopted by the queer community pre and post reinstatement of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code by the Supreme Court of India. For over a decade, in numerous cities across India, queer pride parades are held annually throughout the year. An ode to the Stonewall riots in 1969, and Friendship March in Kolkata in 1992, the pride parade has become an annual national event attracting marchers as well as onlookers across varied age groups, socio-economic political backgrounds, along with sexual orientation and gendered identities. These parades can be seen as liminal spaces of ritualistic, socio-spatial performance and sub-cultural processions of

non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations largely organised by LGBTQ rights activists across the country.

The chapter analysed how the marchers in the annual queer pride parades across India, attempt to strategically transgress, and reclaim largely heteronormative public spaces. The pride parade features rainbow flags, colourful costumes, defiant posters, provocative placards, political sloganeering along the lines of equality, and finally participants endlessly dancing to celebratory music. The parade seemingly becomes a site of ‘spectacle’ for varied representations for all the media personnel, who throng the site of parade, due to its seemingly blatant sexual overtones, in an attempt to capture images of the participants flaunting their sexuality.

The chapter reflected upon the various issues of representation in media and self-representation of queer subject in the aegis of the neoliberal state. While, the media’s role in bringing forth issues plaguing the LGBT community in India is commendable, one of the spaces where media’s role is most critiqued is representation of the queer community to larger heterosexual population. Mainstream media organisations at times lack sensitisation in covering the annual queer pride parade, which remains an active site of congregation and participation of the queer subjects across the country. Media ends up perpetuating stereotypes and stigmas around the queer pride parade with its overt use of blatant sexual-ness of the parade goers creating a ‘homosexual enigma’ amongst their heterosexual counterparts. Media at times also overlooks the protest and demonstrative aspect of the parade against state-sanctioned brutalities against queer subjects.

These stereotypes get further perpetuated by the participants and spectators of the queer pride parade who at times follow the notions of masquerade and make a spectacle of themselves. However, the notion of ‘masquerade’ as witnessed by the parade goers, spectators, media personals and heterosexual population alike, becomes one of the tools to dissent, since the “capacity to feign ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ on their part” (Butler 1990). This is in regard, as most of members of the queer community attempt to ‘pass off’ as straight, heterosexual law-abiding citizens in their everyday life. The claims for ‘regular appearance’ in some narratives reflect upon the ‘invisibility in everyday life’ to ‘hypervisibility witnessed in the site of pride parades’. The act of masquerade during queer pride parades is also a

mechanism for many parade-goers to “make a spectacle” of oneself, while maintaining anonymity in fear of being outed by the media.

The chapter also emphasised on the attempt to establish a collective queer front across the country, as the queer pride parade is fraught with various representational and intersectional issues such as gender, class, and caste, which further fuels a ‘politics of exclusion’. This was reflected upon through various incidences within mainstream pride parade organised by activists and organisers across various metropolises as well as small towns to boycotting of mainstream pride parades by radical groups who organise their own protest demonstrations. Various viewpoints regarding “pride as a site of festive celebration and political demonstration” (Enguix 2009; Ghosh 2014; Villaamil 2004) raise key questions around ways participants are represented and self-represented during the event. This “spectacularisation of the event overlooks the political aspect of the parade, as the media also focuses on the ‘pride parade as site of spectacle’ stripping it of its political identity” (Enguix 2009; Ghosh 2014).

Chapter 5 titled “Negotiating the ‘sexed other’: Performing Sexuality on Queer Dating Websites” highlighted the role of cyberspace in creation of various spatial, political and virtual intimacies within the marginalised groups like sexual minorities. By investigating discourses of representation and self-representation on the basis of gender, class, caste, and sex, I attempted to demonstrate the promise that digital technologies hold in mediating queer subjectivities across various queer dating websites and mobile applications. Websites like www.planetromeo.com, www.pinksofa.com, www.gaydar.com along with applications like Tinder and Grindr creates a space for virtual intimacies among its users. This further substantiate dialogues on intimacies other than the right based legal recourse framework followed by queer politics across India.

Through the intersectional lens, I interrogated and critiqued these online queer spaces, which at times operate around notions of “virtual communities” (Boellstorff, et al. 2012; Castells 2000; Hine 2000;). One of the predominant ideas operating within South Asian online communities is the politics of class and language which is implicitly visible within the online queer communities such as Queer Campus on Facebook to user profiles on queer dating apps, and plays a quintessential role in segregationary politics operating within these online groups.

The chapter reflected and critiqued the politics of representation operating within queer dating websites and applications such as Planet Romeo and Grindr respectively where the users perpetuate stereotypes associated with performances of gender and sexed expression in their online profiles, and align itself to the larger narrative of homonormativity. Practices like effeminophobia, straight-acting to caste, class and gender-based screenings of profiles on Grindr and Planet Romeo allows systematic discrimination against gender non-conforming individuals along with users belonging to lower class and caste socio-economic groups. These inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms work in tandem to glorify specific beauty standards, body types such as straight-acting masculine gay male etc. further perpetuating social marginalisation of all other identities across Grindr and Planet Romeo.

Besides, the social stigma attached to queer women's presence on online dating applications, their experiences are marred by incidences of catfishing and trolling. Many women are now switching to paid dating applications like Hinge or Bumble in an attempt to refine their search for 'like-minded individuals'. Some of my interlocutors, during the course of research decided to log off and delete their profiles from dating applications due to daily instances of online harassment. Queer women reflected upon the lack of 'women only' online dating applications with more money being pushed to develop dating applications for their heterosexual counterparts.

Chapter 6 titled "Sexual Citizenship and Transgressions in Indian Advertisements" interrogated the phenomenon of 'sexual citizenship' and rise of the 'queer cosmopolitan consumer/citizen' (Evans 1993; Binnie and Young 2006; Cossman 2007; Hannerz 1990;). This chapter through analysis of several advertisement campaigns released post neoliberalization in India, deconstructed various representational as well as assimilationist strategies employed by mainstream Indian media. In order to present respectable models of assimilation of the newly decriminalised queer subject (post 2018 judgement) within the larger heteronormative society, advertising agencies and corporate brands are attempting to broaden their consumer base by reaching out to the queer community. The collusion of the state along with these brands work in tandem to advance the neoliberal consumer capitalist-based economies where "the concept of individual choice tends to depoliticise whatever it touches" (Whisman 1996).

The chapter focused on the flawed, segregated and exclusionary nature of queer representation across various media platforms with special reference to advertising campaigns which saw the newly recognised queer subject as their target audience. This deployment of various advertising and marketing strategies is rife with complications as it “positions sexual minorities as possible consumers” operating in a largely capitalist economy in India. By employing much criticised practice such as ‘queerbaiting’ in the name of “inclusivity and progressive narrative” while not alienating their larger heterosexual target audiences. In the case studies that I have analysed during the course of this chapter, I reflected upon the ‘alleged’ depoliticization of the queer movement with commercialisation and corporatisation of LGBT issues. For Steven Kate and Russell Belk (2001) this signifies, “various organisations taking benefits out of the ‘cause’, stressing consumerism and dissolving the revolutionary spirit of Stonewall” (Kates and Belk 2001).

The chapter briefly reflected upon ideas of ‘homonationalism’ and ‘pink washing’ post 2018 judgement, that partially read down Section 377 of IPC, furthering the debates around commercialisation and consumption of queer identities. This euphoric judgement saw a frenzied acknowledgement by several top corporate organisations and brands, who came out in support of the LGBTQIA+ cause. Kates and Belk (2001) sees this as “a dubious but powerful activity, which may result in the social legitimisation of gay and lesbian community” (Kates and Belk 2001, 422). These brands targeted an earlier untapped market of LGBTQ individuals and through their campaigns allowed greater visibility to the earlier criminalised counter-publics. Many brands celebrated the post 2018 verdict by changing their display picture of brand’s logo with hues of rainbows to suggest their acceptance and inclusivity towards the cause. The rainbow flag has been an inspiration for commercialisation of all kinds of product and services; from brands like Swiggy, Zomato, India Bulls, Bira, Durex India, Airbnb changing their display and cover photos on social media websites and applications like Facebook and Instagram.

As I write these concluding words, the Supreme Court on August 12, 2019 dismissed a review petition seeking various civil rights for the queer community, such as same-sex marriage to allowing same-sex couple’s right to adoption or access to adoption via surrogacy. This review petition’s rejection is underplayed within the mainstream media as well as within

the queer community, as India attempts to recover from the euphoric celebrations around September 6, 2018 judgement, that decriminalized ‘consensual same-sex relationship’.

The review petition submitted by Tushar Nayyar was rejected by the bench, comprised of Justice S Abdul Nazeer and Justice Deepak Gupta. The review petition submits,

“LGBTQ rights are not recognised as part of human rights. Not recognition of same-sex marriages of (Indian Special Marriage Act, 1954), availability of adoption, surrogacy, IVF is violative of Article 14²⁵³, 15²⁵⁴, 19²⁵⁵, 21²⁵⁶ and 29²⁵⁷ of the Indian constitution. Discrimination solely on the basis of sexual orientation violates Article 14, 15, 21 in relation to Army, Navy and Airforce.”²⁵⁸

The petition further asserts,

“Other instances of indirect discrimination are not addressed in the Navtej Singh Johar case. People in the military are not allowed to serve openly. Heterosexual people end up marrying LGBT people, and end up consummating marriage with them, which harm both parties. Gay women have it worst.”²⁵⁹

The petition works in tandem with what Urvashi Vaid elaborated, as the to-do list for LGBT movement across the world, where she demands,

“the right to live and work free from discrimination based on sexual orientation; the right to freedom from harassment and violence that is generated in response to

²⁵³ Article 14 of the Constitution of India reads as, “The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the law within the Indian territory of India.” For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/367586/>

²⁵⁴ Article 15 of the Constitution of India reads as a fundamental right of the Indian constitution which, “prohibits the discrimination by the state against any citizen on the grounds of any caste, religion, sex, race and place of birth.” For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/609295/>

²⁵⁵ Article 19 of the Constitution of India guarantees the citizens of India, “right to freedom of speech and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1218090/>

²⁵⁶ Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees ‘right to life and privacy’ to all citizens of India, “no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to established by law.” For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1199182/>

²⁵⁷ Article 29 of the Constitution of India protects, “the interest of minorities by making a provision that any citizen/section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture have the right to conserve the same, and ensures admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving aid out of State funds on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them”. For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1888152/>

²⁵⁸ Review Plea Filed In Supreme Court For Civil Rights Of Homosexuals published on April 16, 2019

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/review-plea-filed-in-supreme-court-for-civil-rights-of-homosexuals-2024138> accessed on September 22, 2019.

²⁵⁹ Ibid

sexuality; the right to privacy with full sexual and reproductive rights; the right to family, including all parental and legal rights; the right to healthcare that is non-discriminatory and the right to live as “out” non-heterosexuals” (Vaid 1995, 376).

Through this thesis I made a maiden effort to study various shifts in representational politics of alternative sexualities in Indian media with the advent of neoliberalization in post 1990s India. Working with mediated media and culture texts along with events play a formative role in disrupting foundational narratives of representational politics of newly emerging sexual subjects in the post 90s. The thesis follows a linear trajectory which attributes to the birth of queer subjectivities to globalisation and neoliberalization in the 1990s. This was followed by media representations of the emerging LGBT community in India leading to a collective queer consciousness through events such as pride parades that lead to queer activism and finally representation and self-(re)presentation of queer population on digital platforms and various other platforms on New Media. However, the linearity of this narrative does not capture the nuances and various circumstances, which led to its mass proliferation.

The lives and media-based representations of the queer community as researched in this thesis is emblematic of the everyday negotiations undertaken by the queer individuals in India. Sara Ahmed (2004) sees these everyday negotiations as:

“This is not about the romance of being offline or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with perception of others, with ‘straightening devices’ and the violence that might follow when perceptions congeal into social forms” (Ahmed 2004, 107).

The public visibility of queer community has grown exponentially due to media representation in the last three decades. The news coverage ranged from HIV/AIDS epidemic, lesbian suicides, coming out stories along with queer pride parades held in almost all major metropolitans and small towns. Media’s representation however didn’t equate to any form of larger social endorsement or acceptance by the masses, but rather a tacit tolerance. The queer politics in India continues to relegate exclusions and is far from being intersectional, with issues like class, caste, gender expressions and non-normative sexuality dealt superficially within the Indian context. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan highlight this in their seminal anthology *Because I Have a Voice* (2005) as,

“Perhaps the most relentless construct which assaults queer people in their conceptualisation of their lives as the preoccupations of a small, western educated and elite minority, whose understanding of sexuality is thus aped from the West” (Narain and Bhan 2005, 15).

This imagination of the classed and anglicized Indian citizen attempting to ape the West has now fuelled attempts at reimagining “a Hindu nationalist, upper class, globalised queer subject” (Dasgupta 2017; Chatterjee 2018) who can be easily assimilated within the nation-state. This thesis was an optimistic almost naïve endeavour to understand politics of representation of the queer community residing in India. As I was starting out with this work in 2016, I was ‘wilfully unaware’ of my own class position as a lower middle class, upper caste, English speaking queer woman which facilitated my entry into various social circles and allowed a ‘queer kinship’ with my interlocutors, who saw me as ‘one of them’.

Since I began this research in 2016, there have been significant legal reforms with respect to queer politics in India. During the course of this work, Section 377 saw its reinstatement in December 2013 by Supreme Court of India, the following year also saw the election of a new government in 2014. The ruling party at the outset declared ‘homosexuality as immoral’ and continued to refrain from making any comments when decriminalisation judgement came on September 6, 2018. Paola Bachetta sees this in the dual operation of “xenophobic queerophobia and queerophobic xenophobia” (Bachcheta 1999, 144).

The sense of elation and new found freedom experienced by the earlier “criminalised miniscule minority”²⁶⁰ is far from the ‘queer utopia’ imagined by many scholars and activists alike. The September 2018 judgement have had legal as well as social implications in terms of reformative action for the earlier ‘criminalised queer community’. However, as indicated by in Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, both politics of representation and social reformations cannot exist in a vacuum and requires recognition of rights and freedom for each and every one. One needs to address rifts while acknowledging the need for recognition of rights of various local identities such as hijras, kothis, panthis as well as other

²⁶⁰ On 11th December, 2013, Justice Mukhopadhyay and Justice Singhvi’s decision on the PIL ‘Suresh Kumar Koushal vs. Naz Foundation’ that recriminalized the lives of millions of LGBT citizens of India, by upholding the validity of Section 377. The rights of the queer community were referred in the judgment as the “so-called rights of the miniscule minority”. For more see <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/58730926/> Accessed on 9/6/2019.

lower class and caste gender non-conforming individuals who are at times deliberately left out from the progressive mainstream media narratives.

As a politically aware academic and an ethnographer involved in community-based activism, I believe it is imperative that I should be engaged with ‘participatory research’ for collaborative knowledge creation. Throughout my work, I have critiqued the representational politics employed by media as well as the need for queer politics to do better, however that is a simplistic and reductive critique. I also see this project as reworking with exercise of ‘collaborative community’ building by writing and rewriting our own histories, where one can acknowledge failure fearlessly. As I have learnt from Judith/Jack Halberstam in their seminal work *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011):

“Failure suggests as a historiographical method, within which we must write queer history not simply as a record of heroes, martyrs, forebears but also a record of complicity, cowardice, exclusion and violence-in other words, any history, LGBT history included, contains episodes that are shameful, racist, complicit with state power orientalist, colonial and so on. To leave the history out is to commit to normative models of self-time and the past/future” (Halberstam 2011).

Despite various critique of assimilationist politics plaguing the queer movements around the world, this work attempts to document the trials and tribulations of a community through the act of representations and self-representation within media, as the struggles for rights and recognition continues.

APPENDIX 1

GLOSSARY

Terminology of terms related to gender and sexuality

Note: I have tried my best in glossary to carefully research and present definitions of terms related to gender and sexuality. These definitions should be taken as suggestive pointers for understanding gender and sexuality terms. It is difficult to capture the essence of gendered and sexual identities in a few sentences. The definitions may vary for everyone since we all have our unique ways of defining ourselves which should be respected.

1. **GENDER:** Refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behaviour that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviours that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity.
2. **GENDER EXPRESSION:** The ways in which we present ourselves to the outside world. This can be in terms of our behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, or voice. This manifestation or expression may or may not conform to socially defined behaviours and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine. There is no wrong or right way to present yourself.
3. **SEXUALITY:** Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life, and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles, and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed.
4. **HETEROSEXUAL:** An individual who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of a sex other than their own.

5. **HOMOSEXUAL:** An individual who is sexually attracted to people of the same gender as their own.
6. **INTERSEX VARIATIONS:** Human bodies have many variations, and these could be at multiple levels-reproductive, hormonal, physical etc. Intersex variations are congenital differences in reproductive parts and/or secondary sexual characteristics, and/or variations invisible to the eye such as chromosomal and/or hormonal differences. Since human bodies are so diverse, there is no absolute standard of a 'normal' male or female body.
7. **QUEER:** "Queer" is preferred over other terms (now slowly recognized and used in India) by many activists and members of the community, since it does not adhere to right sexual identities within the fixed LGBT categories and allow for space and ambiguities for diverse sexualities and gendered expressions to be included. Queer encompasses multiplicities of desires and diverse sexualities outside the heterosexual/homosexual matrix in which identity is seen as performative, something that we do and act out rather than possessing, and something that we assemble as part of discursive practices.
8. **LGBT:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
9. **LESBIAN:** A person who identifies as a woman and is sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women who identify as women.
10. **ASEXUAL:** A person who does not desire sexual activity, either within or outside of a relationship. Asexuality should not be confused with celibacy i.e. the conscious decision to not act on sexual feelings, usually due to religious reasons. While asexual people are physically non-sexual type folks, they are nonetheless quite capable of loving, showing affection, and establishing romantic ties with people.
11. **BISEXUAL:** A person who can have sexual and/or romantic attractions towards those of their own gender as well as those of other genders. There is a myth that bisexual

people are promiscuous or indecisive (referred as fence-sitters). But being attracted to multiple genders does not imply being attracted to more than one person at a time. A person may be monogamous (engaging with one person) or polyamorous (engaging consensually in multiple relationships) regardless of their sexual orientation.

12. GAY: A person who identifies as a man and is sexually and/or romantically attracted to others who identify as men. This term can also be used to describe any person (man or woman) who experience sexual and/or romantic attraction to people of the same gender.
13. BUTCH: Butch is a term used to describe a woman who presents her appearance and other behaviour in a traditionally masculine way.
14. FEMME: A traditionally feminine- appearing and behaving woman. Mainly used to refer to a feminine lesbian or bisexual woman.
15. TRANS*: Trans* refers to all persons whose own sense of their gender does not match the gender assigned to them as birth. Spelt with an asterisk in this way, trans* is an umbrella term coined within gender studies in order to refer to all non-cisgender, genderless, non-binary, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third-gender, two-spirit, bigender, MTF (male-to-female trans person- a person born male transitions to be a woman socially, with or without surgery), FTM (female-to-male trans persons- a person born female transitions to be a man socially, with or without surgery), transman, transwoman, other, man-identified PAGFB, woman-identified PAGMB, and (m)any others.
16. TRANSMAN: A transman is a transgender person who was assigned gender female at birth but whose gender identity is that of a man. Some transmen may choose to undergo surgical or hormonal transition, or both, to alter their appearance in a way that aligns with their gender identity more appropriately. And some transmen may choose not to undergo surgical or hormonal transition.

17. **TRANSWOMAN:** A transwoman is a transgender person who was assigned gender male at birth but whose gender identity is that of a woman. Some transwomen may choose to undergo sex or gender reassignment surgery to alter their appearance in a way that aligns with the gender identity they identify with more appropriately. And some transwomen may choose not to undergo sex or gender reassignment surgery.
18. **CLOSETED:** A gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person who does not disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation to people around them. They often do so for fear of persecution, rejection, and/or negative reactions from others. There are some people who may remain closeted or may not want to ‘come out’ because they do not see a point in disclosing their gender identity or sexual orientation.
19. **CISGENDER:** A cisgender person is someone whose own sense of his/her/their gender matches the gender assigned to him/her/them, at birth. When a person is comfortable with the assigned gender then it is a cis gendered person and a trans person chooses the gender of their comfort. To be cisgender then, is to enjoy certain privilege, which is trans* persons lacks in a world based on the gender binary.
20. **PAGFB AND PAGMB:** Person(s) assigned Gender Female at Birth (PAGFB) and Person Assigned Gender Male at Birth (PAGMB), reflects on the understanding that none of us is born with a readymade gender; gender assigned to us at birth based on the traditional conflation of sex, in particular external genitalia, which gender. This assigned gender may or may not match the person’s own sense of his/her/hir/their gender. PAGFB though not all of them belong to the ‘female gender’ or consider themselves women, just as all PAGMB may not be of the ‘male gender’, or call themselves men. Together the two terms include all person, and every variation in gender and of body.
21. **KOTHI:** Kothi is read as feminized male identity, which adopted by some people in the Indian subcontinent and is marked by gender non-conformity. A Kothi, though biologically male, adopts feminine modes of dressing, speech and behaviour and would look for a male partner who has masculine modes of behaviour, speech and dress. The politics of resistance lies in the inherent challenge to the connection

between anatomical maleness and gendered behaviour, i.e. one expects someone who looks male to act male but kothi refuses to behave in the conformity of heterosexist norms.

22. HIJRA: Hijra as a community represents an existing Indian tradition which clearly contests heteronormativity. Hijra is a cultural identity of male to female transpeople who get initiated into this culture and accept the traditions of the community. There is a history to this community. All male to female trans* people are not Hijras. Hijras include men who go in for hormonal treatment, those who undergo sex-change operations and those under-go sex reassignment surgery(SRS), and those who are born hermaphrodite. The Hijra community has its own culture and ways of living including their own festivals and gods and goddesses. Hijra divides themselves into gharanas or houses and the strength of the community lies in close-knit relationships. Members of the hijra community have contested elections, with Shabnam Mausi and Asha Rabi, becoming the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), Sohagpur in the state of Madhya Pradesh and a Mayor respectively. The Hijra community is one of the most visible of the queer cultures in India.
23. PERSON: Person as a term can replace the universal pronoun, ‘him/his/he and he/she.’ It is an inclusive term which can used in the law to address any human being but before we start using ‘person’, one needs to make the necessary changes in IPC definitions about man and woman and the concept of gender. Person includes any human being of any gendered expression.
24. PRONOUNS: In use of pronouns, there’s an attempt to be faithful to the gender identities that people espouse for themselves. So all those who identified as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ have been referred to by the appropriate gender pronoun’s: *he, him, his; she, her, hers*. For those respondents who did not identify as either ‘man’ or ‘woman’, have used the category ‘others’, and chosen the pronouns *ze, hirs, hir*. Although everyone usually use either the male or female pronouns for themselves, we have used *ze, hir, hirs* to fill the gaps in a language which recognizes only the gender binary.

Source(s): 1) Towards Gender Inclusivity: A Study on Contemporary Concerns Around Gender (2013) by Sunil Mohan, published by Alternative Law Forum.

2) Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of Queer Persons assigned Gender Female at Birth across a spectrum of living gender identities (2013)- a study published by LABIA- A Queer Feminist LBT Collective.

3) Basics and Beyond (2006), TARSHI

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5) Glossary of Terms, Human Rights Commission

6) Gender and Human Rights, WHO

7) LGBT Terms and Definitions, International Spectrum, University of Michigan

8) LGBTIQ Terminology, LGBT Centre, University of California, Los Angeles

9) Queertionary- A Guide of LGBT Terminology, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Centre, Baker University Centre, University of Ohio

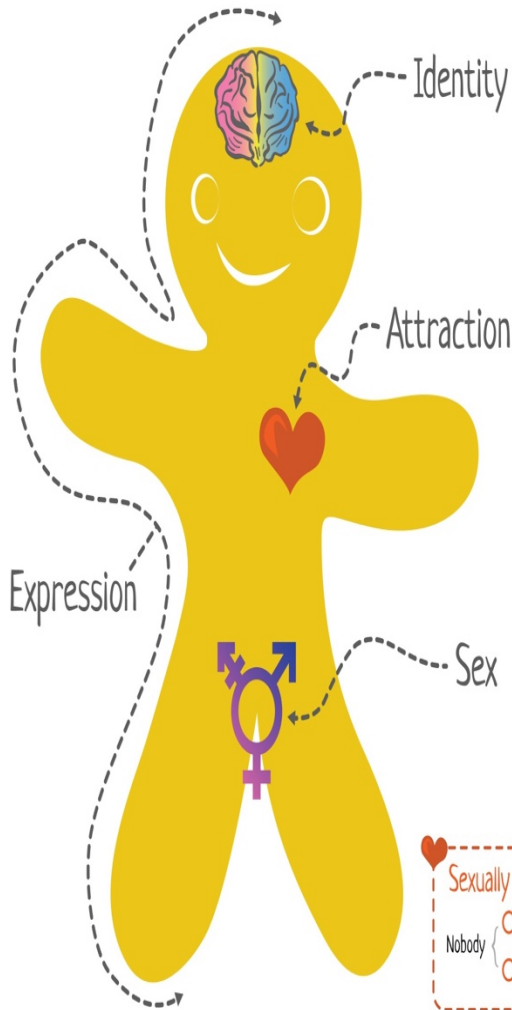
APPENDIX 2

Understanding Sex and Sexuality with the Genderbread Person

The Genderbread Person v3.3

by its pronounced **METRO**sexual.com

Gender is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but most people don't. Like *Inception*. Gender isn't binary. It's not either/or. In many cases it's both/and. A bit of this, a dash of that. This tasty little guide is meant to be an appetizer for gender understanding. It's okay if you're hungry for more. In fact, that's the idea.



Gender Identity

Plot a point on both continua in each category to represent your identity; combine all ingredients to form your Genderbread

4 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos

Indicates a lack of what's on the right.

Woman-ness

Man-ness

How you, in your head, define your gender, based on how much you align (or don't align) with what you understand to be the options for gender.

Labels: "woman", "man", "two-spirit", "genderqueer"

Gender Expression

Feminine

Masculine

The ways you present gender, through your actions, dress, and demeanor, and how those presentations are interpreted based on gender norms.

Labels: "butch", "femme", "androgynous", "gender neutral"

Biological Sex

Female-ness

Male-ness

The physical sex characteristics you're born with and develop, including genitalia, body shape, voice pitch, body hair, hormones, chromosomes, etc.

Labels: "male", "female", "intersex", "MtF Female"

Sexually Attracted to

Nobody

(Women/Females/Femininity)

(Men/Males/Masculinity)

Romantically Attracted to

Nobody

(Women/Females/Femininity)

(Men/Males/Masculinity)

In each grouping, circle all that apply to you and plot a point, depicting the aspects of gender toward which you experience attraction.

For a bigger bite, read more at <http://bit.ly/genderbread>

Appendix figure 1: The Genderbread Person illustrates one way to think about the diversity of sexual identities

Source: itspronouncedmetrosexual.com by Sam Killermann
<https://www.genderbread.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Genderbread-Person-3.3-HI-RES.pdf>

APPENDIX 3

THE HETEROSEXUAL QUESTIONNAIRE

The Heterosexual Questionnaire by Dr M. Rochlin

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to examine the manner in which the use of heterosexual norms may bias the study of gay men's and lesbian's lives.

Instructions: Heterosexism is a form of bias in which heterosexual norms are used in studies of homosexual relationships. Gay men and lesbians are seen as deviating from a heterosexual norm, and this often leads to the marginalization and pathologizing of their behaviour. Read the questionnaire below with this definition in mind and respond to the questions.

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible that your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?
4. Is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?
6. Do your parents know that you are straight? Do your friends and/or roommate(s) know? How did they react?
7. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be who you are and keep it quiet?
8. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
9. Why do heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into their lifestyle?
10. A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexuals. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
11. Just what do men and women do in bed together? How can they truly know how to please each other, being so anatomically different?
12. With all the societal support marriage receives, the divorce rate is spiraling. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?

13. Statistics show that lesbians have the lowest incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. Is it really safe for a woman to maintain a heterosexual lifestyle and run the risk of disease and pregnancy?
14. How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to compulsive, exclusive heterosexuality?
15. Considering the menace of overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone were heterosexual?
16. Could you trust a heterosexual therapist to be objective? Don't you feel s/he might be inclined to influence you in the direction of her/his own leanings?
17. There seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed with which you might be able to change if you really want to. Have you considered trying aversion therapy?
18. Would you want your child to be heterosexual, knowing the problems that s/he would face?
19. What were your first reactions upon reading this questionnaire?

(M. Rochlin. Printed in the Peace Newsletter, 1982, Issue #488, p. 14.)

APPENDIX 4

GAYLE RUBIN CHARMED CIRCLE OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR (1993)

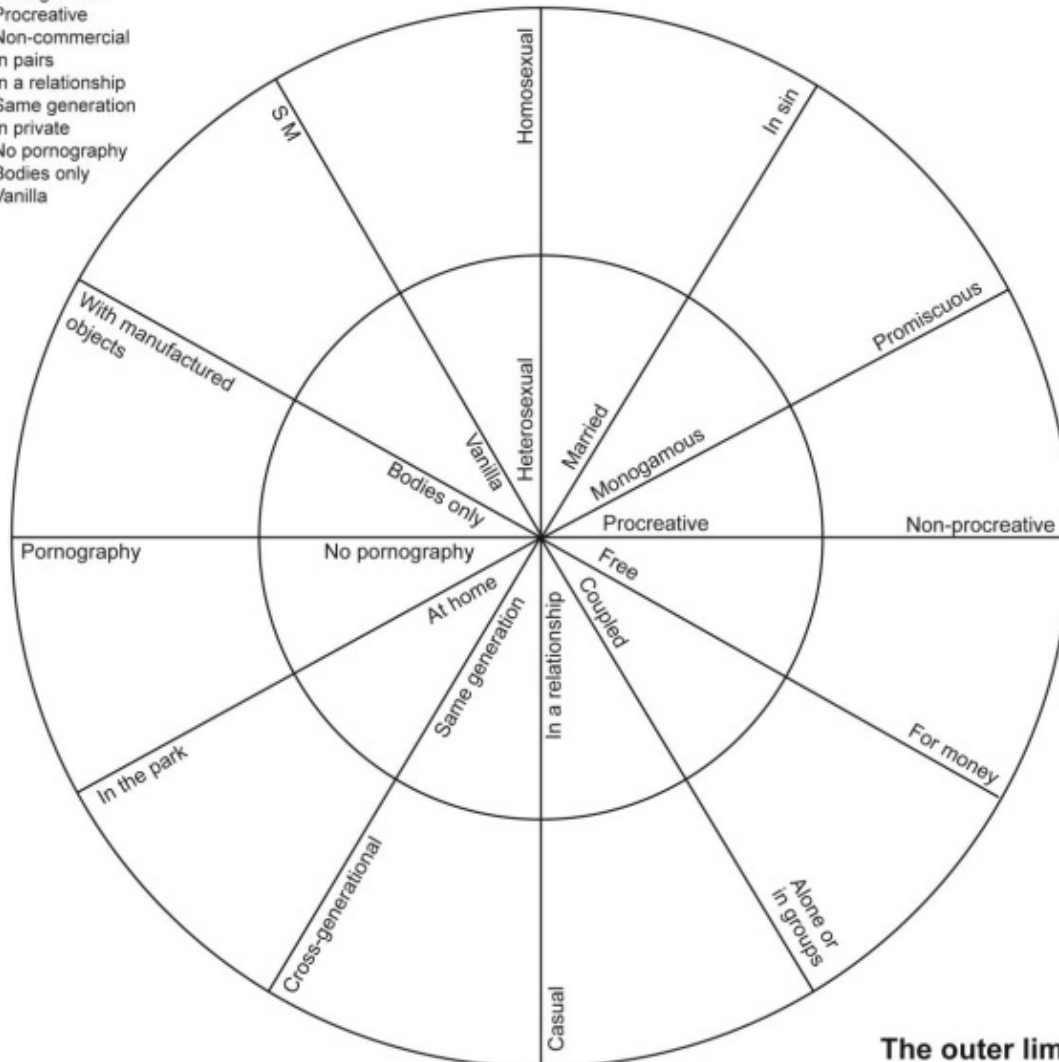
Gayle Rubin (1999), a cultural anthropologist and influential writer on gender and sexuality, suggests that American culture is based on a sex hierarchy, in which “marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid” (p. 158). She argues that our sexual value system consists of a charmed circle of “good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality” and the “outer limits” of “bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality” (p. 153).

While homosexuality falls to the outer limits of this sexual value system, so, too, does fetishism, pornography, sadomasochism, masturbation, prostitution. Similarly, just as homosexuality has been subject to religious, legal, psychiatric, and popular derision, so, too, have these other sexual behaviours.

Rubin (1999) argues that cultures draw lines to determine what type of sexual behaviours fall on the side of “good sex” and which do not. These lines are not historically static. Instead, they are contested terrain, as people debate over the acceptability of sexual practices that fall outside the charmed circle. However, the more elements of the charmed circle to which a person’s sexuality adheres, then the more likely it is that it will move closer toward the line of “good sex.” For example, monogamous gay couples who engage in private vanilla sex come closer to the line of acceptability than transsexuals who engage in S/M sex for pay.

The charmed circle:
 Good, Normal, Natural,
 Blessed Sexuality

- Heterosexual
- Married
- Monogamous
- Procreative
- Non-commercial
- In pairs
- In a relationship
- Same generation
- In private
- No pornography
- Bodies only
- Vanilla



The outer limits:
 Bad, Abnormal,
 Unnatural, Damned
 Sexuality

- Homosexual
- Unmarried
- Promiscuous
- Commercial
- Alone or in groups
- Casual
- Cross-generational
- In public
- Pornography
- With manufactured objects
- Sadomasochistic

The charmed circle of sexual behaviours

Source: Gayle Rubin, 1993, p. 13.

APPENDIX 5

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The following is a consent form for a research project. It is a research project on representation of queer sexuality in Indian media, carried out by Priyam Ghosh, who is the principle investigator (PI) of the project from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The interviewer (the investigator) should have the interviewee read this form carefully and ask any questions the interviewee may have. Before the interview can start, the investigator and the interviewee should sign two copies of this form. The interviewee will be given the copy of the signed form.

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Ms. Priyam Ghosh from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about academic work of faculty on campus. I will be one of approximately 50 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one would be told about it.
2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session. I have the right to decline to answer any question or end the interview.
3. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
4. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

(Interviewee Signature)

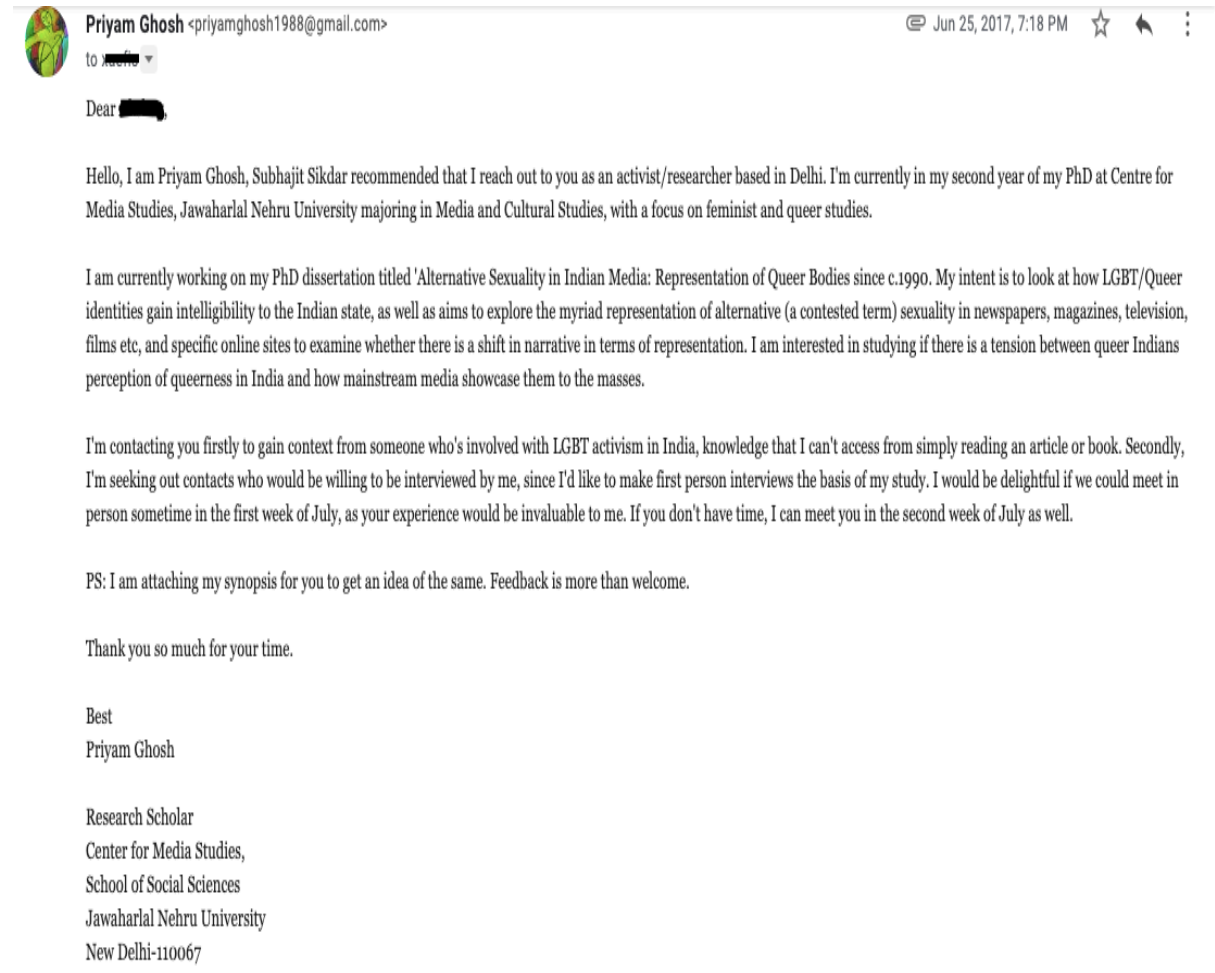
(Date)

(Signature of the investigator)

Priyam Ghosh, PhD Research Scholar,
Centre for Media Studies, School of Social Sciences, JNU
Mob: +91-9711905147
Email id: priyamghosh1988@gmail.com

APPENDIX 6

Sample mail sent to possible interviewees/interlocutors for Research



APPENDIX 7

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Research Project Title: Alternative Sexuality in Indian Media: Representation of Queer Bodies since c. 1990

Researcher: Ms. Priyam Ghosh

You are being invited to take part in a research project titled “Alternative Sexuality in Indian Media: Representation of Queer Bodies since c. 1990”. Before you decide to be part of the research project as my subject, kindly take time to read the attached information sheet carefully and discuss the research in hand with your peers before participating. As if any terminologies are unclear or you would like more information.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The project aims to look at various media representation of ‘alternative sexuality’ (specifically of the LGBT community) in newspapers, magazines, television, films, online spaces etc. This research attempts to examine the shifting narratives in representation of alternative sexuality in India post 1990s. With the 2018 judgement decriminalizing same-sex consensual relationship, this becomes an important intervention in terms of understanding media representation of queer community and how it aims to benefit further strands of research within this field.

WHO AM I LOOKING FOR

This research is looking for informed subjects who identify themselves under rubric of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, non-normative under the overall umbrella of ‘queer’. The participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and the research subject may continue to discontinue their participation at any time. This project offers you an opportunity to reflect upon your own representation in media and how the community views such representations and how different are they from own self-representations?

I hope to hear from subjects across the gender spectrum and ethnicity, sexuality, religion, socio-economic, varied age groups across India to keep it as varied as possible. To participate

you must identify as non-normative or from LGBTQIA spectrum, at least above 18 years old, and currently reside in India (or used to reside in India in exceptional cases).

Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research project at any point of time, without giving any reason, and this will not affect you in any way. Kindly let me know if there is anything we can do to make it easier for you to take part.

THE ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Participation would include online interviews through email, instant messaging etc. This would be followed by ethnographic offline interviews which would include face-to-face interviews in some cases. All data collected will be analysed using variety of research methods.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Most of the offline interviews would be held at the place of comfort of the subject, be their natal homes or public spaces such as coffee shops etc. All information about you would be safeguarded and kept confidential in my password-protected computer and security protected hard drive along with field notes during the duration of the research. All the information will be accessible by the primary researcher and may be shared with my PhD supervisor, but only in anonymised format. No information that could end up identifying the research subject will be disclosed through the research or shared. If you have any specific concerns regarding confidentiality of the research, the researcher will work with you to come to an arrangement in which you feel assured, respected and comfortable.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED?

In most broadest and generic terms the research subject will be asked about their lives and experiences of seeing their representation in mainstream media such as newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts along with their experience of using online dating applications such as Planet Romeo, Tinder, Grindr etc while living in India. The subjects would be asked to reflect upon following questions as attached below:

Part One: Being Gay in India

1. Where were you born? What is your date of birth?
2. Where is your family from originally?
3. Tell me about your family? Did you have any siblings? What is your relationship with your family like now? Tell me about the role of the family-has that influenced your decisions regarding your sexuality in any way?
4. What is/was your father's/mother occupation?
5. Who would you say was the most influential person in your life while you were growing up? In what way?
6. What is your educational background? What high school did you attend? College?
7. What were your memories of school like?
8. Do you have other gay friends? How did you meet them? What about lesbian friends/queer women-and your interactions with the lesbian community? Do you separate your queer friends with your straight ones-or do they know each other?
9. Is it different for people to be gay in India as opposed to in other places in the world? If yes, how?
10. What are some of the unique things about being queer and Indian? Is there a queer culture in India?



Part two: Media representation of non-normative sexuality

1. When you were growing up, do you recall hearing stories or jokes about homosexuals?
2. For you, what were the earliest representations of non-normative sexuality in media?
3. Do you recall seeing any news stories (print), TV advertisements, films etc. which revolved around homosexuality before 1990s? Were these representations true to the reality of a queer subject?
4. Do you remember any coming out stories in print or reading about lesbian suicides in print? How were the stories covered by the media?
5. What is your view about globalization and the effects it has had on queer culture in India? How has the media representations changed post neo-liberalization?
6. Has the view towards homosexuality and at times non-normative sexuality changed post 2009 High Court judgement reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code? Did India become more open to the idea of homosexuality?
7. How did the media representation of queer sexuality change once Section 377 was read down?
8. Did these representational politics change in the wake of two recent political developments-the Supreme Court's reversal of the Delhi High Court verdict on Section 377 in 2013 and recognition of transgenders as third gender in 2014? If yes, how?
9. Have you seen queer representations in any product based advertisements? Do you think the queer realities represented in them are closer to the ground realities of queer lives in India?

Part three: Interactions on social networking sites/queer dating sites

1. Do you have profile on social networking sites? If yes, what do you primarily use it for?
2. Do you participate in online chat cum networking and dating websites? Which ones? Have you met anyone off those sites? What was the purpose of the meeting, if it happened? And how did it go?
3. What role does caste or religion or economic factors play in your interaction with other queer people in India? Is this different online versus in real world?
4. Do you think you post differently under an anonymous nickname from the way you may post or interact on other online forums?



5. How does your representation of self changes when you are online and participating in the group, or are you the same? Do you perform or take on any special traits when you are online? If so, which are these?
6. Are you consistently the same online, or does your online persona vary...(or do you have several online personae?) How do you as a queer subject perceive the reality of 'self' in online spaces, specifically on queer dating websites?



RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Offline and online interviews will be transcribed and questionnaires and emails will be securely saved. Face to face interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed by the primary research into text for analysis to be used in research project. The result of the research will take shape of PhD thesis, but hopefully will be shared with wider readers and audiences through, for example, publications in academic journals or presentations in conferences in the future. In that case, your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym (a false name that you would choose for yourself), as I would remove any significant references that could give away your identity or that of individuals you mention in the course of the research. You will receive a copy of the overall research project, if you would like to.

CONTACT

The primary researcher can be contacted at priyamghosh1988@gmail.com. I would like to thank you for your time to go through this document and agreeing to be part of this project.

APPENDIX 8

TIMELINE OF SECTION 377

Section 377

Legal Battle for Equality and Dignity

- Section 377

“Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punishable with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine.”

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute carnal intercourse.

Note: No law criminalizes the identity of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person in India. What is criminalized is the act of ‘penile-non vaginal sex’ b/w man & woman, b/w man and man and b/w man and animal

- **Timeline of Case:**

2001	Lawyers Collective, on behalf of <i>Naz Foundation (India) Trust</i> , filed a writ petition in Delhi High Court challenging the constitutionality of Section 377 on grounds of violation of right to privacy, dignity and health under Article 21, equal protection of law and non-discrimination under Articles 14 and 15 and freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution.
2002	Notice issued to Attorney General of India, in light of the constitutional issues rose.
Sep. 2003	Ministry of Home Affairs filed a counter-affidavit opposing the Naz petition; justified Section 377 to cover lacuna in rape and child sexual abuse laws as well as because of public health and public morality.
2 nd Sep 2004	Case dismissed on the ground that it was an ‘academic challenge’ as Naz Foundation was not being prosecuted under Section 377.
3 rd Nov 2004	Review petition came up before the same bench of Delhi High Court and dismissed.
Feb 2006	SC held that the case needed consideration and remanded it the High Court to be heard on its merits.
April 2006	Joint Action Council, Kannur impleaded as a party opposing the petition.
July 2006	NACO filed an affidavit supporting the Naz petition: 377 impeded HIV prevention.
Oct 2006	B.P. Singhal, former Rajya Sabha MP from BJP filed an intervention opposing the Naz petition.



Nov 2006	Voices against 377 intervened in support of reading down of Section 377.
18 th Sep 2008	Final arguments began.
2 nd July 2009	<i>"We declare that Section 377 IPC, insofar it criminalizes consensual sexual acts of adults in private, is violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution."</i> -Delhi High Court
2009-2010	15 Special Leave Petitions (SLPs) filed in SC against HC decision; 'stay' not granted.
2009	Govt. of India does not appeal; Group of Ministers finds 'no legal error' in HC judgment.
2009-10	5 interventions filed in support of HC judgment incl on behalf of parents of LGBT persons & mental health professionals.
Feb-Mar,12	Final arguments in SC.
27 Mar,12	SC reserves judgment.
March 2013	<i>Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013</i> passed, revising sexual offences
11 th Dec 2013	<i>SC decision upheld S.377 "Section 377 IPC does not suffer from the vice of unconstitutionality and the declaration made by the Division Bench of High Court is legally unsustainable"</i>
28 Jan 2014	SC rejects review petitions.
22 April 2014	SC allows oral hearing of the Curative Petition.
2 February 2016	SC hear Curative Petition against Section 377 refers to a 5 judge bench

• **Highlights of the Delhi High Court Decision:**

- i) Firmly established **privacy** – of person, not just space or acts, as a fundamental right
- ii) Interpreted 'sex' to also mean **sexual orientation** as grounds prohibiting discrimination
- iii) Affirmed **"integrationist"** policy; protection of rights = promotion of public health
- iv) Rejected **public disapproval** as basis to restrict rights and
- v) Set **constitutional morality** (principles of inclusion/ equality/plurality) as standard to assess if state interest in curtailing rights is compelling.
- vi) Gave credence to the fact that Section 377 **is violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15** of the Constitution; bringing a focus on equality.
- vii) Emphasized **consensual sex** between **adults**.



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- **Supreme Court Reasoning and its fallacies**

- i) Non-consideration of substantive arguments under privacy, dignity and health
- ii) Incorrectly laid emphasis on numerical strength by holding that LGBTs constitute 'miniscule fraction' of the country's population (Perception of 'bias' : 'miniscule minority'; 'so-called rights of LGBT persons').
- iii) Abdication of the power of judicial review and guarantor of fundamental rights of people (One Person's right to be protected).
- iv) SC overlooked materials on harassment/abuse of LGBT persons, which it itself recorded in the judgment and accepted by HC
- v) Ignored the association between 'act' and 'identity' by holding that Section 377 prohibits 'acts' and not criminalize a particular people/identity/orientation.

Efforts in Parliament

On 18 December 2015, Lok Sabha member Shashi Tharoor of the Indian National Congress, introduced a private member's bill to replace Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code and decriminalize consensual same-sex relations. The bill was defeated in first reading, 71-24.

In March 2016, Tharoor tried to reintroduce the private member's bill to decriminalize homosexuality, but was voted down for the second time.

APPENDIX 9

NALSA VS. UNION OF INDIA- TIMELINE TILL 2016

National Legal Services Authority
vs.
Union of India: Recognition of Self-identified Gender in India

- **Supreme Court Decision:**

- i) No legal recognition of **gender** outside **binary** norm of male and female based on **sex assigned at birth**.
- ii) Idea to approach SC stemmed from '**community consultation with judges**'.
- iii) NALSA filed PIL in Sept. 2012 seeking grant of equal rights and protection to transgender persons; recognition of third gender in identity documents; and for admission in educational institutions, hospitals etc.
- iv) Intervention filed on behalf of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy by Lawyers Collective.

- **Highlights of the Supreme Court Decision:**

- i) Recognition of third gender.
- ii) Recognition of people who identify in the gender **not associated with their sex assigned at birth** based on **self-identification**. Includes female identifying as male and male identifying as female.
- iii) **Discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation and gender identity** amounts to discrimination under Art 14.
- iv) **No SRS or medical intervention** required for recognition of gender identity.
- v) A series of **directions** given to the Centre and States, including **reservation under socially and educationally backward classes** in public educational institutions and employment.

- **Definition of Transgender:**

"Transgender –an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to their biological sex"

➤ As per SC, the term includes:

- i) Persons who do not identify with the sex assigned at birth.
- ii) Hijras/'eunuchs', who claim to be neither male nor female.
- iii) Inter-sex persons.
- iv) Persons intending to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS).
- v) Persons who have undergone SRS to align their biological sex with their gender identity in order to become male or female.
- vi) Persons who cross-dress.



- **Post-NALSA Developments**

- **Policy Initiatives**

- i) Setting up of Inter-ministerial co-ordination committee (IMCC) to implement NALSA judgment (April, 2014)
- ii) National Commission for Backward Classes recommendation to include transgender persons in 'other backward classes' (May, 2014)
- iii) Educational schemes for transgender students by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment viz. Right to Education Act, 2009.

- **Initiatives by State Govts:**

- i) Transgender Boards (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal)
- ii) Free clinics (Pondicherry, Chhattisgarh, Kolkata)
- iii) Monthly pension (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi)

- **Higher Education**

- i) University Grants Commission's circular to all Central and State Universities include 'transgenders' under 'gender column' in all applications (October, 2014).
- ii) Followed by Delhi University, Mumbai University, Jamia Milia Islamia, Jadavpur University, etc

- **Financial Inclusion**

Reserve Bank of India directed all banks (public and private) to include 'third gender' in all forms/applications under the gender column (April, 2015).

- **Legislation**

Passage of Private Members' bill in Rajya Sabha on the Rights of Transgender Persons that seeks to establish a National Commission for TG persons (24th April, 2015).

Efforts at Implementation

Rajya Sabha passed a private member's Bill in 2014, brought in by DMK MP Tiruchi Siva to empower transgenders.

Shri Thaawarchand Gehlot, Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment to the Secretary General, Lok Sabha, introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill in 2016.



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