Sexualness

akshay khanna
To our Queer movements, all those who have been, are, and will be, a token of love.

We shall see, it is inevitable that we too shall see, that day that has been promised us, that which has been written on the slate of eternity when these high mountains of tyranny and oppression are blown away like fluff and beneath our feet, the feet of the oppressed shall this earth tremble, shake and beat and above the heads of rulers shall lightning strike and thunders roar

We shall see, it is inevitable, we too shall see that day
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An Introduction

India is dramatic. Anyone who has felt its sweltering summer and waited—eyes beseeching the cloudless sky—for the first monsoon shower knows why. The first cough of thunder is a resounding proclamation that the struggle, for the year, is done. People stream onto the streets to get drenched in the first heavy drops, breaking into dance, singing songs of the rain—just like in the movies. This is not merely relief, it is jouissance. Just when one forgets everything but the relentless, oppressive heat, just when the monsoon can only be spoken of in hushed tones, as though it were a mystical saviour, the clouds arrive and burst in an affirmation of life, of the cycle of life, bellowing out the inevitability of the end of summer’s tyranny. It is a moment of epic emotions. Strangers smile knowingly at each other, joined in a carefree laughter, as though we had won the cricket World Cup. But imagine, for a moment, the intensity that this experience could generate when it magically coincides with a victory that those eyes have demanded of the sky not for one summer, but for 10, or 140. How does one speak of a moment where the skies burst forth in celebration precisely when, at the end of a long battle that has drawn blood, sweat and tears, a state that has always despised, attacked and ridiculed you, turns around in an
open embrace and announces ‘you are citizens, free, equal, with the right to be who you are’?

I was not in Delhi that momentous morning of 2nd July 2009 when the Delhi High Court ruled that homosexuality could no longer be considered an offence under Indian law. After a decade-long litigation, instigated by the HIV/AIDS NGO the Naz Foundation (India) Trust, the Court declared that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code—an anti-sodomy provision brought into force in 1860 by the British colonial administration, under which homosexual acts, and thus in effect homosexuality, have been deemed criminalised—violated constitutionally guaranteed Fundamental Rights, recognising for the first time, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk as citizens. Technically, the judgement simply held that consensual sex between adults of the same sex, in private, is no longer punishable under Section 377. The implications, however, of this judgement are far greater than this. “The terms of the debate have been reset,” argued Gautam Bhan, a leading queer activist on television that evening, “we will now speak as full citizens.”¹ That day will perhaps be remembered by Queer Indians across the world as the day when ‘we finally became free’. National television channels ran this as the top story for two days, merging colourful images of the recently concluded Pride marches in five major cities of India with those of my friends, comrades and lovers breaking into tears of disoriented delirium. “India has finally entered the 21st century,” newspapers reported, even as religious figures across the board shook their heads in angry disapproval—the Hindu sadhvi, Christian reverend and Muslim maulvi echoing each others’ (mis)

conceptions of India as ‘conservative’. Having now had a taste of this ‘freedom’, this sense of being “full citizens”, it seemed, from here on, there was no going back.

This 21st century that India had entered, it turned out, is not linear. A lot has happened since.

While I missed the drama of 2009, as luck would have it, I was present outside the Supreme Court of India a mere four years later for an equally dramatic moment. I had spent the best part of the morning shuttling between counters, trying to get a pass to enter the premises in the hope of watching the highest court of the land lay to rest doubts on the simple fact that the Right to Life must include a Right to Sexuality, dismissing the irrational demands of no less than 18 appeals against the Delhi High Court’s sterling verdict. The sudden commotion in the lawns of the Court, teeming with journalists, television cameras, lawyers, inquisitive onlookers and interns of various international organisations, was inescapable. As the mass of people elbowed their way into the earshot of lawyers who had just stepped out of the Court with news, I heard, in disbelief, the words “appeal allowed”.

Queer activists had waited for more than a year since the arguments in the Supreme Court had been completed and when the bench had reserved judgement. We had, in this period, imagined all kinds of outcomes and scenarios. Although the complete reversal of the High Court decision had always been a possibility, it had, in honesty, simply been

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fuel to the perverse enjoyment of imagining the worst case scenario, possible only because such an outcome could not really happen. In the din that followed over the subsequent minutes, hours and days, journalists and TV channels cornering anyone who seemed remotely related to the case for sound bytes, for reactions, for tears and anger, and as we waited to read the actual judgement that had so summarily dismissed our struggle, some things became clear—at stake were the juridical possibilities of citizenship, what it means to be a ‘minority’ in the Indian nation, the balance of powers in the state and our experience of time. The tryst with the law had completed a circle and yet another phase in the Queer struggle had begun. Most recently, in February 2016, another spiral in this engagement of the Queer movement with the law began, with the Supreme Court signalling its seriousness in considering the questions of constitutional significance, referring a ‘Curative petition’—a recent innovation of the Supreme Court that allows it to rectify its own grave mistakes in the interpretations of the Constitution—to a Constitutional Bench of five judges. Which questions of constitutional import will be identified for consideration is yet to be seen. Indeed, it is yet to be seen whether the five judge bench considers the petition at all. But it is a matter of concern that within this list of possible issues to be considered lies the very essence of the Indian state. At stake is the very structure of Indian constitutionalism—from the question of whether the rights of a ‘minority’ are subject to the political will of a majority as articulated in the Parliament, to the ambit of the powers of the Judiciary to hold the Legislature and Executive branches of the state to a constitutional morality, to specific interpretations of Fundamental Rights provisions and how they and their limitations relate to each other. In a political moment of a Hindu nationalism that has scant regard for
the Constitution, and for law more generally, and where minorities and marginalised communities outside the narrow ambit of the nation defined in terms of the upper caste Hindu masculine subject face violence with impunity, this is a central political question for the future of India and, more specifically, of those who are, in fact, opposing the Delhi High Court judgement. Sexuality, in other words, has come to be articulated as a node for the consideration of political questions central to the very notion of India, of its constitutional design, of the meaning of citizenship. This book tells a story of how this moment came to be. More specifically, this book is primarily, though not solely, concerned with how activists went about bringing the Queer body into the juridical register as an intelligible subject vested with rights as citizen, i.e., as a citizen-subject.

This was not the first time that the Queer body has been articulated as intelligible in the eyes of the modern Indian nation-state. As a matter of fact, the case before the Delhi High Court was hinged on and made possible because of the prior entry of a Queer body in another register of governmentality (Foucault 1991)—that of public health. Specifically, this was in the context of the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic which, in the mid-1990s, recognised MSM (men who have sex with men) as a category of persons who faced a high risk of HIV infection. Since the mid-1990s, the Indian state has taken cognisance of this category and has been involved in identifying, ‘mapping’ and targeting interventions on folk deemed to fit in this category. The petitioners in the Delhi High Court and, in turn, the Court itself, drew heavily upon epidemiological knowledge produced about this category and upon the logic of public health employed in the context of HIV/AIDS. Simply put, the criminalisation of homosexual acts, and of homosexuality by extension, was manifesting
as a hindrance to HIV/AIDS interventions with MSMs, burdening the population at large with an elevated risk of a terrifying epidemic. The entry of the Queer body into the juridical register, in other words, was predicated on its entry into an epidemiological register. The negotiation of entry into these registers dominated Queer activism in India for two decades. As such, these two registers—the legal and the epidemiological—form the focus of this book.

I begin this introductory chapter by laying out the underlying theme of the book, that of ‘sexualness’. I do so by describing the broader context and theoretical concerns informing this book, sifting out key elements of what is at stake in the question of ‘sexuality’ in contemporary India. I then go on to briefly clarify my use of some key terms. Speaking to a wide range of expectations from readers, I follow this with a brief description of my fieldwork and the material I bring into the book and then a note on questions of subject positions, ethics and objectivity. This is followed by a description of the structure of the book and, finally, a note on my stylistic choices.

'Sexualness', Sexuality and the Question of India's Modernity

There is a multiplicity of idioms and metaphors through which gender diversity and sexualness are spoken of, transacted and experienced in India. In the last two-and-a-half decades, the emergence of a political movement against marginalisation on the basis of sexuality and gender non-conformity has brought about the circulation of some of these idioms in particular registers of governmentality. The most significant of these, as mentioned earlier, are public health and law. In the process, something quite else is created, and this something else portends to speak the truth
of ‘sexuality in India’. The story here is of the emergence of ‘sexuality’ as a legitimate cause for a movement, as an aspect of personhood, as a political object, as a context of social mobility and as a mode of connectedness between people and geographies. ‘Sexuality’ is, in this sense, a ‘modern’ phenomenon. And although in this book I focus on this emergence, on the process through which ‘sexuality’ becomes intelligible in these registers of governmentality, my gesture is equally towards what I call ‘sexualness’. This neologism is central, I argue, to the question of what is at stake in an anthropological project attempting to make sense of the sexual in non-Euro-North American contexts.

YES, MEN HOLD HANDS IN INDIA

Reflecting on a theme that invariably comes up in conversations with European and North American visitors to India, and on a whim, I recently logged on to Flickr (a website on which one can share photographs and video clips with the rest of the world wide web) and quickly searched for ‘men holding hands India’. Of the several hundred images that this repository churned out, a sizeable number were simply of men holding hands on streets in India. Many of these photographs are clearly taken candidly. Those taken face-to-face suggest a nonchalance on the part of the subjects, as though the fact of holding hands is nothing out of the ordinary.

There are some interesting features in this group of photographs. First, they are largely taken or posted online by European and North American travellers. Second, the aesthetics of the subjects in most of these photographs suggest that they are perhaps all lower to middle class. Third, almost all these photographs have been given strikingly similar titles by the photographers: ‘just good
friends’, ‘friends’, and ‘men holding hands—a normal occurrence in India’. Some photographers go a step further and include explanatory notes below the photograph such as ‘they are NOT gay’, and ‘Yes... men in India hold hands. At first I thought everyone was homosexual, then realized it’s a sign of friendship!’

Figure 1: Men Hold Hands in India

There is something fascinating about this. First, that the sight of men holding hands in public is experienced as remarkable by this Euro-North American gaze—remarkable enough not just to be photographed, but to be exhibited alongside snake charmers, cows and the Taj Mahal as a cultural peculiarity they were privy to in their travels around India. Second, that the image of two men holding hands suggests the realm of (homo)sexuality to this peculiar gaze. And third, that this suggestion must be simultaneously negated—it apparently cannot be the case
that the act of holding hands is erotic. In a ‘conservative’ society such as India, clearly, men cannot be ‘Gay’ or, at least, cannot articulate homosexual personhood publicly. The image must thus be divested of (its) eroticism and the act of holding hands firmly placed in the realm of a sociality that is bereft of eroticism.

But who is to say that these men are not ‘homosexual’? On what basis is it being said that their ‘homosociality’ is not simultaneously erotic? Is ‘friendship’ in India the same as that in North America? Or is the cleaving of ‘friendship’ from ‘eroticism’ a Euro-North American peculiarity? From Freud’s psychoanalytical theory of sex to Judith Butler’s meditations on power, the understanding of gender seems to be that real (heterosexual) men and women are created through the continuous denial of homoeroticism. Not only must homosexual desire be denied, its very loss must be denied as well. It cannot be mourned, but must be managed. Homoeroticism must thus, in Euro-North American contexts, be accommodated neatly in an identifiable homosexual body, aesthetically marked, affectively defined. But what if this melancholic gender universe is not universal? Is there a possibility, for instance, that to be ‘friends’ in India already entails an easy eroticism between tactile selves, and that the entire framework that cleaves eroticism away from an asexual sociality is an unnecessary imposition, a projection of a gender-anxious Euro-North American masculinity onto everybody else?

This brings to light the nature of what is at stake when a ‘western’ gaze encounters non-western sexual and gender articulations. It is not my argument that these men holding hands are actually and necessarily Gay or any other form of homosexual (and that the unwitting American tourist has denied the existence of homosexuality in India because of
the stereotype of the ‘conservative other’). Neither is it my intention to argue that the fact that Indian men hold hands in public is evidence of (an intelligible, recognisable and distinct) homoeroticism of Indian society. My suggestion is, rather, that these are the wrong questions to be asking in that they already presume an easy commensurability between a ‘western’ epistemology and the sexual in India. They already presume, in other words, that gender and sexualness in India can be easily understood in the same terms as they are understood in Europe or North America—in terms of sexuality evident in ‘types’ of people, and through the employment of binaries such as male–female, public–private, homosexual–heterosexual, gay–straight and homoerotic–homosocial.

The image of two Indian men holding hands does not simply offer itself up to be appreciated through these categories. It is not, to use Foucault’s words, the “accomplice of our knowledge” (1981: 67).3 The asking of these questions of ‘homosexuality (as personhood) in India’ is, in this sense, an artefact of the interface between a Euro-North American lens and a complex economy of idioms and experiences of gender, sexualness and class, amongst other things. I am not here intending to offer some other, ‘authentic’ epistemology for understanding ‘sexuality in India’. My project is far more humble. I focus rather on the processes through which a particular claim to speak the truth of Indian sexuality, strikingly in the image of a (Euro-North American) ‘global’

3 The entire quote reads: “We must not resolve discourse into a play of pre-existing significations; we must not imagine that the world turns to us a legible face that we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour. We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do on things, or in any case as a practice that we impose on them...” (1981: 67).
original, is made, how this truth is then brought to circulate and to what effect.

It is in this context that I use the term ‘sexualness’ to mark exactly its distinction from ‘sexuality’. To put it briefly—in much literature, as well as in the ‘field’, so to say, the term ‘sexuality’ is predominantly used to refer to an aspect of personhood. Sexuality is something, in other words, that is presumed to be an aspect of the person, it is ascribed to the ontology of personhood—as though who or what one desires or fucks defines what one is. This is a historically peculiar formulation, most strongly articulated a mere century back, when biomedicine ascribed itself the authority to speak the ‘truth’ about sex and desire (see Weeks 1986; Katz 1990; khanna 2007a). This claim of authority and the eroticisation of consciousness, behaviour, emotion and identity took place through the convergence of several social factors. Katz argues that this may be understood in the context of developments in the political economy in Europe and North America, where

…the transformation of the family from producer to consumer unit resulted in a change in family members’ relation to their own bodies; from being an instrument primarily of work, the human body was integrated into a new economy, and began more commonly to be perceived as a means of consumption and pleasure (Katz 1990: 12–13).

In earlier works, I have examined the curious reproduction of this ontology of personhood in the discourses of medicine and the law and in mass media articulations in the Indian context, and argued that it refers us to a post-coloniality of these authoritative discourses (khanna 2005 and 2007a). I concerned myself with the implications this might have for activism around sexuality and gender, highlighting that in order for the sexual to enter the picture in law and
medicine, it must apparently be contained in the person and be constitutive of a liberal subject. This resonates with much anthropological work on the sexual as well, where we find a dominance of a concern with subjectivity and with identity, and how identities determine subjectivity. Tom Boellstorff in a review of Queer studies in anthropology terms this a “logic of enumeration”, whereby “political and theoretical efficacy can exist only through naming each category of selfhood or experience”, and which presumes that “concepts name pre-existing entities and relations, rather than asking how the social is produced and sustained through acts of representation…” (2007: 18–19).

But in my experience of India, of growing up in India, in my fieldwork and in the stories I tell here, the erotic and the sexual need not speak to the sense of self or the definition of the self at all—for instance, men have sex with other men, or are erotic with other men without thinking of themselves as any ‘different’. There is, in other words, a ‘sexualness’ that escapes the frame of sexuality, desire and eroticism that flows through people without constituting them as subjects. There are a large number of idioms and practices through which this sexualness circulates. I now offer a glimpse of this diversity, picking instances from my 15 months of fieldwork between 2005 and 2007 that took me through places as disparate as West Bengal, Meghalaya, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. This included small towns and villages in these areas and also the big cities of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore and Chennai.

*Launda naach* (literally ‘boy’s dance’) refers to the erotic dance performances by effeminate adolescent ‘boys’ at marriage celebrations in large parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and some parts of West Bengal. But the *Launda* here is a temporal, seasonal category as the same ‘boys’, when not
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on tour, take on various other identities, aesthetics and jobs.\(^4\) The term Murat in Gujarat refers to an extremely flamboyant queer embodiment which is difficult to translate—it could mean ‘idol’ (i.e., of a deity), ‘face’, mask or performance. This idiom is not an ‘identity’ in the strict sense as it is already defined at a distance from an inner psychic self and is far more obviously performative than most other embodiments I have encountered. The concept of masti, which translates to fun or intoxication, can be simultaneously used to refer to sexual play between boys or men without significant implications to the sense of self. One does not become a homosexual by simply doing masti and this distance from personhood is the exact function of the term (Boyce 2007; khanna 2007a; Row Kavi 2007). In central and north India, practices such as Maitri Karaar are extremely similar in form to marriage. In them, people of the same sex commit companionship and love to each other in the presence of the community and in a temple with the exchange of garlands and the like. Columns in local newspapers talk every so often about two women getting married in a village temple in ceremonies solemnised by priests, before the entire village (Vanita 2011). Many of the languages I encountered in my fieldwork have explicit terms to describe masculine females, effeminate males, various sex acts and transactions. And these are neither isolated nor necessarily marginalised from a ‘mainstream’. The Bhakti tradition in northern India; the devotees of Yellamma—the Jogappas in Karnataka; the annual Aligal Thiruvizha festival in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu; the annual festival devoted to Bahuchara Mata in Gujarat—these are all instances of temples, festivals, mythologies, pilgrimages and practices drawing large numbers of people for whom the thirdness of gender, the movement between

\(^4\) I discuss this phenomenon in greater detail later in Chapter 1.
gender identities and same sex desire are seemingly not out of the ‘ordinary’.

In the context of the juridical subject, developments in South Asia over the last decade fundamentally challenge the all too easy binary frames that dominate understandings of gender and sexuality. In this period, several registers of citizenship were modified to more accurately recognise the diversity of gender in the subcontinent. The electoral roll in India was amended to include three categories for gender, ‘female’, ‘male’, and ‘other’. Ration cards, passport application forms, the census and even visa applications to India then offered three options, the third category ranging from ‘other’ to ‘transgender’ to ‘Hijra’. Similar recognitions have taken place in a range of juridical registers in Pakistan and Nepal as well. It is significant that this was not simply Hijra, or a closed category of transgender, but rather, an open category that might allow for the acknowledgement of diversity rather than taxonomies that fix each subject with its “true name”, “true place” and “true body” (Foucault 1979a: 199–205). In 2014, however, the Supreme Court of India, on a petition by the National Legal Services Authority, consolidated these diverse articulations of ‘thirdness’ of gender in a judgement that at once extends the obligation of the welfare state to those marginalised due to their gender non-conformity, and limits the scope of the category of thirdness in order to provide a coherent frame for affirmative action. At the time of this writing, this judgement has evoked state-level processes of policy making to enable this affirmative action, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has set up a committee to flesh out the implementation of the directions in the judgement, the Supreme Court has clarified that ‘third gender’ refers only to Hijras and, at the same time, two draft legislations that seek to further define the category
of transgender have been introduced in Parliament. The crucial point for us at this point in the book, however, is the mere recognition that the gender universe in India and more broadly in South Asia, is beyond the binary of male and female, this fact being recognised by the state itself.

Embodied articulations of same-sex desire in seemingly normative contexts further bring into question the very presumption of the ‘marginality’ of queerness to India. Gender-segregated compartments in local trains in Bombay, evidence of the presumption of heterosexuality in the spatial regulation of sexualness, for instance, are also the spaces that offer up the most delicious same-sex sexual possibilities (khanna 2009a; Boyce and khanna 2011). This interstitial articulation of same-sex sexual desire has recently found its place in the analysis of space and subjectivity in the work of Paul Boyce, who argues that

...relations between space and same sex sexual subjectivity are produced and reproduced in a complex interweaving of less than obvious practices, perceptions and contexts. Men who have sex with men are not necessarily socially distinct subjects; male-to-male sexual space is not simply geographically discrete or marginal (2006: 409–10).

While I am hard pressed to be able to speak of all these instances within a coherent inclusive frame, one thing emerges clearly from them. To simply say that 'Indian

5 The first of these two Bills was introduced in April 2015 as a Private Member’s by DMK MP Thiruchi Siva in the Rajya Sabha. The Bill was passed without contest and has been celebrated by some Transgender groups as being in resonance with the NALSA judgement. The second Bill, introduced by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in August 2016, is a regressive piece of legislation that draws on harmful stereotypes about Hijras, establishing a screening process for the assessment of authenticity of claims at being transgender, etc. For a discussion on these developments, see Bhattacharya (2016) and Semmalar (2016).
society is conservative’ or ‘homophobic’, and to examine these various sexual economies within an epistemology of ‘homosexuality’ would miss the point completely. Queerness, in the sense of multiple genders and forms of sexualness, is far from marginal to India either spatially (Boyce 2006), in praxis or indeed in moral, social and religious discourses. To understand the sexual in the Indian context, then, we need conceptualisations that displace the centrality of personhood.

Let me be clear that it is not my intention to romanticise India as some sort of Queer heaven. Alongside this diversity is a high level of violence and exclusion, much of which Queer activism, and thus this book as well, is concerned with. The instances of women entering pacts to attempt suicide together (Arasu and Thangarajah 2011) or running away from violence were, in the period of the fieldwork that informs this book, reported often enough to keep activist groups around the country on their toes, running from court to hospital to police station and shelter throughout the year. Recent years have also seen some of the most gruesome murders of Queer males—whether ‘crimes of passion’ or ‘homophobia’, the fact is that many lives have been and continue to be lost. And there is the all too common experience of effeminate males being beaten up or raped in public parks, in schools, in colleges. All this is in addition to and was often related to Section 377, which had, in the years before the Naz judgement, come to be increasingly used as the basis for harassment and extortion, most visibly of Queer males in cities.

**COLONISATION AS HETEROSEXUALISATION:**
**THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF POST-COLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP**

How does one make sense of this predicament where, on the one hand, is a multiplicity of idioms that embrace and
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often celebrate diversity of sexualness and gender and, on the other, is horrific violence and exclusion? It is tempting to characterise the negative experiences and the violence against Queer bodies as a legacy of colonisation and of the impact of neo-liberal expansion. Section 377 was, after all, a colonial law; just one provision in an experiment the colonial government carried out in India and then replicated in other colonies. It was, again, the colonial administration that made the fact of being a eunuch—referring most often to the figure of the Hijra (a social, economic and political community that is famously “neither man nor woman” [Nanda 1990] and which is now being increasingly translated as ‘transgender’, moving from one gender to another)—a criminal fact, categorising the community along with others that were termed “criminal tribes”. In another vein, it is a fact that as the middle class takes on the mantle of ‘modern subject’, it has tended to distance itself from hitherto-celebrated aspects of diversity. A case in point is the reduced role of Hijras in marriages and childbirth. In North India, Hijra groups would be invited to bless a couple during the

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6 The Hijra community is amongst the most studied in the history of anthropology of South Asia. See Rose 1907; Carstairs 1957; Opler 1960; Sharma 1989; Nanda 1990; Hall 1997; Busby 1997a; Jaffrey 1998; Talwar 1999. This literature has largely focused on the issue of sex/gender ambiguity, bringing the Hijra into debates on binary gender categorisation, cross-cultural understandings of gender fluidity and the construction of sexual categories and, in later years, into a debate on western versus non-western tolerance for sexual ambiguity and binary gender categories (Reddy 2005:30–31). This locates Hijras within an approach that Reddy calls “third-sex analysis” which “…tends to effectively separate the domain of sexuality from that of political economy and the analysis of other axes of identity, thereby limiting its usefulness as an articulation of the complexity” (ibid.:32). For an overview of much of this literature, see the chapter ‘Hijras, Individuality and Izzat’ in Reddy (2005).

7 This was under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.
marriage ceremony and to dance and entertain the wedding party. In return, relatively large sums of money would be given in gift to the group. Similarly, Hijras would be invited to bless newborn children. This would be a primary source of income for Hijras who would otherwise not find employment in ‘regular jobs’. In recent times, however, this practice has come to be marked as ‘backward’, as a waste of money and as one of the old Indian ways that need to be left behind. And while those ‘regular jobs’ are still few and far between for Hijras, this source of income is precarious. This is one of the main narratives given to explain sex work within the Hijra community, one which is formally characterised by sacrifice and celibacy. In the ‘modern’ economy, in other words, a rather dry heterosexual self of ‘real men’ and ‘real women’ establishes a monopoly over legitimacy of being.

The relatively recent work of historians complicates this story. Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita’s *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000), for instance, constructs a history through extracts from Indian writings on the subject starting with ancient texts such as the Mahabharata and the Kama Sutra, going on to medieval texts from Sanskrit and Perso-Urdu traditions and finally ‘modern’ Indian texts. Each of these translated extracts is accompanied by essays which historicise and contextualise them. This book makes a convincing argument for the existence in pre-colonial India of several complex discourses around same-sex love, “rich metaphorical traditions of representing it” (Vanita 2002: 167), and the use of names, terms and codes to distinguish homoerotic love and those inclined to it. The book then traces the manner in which the colonial experience reframed such discourse within a ‘Victorian morality’—for example, through the heterosexualisation of Urdu poetry, specifically the ghazal. Vanita’s second edited volume on sexuality in India focuses more specifically on this second
point, i.e., on the way colonialists and nationalists attempt to rewrite “multivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform tradition, and the way these rewritings are contested (ibid.: 4). This work revitalises certain idioms of same-sex desire and points to the processes through which these have been silenced or subsumed, the best example of which is Petievich’s examination of the terms ‘Dogana’ and ‘Zanakhi’, the ‘lesbian’ voice in Urdu poetry. An underlying question in the book is about naming, about vocabularies and languages through which same-sex love may be spoken of.

The argument that sexuality-as-personhood and the homosexual as a type of person is a modern idiom seems to lie here in contradiction with Kidwai and Vanita’s identification of pre-colonial names and languages that speak of same-sex desire and, as they argue, these names often relate to personhood. My argument here is that there is a specificity to the modern idiom that distinguishes it from the pre-colonial—there is a difference between the ‘Dogana’ and the ‘Lesbian’, between the ‘Launda’ and the ‘Gay’, in that they evoke different ontologies, presuppose distinct discursive fields and circulate in distinct political economies as idioms of sexualness. This nuance may be brought to Jeremy Seabrook’s slightly unwieldy proposition that “homophobia is a colonial legacy” (2004). To speak of ‘homophobia’ is to already presume a cultural consensus around the existence of the ‘homosexual’ as a type of person. To the extent that this ‘homosexual’ emerges from biomedicine—with biomedicine itself being a colonial enterprise (Arnold 1993)—‘homophobia’ may be understood in a context of post-coloniality. And yet, it would be inaccurate to simply identify the violence visited upon the Queer body with ‘modernity’ in either the colonial or neo-liberal sense. At one level, such formulation runs the risk of constructing a simplistic ‘authentic’ pre-colonial
experience of sexualness in India, the ‘land of the Kama Sutra’. At another, it negates the fact that the modern idiom of sexuality as personhood is exactly a crucial domain of emancipatory politics today. It runs the risk, in other words, of writing the question of sexual politics as another instance of a modernity–tradition dualism.

While this is a tempting and indeed a politically significant antidote to the orthodoxy often espoused by the state and the religious right wing in the present moment—that the real, traditional India is ‘conservative’ and that homosexuality is a western pollutant—it is, nevertheless, inaccurate and, ultimately, unhelpful in understanding what is at stake where vernacular idioms of sexualness and gender must circulate alongside, collaborate with and contest modern forms of personhood. Instead of framing the question of sexualness and sexuality as one of competing claims to modernity and tradition, I thus look at the conditions under which various idioms are brought to speak to each other. In particular, I am interested in the conditions for the adoption and contestation of the idiom of ‘sexuality-as-personhood’ in Queer politics in India.

THE QUESTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

As mentioned earlier, the question of subject-making has dominated much anthropological and philosophical exploration of sexuality. This perhaps has something to do with the seductiveness of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* series which, ultimately, tells the story of how subjects are discursively produced, through the internalisation of regulatory and disciplinary regimes, through “work on the self” and through which the subject becomes the site for harmonisation of the antagonisms of power (Žižek 1989: 2). The subject here is not constituted in a singular moment,
but is the effect of a multivocal and continuous reiteration of power (Butler 1997: 16). And even while in much of this work, with Butler in particular, the ‘essence’ of the subject is exposed as a discursive effect of reiteration, this effect is seen to refer to an interiority which stands in for the truth of persons. Subjectivity, in other words, relates to an inner-psychic reality, a ‘self’. Flowing through this book is a contestation of this presumption of interiority. Here I briefly set forth the theoretical design of this contestation.

Balibar (1994), Butler (1997), Brown (1995) and Žižek (1989), amongst others, have in various ways attempted to tackle a particular contradiction in the Foucauldian frame of subjectivity—that the subject is complicit in its own subjection. “Why is it,” asks Balibar,

that the very name which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the originary freedom of the human being—the name of “subject”—is precisely the name which historically meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e., subjection?...is it... because “freedom” can only be the result and counterpart of liberation, emancipation, becoming free: a trajectory inscribed in the very texture of the individual, with all its contradictions, which starts with subjection and always maintains an inner and outer relation with it? (1994: 8–9, emphasis in original).

For Wendy Brown, this paradoxical form of the subject is the basis for a critique of emancipatory politics in the realm of law. The assumption of such projects of emancipation, that the politically committed subject would be cognizant of the full map of power and plot appropriate strategies, eschews “the problem of subject formation by and through the very discourses being charted as sites and zones of unfreedom” (Brown 1995: xi). By becoming subjects in our claims to justice, we invite the law to constitute us, to
speak the truth of our experience and to adjudicate on our conditions of being.

Butler brings theories of power in conversation with psychoanalysis to answer the question of why it is that we subjectivate ourselves in this manner. She takes as an example Althusser’s theory of the linguistic inauguration of the subject, i.e., interpellation (Althusser 1984). The scenario here is of a policeman on the street shouting out “Hey, you there!” This is the staging of a call to subjection. When a man on the street turns around, he is responding to that call, identifying himself with the name and thus coming into existence as a Subject. Butler argues (as does Žižek 1989: 2–3, 44) that this is a misrecognition—one that is predicated on a self-attribution of guilt, a “submission to law through an acceptance of its demand for conformity” (Butler 1997: 106–07, 112). Why then does the man turn around and interpellate? Here Butler turns to theories of the psyche to identify a “passionate attachment” to subjection, a “narcissistic attachment to one’s continuing existence”. This passionate attachment is itself the product of disciplinary cultivation (Butler 1997a: 102) premised on a separation of the subject from itself. Simply put, the subject in these theories is ‘reflexive’ and the moment of origin of this subject is the moment in which it recognises itself as the source of that which is disgusting, that which is to be disavowed.

Butler’s reference here is to Hegel’s theory of self-enslavement, where the self to be renounced is figured as a bodily self, as the “actual individual in the animal functions” (ibid.: 50). Hegel, Butler suggests, is pointing towards defaecation as an object of self-preoccupation. “Here, consciousness in its full abjection has become like shit, lost in a self-referential anality, a circle of its own making” (ibid.). This recognition of one’s own animality—that the self shits—brings about the split within the self, the moment
of self-disgust, where the subject recognises itself as the source of that which is disgusting, its own worthlessness which must be overcome through work on the self and, most significantly, through the projection of this despicable self onto a despised other.

It is here, argues Butler, that the violence of social regulation is to be found, “in the circuitous route by which the psyche accuses itself of its own worthlessness” (1997: 184). In short, self-loathing is the very condition of the subject’s existence. Submission here emerges as that form of mastery that enables the emergence of the subject. This is the ‘psychic form of power’ through which we come to be constituted as subjects. There are two critical ways in which I depart from these theories of subjectivity culminating in the work of Judith Butler.

The first is to mark a conceptual distinction between the ‘subject’ and the ‘self’. Subjectivity, I argue, is better understood in terms of forms of legibility, bringing our focus onto the politico–economic, historical and cultural conditions under which these forms come to be performed as embodiments-in-the-world. The question of selves, though

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8 I have had the opportunity to briefly interrogate Professor Butler about the possibilities of imagining a subject that is not based first and foremost on the Hegelian split, and on questions of power inherent in presuming a universal theory of subjectivity. This was at a lecture she delivered at the University of Sussex in February 2011, entitled ‘Arendt, Cohabitation, and the Dispersion of Sovereignty’. Interestingly, Prof. Butler’s lecture marked a shift in her theory of subjectivity in that it was concerned with a fragmented subject whose multiple voices are in constant conversation with each other, thereby displacing the frame where the subject is singular. And yet, this plurality is only after the prior Hegelian split. In response to the question of being able to conceive of a subject that is relational rather than based on this internal split, Prof. Butler suggested that she would be happy to sit and identify the moment in which the Indian subject had its Hegelian split, but that this was an essential condition for the subject’s existence. I discuss this further in the final chapter of this book.
often related to the performance of legible subjects, is far broader and diverse. As one instance we might usefully refer to a long-standing argument in the anthropology of South Asia—that, as compared to the contained self articulating in Europe, i.e., the ‘individual’ (that which cannot be divided any further), South Asians are ‘dividual’. This argument, emerging from the work of Louis Dumont (1970), is that these selves are relational—the self emerges only in relation to others, or in the works of Mattison Mines and Cecilia Busby (1997a), in transaction with others. It is not, in this sense, an ‘internal’ conversation, but one that is already and always social.

My engagement with this argument is not to simply accept an opposition between ‘dividual Indian’ and ‘individual Euro-North American’ selves. Rather, we live in a heterogenous time where we are all both individual and transactional, but the configurations of the combinations are products of more specific political and historical processes. On the one hand, we have the striking articulation of individualist frames of selves in the ‘new’ neo-liberal political economy and cultural sphere—the great Indian middle class of the big cities, the nuclear family and the emphasis on evidencing the self as a worthy constituent of the political economy. On the other hand, the fractured self is emerging in more recent continental philosophy that considers the western subject as already existing as, and only as, an assemblage. The notion of the “molecular unconscious” in the schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari (1977: 295), the notion of the Cyborg in

⁹There are many ways in which the theoretical offerings of Deleuze and Guattari resonate with the departure from the assumption of interiority of the subject. Their notion of the ‘body without organs’, for instance, is the disavowal of precisely this interiority. My reference in the text is, however, particularly related to their shift away from the ‘molar’ approach of Freudian psychoanalysis and the relationship between desire and self.
Donna Haraway (1991), the subject/object in speculative realism (which conceptualises objects, including humans, instead, they offer us the conceptualisation of the ‘molecular unconscious’ as always partial, as always forming ‘free multiplicities’, machines connecting to other machines, each forming part of multiple flows. This molecular unconscious, they argue, knows nothing of castration (which they see as central to the ‘molar consciousness’ of Freudian psychoanalytical approaches to desire and sex), and of ‘lack’ because:

...partial objects lack nothing and form free multiplicities as such; because the multiple breaks never cease producing flows, instead of repressing them, cutting them at a single stroke—the only break capable of exhausting them; because the synthses constitute local and nonspecific connections, inclusive disjunctions, nomadic conjunctions: everywhere a microscopic transsexuality, resulting in the woman containing as many men as the man, and the man as many women, all capable of entering—men with women, women with men—into relations of production of desire that overturn the statistical order of the sexes. Making love is not just becoming as one, or even as two, but becoming as a hundred thousand (1977: 295–96).

In their project of schizoanalysis, the libido is placed, first and foremost, in the social field, as an investment in the social field. This is a powerful argument against the psychoanalytical conception of desire whereby it “maintains that the libido must be desexualised or even sublimated in order to proceed to the social investments, and inversely that the libido only resexualises these investments during the course of pathological regression” (ibid.: 293). It is in this sense that the notion of the self in Deleuze and Guattari is contingent, relational, social and, most significantly, outside of the interiority of a coherent self.

Haraway’s notion of the Cyborg, while first conceptualised as an “ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism” in 1983, developed into a crucial intervention into the very notion of personhood. In her classic essay ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, finally published in 1985 and then gaining popularity in her 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, she identifies the dissolution of the distinction between human and animal, human and machine, and the physical and non-physical (1991: 149–55). In particular, Haraway’s argument of “fractured identities”, based on these dissolutions and the recognition of the intersections between class, race and gender (ibid.:155–61) provide the resonance with the shift from the notion of coherent interiority suggested in this book.
as being constituted through external relationships) and the radical reframing of the actor as an actor-network in Latour (2005),\textsuperscript{11} for instance, find a striking resonance with the notion of the dividual self. And while there is a disjunction in terms of the conditions under which we come to these particular conceptualisations, what we arrive at is a question of the conditions for the articulation of subjects as self-contained and coherent individuals, or as relational beings where the self is found not ‘within’ the subject, but in its relational conditions. The question then is not of ontologies of selves, but of the conditions for their articulation. At the very least, what this implies is that we work with a multiplicity of ways in which to imagine both selves and subjects.

Having disposed of the burden of the external/interiority dichotomy, the second shift I make is to pull the conversation about the subject outside of the realm of interiority and into the realm of political economy. In this context I find it useful to think along with the work of Slavoj Žižek who, like Butler, draws on psychoanalysis but instead points us outward, onto the surface and the form of the subject. The subject in Žižek, following Lacan, is “an empty place” that comes to bear phantasmic investments retrospectively (Žižek 1989: 175).

...if we make an abstraction, if we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivation, all the fullness of experience present in the way individuals are “living” their subject-positions, what remains is an empty place which

\textsuperscript{11} Bruno Latour’s notion of the actor-network theory argues for a horizontal ontology, whereby objects and other non-humans are granted an agency at the same level as humans. Arguing against the notion of the human as the only agent, the sovereign, he suggests that non-human actors exercise an agency similar to humans, and that these actors gain meaning in relation to each other.
was filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure, is the subject (ibid.)

The subject here is not, in other words, that which fills in the empty space, it is the empty space itself. The effect of a unity between the subject and that which occupies it, i.e., the effect of the subject as an embodiment-in-the-world is maintained through the working of an ‘as if’ postulate. In Marx, the value of a commodity is maintained not through a connection with its materiality, but rather through its transaction as though it had that value. For instance,

during the act of exchange, individuals proceed as if the commodity is not submitted to physical, material exchanges, as if it is excluded from the natural cycle of generation and corruption; although on the level of their “consciousness” they “know very well” that this is not the case (ibid.: 18, emphasis in the original).

The subject here is not their “consciousness” but the form that emerges in their exchange—it is that which is posited by the ‘as if’. And it is not as though there is a content to this form independent of the transaction—the subject here is the form itself. The question of why people name themselves in relation to these forms, then, is to be understood not simply in terms of some inner psychic process, but rather in terms of the conditions of the occupation of these ‘subject positions’. In Žižek, the subject is thus divested of its ponderous psychic mystique. Identification is here acknowledged as a political–economic process rather than ‘work on the self’ or the recognition of one’s ‘true name’.

What are the implications of this discussion on the question of sexuality? Simply put, the framework of the interior subject produces the idea of sexuality-as-personhood, a world where social regulation is through work on the self and which produces “sexuality types”
(khanna 2007a), i.e., hetero-, bi- and homosexual persons. The relational subject in contrast is contingent and a social conversation. This latter would, in other words, relate better to the idea of sexualness. In the context of the subject itself, ‘sexuality types’ emerge as particular forms or positions that are deemed intelligible through historical, politico-economic and cultural processes. A study of sexuality then is about understanding the conditions under which we come to perform these subject positions as though they are embodiments-in-the-world.

As such, while I draw heavily from Butler, Brown and Foucault, the question I address in this book is not of the inner truths of sexualness in India, or of the psychic realities of those that I write about. When I address the question of the ‘subject’, I refer to the forms that are performed and the mechanisms through which these forms are established as embodiments-in-the-world. At the same time, I am concerned with the ways in which our experiences of sexualness, our relational and transactional selves collaborate with, or contest these processes of legibility.

DISCUSSION ON KEY TERMS AND USAGES

‘Queer’

The term ‘Queer’ has a history in India that is distinct from its origins in the west. While in Britain and North America its adoption marks a reappropriation of a term of insult and ridicule—and it seems there are a large number of people who are uncomfortable with this history—by the time it has come to be meaningful in India, the term has shrugged off this history. Dislocated from its past, this term now circulates variously, it is an empty signifier that comes to be filled in different ways in different contexts and times. During the period of fieldwork, in some parts
of the country, in male gay spaces in Bombay, for instance, the word ‘Queer’ was used largely as a shorthand for the alphabet soup of sexuality identities, ‘LGBTQJKH…’, or ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Kothi, Queer, Jogappa, Hijra, Aravani…’. It referred, in other words, to an identity-based movement that sought to be nominally inclusive of various sexual and gender identities that are not heterosexual. In other parts of India—in Delhi, Calcutta and Bangalore in particular—Queer referred and continues to refer to a political perspective that is in sharp contrast to identity-based politics, one that is framed in terms of opposition to ‘heteronormativity’ (Warner 1991) and ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 1994 (1986) and Menon 2005). These ideas provide a larger political context and a loose structure within which to understand the processes through which the categories of heterosexual ‘woman’ and ‘man’ come to be seen as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. The understanding here is that these categories are maintained as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ through constant and vigorous enforcement, through political, economic and cultural practices of institutions that define the ‘norm’. This ‘norm’ is, to put it simply, that the heterosexual, monogamous, marital, procreative, same-caste, -race, -religion and -class coupling is the only form of legitimate sexual relationality. Sociality and the political economy are then structured around this norm. That which falls outside of this norm must face social and political sanction, be marginalised and excluded or be subjected to intervention that will bring the deviant back within the norm. In other words, this political perspective is based on the acknowledgement that the participation of actors in the economy, in political and cultural domains and in social life in general, and one’s access to resources and rights, is mediated by one’s status in a heteronormative framework, by the manner in which this
position is performed. In this context, apart from a political positionality, Queer refers to all those people whose lives and life choices challenge the norm of heterosexual same-caste, -class, -race, etc., monogamy. This has been a key feature that enabled a dynamic and exciting movement that engages with and seeks to draw support from various other emancipatory political formations such as women’s movements and Dalit movements.

While this book tells a story of how this political form came to be, came to be challenged and transformed, there are at least two further, more recent articulations that might usefully be pointed out. The first is a rejection of the Queer frame from an emergent ‘Trans*’ perspective which, contained within the binary frame of male–female and the experience of Trans* within the metaphor of transition (from one gender to the other), argues that Queer is the privilege of the entitled. This perspective has been articulated, at times, as an opposition to the Queer project—the self-realisation of those who speak from this positionality being satisfied only through the binary. The ability to experience gender outside of the binary, it is argued without a sense of irony, is the effect of ‘cis-privilege’.12 This is a term that I am unable to find meaningful in a context of a diversity of genders. The irony of this position is perhaps best recognised in the contradiction of a desire for being unremarkable/unremarked and, thus,

12 ‘Cis-gender’, as I understand it, refers to those persons whose gender is the same as ‘sex assigned at birth’. It forms a binary as against ‘Transgender’ understood as a disjunction between gender and sex assigned at birth, which in turn is based on the binary of male and female. Always used either as a term of insult, or as an expression of humility of ‘allies’ to this articulation of trans* politics, it reinforces several binaries typical of western thought—between male and female, mind and body, the normal and the normalised. The term rose in northern American academia and activism and, as with several other elements of the geopolitics of gender and sexuality, has been appropriated in other parts of the world, including India.
for normality and a lament on ‘invisibilisation’. A deeper irony is in the fact that this argument is articulated in opposition to the political decisions of embodied praxis and social presence of those who make our queerness constantly visible, generating disjunctures in the heteronormative gaze, and bearing the violence, curiosity (and, undoubtedly, eroticism) of these disjunctures.

A second, more enriching questioning comes from an emergent Dalit Queer positionality. It points to the failure of the Queer movement to empirically realise a true politics of intersectionality, failing to recognise the complex ways in which sexuality is constituted of caste, and the ways in which Queer spaces themselves are dominated by caste Hindu activists, experiences and imaginations. We thus see the opening up of questions of discourse, practice and of the materiality of activism, reopening the relationship between the affective and political.13

THE ‘MOVEMENT’ AND ‘PROJECTS OF CITIZENSHIP’

This diversity of meanings to the term ‘Queer’ complicates the use of the phrase ‘Queer movement’. Indeed it may be

13 A powerful articulation of this positionality might be found in a statement made by a group of Dalit Queer activists at the Delhi Queer Pride march in 2015. An excerpt:

...We want to remind everyone that caste is alive and festering. It is in our lives, in this city and country—not just as bloody massacres but also in erasure of history, identity, culture. It exists in the humiliation of Dalit children across rural India and the throttling of voices. We want to remind everyone that a common oppressor subjugates us all—that LGBT individuals can be lower caste too—that queer and caste aren’t so isolated from each other. So, let’s join together to challenge our surroundings, not just to smash hetero norms but caste shackles too...

The entire statement may be found at: http://orinam.net/dalit-queer-pride-at-delhi-queer-pride-2015/#sthash.t69GMRJT.dpuf
asked whether such a movement, as a phenomenon, exists at all. There are two aspects to my usage of this phrase. The first is as an analytical category, a broad frame to include most activism around sexuality and gender diversity in different contexts. My bias here is towards the more inclusive frame used in Delhi and Bangalore, these being the politics that have defined my own biography as an activist. I use the term ‘activism’ here to refer to actions of people and groups that aim to address unfavourable conditions of being, the negotiation of the terms of one’s existence in conditions of injustice and gender aggression.

There are various modes of political action which relate to each other in complex ways. They sometimes collaborate and sometimes challenge each other. If a formal writ petition in a High Court highlighted the violence to the Queer body of the lower economic strata, equally, it was through the performance of particular positions of juridically intelligible victimhood that that body claimed social mobility. And to complicate this picture further, the disjunctures between these modes of political action do not map out on the differences between various bodies—it is not as though the formalised projects of citizenship belong to the elite, while the ‘everyday’ belongs to the ‘subaltern’. The elite have their own everyday, and the formal artefacts of citizenship—documents, identity cards, and business cards even—often carry more significance to the ‘subaltern’. Then there are the spaces where these categories lose intelligibility, in the socio-sexual intercourse\(^\text{14}\) of the cruising area, for instance.

\(^{14}\) A commonly stated formulation amongst activists in the context of nominally male, same-sex desiring folk, across class, seemed to be that it is easy for people to interact sexually across class, but not socially. On the other hand, in certain contexts of women who do sex work, there is a very clear definition of the class boundaries of the sexual universe within which sex is transacted—men from more affluent classes are regarded with suspicion.
Significantly, these are also stories of mobility—social, economic, geographical—where modes of action cannot be seen to be attached to particular bodies in any simple way. It is in this context that I defer to the loose analytical categories of ‘activism’ and Queer movement. In other words, while I include in this phrase movements that are pegged on identity and the right to equality on the basis of difference, equally, I include small town activisms such as the opening of Queer-friendly cafes in a small city like Shillong, the setting up of resource centres in small towns like Chandanagar, and initiatives to bring about dialogue in schools and colleges in towns across the country around discrimination against gender Queer youth. Analytically, I also include in this category of the Queer movement the activisms involved in mainstream electoral politics—such as the sometimes successful campaigns of Hijras to stand for election to public office, or the negotiations with political parties to bring sexual rights into their manifestos.

The second aspect of my usage of the phrase Queer movement is descriptive of the way the term itself is used in activism—the contested imaginaries of a coherent phenomenon, or a story of how such disparate activisms are framed as a concrete whole. This phenomenon owes the possibility of its being appreciated as a coherent whole to the constitutive effects of law. It is in the context of a formal project of citizenship, in other words, that these disparate activisms have had to organise and imagine themselves as a ‘movement’.

The phrase ‘project of citizenship’ here refers to those activisms that are concerned with the attainment of rights, entitlements and resources accorded to citizens in the juridical register, i.e., the acknowledgement of the subject as citizen. This would include actions such as the writ petition in the Delhi High Court and various other engagements
with law reform processes, for instance. Another instance would be activism that brought about the inclusion of the gender category of ‘other’, ‘third gender’ and ‘transgender’ in juridical registers in South Asia. These radical changes, started in the state of Tamil Nadu, where *Aravanis* (roughly, the local equivalent of *Hijra*) were recognised as a gender in themselves and granted the right to ration cards (which give them a right to subsidised food and gas at the government run shops), a promise of affirmative action in educational institutions and in a range of other registers of citizenship. The specificity of such projects lies in their distinction from other activisms that may aim at access to resources, but not on the grounds of being citizens.

One phenomenon that unfortunately does not feature at any length in the current book, but which demands attention, is what I identify as ‘unruly politics’.\(^{15}\) Since early 2014, and especially since the coming to power of Narendra Modi’s neo-Fascist regime—marked by upper caste Hindu extremism, violence as a mode of politics, masculine aggression, brutal capitalism and a form of sovereignty

\(^{15}\) I have, in collaboration with a group at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, developed a theoretical lens called ‘Unruly Politics’. It was instigated by resonance between the experience of various members of the group that new forms of political action, especially of the disenfranchised, come from outside the realm of formal politics. This thinking took on an urgency in the context of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011. While different articulations of this thinking focus on the myriad complexities of emergent forms of political action, my own characterisation focuses on the insistence on new languages of politics, political action and imagination. These forms, I argue, are marked by an irreverence to not just the limits of what is considered politics, as defined by the state and capital, but also to the forms of political action that have characterised social movements and civil society formations that address the state, the law and formal registers of governmentality. For a fuller treatment of this lens, see khanna (2012) and khanna et al. (2013).
that constantly demonstrates an apparent ability to stand outside of the law—a new form of political action and organisation has emerged that is at once irreverent to existing forms of civil society activism and to the scripts of political action recognised by the state. Rather than engaging with the juridical, courts and legislative spaces, rather, in fact, than addressing structures of the state, this group of people occupy streets, address the non-state elements of the regime, often using humour and chutzpah, drawing out a true politics in a time of cynicism. When the Hindu Mahasabha, one of the bodies in the Hindu nationalist machinery, announced, for instance, that any couple found romancing in public spaces on Valentines Day 2015 would be forced to get married, these irreverent young folk landed up en masse at the doorstep of the Mahasabha—same-sex couples, inter-caste and inter-religious couples, in groups, all articulating non-normative desires, demanding that the Mahasabha deliver on its promise. Similarly, the ‘Kiss of Love’ protest in 2014 arrived not at Jantar Mantar, the place set aside in Delhi for political protest, but outside the office of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu militia. This irreverent form of protest paved the way for a more sustained political formation, the Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage) Campaign, that vociferously and creatively fights the various mechanisms through which the mobility and access to public spaces is restricted for young women in the city, the discourse and rules through which women’s sexuality is sought to be controlled. Protests and organisations of this political form do not first take permission from the police or structures of authority, they do not plan out litigation strategies, or treat the law as the site for struggle, but relocate the struggle spatially, responding to the everyday articulations of structural patriarchy. Inevitably, the protests are met with police high-handedness, violence from
Hindutva aggressors and detention at Parliament Street police station in Delhi. But it is this irreverence to the law and to established modes of civil protest that has opened and instigated a form of political subjectivity, and indeed mechanisms for the formation of this form itself. From a Queer political perspective, this phenomenon arises from the coming together of activists and students involved not just in the politics of sexuality but, equally, with labour struggles, engagement with land rights struggles in tribal areas of the country, student movements and other anti-fascist drives to political change. I return to this exciting phenomenon only at the very end of this book, for it is my belief that in order to fully appreciate the political significance of the unruly, a close understanding of what came before is essential.

**He/Her, Herim and S/He**

My use of unorthodox pronouns in this book is not simply a matter of Queer political practice and the project of creating new languages in which to transact gender, but one that simultaneously relates to a very specific problem of translation. My fieldwork took me through many languages—English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Bangla, Khasi, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi. While I am fluent in English and Hindi and, to a lesser extent, in Kannada, I learnt most of the others through their similarities with Hindi (and Kannada, to some extent). My ability to transact in these languages was thus mediated through Hindi. As such while there is much to be said about the specificity of each of these languages and how they relate to the transaction of gender, of erotics and desire, and of personhood, here I specifically discuss the articulation of gender in the speaking of Hindi.
Kira Hall, writing at the intersection of Linguistics and Anthropology, and pioneering the field and methods of ‘Queer linguistics’, provides us with some interesting arguments vis-à-vis the articulation of gender in the speaking of Hindi. The alternating (linguistic) constructions of female and male selves by Hijras, she argues, become apparent in quite basic choices of feminine and masculine forms because “…nouns, verbs, adjectives, and postpositions in Hindi are marked for feminine and masculine gender, with verbs being marked in all three persons” (Hall 2002: 137). Gender, in other words, is writ large in the grammar of the language. Hall argues against a “traditional linguistic distinction” between “grammatical gender” and “natural gender”. In the first, gender is seen to be an arbitrary grammatical category with syntactic consequences, and in the second, gender is treated as a “natural” category that reflects the “biological sex” of the referent. Against this, and on a reading of Judith Butler’s argument that gender works “as a performativa”, whereby “our understanding of ‘biological sex’ is discursively produced” (ibid.:157), she argues that identity is a product, rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices. “We must turn our focus to the speech event itself,” she argues, “uncovering how speakers manipulate ideologies of femininity and masculinity in the ongoing production of gender” (Hall 2002: 157). The Hijras of Banaras in Hall’s ethnography, with a “heightened awareness of how language can index gender identity”, challenge these ideologies of masculinity and femininity and yet, argues Hall, their use of “grammatical

16 Hall’s reading of Butler is framed in terms of the ‘understanding’ of “biological sex”, rather than the experience of sex/gender, i.e., rather than an argument that our experience of sex/gender is discursively mediated, her argument is limited to cognitive framing.
gender is nevertheless constrained by a rather traditional and dichotomous understanding of gender” (ibid.).

Two aspects of Hall’s ethnography are of particular interest here. The first is the relationship between grammatical practices and the negotiation of identity within a community. Hall’s informants, for instance, use the masculine when speaking to a superior or inferior, recall past selves as non-Hijras and express intense anger, and use the feminine when expressing solidarity and intimacy with fellow community members. To refer to a fellow Hijra in the feminine, in other words, is to acknowledge her gender, it is to establish a commonality, solidarity and intimacy within a community. To use the masculine is to establish a distance, to actively fail to acknowledge that commonality. This resonates with my own experience of the use of grammar in various Queer communities across India. When my friends and lovers address me in the feminine, it is an act of affection, of intimacy. I am, however, addressed in the masculine when it comes to being a political actor, as a professional, or in a disagreement. This position is reversed when it comes to butch women, who refer to each other as ‘bhaiya’ or ‘brother’, or take on the tone of male bonding between each other in relationships of solidarity. This description is a simplification, as there is the possibility of distancing within counter-normative uses of grammatical gender. There are, in other words, negative markers or subject positions, or idioms of personhood within the counter-normative grammatical lexicon—for instance, the use of the term Dhurrani in West Bengal is often an insult, designating a hypersexuality to a female-identified queer male. An instance in the English lexicon would be the use of the term ‘bitch’ in reference to effeminate Queer male folk—this can be used as a marker of affection, but equally as an insult. In either case, the person addressed is within the counter-normative grammatical
gender and not outside of it. I do not, in this book, intend to examine these linguistic practices in any great detail, but point to the active use of grammatical gender as a method of negotiating terms of affection, whether a person is within or outside the ‘community’, and thus, the very boundaries of ‘community’.

The second interesting aspect of Hall’s ethnography is the ‘constraints’ of a ‘rather traditional and dichotomous understanding of gender’ that she points to. The constraints of grammatical morphologies become important in understanding the (linguistic) production of gender. It is here that I differ with Hall, and the basis on which I prefer the pronouns herim, heris and s/he. Rather than consider the grammar of Hindi as limited by ‘constraints’, I argue, it offers potential for a play of gender and sexualness that cannot be easily translated into English.

Hindi, like many other Indian languages, and European languages such as Italian, ascribes gender to objects. This is quite unlike English where the ascription of gender to objects is metaphorical (for instance, when a ship is referred to as ‘she’). Grammatically, gender in Hindi attaches not to the person but, rather, to the object and activities apropos of the person and in verbs. As an instance, let me examine the case of possessive pronouns in the third person, equivalents of ‘his’ and ‘her’ do not exist in Hindi. Pronouns that establish a relationship between a person and an object are, instead, gendered according to the gender of the object. The terms ‘uska’ and ‘uski’ (possessive, singular object belonging to a single person) are examples. In the sentence: “yeh uska pen hai”, which means “this pen belongs to (a given person)”, the gender in the word ‘uska’ (his/her) is masculine, not because the person who owns the pen is male, but rather because a pen is itself masculine. The same sentence “yeh uska pen hai” is to be used irrespective of whether the
owner of the pen is male, female or otherwise. Similarly, in “yeh uski kitaab hai”, ‘uski’ takes the feminine form because a kitaab, or book, is feminine. There are no simple rules to make out whether an object would be masculine, feminine or otherwise—the gender of things is not something that can be taught or learnt, it can only be known. What this implies is that the grammatical person is not already gendered and it is possible for such person to negotiate heris way through language without being marked as either male or female. This potentially unmarked grammatical person, however, acquires a gender in certain linguistic forms through verbs. A person doing something is always gendered. For instance, to say ‘I am writing’, one must almost always state one’s gender—as either masculine or feminine: “main likhkh RAHA hoon” or “main likhkh RAHI hoon”, respectively. The exception to this is when the self is referred to in the plural, or in a form similar to the royal ‘we’, i.e., where ‘main’ (I) is replaced with ‘hum’; ‘woh’ (he/she) with ‘weh’; and ‘tu’ (you) with ‘tum’ or ‘aap’.

This deferral to the plural is also an action in the negotiation of status. This exception aside, in Hindi, it is as though it is in doing that a person becomes a gender, or that gender is written onto the person. The significant thing here is that the linguistic gendering of the subject is an incomplete project. The entry of a person into language, or the coming into linguistic existence, to use Althusser’s framework, does not already presume the ascription of gender.

This, on the one hand, allows for conversations in Hindi that are simply not possible in English. It is possible to speak without assigning a gendered subject position to oneself, or to the object of one’s affection or desire, i.e., without marking oneself in a heterosexual matrix. Significantly, it is possible to participate in an interview as a Queer person without marking a disjuncture of the self from the language. In
Hindi it is possible to carry out long and detailed exchanges about my relationships without mentioning the gender of a partner, thereby marking that relationship as homosexual or heterosexual. A much broader range of subject positions was thus available to me in the field and the potential for the types of conversations that were possible was remarkable.

It is keeping in mind the unique grammatical conditions of these conversations and stories and in order to communicate subjects that are unmarked by gender, especially when these subjects are actively playing with, contesting, strategically reaffirming and slipping between linguistic genders, that I use the pronouns herim, heris and s/he. I choose not to use ‘ze’ or ‘hir’, as is being used by an increasing number of Queer activists in English speaking parts of the geo-political North, as I want to maintain that even though the subject is unmarked in terms of gender, when it does come to be marked it does so within a linguistic duality.

**METHODOLOGY, FIELDWORK AND MATERIAL**

This book is primarily based on multi-sited doctoral fieldwork carried out between October 2005 and February 2007 in different places in India. For the largest part of this period I was based in Delhi, where I worked in a dual capacity as researcher and activist with various groups that constitute Voices Against 377, a broad coalition of progressive groups and NGOs that has spearheaded the Queer movement in Delhi. Associated primarily with Prism, a group of which I was a co-founder, I participated in various forms of activism including crisis intervention, legal research and drafting of position papers on legal issues being discussed in the movement, coordinating workshops on sexuality and gender with groups associated with the women’s movement and with the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan
(People’s Health Movement). I also closely followed the developments relating to the litigation in the High Court, participating as an activist in the decision making processes related to an intervention that was filed by Voices Against 377 in the case.

From my base in Delhi I travelled all around India, initially following events, incidents and stories as they came up and then returning to follow threads that related to the concerns of the research. I travelled to Lucknow in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh to examine the fall-out of the arrest of four gay men which had given rise to a media scandal, protests, police investigation and panic amongst Queer folk around the country. The brutal murder of a gay man took me to Shillong in the North Eastern state of Meghalaya. I travelled to Calcutta and some smaller towns in West Bengal, first around the annual Pride Week conducted there and then again to delve deeper into stories that opened up on the first visit. I visited both Bombay and Bangalore on multiple occasions, sometimes to attend conferences and the like, and sometimes to meet with particular activists and follow particular stories. I spent some time in Baroda, a city in Gujarat, and in Chhota Udepur, a village in the vicinity in the context of carrying out workshops and discussions around sexuality with a local activist group. I also took up a consultancy with a small development and human rights donor to write a report making suggestions for priorities in funding HIV/AIDS work. This took me to rural areas in south Maharashtra and north Karnataka and also to the cities of Pune, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bombay and back to Delhi. All in all, my fieldwork involved much travel between places connected through stories and through activist networks.

My participation and research in these different places and contexts was enriched by my multiple positionality as
researcher, activist, Queer person, as workshop facilitator, public speaker and as consultant. This also enabled a range of different ways of capturing these experiences in terms of diverse types of writing and recording. Further, circulating in the sexual economies of many of these sites, embracing my own sexualness was significant and insightful. Over the period of fieldwork, I had the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with many activists individually and in groups. Equally significant as these interviews was the fact that my network of friends and comrades, my Queer family, took to my role as researcher, calling upon me often to record for posterity our informal and intense discussions on our own conditions of being and our experiments with new ways of being. In this sense, my various subject positions—of being an anthropologist, an activist, being Queer and part of the family—came together beautifully, giving me the privilege of perspectives I may not have had without any of these.

In addition to these experiences, field notes, reports, interview recordings and relationships, this book draws upon various other material. This includes some historical material in terms of commentaries, minutes and biographies of colonial administrators, legal material in terms of judgements, statutes and commentaries on them, documentary and feature films, newspaper archives and electronic material of various types. I also draw upon my experiences as an activist and as a lawyer in the seven years that I had been involved in the Queer movement before I undertook my doctoral work. I have had the opportunity to be a part of many of the significant events and processes that constitute the backdrop of the research. I point these out in the body of this book.
A REFLECTION ON GENDER IN THIS BOOK

Even as this book claims to be about the Queer movement, the reader will notice that, for the large part, the stories that I tell relate to putatively male bodies and subjects. In the first section the focus is on MSMs, the narratives of violence relate largely to experiences of queer ‘male’ folk in public spaces and the chapters on the law, especially in the context of Section 377, again most directly relate to the male subject. It is only in the penultimate chapter of this book, ‘The Cleavage on the Queer Body’, that I arrive at the question of female sexuality. There are some complex reasons for this that deserve explanation.

The primary focus of this book is the entry of the Queer body into registers of governmentality. In the first instance, the bias towards the putatively male body relates to the prioritisation of this body in these registers themselves. In the context of the epidemiological register, where the entry of the body is hinged on epidemiological risk, the focus is squarely on sex between men; same-sex relationships and gender queerness amongst putatively female folk is afforded neither recognition nor relevance. The conditions of relevance are, after all, the risk of HIV transmission in penetrative penile–anal sex between men. In the context of the law, sexuality is already male sexuality. In ‘Cleavage…’, I examine the construction of female sexuality in the law in some detail. I argue, inter alia, that in the law, female sexual agency is recognised only in its negation. In the specific context of Section 377, sex between women is technically excluded. An explanation to the provision reads that “penetration is sufficient to constitute the offence”. This attempts to clarify that ejaculation is not necessary for the completion of the offence but has been interpreted by courts to mean, instead, that penetration, by a penis, is necessary
for it to be considered that the offence has been committed. ‘Carnal intercourse’ in this sense necessarily implies the presence of a penis. The implications of this are discussed at greater length in the book, but the short point to be made here is that both the epidemiological and the juridical register are already inclined towards a consideration of male sexuality, often to the exclusion of sexual agency of putatively female subjects. As this book is concerned with these registers, inevitably, I reproduce these biases in terms of the ethnographic focus.

A second series of reasons for the apparent bias in this book relates to subject positions available to me and the limitations on my ability to flow through spaces most effectively occupied by queer women, other putatively female Queer folk and their specific activisms. ‘Autonomous’, women-only spaces are also exclusive. These are spaces that have had the most exciting activist energy and the most interesting political complexities. There are many stories to be told about the intersections between the Queer movement and the women’s movements, for instance, stories of Dalit feminism intersecting with lesbian and bisexual women’s political strategies, etc. But these stories are not mine to tell.

And yet, I maintain that this book is not about male sexuality but is rather about Queer activism more broadly. This relates to an ethnographic specificity that I discuss at some length in Chapter 4, where I offer a brief history of a uniquely Queer movement in Delhi—a movement that is not sequestered into Gay and Lesbian spaces and, further, is not limited to people who identify as particular sexuality types. This is where my own biography of activism stems, and even where I consider the experiences of putatively male bodies, I bring to those experiences questions that emanate from Delhi’s heady Queer politics.
A NOTE ON SUBJECT POSITIONS, ‘OBJECTIVITY’ AND ETHICS

There are some specificities to this book that need to be discussed at the outset. These relate to the possibilities of writing an ethnography of one’s ‘own people’, the peculiar political and ethical questions this opens up, and the nature of anthropology as a way of apprehending things in the world. What does it mean to do ‘insider ethnography’, where the positions of researcher and dramatis personae merge?

The specificity of the ethnographic encounter as a source of some pristine material, which is then transformed into data and ultimately brought to bear on the production of knowledge, has long been brought into question. Gupta and Ferguson, for instance, suggest that ‘the field’ itself is a clearing whose deceptive transparency obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it. It is, they suggest, a “highly overdetermined setting for the discovery of difference” (1997:5). The object of anthropological scrutiny is, in other words, a product that owes its intelligibility to the contingency of the anthropologist’s creativity. This gives way to the truism that the anthropologist is not a fly on the wall, but rather a constituent part of the field that s/he writes about. This further leads us to the imperative of reflexivity whereby the anthropologist places her/himself within the frame, in the text, and as a character. Yet, there is a difference between these practices of reflexivity and the demands made on this particular project. These arise from my own particular biography and the various positionalities that this biography has afforded and disallowed me.

As mentioned earlier, before undertaking my doctoral work, I had already been an active associate of the Queer movement. Indeed, I call upon my identity as a Queer activist as often as I do that of an anthropologist. Further, I have been deeply embedded in many of the exact processes,
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communities and relationships that feature in this book since long before I introduced a relationship of research to complicate matters. I am, in other words, a political actor and my own actions have played a role in many of the stories that I tell in these pages and it would be disingenuous of me to pretend otherwise. Veena Das points us to a “peculiar double bind” which traps the non-western anthropologist who wishes to relate experience and representation, gained through membership of her own society, when constructing the anthropological text (Das 1995: 25). And yet, it is this exact embeddedness that has made my questions and curiosities possible in the first place. In this sense, rather than a limitation that ‘traps’ me, my biography emerges as a key aspect, an enabling condition of my ability to see certain things and see them in particular ways.

Anthropological knowledge, as a form, continues to be structured by the presumption that the anthropologist is an outsider to the field, that university is ‘home’ and the ‘field’ that place where the anthropologist travels to. Discussions around ethics and training in research methods, for instance, presume this distance between anthropologist and field. In this regard, my own predicament gave rise to some interesting discussions. In one such discussion, it was suggested to me by Thomas Blom Hansen, an anthropologist whose work on masculinity in the Hindu right has informed much of my own thinking, that the value of anthropology lay in the ‘epistemic distance’ that the ethnographer takes from her/his field and informants. If this epistemic distance is not already present, he argued, one must actively create it. This implied, in effect, that insider ethnography was an impossibility. In response I insisted that this was a ruse of anthropologists to maintain the uniqueness of their work—it is only by speaking in a language distinct from that of their ‘informants’ that anthropologists could claim to say
things about people that those people themselves could not either say or contest. Epistemic distance, then, amounted to the mechanism through which the world was presented as an empirical fact, as an “accomplice to our knowledge” (Foucault 1981: 67), and no amount of ‘reflexivity’ would change this basic structuring of this form of knowledge.

There is another peculiarity of my project that is relevant in this regard. This research is about activism, about self-conscious action aimed at changing one’s conditions of being. These conditions of being are already framed as a ‘problem’. Activists are already in the business of making sense of their world and pull from various epistemologies in their contestations of meaning and reality. Since the early 2000s there has been an exciting trend where Queer folk, and more specifically Queer activists, have delved into disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, law and even economics, focusing on sexuality and on the Queer movement itself. Many of these projects, including my own, seek to create resources and arguments in aid of the Queer movement. In addition, there is an already existing familiarity with anthropology, as anthropologists from Euro-North American universities have made Queer sexuality in India the object of their research. Many of us, including myself, have featured in ethnographic writings. This has also given way to practices of engaging and contesting that which is written about us. What this means is that not only is the Queer movement that I write about already framed as an object within and by the field, the epistemological offerings of anthropology are part of the field as well. Many people know not just their Foucault and Butler, they know their Cohen, their Boyce and Reddy well enough to contest and appreciate them. In this context, to work an epistemic distance into my writing would be an arrogant disavowal of the possibilities that engaged interlocutors have to offer.
Annelise Riles works through a similar predicament in her book *The Network Inside Out*:

...where the people described in this book already understand themselves to create networks in order to generate realities by studying, analysing, or communicating about them, discovering a “network” no longer can evoke the surprise of uncovering hidden analytical truth as it once did. This replication of the work of sociologists—an example of what Lash terms “modernisation’s doubles”—offers an opportunity, I think, for developing ways of thinking that do not resort to surprise discoveries, do no uncover hidden generalities, and yet do not treat cultural phenomena as uninteresting or undeserving of analysis because they are already understood, elaborated on, and even critiqued by those who used to provide the raw “data” for our analyses (2000: 4).

In such conditions, where there is a lack of an ‘outside’ on and against which to work, Riles suggests, “anthropological analysis is reduced to restatement, to repetition, to generating reflexive modernity’s ‘doubles’” (ibid.: 5). Ethnographic description then, she continues, must become demonstration. In my own context, this demonstration implies, and was always meant to be, an act in the field. This book, in other words, is activism itself. In this sense, marking an ‘epistemic distance’ is anathema to the project.

What then is the value or uniqueness of this project? And what enables this book to be considered, *inter alia*, a work in Social Anthropology? And why would it be interesting, as I hope it is, to either a Queer movement that already knows itself, or to an anthropologist outsider to the movement? The simple answer is its multi-sitedness and the possibilities of juxtapositions that this opens up. I mean this in two ways. First, that this book pulls on disparate contexts in disparate places in the field. When I set out on this project,
my experience of the movement and, to some extent, the movement itself was limited to the activisms located in Delhi, Bangalore and Bombay, the big cities of modern India. The claims that we were being called to make, however, were about larger realities—about sexuality in India. While the urban poor, in the figure of the Kothi\textsuperscript{17} and slum-based women in same-sex relationships, had already made their way to the frame, I felt the need to step out of these cities, to see what was happening outside in smaller cities, in towns and villages. This project was a step in that direction and in the process of this research, some connections were indeed made between these various sites as I became a conduit for conversation and collaboration between activists in these various sites. In a sense, an objective of this project was, inadvertently perhaps, already fulfilled in its doing.

Equally significant has been the second sense of multisitedness, as this book traverses various epistemologies and ways of appreciating the world. I engage here the languages of anthropology, law, epidemiology, biomedicine, human rights, history and the various languages of activism. Anthropology is here not a privileged position or epistemology from which I make sense of things in the world. It is, rather, one of these many sites, each contributing interesting and exciting objects and ideas to the party. And yet there is something special about anthropology—the university, the library, the rich and enthralling worlds of ethnography that colleagues bring to interact, all bring about a dense point of surrealist juxtaposition allowing idioms and objects from disparate contexts to flirt with

\textsuperscript{17} The Kothi is a complex identity/subject position that has been central to the HIV interventions with MSMs and is typically framed as the penetrated male in a same-sex encounter between men. I deal with the complexity of this identity in some depth in Chapter 1.
each other. It is in these interesting juxtapositions that anthropology offers the possibility of new and interesting questions.

Given that this book attempts to carry objects and ideas between spaces, it is not possible to call it an insider ethnography—the possibilities of speaking as an insider presumes a definite inside and therefore an outside. Strangely enough, then, I come to a point where I must disavow it as a description of my project.

There is something more to be said about being a political actor in the field—the writing of this book called for a rather specific and often overbearingly demanding form of reflexivity. I address this through stylistic means, on the one hand, where the voice I speak with is already that of a person located within the ‘movement’, and one that is familiar to and often clearly imagined by the people I speak about. On the other hand, I attempt to flag wherever possible and relevant the implications of my specific presence and perspectives, this especially where I am aware that mine is one of many competing or collaborating perspectives on the way things are or should be. This is often a difficult and tricky position to take in writing. What I do in this regard is offer to the reader, as best as I can, the arguments and perspectives that I, as an activist and anthropologist, argue against. While it would be insincere of me to suggest that I have been successful in this attempt—I am sure that I have not, for it is not possible for me to speak from any location other those that I occupy—this opens up two questions for discussion. The first relates to the question of ‘objectivity’ and the second, to the ethics of research and writing.

‘Objectivity’ as a concept has, by and large, been disavowed in anthropology as an impossible hypothetical and been replaced by the concern with reflexivity. David Mosse, following Bruno Latour, suggests that ‘objectivity’
cannot be derived from standing above the fray or by suppressing subjectivity, but rather by engaging with that which “comes from maximising the capacity of actors to object to what is said about them” (Mosse 2005: 14). This again calls for an epistemic commensurability rather than a distance between ethnographic description and its actors. The possibility of objection is itself already mediated through political, economic and cultural formations and hierarchies. The mere fact that these words are ‘available’ for objection in a reified public sphere do not directly speak to the possibilities of their value. Their value, ultimately, will depend on whether the stories I tell and the arguments I make resonate with those of people reading them. In this sense, the question of ‘objectivity’ becomes a false one, and the value of this work lies in its circulation and contestation amongst the people and contexts that it engages. In this context, much of what lies in this book has already made its way to activists and, to the extent possible, I attempt to incorporate these objections such that they may circulate with the text itself. And second, in writing I already address the *dramatis personae* as an audience. If the words in these pages do not address solely the anthropologist, but rather, also the anthropologist, it is for this reason. I beg a generosity of the reader, whether activist or anthropologist, curious or flaneur, in this regard.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

There are, after this Introduction, six chapters in this book. The context of the first, ‘The Soft Boy and heris Hard (Epidemiological) Fact’, is the production of epidemiological knowledge about the MSM, the category through which the global HIV/AIDS industry apprehends same-sex desire between male subjects. The HIV/AIDS industry is
a sprawling phenomenon that involves a wide range of players, a translocal network of governments, multinational corporations, international development agencies and institutions, NGOs, support groups, community-based organisations or CBOs. The epidemiological equation through which the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS is understood, addressed and measured is based on the categorisation of the population into types of persons premised on certain understandings of risk and sexual behaviour. This includes the categories considered to be ‘high risk’, men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers, injecting drugs users, truck drivers and the like. These groups are singled out for ‘targeted interventions’ on the understanding that their peculiar conditions place them outside the domain of the public health system of the country. A large part of the work of the HIV/AIDS industry in these interventions is the production of data about these communities. In ‘The Soft Boy and heris Hard (Epidemiological) Fact’, I examine the social, cultural, economic and political conditions under which epidemiological knowledge relating to MSM, further categorised into various ‘indigenous identities’ such as Kothi and Hijra, is produced. The HIV/AIDS industry, I argue, is primarily involved in establishing ways in which these socio-economically marginalised bodies are made available for intervention, research and clinical trials for drugs and vaccines. In this context, I use Lawrence Cohen’s concept of ‘bioavailability’ which looks at the ways in which certain bodies and body parts are made available for reintegration into other bodies (2005a). I extend this concept to the practices of abstraction that the bodies of those deemed to be MSM are subjected to.

This process of establishing relations of availability simultaneously engendered social mobility for Queer folk who are otherwise excluded from masculinist political
economies. For instance, this meant regular employment in NGOs, the creation of networks of support and services, and the inauguration of a realm of respectability for hitherto despised folk. These processes have been pegged on the creation and adoption of identities, such as the Kothi identity, which ironically find their political significance in their ability to be seen as timeless, ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’.

The chapter examines two idioms of gender and sexualness that are appropriated in the process of the production of epidemiological knowledge—the *Launda naach*, an erotic dance form popular in north and central India, and *Meyeli Chhele*, a Bengali idiom relating to ‘girlish boys’. The context of the first brings to light the politico-economic conditions of self-subjectivation, of the entry of the Queer body into the epidemiological register. The second vignette opens up the question of the play of visibilities in the identification of bodies that may be considered for such entry.

The next chapter, ‘A State of Arousal’, is concerned with the experiences of violence visited upon Queer folk and the peculiar predicament where such violence becomes a resource for the movement to lay claims to speaking for and as an injured body, and ultimately to lay claims to citizenship. Where social, political, economic conflict/tension plays out on particular bodies, activists find ourselves engaged in the work of bringing these instances to bear upon their projects of citizenship. In order for this to happen, the global form of ‘homophobia’ is evoked and these experiences are in turn made intelligible as instances of ‘homophobic hate crimes’. This is a process, I suggest, through which the erotic dimensions of these experiences are disavowed. Based on fieldwork in Shillong, a small city in the North Eastern state of Meghalaya, a few months after the particularly brutal murder of a gay man, this chapter
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examines the relationship between eroticism and violence and argues that the extraction of the former from the latter disables our ability to acknowledge homoeroticism within the state.

‘The Social Lives of 377’ opens the section of the book concerned most directly with Section 377, the provision under which homosexuality is/was/is, in effect, criminalised. This provision, an articulation of a peculiarly Victorian morality, has been in the statute books since 1860. Yet, it is only since the mid-1990s that there been a heightened awareness of this provision, in the mass media, amongst Queer folk and, significantly, amongst the police and various branches of the state. On the one hand, I argue that that this is the result of activism—it is the Queer movement that has given Section 377 a ‘social life’. At the same time, this has been a process through which the law has been inaugurated as a space for the articulation of rather more diffuse tensions. It has given a tangibility, an intelligibility and a concreteness to experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and violence experienced by Queer folk. The provision has in this sense been elevated from being a pedestrian provision of law that impinges on the relationship between particular Queer bodies and the police, to the status of Law, the realm of a grander legality where terms of citizenship are negotiated. In this sense, this chapter tells the story of how the Law came to be constituted by the subject.

The chapter titled ‘See you in Court’ reverses this question and looks at the constitutive potential of the Law. The context here continues to be Section 377, in particular, the litigation in the Delhi High Court in some detail. To begin, this chapter delves into legal history, examining the Emergency of the 1970s, a dark period in the history of the Indian nation-state, when fundamental rights were legally suspended and the Constitution itself came under attack. It
is in this period, a “state of exception” in Giorgio Agamben’s terms (1998), that we find the origins of public interest litigation (PIL). I argue that in this period the speaking citizen-subject, stripped off of its rights, was united with the mute body of the ‘masses’ in its injury and it is in emerging from this unity that the speaking subject, i.e., ‘civil society’, took upon itself the right to speak for the masses, a right for which it continues to compete with the state. It is thus that the PIL emerges as a phenomenon that brings about contestation and collaboration between various actors across the traditional dichotomy of citizen versus state. In the context of the litigation in the Delhi High Court, I argue that it is in the engagement with the Law that the Queer movement has come to be constituted as a coherent entity. This was a necessary pre-requisite for the entry of the Queer body into the juridical register. This Queer body, I argue, had to be evidenced in two ways—as a species body enumerated through epidemiological knowledge, and as an ascetic modern evidenced through the narrativisation of life experiences. This chapter thus brings together the two themes of the book, the epidemiological and the juridical. The reader may be warned that this chapter is unconventionally long and might have been split along the sections into two chapters, but has been kept as one as these sections feed each other.

The penultimate chapter, ‘Cleavage on the Queer Body’, returns to the interactions with the law, as distinct from the Law. In this chapter I examine a distinct, yet connected and contesting project where claims to citizenship are made by actively divesting the body of sexualness. This, I suggest, is a cleavage that the Queer movement is not simply constrained to produce, but which is as much an effect of the diversity of bodies it claims to speak of and for, and the conditions under which these diverse bodies seek a sexual
articulation. The formal objective of the Queer movement, inasmuch as such an objective can be gleaned, avows itself to the first project where the ‘articulable’ or the realm of words of Law is prioritised. But while the articulable has been prioritised, Queer folk go about negotiating their way in relation to the law through the strategic articulation of visibility. The ‘see-able’, in other words, deserves its place in the analysis of the conditions of the Queer body and its claims to citizenship. The consideration of the visible or see-able on the same plane as the articulable, I argue, allows for a more fruitful engagement of the two projects and allows for the conceptualisation of a ‘politics of ambiguity’.

The final chapter, ‘The Being of Unseen Light...’, plays a dual role. The first is the traditional role of the conclusion of an academic book—to pull together and clearly articulate the arguments offered in the book. In this context I focus on three main arguments—the first relating to the place of the ‘bare life’ in politics and Law, arguing that the process through which the political life of the subject is made meaningful is predicated upon the visibility of a reduction to the bare life, to the demonstration of the absolute capacity to be killed. I further argue that it is in the suspension between life and death that this visibility is possible—it is neither life nor death and, by extension, neither biopolitics nor necropolitics animates the process of enrichment of the juridical life, but rather the space between them. The second argument relates to the question of the subject. Taking forward the critique already offered in this Introduction, I examine the slippage from Hegel’s analysis of the Master–Slave dialectic to a liberal assumption of interiority as articulated in Butler. I suggest that in the Indian context, the resolution of the Master–Slave dialectic is not through sublimation and the cleaving of an interiority, but rather through the constant reproduction of social hierarchy,
articulating in the ideology of caste, but also gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. The subject, and political subjectivity in particular, must then be understood not in terms of interiority and individualism, but rather in terms of social, economic and political organisation, transaction and experience. The third argument I bring back in the final chapter relates to what I have termed a politics of ambiguity. Rather than striving simply towards intelligibility, I argue, a Queer politics must be able to draw on a range of ‘lights’, on forms and conditions of visibility, and equally insist on unintelligibility, the ability to constantly disrupt aesthetics, i.e., that which orders what can be sensed and is “sensible” (Ranciere 2006).

Having set up these three key arguments, I end the chapter, and the book, with a theoretical experiment—the application of a framework obtained from Quantum Mechanics to the question of sexuality and sexualness. While this might seem, at first glance, an unlikely turn, I suggest that the science of optics, and in particular the work of physicist C.V. Raman, provides us with a theoretical design to make the notion of ‘intersectionality’ meaningful, for us to understand the politics of visibility, naming, substance and ontology.

There are two stages to the argument. In the first, I look at the mechanics of how objects or surfaces seem a certain colour—what makes the sea blue in one instant and red in another? Seeing how the colour that is visible to us is that element of light which is rejected by the object, I formulate a hypothesis of ‘everything but-ness’—just as the object that seems red to us is actually constituted of everything but ‘red’, I argue, resolving a thing as ‘sexuality’ actually enables it be constituted of, to be the function of other social, political and economic elements, of caste, class, race, gender, etc. ‘Sexuality’, in other words is constituted
of ‘everything but’ that as which it is named. A politics of ‘intersectionality’ must then look not merely at the co-constitution of elements of the socio-political, but also at the processes through which the apparent resolution of one element actually enables the functioning of others. The second stage of the argument attempts to sketch out what such a politics of intersectionality requires, how we might apprehend this ‘everything but-ness’. Here I draw on the phenomenon of ‘Raman scattering’, more popularly known as the ‘Raman Effect’. The Raman Effect, which demonstrated that light is constituted of both particles and waves and that the ontology of light itself changes in its interactions with a substance, is a type of scattering of light that is different from what might be considered the apparent mechanics of light. Even while white light is dispersed into a spectrum of colours, simultaneously, there is light being scattered, which is visible only when observed at a different angle. This light is the effect of the ontological entanglement of light and substance, with light behaving as particles. It is this that gives us a glimpse into the constitution of the object itself, but also into the nature of light. This is precisely the insight into that ‘everything but’ which constitutes sexuality and in order to see this, we to recognise that understanding sexuality as an enumeration (of a rainbow spectrum of types) is not simply incomplete, but rather a process of enabling other elements to function. Forsaking this, or at the very least displacing its centrality thus, we need to develop technologies of seeing obliquely.

Finally, a word to the reader about the stylistic choices I make in this book. Readers accustomed to more conventional forms of ethnographic writing have sometimes found my style unfamiliar. This has been, on the one hand, because of the rather personal voice I use—there is no getting away from the fact that it is, in part, about me, those I love and our
journeys as Queer people in contexts that are often difficult. In places the writing is dramatic, lavished with metaphors and attempts at romance and eroticism. But these moments are poetic and erotic and we are, as I suggested earlier, dramatic, and it is this sense of the Queer life that I attempt to share. This, on occasion, articulates as digression as the text meanders in directions the relevance of which might not be literal or immediately evident. This is a conscious stylistic method that I hope has worked. After all, this book is not an attempt to speak some ultimate and closed truth. It is, rather, an attempt to tell stories in ways that raise interesting and new questions. I hope I have been somewhat successful in this regard.