Going Sideways

The Poetics of Becoming-Queer in India

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This is submitted as partial fulfilment for the degree requirement
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Supervisory Team

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Declaration:

"This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted."

Signed:  Dated: 21 September 2021

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Abstract

Going Sideways: The Poetics of Becoming-Queer in India

Liberation movements based on identity present themselves with enormous challenges regarding rights and inequalities. The Indian public health response to HIV/AIDS resulted in foregrounding the existing identity 'Kothi' and adopting a behavioural category called 'MSM' to designate the main beneficiaries of aid (Cohen, 2005) (Puri, 2016). This underprivileged part of the population was consequently provided with victim narratives which explains why it is impossible to render its stories without pathos. Linked to a quest for emancipation, identity is a complex category especially in post-colonial nation-states like India. Here identities are unavoidably entangled with other modes of governance such as religion, caste, class, and the law. The socioeconomic and geopolitical realities of the Kothis confine them to HIV/AIDS discourse (Kapur, 2018), where they continue to be labelled as *subaltern queers* (Narrain, 2004). Failing to embrace the specificities of identities, this discourse erases differences and inevitably undermines the very creative and liveliness of what can become queer.

Going Sideways is a practice-led inquiry that problematises the neo-liberal, neo-colonial approaches to identity politics, while resisting the sense of concerted queerness that occurred in the form of already-known prescriptions to assimilate all subjects of desire in India, thereby discounting historical and social inequalities. *Going sideways* offers a threefold framework which builds its artistic resistances

through critical fabulation (Hartman, 2008) and storytelling (Benjamin, 1999, Arendt, 1998; Cavarero, 2000) as minor forms of literature (Deleuze and Guattari,1986) that in-turn demand a listening-encounter (Golding, 2018) which enables a queer possibility, a leap into the future (Muñoz, 2009). The threefold braid consists of stories that function as an auto-collective-biography of the Kothis, a glossary as a non-closed, living-breathing archive that politically and conceptually binds this thesis, and a moving image work which helps to visualise this project empathetically, but also creates a political *bent*. This project seeks creative *ecstasy* through storytelling which prepares for an encounter to happen. Together these aphoristic approaches create a gentler '*knowledge-system*' as a '*rehearsal*,' invoking the essence of *becoming*. It allows a queer-wisdom to be shared, and its orality enables us to hear the *mumble* of the unvoiced. Sideways thinking has an erotic energy which brings us to *life* in a queer way, without being categorised. This work also marks an urgency to rethink identity politics subversively, by inhabiting a path that is always-already sideways. It is a work of love and friendship, that calls for radical and ethical equality. This resituates the poetics of *Queer-Becoming* in the field of emergence, where one can imagine new ways of encounters in a queer multiverse.

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***Please note: all works are available online as cited below and are available for preview prior to the Viva. At www.charansingh.net**

NOTE ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF TRANSLITERATED SANSKRIT AND PĀLI WORDS

The vowels are pronounced almost in the same way as in Italian, except that the sound of *a* approaches that of *o* in *bond* or *u* in *but*, and *ā* that of *a* as in *army*. The consonants are as in English, except *c*, *ch* in church; *ṭ*, *ḍ*, *ṇ* are cerebrals, to which English *t*, *d*, *n* almost correspond; *t*, *d*, *n* are pure dentals; *kh*, *gh*, *ch*, *jh*, *ṭh*, *ḍh*, *th*, *dh*, *ph*, *bh* are the simple sounds plus an aspiration; *ñ* is the French *gn*; *ṛ* is usually pronounced as *ri*, and *ś*, *ṣ* as *sh*.

*Surendranath Dasgupta, (1922), A History of Indian Philosophy, (London: Cambridge University Press).

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glossary:

Things that are differently understood.

Which establishes the sideways encounter.

This glossary constitutes a crucial part of my practice. It is situated here as a kind of 'scaffolding' for the thesis. Through this architectural meditation, a sideways encounter is enabled to gently manifest in order to foreground the critical perspective outside of the definitional constraints of languages and disciplinary protocols. It is a methodological tool not only intends to advance new meanings of the terms that undo the grammar of neo-colonial oppression, but also invokes complex histories that are otherwise forgotten, ignored or unheard.

AIDS

(Acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome)

(Also, a condition that brings a certain category of people together.)

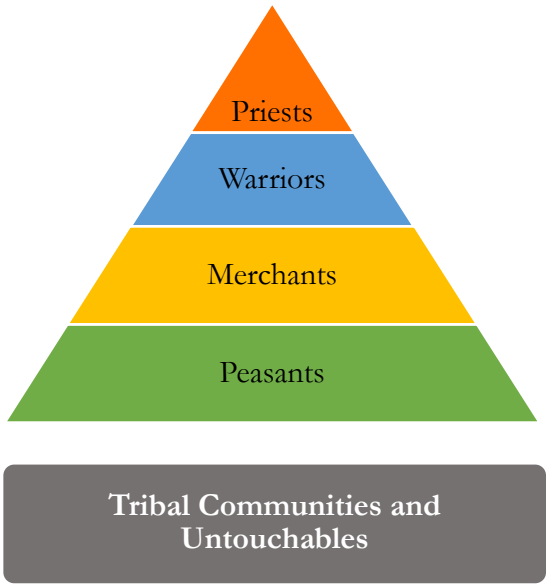
A noun, a name, a definition that has no real meaning, as far as the supposed high risks were concerned. The leaflets resorted to a peculiar, medicalised language; foreign to most of the underclass, so how does one make sense of the thing itself?

Behaviour (change communication)

(Doing, life)

A form of concise but authoritative instructions is given to a set of people, with a dismissal of their previous habits and patterns and to make them change their attitudes towards sex, for example, phrases such as "look at your behaviour," "behave yourself," or just "behave" in a firm tone. This way the term 'behaviour' relies on its negative connotation of bad behaviour that needs to be changed, amended, suspended.

Caste



The roots of caste are deep and salient to the formations of Indian societies, an entangled structure to protect the class, therefore, almost always caste dictate the class, and the untouchables falls 'outside' the caste pyramid/fold.

Centre

(Pedagogies of power) (mythical location)

A colonial location: In most of our imaginations, the ideas related to the centre suggest power, privilege and a cluster of systems that occupy a place of importance – a form of colonial binarism, which could not be what it is, without producing the margins.

Closet

(a conundrum of opacities) (becoming transparent)

You are 'out' therefore you are 'gay'. What were you before?

The 'closet' presupposes that you were in fundamental darkness *before*, and that you leave this darkness behind by coming out and discard the repository of shame and a negation of self.

Collaboration

(sugar)

Think this way: togetherness has been invoked, forced, imposed. A notion that is now named as collaboration – *ek mithi goli* (a sugar pill), that intend to keep everyone happy.

Common Sense

(Given. Something that cannot be put to test)

An innate attribute of knowing infused with spatial conventions making us surrender to something that is not universal.

Community

(Overused suffix)

A suffix, that comes with every noun, even if they are not a proper noun. For example, MSM community PLHIV community, Sex worker community, Hijra community; your community, our community, and their community.

Consent

(Assumes that freedom of choice exists for everyone)

S has been working as a community health worker for fifteen years. Currently he is at AB foundation where he earns less than half of what an unskilled labourer would earn, according to the rule book. S has limited options to work elsewhere due to various factors. A researcher approached the foundation's director to write about them. He wants to interview S, who has been told to answer the researcher's questions. S thinks that saying no could jeopardise his job. Now S has no choice but to give the interview. He signs a consent form. S was given the assurance that his interview will not be published in India, but S has no clue where it will be

published. He was not able to negotiate entirely, the conditions of his participation in this research.

Desire

(a song)

Justzu Jiski Thi Usho Toh Na Paya Humane,

Iss Bahaane Se Magar Dekh Li Dunia Humane.[1]

I did not attain, whom I desire, but in this way, I learn the life lesson. In this context desire has acquired an unattainable and unrealistic attribute.

Dreams

Swāpāndosh:[2] – the fault of our dreams

dream as missing realities

Good Person

You as an individual, who, through multiple discourses. In the absence of compliance, you will be unruly; thus, no-longer-a-good-person.

Farsi[3]

A secret language to enter a world of wisdom, love, freedom, and privacy where one can express oneself, whilst hiding in plain sight.

[1] Umrao Jaan (1981) Director: Muzaffar Ali, Music: Khayyam, Lyrics: Sheheryar.
[2] In Swāpāndosh: refers to ejaculating in your sleep it made of two wards, which literally mean Dream + Fault, together they refer to fault of dreams for which you need to ho meditation. The English term for it is Nocturnal Emission.
[3] See: Kira Hall's work mentioned in this thesis

Family

(Soft governance)

In such a society where all the power is given to men, and often without any social restrictions, it allows virile masculinities to thrive. As children, we were always told that family is the core of society, that we do not exist outside its boundaries, that we must belong to it and protect its values.

Freedom

(a dream) (perpetually, it exists in the future)

"Before the birth of freedom, we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow." A promise was made to millions of Indians at midnight, on August 14th, 1947.

HRG (High-Risk Group)

(The surplus)

In a prior life, before turning into a noun, HRG used to be an abbreviated category for statistics and data that you encounter on a page, it would be something like this: '8% HRG-MSM are not aware of their rights, they seem to be less knowledgeable'.

HIV

(Human immuno-deficiency virus)

By nature, the HIV virus is not a form-of-life, it can die if exposed to air, in fact, it is a parasite, it requires an external body, my body to survive, to exist and to flourish. So how can that be powerful, a virus which does not even have a life of its own?

India

(The making of a national enterprise)

My mouth clenches to twitch and my tongue that forces on the 'In', stretches on the 'd' and then releases on the 'ia' – 'India'. And then exhale! When they say 'India', I hear 'exotic' and sense greed, and power that triggers memories of our mutual colonial past.

Kothi

(An afterthought of the thriving lesbian and gay movement in India)

Kothi with an upper-case 'K', as a proper 'noun,' as a shard of defence and a way of resisting the neo-colonial grammar of oppression.[4]

Landscape/s

(Queer practices from other locations, that are not the centre)

The unintended identity that has been created in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis is confined within NGO spaces. One would not be and could not be an MSM outside the drop-in centre[5] and the health centre.

Language

(Remains of an oral orgasm)

Language has made it possible to express desires, loves, identities that are otherwise not permitted to exist. However, life-saving information was entangled, hidden, within the labyrinths of language, that no one could access.

[4] For further reading on the etymology of the term Kothi. See annex 2.

[5] A place where Kothi, Hijra and MSM population gathered to rejuvenate, meet friends, collect information on health and human right issues and seek referrals to other services provided by the NGO. These centres mainly run by NGO and usually situated where higher density of their target population.

Law

(Unnatural)

The quotidian life of the law has been dissimilar than what one sees in the law book. This comes in the form of threat, fear, and modes of intimidation by police, family, or blackmailers, rather than being in court through constitutional procedures.

Life

(survive) (this could be a separate entry – reduce life to survive)

The word life presupposed something active, something that is moving. But when life gets trapped, coerced, and reduced to *survival*. Death of a life.

Love

Love; attempt #1

(life)

She seldom leaves me alone. Out of sight is out of heart, she says. She tells me that I look like her and my eyes and chin resemble hers. She puts my hand close to her face, then she whispers something. She has given me a name 'Sonu', it means pure gold or a gift from God. I don't know what it means to be a gift from God, only she can tell. She is the sole source of all my knowledge, sense and she is my universe. She waits for hours to have a glimpse of my eyes when they open, the ones that look like hers. But I mostly sleep, yawn and cry. My only encounter which brings me to life is when my mouth touches her breast. I am a mere infant, that she snuggles in her lap.

Margin

(Together, they all screamed – f#@k the centre)

Often peripheries have been invoked with presuppositional relations to the centre, and that centre exists materially. Without discursive co-dependency the centre would not have much meaning.

Patriarchy

(…what would my father think?)

B: Well, one of the answers to that could be patriarchy – the rule of the father and I would say it in plural – patriarchies. The systems we have all been suffering from, which control our societies, and which are led by the patriarchs of all the states. These are fundamental to maintaining all forms of hierarchies – religion, society, economics, desire, sexuality. Power that regulates everyone – it affects everything, including the home, even the tiniest unit in that enormous structure – you and me.

Photograph

(Promise of truth) (truth that is compromised)

When I asked, he said – *'The 'picture' is of outside the house'.*

Politics

We often say we are not *that,* which immediately forms a dichotomy.

If we are not that, then what we are, is supposedly the opposite of what we are not.

Positive

(For once I was made to feel positive about myself, but…)

"You used to be always positive. Be positive, you always insisted, to find goodness and strength in any bad situation. What would you say now? Now that, I am positive!"

She said quaveringly. While showing a medical report that says her blood results are reactive to HIV.

Programme

(Good intentions)

A woman, in a husky voice, ends the stanza of a song, she says - 'toh, kya programme hai aaj raat ka' (so, what's the programme for tonight), this is my first memory of the word 'programme'. Since then, the word programme has always had in my mind something to do with entertaining someone or oneself.

Privacy

(No trespass)

The use of a phrase such as '*it's none of your business*' reminds us of where the social boundaries lie. We know then that we have entered a *private* territory. Until this very moment we really do not know that could be an intruder of people's privacy, if we move one step ahead from where we should be.

Queer

(Opaque tendencies)

At first, the notion of queer in an Indian context came to be understood and has been formulated as a very expansive political response to the compulsory heteropatriarchal power.

Resistance

(Doing politics)

It is not something that one has to *do*. Sometimes, a simple act of stepping out of your house could be a form of resistance, especially when people like us are forced to live in hiding and become invisible.

Safe-Space

(Drop-in center) (10am to 5pm)

Within the development and public health world, a dream was envisioned. This dream was to *provide a safe space* to a population, those who were starved from dreaming, who otherwise have limited or no other venues for self-representation.

Sex

(Who shall I sleep with?)

In the MSM world sex matters. More importantly who do have sex with defines your 'category' thus destiny, but in queer terms — the erotic connections are rather under the carpet. That is such a mind-f**k.

Suffering

They say suffering is good for the soul and for the afterlife. If death is the only goal of life, then why make so much fuss about race, class, privilege, power, refugees, and nationalities?

System

(a lover of patriarchy)

System is the lover who leaves their things everywhere, reluctant to invest in you, and you always feel their shadow all over you, but they are never around when you need them.

Us

(Zero-sum as Socio-political economy)

Is this 'us' all what the 'they' are not?

The 'us' always mystifies me, how it is being used, in what context and by whom? And more importantly what constitute this 'us' in the first place? Who gets to be included in this 'us' and who is being excluded? It is power as well as oppression. How would one know which side is right?

Vulnerability

If I know everything, could I save myself from HIV? The xxx problem of taking 'knowledge as power' to mean the salvation of everything.

Voice

(Utterance of a sound which may or may not mean anything)

Even before we ask the question, "can the subaltern speak?' they should have had the ability to speak. What does it mean to have a voice? The voice that I alluding to, is not something that everyone has, it is something that one found within. It is not to be mistaken with some notion of a given platform, but it is the encounter that it brings forth, thus it is an emergence.

List of Illustrations

PREFACE

Mumbling: learning how to speak

: linguistic imperialism

My mouth clenches to twitch and my tongue forces on the 'In', stretches on the 'd' and then releases on the 'ia' — 'India', and then I exhale! As hard as it is to fit 'India' in my mouth, it is even harder to swallow the term — Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome, that shaped the fate of the Kothi population in the nineties, a term which continues to jostle against my tongue.

Geographically 'speaking', this project is located in Delhi, India, but this speaking does not come so easily, particularly when it is about the learning and unlearning of the history of India. The part of history that I am going to re-tell, is also about a latent place whose foundational location exists in my own past.[1] Thus, an aspect of his past is *still*, and yet, at the same time, it is also about an *evolving* and *movable* thing. My practice of storytelling shows the nature of time, which collapses yet continues to evolve. It also reveals, in part, the historical significance of language that preserves and binds together the grand narratives of the nation, the identity of its people, their religion, classes, and castes.[2] The impact of the

[1] See the Glossary.

[2] Since ancient times, Sanskrit a liturgical language has been learnt by the Brahmins, who are the priestly caste. Through Sanskrit, they continued to hold monopoly to accessed and interpreted religious texts, thereby keeping, and protecting knowledge within their limited domain. They also used it an instrument of oppression to maintain hierarchies and cultural dominance over the other. See: Doniger, (2009), Hindus.

grand narratives does not end here, in colonial times, there was the urgency of making English the language of bureaucracy and governance in India in order to subjugate its people further on a linguistic basis.[3] Lord Thomas Macaulay presented a report in 1835 to the British Crown, entitled "Minute on Education" in which he noted that English had to be taught to a very select group of people who would later be useful for the Empire.[4] In support of his proposition, Macaulay explained, "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[5] Thus, began the expansion of the English language across the Indian subcontinent, replacing major regional Indian languages as the language of legality and governance.[6] According to Anita Desai, it has remained true to this day, which is why she writes "It is true that from its earliest days in India – i.e., the seventeenth century – [English has] been the implement of power and proselytization" […] "…it has continued to be the vehicle of divisiveness."[7] Therefore, it may be argued that Macaulay's imperialist recommendations contributed to the expansion of the empire and to establish

[3] For examples: Miles Ogborn writes on colonial languages, speeches, and archival material extensively. See: Ogborn, (2010), The Power of Speech: Orality, Oaths and Evidence in British Atlantic World. Also more specifically see Gopal's work who traces the evolution of Indian English in literature: Priyamvada Gopal, (2009), *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration*, (New York: Oxford University Press).

[4] Lord Thomas Macaulay, (1835), Minutes on Education. These recommendations became foundational reasoning for many discriminatory practices, including language and sexuality. columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html, (Last accessed on 21st June 2021).

[5] Macaulay, (1835), Education. These recommendations resulted as, those who learn the English language will gain knowledge that would help them to control all the other non-English speaking members of society.

[6] This paradox of 'language of law' is elucidated in chapter four through an example of my practice.

[7] Anita Desai, writes this in the *introduction* to *Midnight's Children,* (1995), Salman Rushdie, (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd.)

English as the global language of administration and knowledge production in India.[8] Therefore, it is important to ask – who has the ability to speak?

In my research, I eschewed the voyeuristic approach to 'document' the lives of the underprivileged. I also refrained to call it a 'practice' of artmaking, as such practices often proliferate in art and academic discourse. Instead, it examines the ethical issues surrounding the notions of identity, visibility, and representation. It makes the point that speaking on the behalf of others is problematic. This work also critiques the use of 'we' and 'us' as a confusing and unethical way to formulate political responses which undermine everyday struggles of the marginalised.

This thesis follows the lineages of postcolonial thinking, and it uses critiques of caste, class and subalternity, drawn from the works of Indian feminists, especially Gayatri Spivak, Himani Bannerji and Uma Chakravarty (some of their works are referenced in my thesis). While also finding affinities with fiction writers Amrita Pritam, Mahasweta Devi, and Ismat Chughtai, as their work provides me an insight into subaltern subjectivity, more creatively.[9] Thus, in-between the twitching, stammering, and mumbling — it is my intention to enable a delicate move, so that the subject's voice can come-through in the stories, without commodifying or compromising their dignity. As "the voice is not an object that is already there; it

[8] It should be noted that other colonies were subjected to the same linguistic discrimination as shown by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer, he fervently questions the dominance of colonial languages in Africa. See for example: Thiong'o (1994) *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Publishing House)

[9] For examples: Mahasweta Devi, (2001), *After Kurukshetra*, (Kolkata, India: Seagull Books), that intertwines stories which have the essence of minor forms of literature that break open the Indian epic saga – the *Mahabharata;* Ismat Chugtai, (2006), *The Crooked Line*, trans Tahira Naqvi, (New York: Feminist) Press), and Amrita Pritam (2009) *Pinjar* (The Skeleton), trans Khushwant Singh, (New Delhi: Tara Press), is set against the backdrop of Indo-Pak partition.

emerges."[10] My practice of storytelling is grounded in the concept of minor literature, insisting upon speaking at a *lower or minor node*, which is a gentler move.[11] By speaking in lower frequencies, it preserves the voices of its subjects and prevent them from being further diluted and consumed. So, with these intentions, I began my sideways conversation with a poetic resistance.

"To learn English
To dispel all woes.
Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English."

Savatribai Phule, 1854 [12]

[10] Holly Patch/Tomke König, (2018), Trans* Visibility: lived experience, singing bodies and joyful politics, FZG – Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien, 1-2018, S. 31-53. doi.org/10.3224/fzg.v24i1.03.

[11] The three characteristics of minor literature described by Deleuze and Guattari are the de-territorialisation of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, (1986), *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature,* (Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota Press), trans Dana Polan. Also see use of minor frequencies, in Tina Campt, (2017), Listening to Images, (Durham: Duke University Press); and Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, (2013), The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study, (New York: Minor Compositions)

[12] Savitribai Phule, (1854), 'Learn English', in the *Dalit Ghetto,* velivada.com/2015/01/03/few-poems-by-savitribai-phule/ (Last accessed on 21st June 2021). Velivada is a Telugu word, which means "Dalit Ghetto" from which this archive is named. Education was not easily available to the lower castes as noted by: Uma Chakravarti, (2018), *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (revised edition), (India: Sage/Stree).

INTRODUCTION

Framing: the peripheries

"The history of modern India tells us a complex, surprising, captivating, and yet un-concluded story of freedom."

Sudipta Kaviraj[1]

A much-needed public health discourse that addressed HIV/AIDS prevention in India has efficaciously swallowed the culture of a localised multi-dimensioned, queer identity of Kothi, whilst establishing the label — MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) as a global behavioural category in the nineties.[2] As one tries to understand in what circumstances the term MSM might have been conceptualised, one discovers that even though "the term held a promise of reduced AIDS stigma," it could not avoid but further stigmatise the population the term was meant to benefit.[3] People were given the term *Men who have Sex with Men*; and were told they belonged to a "high-risk group" apparently the group that has more sexual relations than the rest of society.[4] Thus, labelling in this way made them accustomed to an inbuilt sexual taboo since its inception, every time the term was used. A close reading of its

[1] Sudipta Kaviraj, (2011) *The Enchantment of Democracy and India*, (Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black), 91.
[2] Jyoti Puri, (2016), *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press); Also, see: Lawrence Cohen, (2005), "The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification", in *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*, ed. Vincanne Adams & Stacy leigh Pigg, (Durham: Duke University Press).
[3] Rebecca M. Young and Ilan H. Meyer, (2005), The Trouble With "MSM" and "WSW": Erasure of the Sexual-Minority Person in Public Health Discourse. American Journal of Public Health 95, 1144_1149, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2004.046714.
[4] Dilip Das, (2019), *Teaching AIDS: The Cultural Politics of HIV Disease in India*, (Singapore: Springer). Also see Puri, (2016) *Sexual States,* 8.

origins, however, made me realise that there was nothing 'sexy' about it, except the term 'sex' was used tangentially to describe the relationship between the two — men, who remained silent. At the same time, the space in-between the two men was being punctuated with pathos and *survival* stories as opposed to stories about *life, love, and pleasure*. Essentially, such theorisation of their 'sex' became a 'fatality' for these men. They were fenced up into narrow categories instead of being given the opportunity of becoming a possibility, the stark opposite of what Michel Foucault suggested in an interview.[5]

Presented as a "public health" priority, the implementation of this policy framework undermines the desire of Kothi who are breaking not only gender but also socio-political norms daily. As a result, from this point on the Kothi and MSM have been the subject of studies, mainly within disciplines such as sociology and epidemiology, where their relationship to Human Rights, their criminalisation under the archaic law, Section 377, and their vulnerability to HIV have been referenced endlessly.[6] Despite this fact, these studies remained distant from their subjects' lived realities, and were unable to talk about them as the subject of desire. This growing scholarship, which favours a populist and gendered approach, turned every person they cared for, into an inhuman acronym, risking the undoing of the support

[5] Michel Foucault, (1997), "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity", in *The Essential work of Michel Foucault – 1954-1984, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* – Vol One, eds. Paul Robinow, (New York: The New Press), 163.
[6] Section 377, an anti-sodomy legislation, which was originally drafted by Lord Macaulay, I will be discussing this in chapter 1 & 4. See: Narrain, (2004) Articulation; Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*; Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*.

they advocate — that is human rights.[7] My analysis of these intertwined situations led me to the problem of the periphery that frequently appears in such discussions. This though has very little resonance to the periphery I come from. So, part of the question became how have these peripheries emerged and pervaded the centre and but also how have they been maintained systematically? In this inquiry, I will be discussing how a certain kind of 'presuming', and 'the writing' about the Kothi population, flourished. And more importantly how these writings have shaped my practice of sideways thinking, which I will discuss shortly. Simultaneously, I will also be locating the governing apparatuses in which Kothi gets trapped. Therefore, *Going Sideways* invokes ethical questions around identity politics while offering methodological tools that should help re-situate queer discourse that looks *otherwise* towards the subaltern population in India. For this reason, it also becomes essential for the sideways *turn* to occur.

So, among the many overlapping discourses that affect subalterns, the one that I am alluding to, is the one advocated by social and literary theorists and critics such as Edward Said, who have influenced how discourse gets established since the late seventies.[8] Other than Said, whose *Orientalism* was a pivotal work, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Homi Bhabha, Himani Bannerji and Achille Mbembe are amongst those whose discourse analysis came to light, which has

[7] Arvind Narrain, (2004), The Articulation of Rights around Sexuality and Health: Subaltern Queer Cultures in India in the Era of Hindutva, Health and Human Rights, Vol. 7, No. 2, Sexuality, Human Rights, and Health (2004), 142-164. Also see: Ratna Kapur, (2018), *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl*, (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited).
[8] Edward W. Said, (1978), *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

given valuable depth to my practice. This also includes the works cited in the Preface.[9] Their scholarship has challenged ideas around subject formation, which were otherwise were rooted in the philosophical traditions of the West. These theorists who explored the interconnectedness of philosophy and the social, have also brought their unique subjectivity into postcolonial discourse. With great complexity their works highlights the problematics of cultural difference and hierarchies, which had been dominating the academic literature, that had previously been normalising colonial violence. For example, in her intrepid 'critique of postcolonial reason,' Spivak remarked that "The field of philosophy […] produced authoritative "universal" narratives where the subject remained unmistakably European."[10] Through this, Spivak implies that most Euro-American philosophers have been implicated in, within the discourse of subjectivity and subject formation.

My research also takes as its points of departure the nineteen-nineties, when, one finds that *queer activism* emulates ways of 'doing' identity politics in the Global South. A form of neo-colonialism fostered by a range of players. Such as the case presented by Suparna Bhaskaran in her significant work on post-nineties' globalisation and its impact in India.[11] While referencing the emerging queer

[9] Apart from Spivak, Minh-ha, Bhabha, and Hall, see also some of the lesser-known scholars apart from the Western art cannon whose work influenced my thinking of the discourse related to my work includes Uma Chakravarti, (2018), *Gendering Caste*; Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, (1998), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India;* but also, Leela Gandhi, (2019*) Postcolonial Theory*.

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (1999), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 8.

[11] Suparna Bhaskaran, (2004), *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan); Another more recent queer critique of cultural capitalism of the West, see C. B. Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano, Eds (2012) *Queering Anarchism: Essays on Gender, Power, and Desire*, (Edinburgh: AK Press).

activism, Bhaskaran observes the use of the term "sexual minorities as elitist mimicry of the West." Thus, playing the role of an intermediary between two worlds, two ways of thinking—East and West, activists, with these new vocabularies have "catalysed the ensuing debates around India's colonial anti-sodomy statute," Bhaskaran writes.[12]

However, one other point of departure for me was the lack of discussion around HIV/AIDS among middle class queer circles that I encountered, particularly when I came to inhabit English language activism. The membership of these newly evolving spaces expels marginalised others, even though these underclasses have been invoked persistently inside courtrooms to demonstrate, as a prime example, their vulnerability under the law and how law affects HIV prevention efforts. Consequently, what is not surprising is that the policies that underpin the neoliberal agendas still exclude, perhaps unintentionally, the majority from the results of this co-called collective struggle. In the decades after the colonial era, this form of subjugation has been a tenet of neoliberalism and its "civilising project" that has spread across institutions that cater to health and other developmental issues.[13] Thus, the subaltern subject remains a second-class citizen, which brings me back to the question of 'who is continuously speaking, and for whom', a juncture from which Spivak and Said had begun. In this light, the answer to this question demands a

[12] Bhaskaran, (2004), *Made in India,* 79. Also see: Homi K. Bhabha, who theorised the notion of 'mimic', in the context colonialism and post-colonial theories. Bhabha, (1994), *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge).
[13] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl.*

delicate and nuanced approach, which stems from and is informed by the subjectivity of the subaltern, in this case the Kothi. Furthermore, this requires a certain kind of truth, fluidity, and cohesion, all of which will be addressed in chapters two and three, in relation to the idea of emergence, and its capacity to circulate 'truth', through storytelling.

: *sideways* work

> "Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words." [14]

The aim of this work is to trace the contexts in which Kothi identities have been overlapping, blurred, appropriated, and superimposed on an imaginary victim identity. It also seeks to present Kothi's voices, while creating ethical ways to tell their stories. It is because, within the imposed 'template' of victimhood, Kothi were largely described by cultural equivalence or metonyms such as 'lady boy', 'drag' or 'street queen.' Yet, Kothi "…were recruited by middle-class outreach workers to replace themselves, to help fulfil funders' mandates for more and better sexual truth" about themselves.[15] In this way, not only does Kothi's presence testify that same-sex sex exists in India, but they also function as bodies within the biology of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In other words, they are transformed into an integral part of

[14] Hannah Arendt, (1998), *The Human Condition*, (second edition), Introduction by Margaret Canovan, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 186.
[15] Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*, 293.

the NGO machinery. It became manifestly known to me that there is a lack of representation of Kothi; their identity always-already depended on NGO narratives. It would not be wrong to say that they are almost non-existent outside the NGO world. It is also difficult to distinguish the economies of violence at work in such representations. Therefore, there is an urgency to address this matter, especially since other people with good intentions claim to already have done so.

This absence of empathetic representations of Kothi is the determining factor, which helps me deploy a broader visual strategy, which is reinforced by the textual element of this project. The choices I have made in my practice involves repetition. Because I see repetition as a 'rehearsal,' I perceive it as a queer tactic to become known and heard, the gentlest 'knowledge system' I have encountered. But repetition is also the guiding principle, as stories and images form pluralistic images of Kothi when encounters occur, and this requires the sharing and circulation of stories.

It then becomes a question of how the complexities of subaltern voices can be made visible in our contemporary discourses and how can they enrich our understanding of queerness which is always-already a queer-becoming. I will answer these questions by drawing a historical framework in such a way that will complicate as much as illustrate many stories of desire and intimacy in the context of Indian culture. Moreover, this thesis will also demonstrate how HIV/AIDS prevention programmes by using the language of human rights overshadowed the minority

discourse available to Kothi. A minor culture that was enriched with their own "stylistics" and their own version of queerness.[16] For this reason a larger historical discourse will help us situate this project. It starts with the invention of homosexuality as a category of human behaviour in the West and its subsequent criminalisation by strict legislation in 1861(which was also valid in India), to the Supreme Court of India's verdict in September 2018 that decriminalised same-sex relations.[17] I will be looking at these historical events sideways. India's recently emerged and widely celebrated LGBTIQ+ visibility campaign suggests that the queer movement has raised public awareness and enabled a more tolerant environment towards same-sex relationships. Nevertheless, what modes of governance have proliferated since then and who has benefitted from these human rights gains?

This practice-led research, for me, is an ethical departure from a pre-established genealogical understanding that is almost always reductive and has become the all-too-common fate of sexual subalterns.[18] This departure could also be called an emancipation. It's a departure from the victimised narratives that I often encountered in NGO literature. Through this research, I examine the ethical

[16] For Michel Foucault refers technique of the self is crucial point to the political understanding of body and the creation of relationships with self and others, in this sense I use the 'stylistics' which Kothis have made for themselves. See: Foucault, (1997), "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity"; also see: Charan Singh, (2018), The Kothis, Hijras, Giriyas and Others, *Photo Works, Photography, Art, Visual Culture*, (Brighton, UK: Photoworks), Issue 24, LGBTQ+, 158-171.

[17] The Supreme Court of India delivered its verdict on Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India case to decrimalised homosexuality. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article24880700.ece/binary/Sec377judgment.pdf (last accessed on 22nd August 2021).

[18] My analysis is informed my years of engagement with HIV work but also a reading of Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, and Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*. Their work has been critical for a comprehensive understanding of the discourse of human rights and the making of sexual subaltern in India.

questions around identity and its representations. Using storytelling, moving images and a glossary of critically constructed keywords my practice takes the form of a braid by connecting all three analytical approaches. Together they create a *listening-encounter*.[19] This tool is borrowed from Johnny Golding for two reasons: first, to rehearse and, second, to re-situate Kothi's minor discourse so that a softer and gentler register can be established for an encounter with their queerness. To keep the discussion sideways, I have used *interruption poetics*. I consider them a critical tool to remain incomplete in a queer-way and which also infuses the possibility of *rehearsal*. They function as a doorstopper (or opener), which not only add a nuanced perspective to the ongoing discussion but also provide cultural perspectives. The aphoristic utterances are crucial because they allow the stories to emerge with furtiveness. And by exploring the poetics of queer lives it rejects pathos, as these utterances paint an immersive and radical portrait of people who have been marginalised. It is an essential way of queer living that continues to influence my relationships with my city and its people, who are frequently depicted in these stories. That is why I call these stories 'a rehearsal for life' because of the repetitive nature of their dissemination, following on the ancient Indian oral tradition of sharing knowledge and wisdom through stories.[20]

[19] See: Johnny Golding, (2018), "Friendship," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press), 262-276.

[20] Oral traditions are highly regarded to share knowledge and wisdom within Indian philosophy, for which I rely on feminist scholars. See: Wendy Doniger, (2009), *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, (New York: Penguin); and Kumkum Roy, (2010), *The Power of Gender & the Gender of Power: Exploration in Early History*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press); also this edited volume of essay many of whom deals with oral tradition and the making of self, with specific examples to poetry, see: Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds. (2015), *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*, (Durham: Duke University Press).

In my thesis, the story is the bridge between practice, politics, and research, and as a central figure in my research, the Kothi provide the energy and creativity that allows their lived experiences to emerge. The stories that they tell are not only used to create "spaces of resistance, resistance to the narratives of [institutionalised] power," but also to ground minor events of unfolding desire, gender and belonging.[21] While the stories that I am exploring are autobiographical, often they are told in the first person. It is to establish a direct connection with the readers. It is a strategy that eliminates ambiguity of an omniscient narrator. For example, in the *Story of Her,* the protagonist goes back and forth in time to tell the story that they experienced with their friend; thereby claiming their past and present.[22] Later, in Chapter 3 and 4, I will discuss the significance of locating these stories in non-NGO settings, which provide them with the ability to occupy a different narrative that breaks away from their original victim context. It also emphasises how stories can create multi-dimensional representations of Kothi. However, not 'everything regarding our past' is available to us, so they also embody a sense of fabulation and fiction.[23] They aim to share fragments and make explicit the revolving, moveable

[21] Patrick Lewis, (2011), Storytelling as Research/ Research as Storytelling, Qualitative Inquiry, Volume: 17, issue: 6, 505-510. (*With my own emphasise*).
[22] Charan Singh, (2021), Photographic Rehearsal: A Still Unfolding Narrative, Trans Asia Photography Review, Volume 11, Issue 1: *Trans*, Spring 2021. quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0011.105/--photographic-rehearsal-a-still-unfolding-narrative?rgn=main;view=fulltext#N12-ptr1. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021).
[23] Saidiya Hartman describe her method of 'critical fabulation' in an essay titled: Venus in Two Acts, (2008), Small Axe, Number 26, (Volume 12, Number 2), June 2008, 1-14., Also, see: David Burrows & Simon O'Sullivan, (2019), Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy. (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press).

and ephemeral nature of queer desires, otherwise called subaltern lives.[24] As a result, these stories become a reflection of the Kothi's own "aesthetics of existence" as well as their own way of inhabiting queerness.[25] It makes these queer practices of resistance and transgression into a work of translation that also emerges as a minor form of literature.[26] In a sense, my stories are a rendition of the political lives of Kothi, who remain at a non-central, minor cultural location, thus for my work 'becoming' and 'speaking on a minor frequency' is an ethical strategy.[27]

My practice utilises both textual and visual approaches to engage creatively with the absences, gaps, holes, and intervals within the archives. By doing so, I am able to move away from the limits of the archive and situate the Kothi into a realm different from their typical NGO spaces. Since the collective voice has been systematically diminished through the neoliberal version of queer, my work enables an atmosphere for creative critique to emerge, a crucial turn for my artistic intervention.

The title of this thesis takes its cue from Alan Fletcher's book titled "The Art of Looking Sideways", but more importantly it is influenced by Kathryn Bond Stockton's work, namely "Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth

[24] My analysis is indebted to Muñoz for his work on ephemeral nature of queerness. See: José Esteban Muñoz, (2009), Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, (New York: New York University Press).
[25] Michel Foucault, (1997), "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Work of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited Paul Robinow, (New York: The New Press), 163-173.
[26] See: Deleuze & Guattari (1986), *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. I will illustrate this later.
[27] See: Deleuze and Guattari, (1987), Minor literature, also see use of minor frequencies, in Tina Campt, (2017), Listening to Images, (Durham: Duke University Press); and Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, (2013), The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study, (New York: Minor Compositions).

Century" in which they both set up their need to contemplate beyond the obvious in their respective fields.[28] However, the conceptual framework for my practice is very much rooted in Indian feminist practices and modes of storytelling, some of which I have briefly mentioned in the preface of this thesis. For me, *Going Sideways* reflects what I try to do through my practice. "Going" refers to an action, a process, and an affirmative act of living. "Sideways" represents a form of queer-resistance against the rigid hierarchies and unjust systems that exploit and thrive on the marginalisation of the powerless. Since the beginning, I have put the emphasis of my research on the "who" not to evade my responsibility, but to create an ethical methodology.

I approach my work from the margins which allows me to investigate the centre from a subjective perspective, therefore, the 'who' of this project is what makes it unique. The conclusions I draw in this project, are the results of my own engagement as an activist and my research into the queer movements and sexuality literature in India. In the coming chapters, I will demonstrate how a departure from the parochial understandings of queer identity and Kothi's subalternity, might destabilise the production of this supposed 'common good.' I will explain the process of "Going Sideways," as it requires an assemblage of tools (stories, glossary, video work) and that it conforms with the *makeshift* nature of postcolonial

[28] Allen Fletcher, (2001) *The Art of Looking Sideways,* (London: Phaidon Press), and Kathryn Bond Stockton, (2009), *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Duke University Press).

methodologies.[29] That is why, this project requires a radical re-contextualisation which unveils the underlying conditions that had induced a diverse population such as the Kothi into a unified subject. Therefore, the core strategy of thinking *sideways* enables me to envision transformative gestures. In this way, this work aims to reclaim the long-standing presence of underclass queer experiences in Delhi, a city I still call home.

: a road to come

Chapter one is a bird's-eye view contextualising my research. It discusses different structural folds within which sexuality research has developed in India. This chapter talks about the arrival of HIV and the human rights movement in India, and it will show how Kothi and MSM populations were reproduced as 'subaltern queers' and 'sexual minorities.' [30]

Chapter two will establish *Going Sideways*. It also contextualises the three critical components of the project: stories, glossary and moving image, which act as the cornerstones of my practice. Together they create an *atmosphere*, an *encounter* of a sort, to make *possibility* an option that could be available to the Kothi. This is a *sideways* turn, through which one can learn to listen to the silence in the perpetual absence of a subaltern subject.

[29] Leela Gandhi, (2019), *Postcolonial Theory: A critical Introduction*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 137.
[30] Arvind Narrain, (2004), The Articulation of Rights around Sexuality and Health: Subaltern Queer Cultures in India in the Era of Hindutva, Health, and Human Rights, Vol. 7, No. 2, Sexuality, Human Rights, and Health (2004), 142-164.

Chapter three will elaborate on the practice of storytelling and its function, which I call 'a rehearsal for life' that foregrounds encounters.[31] In this *rehearsal*, the attempt is to 'create life' with words. Through narrative, dialogic, and performative text-based works, my emphasis has been on orality.[32] Hence, in this chapter, I demonstrate that stories perform resistance, and they create a "knowledge system," but they also create a threshold through which we can see the light of hope and possibilities.

My conversation in chapter four is a response to the continual homogenisation of identities under a queer label which shadows all other ways of 'being' in India. It also triggers an urgency to address the question of public and private in the context of the closet. It started while I was working on a photographic project about various cruising sites in the city, *Garden of Eros*.[33]

Chapter five is a summation of my project. In this, I would be closely looking at the technologies of visibilities and opacity and how they have been used to dilute Kothi identity through the neoliberal language of rights-based discourses. I will also show how storytelling can be useful to revive a delicate history.

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[31] In Eastern philosophy, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, reincarnation is a vital concept, and the notions of cycle of life is fundamental to such teachings. An example of it can also be seen in the Greek tradition, Anne Carson used this phrase in her work while describing Bakkhai. See: Anne Carson, (2017), *Euripides Bakkhai*, (New York: New Directions).

[32] To avoid any confusion, I must clarify from the outset that this investigation is not about the philosophy of language as a field of inquiry. My writing benefits from a reading of Barthes, Benjamin, Kafka, Kundera. But also, Teju Cole, Mahasweta Devi, some of which are referenced in this thesis and are included into my bibliography.

[33] The 'Garden of Eros' was exhibited in PhD research symposium called, Daybreak 2017. rca.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/daybreak-exhibition-shedding-light-rcas-fine-art-research/ (Last accessed on 9th September, 20121).

Since the nineties, cruising sites have emerged as important links for NGOs to conduct their HIV related work.[34] This work included 'community mobilising' and extending referrals to Kothi visitors for health services. Even though Kothi possess a biopolitical nature at these sites, their politics seem to have frozen because they have been depoliticised. They are taught to narrate a victim narrative and their desires have been subjected to policing. Their hard to grasp, unruly desire now appears to have a fixed definition — a victim. Therefore, this work highlights that both Kothi and Hijra with their pursuits for fulfilment, desire, and love outside NGO spaces, have unique and furtive worlds that they created for themselves. I will also be examining how the language of the universalising a gay subject takes away the uniqueness of Kothi and how the HIV/AIDS programmes have failed to create an identity outside the narrow category of MSMs. Bringing underclass lived realities into queer discourses, this thesis will allow the reader to hear the *mumble* of the subjects. It will offer a new form of queer dissent, a new frequency to be heard. A radical call for equality can be made possible by occupying the void of representation. This act will lead us to a path, a queerness, that is always already *sideways*.

[34] *Cruising* is an important space for Kothi, which has been subsumed by the NGOs, thus going back to cruising is also an act of *taking back*. I used *walking* (after Pasolini*) and Polaroids as a crucial method for mapping the city. I was reticent about using a *camera,* including, phone or film, for these walks. It is a *slippery slope* as it becomes too tempting to invade people's privacy at such locations. I did not want to be a *voyeur* but to rekindle my relationship with the spaces. The psychosexual cartography brings temporalities and the fragmentary nature of memories and queer experiences. I am not trying to stand outside, rather putting myself in these landscapes and in doing so also questioning the conditions and implications of *being-here* and the autobiography. But above all, the work and stories are posing a challenge to the dynamics of being a subaltern queer man and sharing these stories and images. *Pier Paolo Pasolini (1984), *The Scent of India*, (UK: Olive Press), Also see: Fiona Anderson, (2019*), Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront,* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press).

Interruption poetic no. 1

I was a concept, a description
A number, a table, a graph
but no image

An idea, a noun
an abbreviation
or definition
but not a thing itself
and no image

An apology on a page, on the margin
A footnote, or a quote
An example sometimes
but no image

Real or unreal,
but always elsewhere

Did I even exist?
How can I exist?

Figure 1: Still from a moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros"* 2017.

I invite to you to sit and discuss with me and let us see all those who have been going sideways.

CHAPTER ONE

Cartographies: Of Desires, Pleasures, and Sexualities in India

"The language of my beloved is Turkish,
and Turkish I do not know!
Would it not be wonderful,
if his tongue were in my mouth!!"

Amir Khusro[1]

: *Delhi- Khusro's dilli*

Shaam ki halchal, *itra*, *shayari* and the company of young men; we know, we are in Sufi poet Amir Khusro's Delhi. This is, indeed a lively scene from his poems.[2] In 1272, when Khusro was only nineteen years old, he had already gained a name and established himself as a favourite of the Chishti saint Shaikh Nizāmuddin Auliā, whose extremely admired hospice was conducive to Khusro's poetic and musical skills.[3] In those days, his ecstatic poems such as cited above, would have been circulated among men at the sanatorium, on the streets of Delhi, and in other cities of the subcontinent.[4] Some of these streets would have been *bazaars* — bustling with people, where one shop would have been soaked in the scent of marigold,

[1] These couplets are translated by historian Saleem Kidwai and appeared in an anthology. Saleem Kidwai & Ruth Vanita (eds) (2000), *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. (New York: St Martin Press),128. Please note that Khusro has also been referred to as Khosrow by some historians.

[2] Hubbub of the dusk [Shaam ki Halchal] Perfume [itra] and Poetry [shayari]. Sufism is a form of Islamic Mysticism that developed into a significant social movement in the early centuries of Islam. According to Vanita & Kidwai, (2010), Islam in India tends to be closer to Sufism than Orthodox Islam. See: Vanita & Kidwai, (2000), 360.

[3] Hazrat Sheikh Khwaja Syed Muhammad Nizamuddin Aulia, the religious preceptor and Sufi saint of the Chishti order, who insisted on love and harmony as way to realising God. Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), Same-Sex, 126. Also, for further reading, see: Mehru Jaffer, (2012), *The Book of Nizamuddin Aulia*, (New Delhi: Penguin).

[4] The modern border did not exist then, so sharing the poetry would have meant sharing in other countries. See: Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, eds. (2015), *Speaking of the Self*.

while at the other shop cardamon and cloves would have been mingling together releasing a sweet aroma. This would have been a cacophony for the senses, smells, and skin, bringing the street to life. There would usually be an old man selling jasmine festoons at the corner of such a *bazaar*. He would also sprinkle rosewater on passers-by men to entice them to buy his garlands.[5] These passing men would probably come from different social backgrounds. There would have been some with curly hair and a gait like an elephant's, whose curvaceous rump would have moved slowly and joyfully. Some of these men would have been wearing *kajal* (kohl) in their eyes, and the poet may have been unable to decide whether to look at their mesmerising eyes or take a glance at their irresistible posteriors. These onlookers may have been intoxicated by the same young boys Khusro describes in these evocative verses in which he also draws attention to the fact that the city had been a multi-faith society at that time:

> "Delhi – Oh, its unadorned beloveds
> Wear turbans, but their tresses are loose.
> They openly kill with their pride
> Though they drink liquor in secret.
> The Muslims have become sun-worshipers
> Because of these simple sprightly Hindu boys.
> I am desolate and intoxicated
> Because of these pure Hindu boys.
> Tied up in their locks,
> Khusro is like a dog with a collar." [6]

[5] One can still find these scenes as it used to be in his time in Delhi, where Khusro flourished and is rested. See: Paul E. Losensky, Sunil Sharma (translated and introduced) (2013), *In the Bazaar of Love: Selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau*, (New Delhi: Penguin, Random House, India).
[6] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex,* 127–128.

Khusro's poems often would have been performed with music and dancing, the atmosphere that this created could transcend people, making them feel free from the material world while creating a space to express their love of God without being bound by conventional gender norms. The Sufi practice of "Samā" or '*binding the Samā*' could loosely be translated as the creation of an 'atmosphere', or 'emergence', through 'listening' to sung poetry; so in a way, it is an "encounter" of "listening" created within a predominantly male environment.[7] The overtly homosocial nature of such gatherings have made this a controversial subject among historians, not only because beautiful young boys were present, but also because they were the subjects of these poems.[8] However, as queer historians argue, if we turn to the archive of art and culture on the Indian subcontinent, throughout its history, we will find that it is filled with multiple discourses which reveal that people proclaimed their love across vast spectrums. The archival evidence suggest how eloquently same-sex desires were expressed across different eras.[9] Sufi poetry, for instance, was popular in medieval times. People from all faiths cherished Sufism because its focus was on spiritualism and personal devotion rather than following "the regimen of a dogma."[10]

[7] Samā – here is refers to an ecstatic atmosphere, but I would like to propose the practice of Samā as an encounter, which I will elaborate on later.
[8] Amīr Khusro's biographer Barnī have given detailed accounts of such assemblies (mehfil), where there was exchange of poetry, accompanied by music, singing and dancing. Paul E. Losensky and Sunil Sharma, (2013), *In the Bazaar of Love: the selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau*, (India: Penguin) 24, (kindle version).
[9] I am using an archive in Derridean sense to refer to a phenomenon. See: Derrida: *Archive Fever*, (1995), also see: Allan Sekula, (1986), "The Body and the Archive", October, Vol. 39, 3-64.
[10] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*, 114.

Today, Khusro is famous for his Hindvi mystical poetry.[11] His work was also pivotal for the emergence of new languages – Urdu, and Hindvi, which later developed into their different dialects. Khusro's poems were both documented and embedded orally in people's everyday lives, and the Sufi tradition of samā have endured for centuries and are still part of South Asian societies in their numerous iterations. Khusro was venerated as a saint. Khusro died a month after the saint Aulia. He was buried near Aulia, with whom he remained close for eternity.[12] The story of Khusro and his visibly celebrated love for Nizamuddin in the city is almost impossible not to feel amorous.[13]

Historian Saleem Kidwai embarked upon the task of translating and excavating examples such as the couplets of Khusro, which illustrate male-to-male love, longing and desire which existed in India. In collaboration with Ruth Vanita, Kidwai co-edited 'Same-Sex Love in India.'[14] It is a significant anthology that traces the history of love in literature over two thousand years and translates works from more than fifteen languages of the Indian subcontinent. Kidwai & Vanita make a clear distinction between what they are looking to situate with their project is 'love

[11] Hindvi a fusion of Persian and Hindi, which emerged as the vernacular language promulgating from Delhi. Hindvi also Hindavi; which later become Hindustani, the language of people of Hindustan that is now called Bharat/India. See: Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*.
[12] To this day, their lives has been continued celebrated by devotees but also followers of poetry, music, and devotional songs, that still a symbol of cultural harmony. See: Losensky & Sharma, (2013), *In the Bazaar of Love*; also see: bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/addorimss/t/019addor0005475u00043vrb.html, (Last accessed 12th September, 2021).
[13] The capital city of India – Delhi, is a consolidation of seven ancient cities. See: Gordon Risley Hearn, (1997), *The Seven Cities of Delhi,* (New Delhi: SBW Publishers), originally published in 1906.
[14] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*.

and not sex.' Sex remains a dangerously taboo subject, even with a rich archival history that refers to an erotically polymorphous society. They assert that desire between women and between men was expressed, rather than consummated. The aim was to bring this unique literary culture to a broader audience, and by that they imply an English-speaking, intellectual audience, both in India and the West, that would eventually underpin homegrown scholarship on same-sex love and desire. In Kidwai & Vanita's work examples of homoeroticism are also evident, although they were not necessarily the focus of their project. Through extensive research, they argued that to locate indigenous queer histories, one must consider the ancient Indian literature and materials as a valid form of representation of same-sex attachments, which they evinced by pointing towards, "a consistent feature of the poems is the theme of Khusro's great love for Nizamuddin."[15]

Kidwai & Vanita's research uncovers numerous examples that are highly suggestive of "life-defining friendships which often lead to a life of celibacy, sex change, cross-dressing and [the] undoing of gender, [as well as] miraculous births to parents of the same sex."[16] They meticulously compile a wide range of homo-erotic and homo-social traditions which were either less known or circulated within a fairly closed circle and, in some cases, had been forgotten and buried in the archives. Since its publication, their work has become a cornerstone for contemporary queer

[15] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*, 127.
[16] Jaydeep Rishi, (2009), Book Review: Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai edited, Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities,* (ISSN 0975–2935), Volume I, Number 2.

scholarship on India. It is also vitally important, as Kidwai & Vanita's examples are helpful to counter homophobic myths that are prevalent in societies across classes and religions throughout the Indian subcontinent. In fact, Vanita claims in her later publications that homophobia was imported into India by the British Empire as a result of their bureaucratic system and rule of law.[17] Although, according to popular perception, people seem to believe "that homosexuality was imported into their society from somewhere else."[18] These exact sentiments were held by the anti-gay rights petitioners in India and were echoed throughout the recent history of legal discourse there, which I will be discussing shortly.[19]

: a historical bottleneck

In 1857, however, the first Indian rebellions broke out, which some historians also refer to as the Indian Mutiny. A series of events brought a halt to the notions of erotic openness or claims that Indian society held liberatory attitudes towards sexualities.[20] It turned into a defeat, that resulted in very cataclysmic proceedings

[17] This edited volume presents a wide range of essays talking about various socio-political changes that took place since pre-colonial time to modern day. See: Ruth Vanita, eds. (2002), *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, (New York: Routledge), 3. Also, see: a more recent publication by Ruth Vanita, (2012), *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India*, 1780–1870, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 117.
[18] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*, xxiii.
[19] Suresh Kaushal was one among many other petitioners including religious groups, appealed the Delhi High Court's 2009 verdict. Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, (2013), The Hindu, "It is Like Reversing the Motion of Earth" thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/it-is-like-reversing-the-motion-of-the-earth/article5483306.ece, (Last accessed on 24th August 2021).
[20] Several events led to what Western historians have named the Indian Mutiny – 1857. On the contrary, for post-colonialists, these events led to the first rebellion for freedom, Arondekar uncovers a vivid history of colonial archives, pertaining to sexuality and its governance during colonialism. See: Anjali Arondekar, (2009), *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press).

throughout the Indian subcontinent, which forever changed people's lives.[21] One of the significant changes was that Queen Victoria was made Empress of India, and the people of the country became her subjects when the British Crown took over from the East India Company.[22] Simultaneously, anti-sodomy laws were enacted by the British, which were deeply rooted in Victorian morality and a need to categorise human behaviour.[23] An unprecedented wave of repressive laws deploying colossal measures were ruthlessly imposed by the new administration to control civil life and liberty.

However, to be more specific regarding this discussion, these measures included the anti-sodomy law also known as Section 377, in 1861.[24] After this, another discriminatory act, namely "the Criminal Tribes Act" in 1871, followed. The new law essentially threatened to imprison anyone who did not fit into Western moral and gender norms.[25] These laws were then imposed upon all British colonial subjects, and the Crown made homosexuality illegal. Implementation of such

[21] In this regard the work of queer-feminist scholars is important, particularly, Geeta Patel, (2002), *Lyrical Movements*; Leela Gandhi, (2005), *Affective Community*, and Anjali Arondekar, (2009), *Record*, as their research on Indian historical archives to bring queer histories to the surface. Together, they successfully mount a challenge to the claim that the categorisation of homosexuality is a nineteenth century's invention and as a consequently which was criminalised, hence the homophobia was proliferated across the Indian subcontinent. Some of their work has been referenced in this thesis.

[22] Miles Taylor, (2004), "Queen Victoria and India, 1837-61", Victorian Studies, Vol. 46, No. 2, Papers from the Inaugural Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association (Winter, 2004), 264-274.

[23] Ruth Vanita eds, (2002), *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, (New York: Routledge), 3.

[24] Section 377, currently amened, was known as the Indian Penal Code's (IPC) Section 377. Load Thomas Macaulay originally drafted it in 1835, then redrafted and posthumously instigated as law in 1861 both in India and Britain, which was later very earnestly adopted by the postcolonial project such as India making a colonial continuity and this law still valid in many ex-colonies of the British Empire.

[25] The short-term aims of the law included the cultural elimination of Hijras through the erasure of their public presence. The explicit long-term ambition was 'limiting and thus finally extinguishing the number of Eunuchs.' For further readings, see: Jessica Hinchy, (2019), *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India, c1850 to 1900, - the Hijra,* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press).

discriminatory laws corroborates Vanita's argument, which she maintains and frequently reiterates in her work.[26] She asserts, for instance, that before the late nineteenth century, there was "no special disapproval targeted female-female sex (what today would be termed as homophobia) appears".[27] However, it does not indicate that all colonial subjects have had equal opportunities to avail themselves and express their sexuality. These claims alter the nature of pre-colonial facts and erode the histories of people who have yet to create a history for themselves. Both Vanita & Kidwai, summarise their project with a striking declaration, and although they imply it provisionally, it invokes anti-colonial sentiments. They write:

> "Although we are aware of the limitations of an analysis that blames all modern ills on colonialism, the evidence available to us forces us provisionally to conclude that a homophobia of virulent proportions came into being in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and continues to flourish today."[28]

There has been similar claim in other former colonies of the British Empire. In recent years, researchers have linked the colonial powers to the importation of homophobia through the instigation of anti-sodomy laws, which later became ingrained in newly formed post-colonial nation-states like India.[29]

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[26] See: Vanita, (2002, 2012), *Queering*; Arondekar, (2009), *Record*; Bhaskaran, (2004), *Made in India*; also see, Hinchy, (2019), *Governing Gender*.
[27] Vanita, (2012), *Gender*, 117.
[28] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex,* 200.
[29] Michael Mumisa, (2014), 'It is homophobia, not homosexuality, that is alien to traditional African culture' article published on February 19th, 2014, The Guardian (UK) in which Mumisa argues 'The very existence of 'sodomy laws' imposed on many African cultures by British colonial rules in an attempt to stem what they thought of as the sexual immorality of African cultures point to the presence of diversity in sexual practices among Africans prior to

archive: gaps, holes, and intervals

Indian historians and scholars have suggested that same-sex relations not merely existed but were actively pursued by people in the Indian sub-continent. These claims are primarily based on ancient scriptures and medieval literature, which also helps us establish their roots within religion and other sacred traditions. These discourses of sexualities are broadly seen and celebrated as historical facts through the lens of ancient Hindu scriptures, which are often rooted in an overall dominating system. This system continues to oppress and subordinate whole classes and castes. However, these archives continue to provide evidence suggesting that same-sex desire was almost intrinsic to the culture they represent.[30]

Since this particular discipline originated around the accumulation of textual archival evidence, it also raises concerns about unwritten and missing archives.[31] The notions of caste oppression and segregation, for example, have been defended by Brahmins and practised by upper castes since ancient times.[32] The Manusmriti, one of the ancient Hindu texts described these discriminatory practices that rationalises violence against untouchables and lower castes, has rarely been scrutinised from an ethical viewpoint. These attitudes still have a lot of bearing

their encounter with Europeans. See: theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/19/homophobia-homosexuality-traditional-african-culture, (Last accessed on 12th September 2021).

[30] See: Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex;* but also see the works of Devdutt Patnaik, who have devoted his career to accumulate such evidence which he interprets queerly.

[31] In the Indian sub-continent, there have been varied oral traditions. Over centuries they have also gradually disappeared. I will be delineating on this point in chapter three. See: Kumkum Roy, (2010), *Power/Gender*; and see: Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, eds. (2015), *Speaking of the Self*; also see: Doniger, (2010), *Hindus*.

[32] Caste is a historical construct, that is rooted in Hindu philosophy. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism and particularly Manusmriti is important to understand its ramifications of lower castes. See: B. R. Ambedkar, (1989), *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches, Vol 5*, Compiled by Vasant Moon, (New Delhi: Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment); and see: Wendy Doniger, (2009), *Hindus*; also, see the Glossary.

within contemporary societies, which also clouds our understanding around HIV and queer discourse.[33] Telling stories without these preoccupations is difficult. The notion of caste is so deeply woven into the fabric of all social and political life, it is impossible to escape this, even if one tries. Due to this fact, the disciplines within the humanities that are dependent on documentary evidence often fail to emancipate or even offer a way to resolve our insidious pasts and impossible desires. It also indicates that these methodologies sometimes can limit the scope of such cultural enquiries, which in fact, requires creative invention and imagination. Therefore, discussing these problematics of the archive becomes imperative.

As I will be illustrating throughout this thesis that the production of representations based on textual material from the archives, as in this case representing Kothi, is insufficient in its narrow context. An exercise to do so, without a scrutiny of archives and critical and creative engagement would only lead to a partial outcome (knowledge). Meanwhile, it is also pertinent to recall that much of Khusro's Hindvi poetry was orally cited and was in the language of ordinary people. Therefore, it had the potential to be more accessible to a larger public across classes, and perhaps, this was so rewarding as in still been used across the sub-continent.[34] On the contrary to this, many other forms of high culture were limited

[33] According to Manusmriti verses 8:272: "If he (a lower caste man) arrogantly teaches Brahmanas their duty, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and his ears." See: Ambedkar, (1989), Writing and Speeches, Vol 5, 66. Some recent ramifications of this attitude were seen in a small-town Una, in state of Gujarat, when four lower caste men were assaulted publicly by the upper caste mob. thewire.in/caste/una-flogging-incident-victims-attacked-again (Last accessed on 25th August 2021).

[34] Oral traditions are hugely important in Indian context as most of the ancient and classical scriptures were shared and composed orally. It was only later they were composed as written manuscripts. See: Kumkum Roy, (2010),

to the elite and ruling classes, and this still is the case in today's India. The more recent writing on sexuality in India are rooted in the legal, medical, and political struggles of queer people. Furthermore, a wide range of actors (activists, academics, artists) across India and abroad have begun "reclaiming" and "queering" the canons of literature, art, and culture that had been hegemonically heterosexual so far. Although, this primarily foregrounds sexuality as human rights and as a legal concept.[35] This limits the scope of sexuality discourse, as it focuses discussion on sex into *silos* and avoids discussing same-sex sex as an equally crucial aspect within sexuality discourse. Hence, in this context, the question Elliot Evans, frustratingly raised is pertinent. Evans asks, "What is the benefit of queer theory if it fails to acknowledge queer sex, and even repeats the ways in which it is rendered invisible or illegitimate?"[36] I illustrate these intricacies throughout my practice and in this thesis, so that it will become clear that scholarship around sexuality in an Indian context requires a multidisciplinary but also a *sideways* approach to better understand the complexities of postcolonial sexual subjects.

Power/Gender; and see: Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, eds. (2015), Speaking of the Self; also see: Doniger, (2010), Hindus.

[35] Their scholarship on queer (male) sexuality has mainly been understood through three broad categories, although, at times, they may overlap with one other; illness/health (HIV/AIDS), see: Khan, (2000); Cohen, (2005); Boyce, (2007); and in media (cinema; primarily referring to Bollywood, television and other forms of popular culture) see: Gopinath, (2005); Dasgupta, (2019), and the legal framework (Indian Penal Code - section 377, human rights) see: Narrain & Bhan, (2005); Rao, (2020); Puri, (2016); and also Kapur, (2018).

[36] Elliot Evans, (2019), "Your Blood Dazzles M/E: Reading Blood, Sex, and Intimacy in Monique Wittig and Patrick Califia," in *RAW: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking,* edited by Ricky Varghese, (Canada: University of Regina Press), 121.

: evidencing, as strategy

In the previous section, I suggested that searching for evidence to establish the historical accuracy of a culture can become an inconclusive and biased task, especially if it is about a tentacular region as India. To illuminate the problematic nature of archives in the Indian context, let me give a specific example. As we learn that the ancient homoerotic literary evidence that Vanita cites in her work begins with the *Mahābhārata* and *Kāmasūtra* which illustrate a vibrant imaginary of intimate sexual relationships between women. She also draws evidence from *Rēkhti*, strands of *Urdu* language erotic poetry that "focus on women's [everyday] lives" through a *female speaker*, which used to circulate within exclusive groups of women.[37] Vanita, like many of her contemporaries, has extensively studied various forms of literary sources that flourished during medieval times, mainly in order to decipher the textual histories of sexuality and same-sex culture in India.

The gravitas of such scholarship suggests that they represent common interests. So, for instance, they claim that there is a "relaxed attitude" towards sex and same-sex in particular by pointing to the example of the " *Kāmasūtra*," where both males and females demonstrate inclinations or perhaps preferences towards same-sex over other forms of erotic pleasure.[38] Despite this, the evidence remains mostly silent regarding the questions of "which" males and females are being

[37] Vanita, (2012), *Gender*, 1. I will discuss this a specific example of this poetry later in this chapter.
[38] Kāmasūtra is a composite and complex work; it codifies a range of societal and gender norms that assert male power hierarchies. The Kāmasūtra only became publicly accessible after its first English translation by Indologist and linguist, Sir Richard Francis Burton (1883). Also see a recent critique of Burton's translation by Wendy Doniger, (2016), *Redeeming the Kāmasūtra*, (USA: Oxford University Press).

referenced. It is important to state that, the *Kāmasūtra* was written at a time when "the intensification of processes of social stratification" was at its peak.[39] It has been clearly stated in the work of Kumkum Roy that "the *Kāmasūtra* is primarily directed towards the nagarāka (citizen), who is often equated with the nayaka or actor."[40] Most rights were available only to a "nagarāka", a man with taste and worldliness. She writes, "It is likely that high-status men were able to enforce their definition of sexual relations through their access to other kinds of power — economic, social, ritual or political."[41] These privileges centralise a particular form of "heterosexual desire of upper-class men" who recognise their superior status over female companions and other women and men with lower social status. Moreover, this goes to show that *sex* and the *social* are highly intertwined in Indian culture, with a material reality, which has its own consequences if you disobey the rules, even if they are unspoken.

Let me now suspend this unfathomable question of the historical wrong – which generally refers to the colonial wrong and has been the frequent subject of postcolonial analysis. It is true that, there are richer texts available on the question of sexuality, but by remaining silent on the issues of the margins, these texts fail to portray the underclass sexual subjects as persons with agency and autonomy over their bodies. The given example of Roy's work shows that one cannot

[39] Kumkum Roy, (1998), "Unravelling the Kāmasūtra" in *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, eds Mary E. John & Janaki Nair, (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 54.
[40] Roy, (1998), *Kāmasūtra*, 60.
[41] Roy, (1998), *Kāmasūtra*, 59.

comprehensively analyse the pre-colonial conditions which led to these claims, as their subjects were not egalitarian.[42] For this project to make space, the subject of desire must be undone, and rather than saying queer is something that is already known, it insists that it is constantly evolving — it is a queer-becoming.

One of the main obstacles to an inquiry such as mine would be the absence of the minor archives. The point is not to say that a subaltern subject needs separate evidence because such evidence simply does not exist in the same way as the bourgeoise archives. In other words, upper-caste history is a history of erasing marginal histories. In the archives, the desires of a subaltern subject are rarely recorded as desire, instead, they appear for contrary reasons.[43] While there is no doubt that same-sex love has existed in the Indian subcontinent, assertions such as "same-sex love in India" sometimes do not resonate with nor speak to subalterns in a meaningful way. Historian Ranajit Guha observed a similar phenomenon in a socio-political context. He writes of "the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation. There were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony."[44]

[42] As Roy shows discrepancies regarding subject of desire. In the context of the long history of the Indian subcontinent, a pre-colonial enquiry would be very complex, which required delineating what is colonialism and what time does one consider colonial time? Although, in past decades there is a growing interest in subaltern studies will shed more light on these grey area in future. However, in the interest of this project, I am staying with the trouble of Kothi after the nineties, thus I am limiting this conversation.

[43] For example, untouchables are mentioned in Manusmiriti (an important text in Hinduism) only to make remarks how to punish then if they break the codes of conducts established by the Brahmins. See: Ambedkar, (1989) Writing and Speeches; also see: Wendy Doniger, (with Brian K Smith) (1991), *The Laws of Manu*, (USA: Penguin Books).

[44] Ranajit Guha, (1988), "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 41-42.

More recently, this form of discursive hegemony implies that queer discourse has traversed two extreme traditions. First, queer sensibilities are intrinsic to Indian culture. Second, the congruence of religious fanaticism and heteropatriarchy, where an already negatively constructed subject of desire continuously struggles for emancipation.[45] Therefore, Kothi, like any other subaltern subject, almost-always appears through their subalternity and victimhood. Also, such discourse implies that all segments of society can freely express same-sex love, but removing gestures from their original and complex social structure creates dwellings in which these ideas get trapped. Additionally, it is through these dense pedagogical silos that we can examine those silent, but salient technologies of oppression, caste, and gender. As Guha observed, they arrive as a failure, such claims promising to challenge hegemony and represent something that has yet to be revealed. To do so, they end up creating another layer of difference that further subjugates underclass queers. Furthermore, it is in this act of fragmentation of an historical event to make something apparent, it is in this *producing-of-differences* where power is contained, and it remains unchallenged.

[45] A strategy adopted in documentary films, in particular, to emphasise homophobia in post-colonial countries has been to quote a fundamentalist reaction to reveal their extreme views rather than having a productive conversation. It is the same both in India and in the West. For example, "How Gay is Pakistan?" or "Out There" were both created by British Broadcasting Cooperation.

platforming: safe space activism

Thus, comes NGO activism. It comes with a promise of hope, safe space, and a platform to speak, however, emphasising on providing the tools of speaking could not be equated to knowledge, awareness, and freedom. In her analysis of the relevance of human rights in postcolonial nation-states, Ratna Kapur describes how rights discourse comes across as a liberal democratic space "…where economic global expansionism was not only coupled with a civilising mission, but also a rescue mission" in which marginal communities get absorbed.[46] Kapur makes further striking remarks by cataloguing the contrast between different registers in which former colonies are viewed. She says "non-liberal epistemological spaces are often equated with illiberalism, primitiveness, irrationality and threat."[47] Since language alone cannot provide meaning and a capacity to speak, it must be viewed within prevailing social and cultural practices.

Empowerment through language requires a certain kind of encounter in which other governing apparatuses encourage change – here, change means, in a radical sense – enabling capacities to resist. Although, "while resistance to the normative scaffolding of liberal freedom remains possible," Kapur writes, "that resistance and disruptions do not in and of themselves bring the resistive subject closer to lasting freedom."[48] This resistance makes it even more difficult for the

[46] Ratna Kapur, (2018), *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl*, (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited), 94.
[47] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 13.
[48] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 28.

subordinated subject to achieve freedom in the prevailing conditions. Hence, the emergence of evidencing as a strategy has failed to give voices to the subaltern groups, as Spivak reiterates the subaltern still cannot speak. However, to put a temporal closing to this part of the conversation I turn to queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, for this helpful critique in which he describes the danger of:

> "…evidencing protocols [that] often fail to enact real hermeneutical enquiry and instead opt to reinstate that which is known in advance. Thus, practices of knowledge production that are content merely to cull selectively from the past, while striking a pose of positivist undertaking or empirical knowledge retrieval often nullify the political imagination". [49]

: un-becoming, of histories[50]

Some histories are often the histories of erasures.[51] My practice aims to further complicate the discourses around already assumed (queer) histories by recreating histories through the "fiction of factual representations."[52] History is something that should always be plural — histories. For example, histories of desire, desirability, and longing to depart from the curated accounts of queerness. Further, we must emphasise queerness is so much more than the tricky process of collecting and

[49] José Esteban Muñoz, (2009), Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, (New York: New York University Press), 28.
[50] This project does not seek to offer a chronological and linear historical account of how the marginalisation of Kothi occurred. It neither promises to provide an overview of sexuality in the Indian subcontinent, a claim that is often made. Instead, it insinuates that all histories are messy and entangled.
[51] My temptation with the use of term 'histories' is to conjure works by Said, Spivak, Gandhi, Chakravarti, Roy, Hartman, Arondekar, and Sharpe. Also interested in what kinds of complexity they bring to the notion of historical canon. I will discuss this aspect of historical narratives in chapter three.
[52] Saidiya Hartman, (1997), *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press).

bifurcating evidence.[53] Such narrow interpretations of historical events that have occurred in a specific time and place can be misleading. It might be unintentionally, but contradicting claims of 'giving voice' to the voiceless, unheard and unsung.

Let us now go back to what remained unclear, which is about Vanita's disenchantment or rather a rejection of Shivananda Khan's agenda to use and promote local vocabulary (of Kothi) in the Indian subcontinent.[54] She defines these terms as "in-group slangs."[55] It is important to mention that the term 'Kothi' is one of many identities explicitly adopted by the underclasses in the subcontinent and there is sizable anthropological work on this issue, which I will be talking about shortly. This rejection of terms can be attributed to a number of factors, such as inaccessibility of archives, lack of research and lack of evidence. But could this be an 'act of abrogation' by post-colonial queer scholars who are deeply invested in challenging sexuality-binarism of the West? The scholars who were concerned about "a dangerously slim entry on South Asia" and of its voluminous literature and culture in a then yet 'to be' globalised queer history project by the West (Western scholars), and which though to believed has "attributed to the ill effects of a

[53] A recent example of this sorts of misinterpretations can be read in a book based on interviews, but it also was criticised by members of the transmasculine community due to a breach of their trust involving ethical lapses and compromises regarding their privacy by the author. See: Nandini Krishnan, (2018), *Invisible Men: Inside India's Transmasculine Network*, (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Private Limited). Later a detailed letter by participants in the project to "Nandini Krishnan, Penguin Random House committed a serious breach of trust, ethical lapses in publishing book on us, charge trans men", see firstpost.com/india/nandini-krishnan-penguin-random-house-committed-serious-breach-of-trust-ethical-lapses-in-publishing-book-on-us-charge-trans-men-6022591.html, (Last accessed on 13th September 2021).

[54] Cohen describes Khan's concept as a "black box" due to its ambiguity. See: Cohen, (2005), Kothi Wars.

[55] Vanita expresses her dismissal in a book released in 2002, although by which time – the term Kothi, to identify one-self was widely articulated by the underclass population across India. It had also been significantly documented in English language NGO reports, which also suggests that there was a huge gap between movements. See: Vanita, (2002), *Queering*, 5.

puritanical tradition."[56] So, could a certain generation of these postcolonial queer scholars potentially, or perhaps accidentally, erase their own marginal and lesser-known, a sort of minor culture in a rush to prove their historical significance to the mainstream.

Vanita, for example, seems to insinuate that what Khan was insisting upon was *merely* "slang", though her interpretation dismisses Kothi presence and delegitimises their importance. In this view, Kothi do not seem to merit the "B" or even "T" of the LGBT community; they simply did not exist before AIDS funding was provided. Also, as illustrated earlier, the ongoing distortion and disruption of subaltern archives makes it impossible to draw a chronological history, this includes the oral traditions. Hence, Vanita's refusal acts as a gatekeeper, preventing an underclass vocabulary, "slangs" as she describes it, from entering (the bourgeois version of) the history of same-sex desire, and effectively erasing them from being a part of it.[57]

But on the contrary, Vanita explores the term Chapaṭi and Chapaṭbāz that found in *Rekhtī* (mentioned earlier) to determine a genealogy of erotic poetry. The terms describe a form of female-to-female pleasure involving *rubbing* and *clinging* that was frequently referred to in *Rekhtī* poetry that shared amongst upper-class women.[58] It is also an activity that has been popular between Kothi-Kothi

[56] Leela Gandhi, (2002), "Loving Well: Homosexuality and Utopian thoughts in Post/Colonial India", in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love in Indian Culture and Society. Eds* Ruth Vanita, (New York: Routledge), 87.
[57] a minor discourse which had served as the upper- and middle-class petitioners to fight to decimalise homosexuality. I will be discussing at the later stage in chapter one and four.
[58] Vanita, (2012), *Gender*, these poems that depict two women identifying other women as chapaṭbāz. 120-121.

lovemaking and was part of their secret language.[59] The Hindustani word Chapați (feminine) or Chapațā (masculine) means a flat surface. In the Hijra and Kothi community, it is referred to an act when someone "pulled back their genitals and clenched between their thighs." [60] So, in this way, Chapațā here also means the '*absence of*' genitals, and this phallus-less-ness as *expression* has been part of Kothi-Hijra vocabulary, and yet, Vanita concludes, it is an 'in-group slang.' Although, for Kothi-Hijra culture, it is an erotically gratifying activity and if it's put bluntly, sometimes even a "slur" and is used while teasing a close friend. If they were discovered to have slept with another Kothi mistakenly (or otherwise), instead of a *real* man, who was generally referred to as a Giriya or a Panthi, depending on which part of India the relationship was occurred. In addition, it is also important to note that sleeping with a non-Giriya may cause laughter among intimate friends, but it is not considered a disgrace.[61] There has been many attempts to historicise queer sexuality in India, but these accounts have wrestled with the dominant Euro-American scholarship on sexuality. Yet, in some ways, the doctrine tends to follow an academic blueprint generated in the West for two important reasons; first – to draw upon, and second – to be detached from. In this way, the Indian academy has

[59] In this regard linguistic Kira Hall's work on Hijra and Kothi language in important. See: Kira Hall, (1997), Go Suck your Husband's Sugarcane: Hijras and the Use of Sexual Insult. In "*Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*," eds Anna Livia and Kira Hall, (New York: Oxford University Press), 430-460.
[60] "The Danish Girl", (2015), DVD, Directed by Tom Hooper, (United Kingdom: Working Title Films/Pretty Pictures). Film portrays Lili Elbe journey to become a woman, a character performed by actor Eddie Redmayne. In a scene Redmayne shown as standing in front of the mirror and tries to hide their male genitals. This is common among Kothis and Hijras who have not undergone the surgery. Kothis called this making-Chapațā.
[61] Giriya: See the entry in Glossary.

successfully secured a field for itself for future studies. However, it often tries to answer, "what we are not," thus limiting its scope.

Interruption poetic no. 2

"*Hai*. Can't you tell the difference between a Giriya and a Kothi?
It is even possible?
What about those plucked eyebrows and his nightingale-like voice?
Oh… you used to be so experienced and debauched.
how have you been lured into Chapaṭbāzi?
"How was it, anyway?"
— Then they both laughed."

In the Indian context, insofar, these evidence-based approaches to archives would relate to a specific class of elites.[62] When scholars study them, they would likely create their own hegemonic narratives of something that Guha has warned us about. This is not to say, that the field of marginal and minor literature research has been abandoned completely, even though it has been largely ignored until recently. That echoes Spivak's suggestive remarks on missing archives and subalternity. According to her, "the 'subaltern' cannot appear without the thought of the 'elite."[63] If one turns to the accounts of postcolonial theorists, where one

[62] As reflected in Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*.
[63] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (1988), "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 11-12. In past decade a new queer scholarship has also emerged, which challenges rigid societal norms and political discourse.

finds the subjects are often divided into two categories, the oppressed and the oppressors, this not only result in dichotomised experiences, but it also cuts all the other discourses into *two halves*, creating rather docile categories of "us" and "them".

Interruption poetic 3

This 'us'
has been a most
ambiguous trajectory
it only renders confusions.
So, to belong; is to go sideways,
go into a tangent, digress,
breakaway, cut across, without a path.
It is evoking 'that' something
without pre-suppositions,
disobeying all the trajectories,
to follow a hunch,
And that is where an encounter happens.

: another beginning (of the common good)

> "Disease always belongs to the outside, the space of the other onto whom it must be projected. Inside the nation, the media produced an othering of spaces like brothels, slums and high- ways and those who inhabited them, from which it discursively insulated the middle-class home."[64]

The recorded history of HIV/AIDS in India began in 1986 when it was first discovered by a team of microbiologists led by Dr Suniti Solomon. Those HIV tests were conducted as a prompt response to news of a rise in deaths among gay populations across the United States. As Solomon did not know of any visible gay communities in India, she decided to test a hundred women. Six of them were found positive for HIV.[65] At that time, these women were reported as prostitutes, since the NGO category of a 'female sex worker' had not yet been designed.[66] This formal 'arrival' of AIDS was officially announced in India on 29th April 1986 by the then Minister of Health & Family Welfare, Mohsina Kidwai, with this declaration, "What had been a disease confined to the promiscuous West had suddenly reached India."[67] This created an atmosphere of hostility and AIDS-panic because "first, they stressed that AIDS was of 'foreign origin,' in a denial" of the possibility that Indians could also be carriers of the virus.[68] Solomon was ordered by the authority "to find

[64] Das, (2019), *Teaching*, 6.
[65] Suniti Solomon had studied and worked in the USA and the UK before she returned in 1973 to work at the Madras Medical College. Siddharth Dubay, (2019), Chapter Eight: "Prison", in *An Indefinite Sentence: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex*, (New York: Atria Books; Illustrated edition). 134, (kindle version).
[66] Das, (2019), *Teaching*, 26. Also see: Dubey, (2019), *Indefinite*.
[67] As noted by Dilip Das. See: Das (2019), *Teaching*, 51.
[68] Das, (2019), *Teaching*, 6.

out if the prostitutes were having sex with foreigners."[69] In 1989, this moral panic justified the coercive action by State authorities, resulting in Dominic D'Souza's arrest and incarceration for being HIV positive and gay.[70] In an interview, Solomon confessed, "*oh my god they are having it in a gay population, we don't have such people in India…*" [sic].[71] However, Solomon reflects on the earlier episode of HIV testing and reception of the news by the state authorities and the media, in a later interview. She says, "I always blame myself; I think if we had found HIV in a baby first, rather than streetwalkers, maybe we wouldn't have so much stigma."[72] Within a few years of these incidents, HIV began to be reported across the country. Thus, the Indian government set up the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) in 1992, a national body whose aim was to combat the AIDS epidemic.[73]

Although, AIDS in India, did not emerge as a "gay disease," as it was initially understood in the West. The gay activist group, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA, hereafter), makes this proclamation in an early report, "Gay people in India have, so far, and for the most part, escaped the kind of scapegoating for AIDS that gay men and lesbians in some other countries have been subjected to."[74] Even the

[69] These tests were forcefully conducted in Madras Vigilance Home, a women-reformatory, although Dube in his account provides all the facts but escapes ethical questions. See: Dube, (2019), 135, (kindle version).
[70] Somewhere between D'Souza's arrest and the Government supported first HIV intervention, I become aware of AIDS through an article. livemint.com/Leisure/WzgebcWZh2qUIaT1wwhfrL/Patient-zero-legacy-of-an-AIDS-warrior.html, (Last accessed on 24th August 2021).
[71] youtube.com/watch?v=jB9h_8m7G7Y (Last accessed on 24th August 2021).
[72] Steve Sternberg, (2005), HIV Scars India's Vast Population, usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/2005-02-23-aids-india_x.htm (Last accessed on 24th August 2021).
[73] National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) being as an official body that works under the Ministry of Health, eventually become one of the petitioners in section 377 case: naco.gov.in, also See Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*; Also, see Dube, (2019), *Indefinite*.
[74] As it was noted in a report compiled by ABVA an activist group led by Siddharth Gautam & et al, (1991), Less than Gay: A Citizen's Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India, 63.

AIDS prevention programmes that worked with MSM, did not use terminology such as LGBT or gay, or at least it was not 'spoken' and 'used' in the same sense as it would have in the West.[75] In fact, for a long time, the middle-classes denied that AIDS even existed, this was noted by artist Sunil Gupta in his photographic work — *Exiles.*[76]

I introduce a specific example of Gupta's work at this point for a number of reasons: firstly, to situate my own pursuit for a visual representation of queer men that is outside the Western art canon, as well as outside of what is typically considered an NGO world, since my project explicitly looking into Kothi representations. Secondly, Gupta uses text to incorporate the voices of the subjects. This visual strategy becomes a powerful tool for a representation, take this quote for example, it states, "*Americans – talking about AIDS and distributing condoms. Nobody believes them. They're always telling us what to do.*" This indicated that many middle-class gay men did not believed AIDS existed; some resentfully blamed the West for it.[77] It is evident that these quotes reflected attitudes within the activists' community as well, as noted in the ABVA report. Therefore, this image identifies the two crucial aspects of my practice, namely,

[75] Both Cohen and Puri discuss the binarism between 'indigenous' and 'elite' activism in relation to HIV prevention. Very limited literature on gay liberation and sexuality was available to non-English Kothi. See Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*; also, see: Puri, (2016), *Sexual States.*

[76] Sunil Gupta, (1987), *Exiles*, *Ten.8,* (Birmingham). sunilgupta.net/exiles.html (Last accessed 12th September 2021), See also: Natasha Bissonauth, (2019), A Camping of Orientalism in Sunil Gupta's Sun City, Art Journal, 78:4, 98-117, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2019.1684112.

[77] To contextualise this image, and my intention regarding cruising, I wrote this short piece which was publish last year. Charan Singh, (2021), A Queer Rehearsal: Towards an Indian Gay Image, Photo South Asia, https://photosouthasia.org/portfolio_page/a-queer-rehearsal-towards-an-indian-gay-image/.

'cruising' and 'AIDS,' but most importantly, it positions this gay 'denial of HIV/AIDS' within a historical context for the Indian subcontinent.[78]

Figure 2: Photowork, "Humayun's Tomb". 1987. From the series "Exiles". Courtesy the artist and Hales Gallery, Stephen Bulger Gallery and Vadehra Art Gallery © Sunil Gupta, all rights reserved, DACS 2021.

[78] Other than Gupta, I have inspired by Alvin Baltrop's photographic series the Pier to think about cruising as a potential site for queer invention. Along with I have also been interested in artist such as Derek Jarman, David Wojnarowicz, Hervé Guibert, and Teju Cole for their range of interpretation of queer life in the city. In recent years, *Cruising* has emerged as an academic interest, within queer art discipline, marking its present at the Venice Biennale's Cruising Pavilion. See: https://www.cruisingpavilion.com. My work also shares affinity with contemporary artist Prem Sahib's work on cruising. Also see Annex 1.

Interruption poetic no. 4

Imagine the scene.
We are sitting in a hospital corridor.
We heard a somewhat eerie background score,
but it is engulfed by chatter in the foreground,
where a woman is walking past the doors,
Despite of the fact that the hospital staff is
gesturing for her not to do so.
There are journalists in the room.
As we now realise that we are seeing the story
through the media's eyes, we follow the woman.
Then she reaches the room where
a young girl is being kept in isolation.
The woman warmly embraces the HIV-positive child and says:
"*Chhune Se AIDS Nahi Phailta! Chhune Se Toh Sirf Pyar Phailta Hai.*"
(AIDS does not spread by touching. By touching, you only share love).[79]

This reassuring gesture became one of the
most memorable locutions of the AIDS campaigns in India.
It was also the first time an HIV positive person
was not a sex worker or a gay man but a child,
which created a significant shift in gaining sympathy from the media.

[79] Deepa Suryanarayan, (2008), 'a tale of courage and love in the time of HIV' published in DNA India. The government-run campaign featured Bollywood's leading actress and activist Shabana Azmi, who, without any reluctance, hugs an HIV positive child. dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-a-tale-of-courage-and-love-in-the-time-of-hiv-1159719 (last accessed 24th June 2021).

: epistemology of the Kothi

By the late nineties, the Kothi became a viable constituency for NGO governance. As a result of their ambivalent gender and sexual practices, this population began to be theorised as an epitome of vulnerability for AIDS prevention research. An insightful account of their apparent femaleness and the contentious debate surrounding their authenticity has been sketched by anthropologist Lawrence Cohen, in his widely cited essay, "the Kothi Wars."[80] Cohen notes that during a 1999 conference, scholars and activists were grappling with the issue of 'Western' straight/gay binaries which they considered irrelevant to most men in the Indian subcontinent.

Nevertheless, it is worth paying attention to the fact that they accepted as an alternative, the "Kothi-Panthi framework," designed by Shivananda Khan, which is loosely based on yet another binary of the heterosexual model of sexual relationships (penetrative man–receptive woman), where Kothi appears to be the one who plays the 'gendered' thus a receptive role in this partnership.[81]

[80] Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*. Cohen locates the emergence of Kothi as it were, at the South Asian Masculinities conference: 1999 in Melbourne, organised by anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava. Gayatri Reddy expressed her concerns about sex binarism while presenting her ethnographic work on Hijra and Kothi community, that contradicts the western model of sexual identity. See: Gayatri Reddy, (2005), *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

[81] This, notions that all Kothi desired a "real man" and enjoyed being a female in the sex-act, either annul their resistance to gay/straight binary or at least appear biased as they are creating a binary by accepting one between Kothi/Panthi. See: Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*. Also see Annex 2.

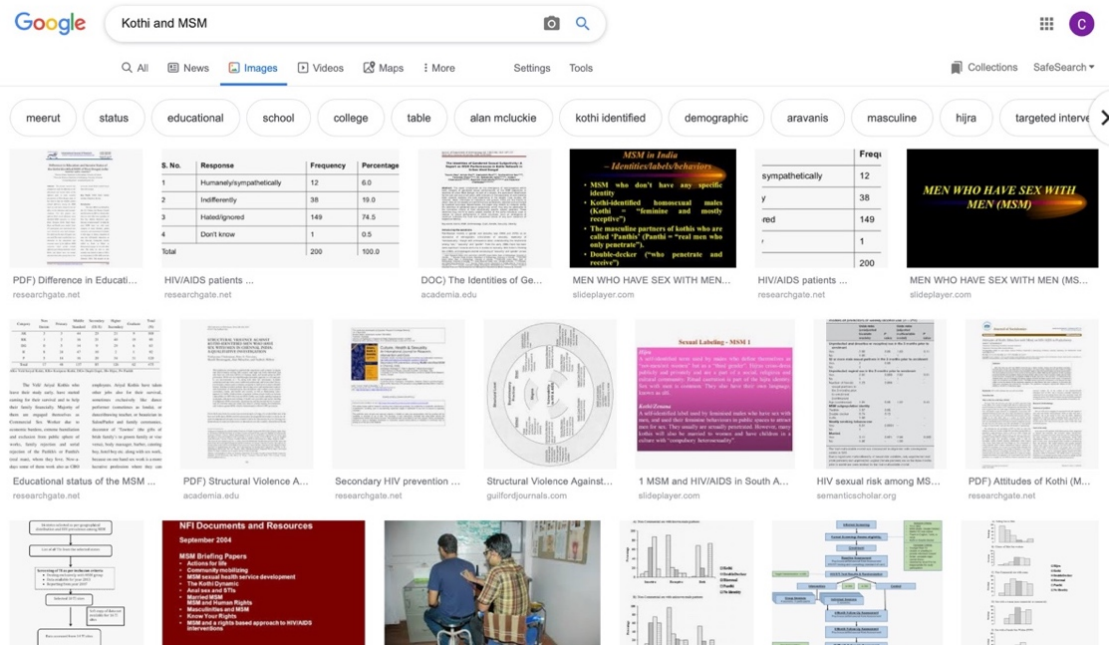

Figure 3: Kothi and MSM continued to be represented through graphs and charts.
This is a google screengrab from October 2019. The digital life of Kothi still shows that they are being presented as date and charts, even an algorithm cannot salvage this.

: gendering Kothi

Linguist Kira Hall's work on queer languages indicates that the closed community of middle-class gay men in India is inherently segregated from "the lower classes, both Kothis and Hijras" those who "employ *Farsi* as a tool for speaking back against the anti-Hindi sentiment embedded in the upper-class perception of English as sexually progressive," whilst making the elites more exclusive."[82] Similarly, anthropologist Paul Boyce brings an important observation on Kothi's lineage, he writes: "Men identifying as Kothi are also sometimes socially and culturally associated with

Also [82] Kira Hall, (2005), "Intertextual Sexuality: Parodies of Class, Identity, and Desire in Liminal Delhi", Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, Vol. 15, Issue 1, 125–144. Hall's work brings socio-linguistic dimension that highlights inequality based of their choice of language. She also suggests that Kothis are closely connected to Hijra. Hijra is a unique sexual and gender identity specific to the Indian subcontinent. Their thirdness poses a challenge to sex-binary. (Also see stories and glossary)

Hijras."[83] However, there has been a long-standing suspicion among queer scholars about claims of authenticity of Kothi as an indigenous identity — the question remains: *was this identity engineered as means to secure bilateral funding?*

The Hijra culture in India has more visibility and significance, both historically and socially. Whereas NGO driven socio-political discourse suggests that Kothi only seeped into the Indian subcontinent's social fabric once HIV funding began. However, one could counter this claim by arguing that — no one was looking for the Kothi before the AIDS crisis. Yet, it remains true to an extent that AIDS funding has created an atmosphere to identify a perfect candidate to be governed, and the Kothi provides that opportunity with a native subjectivity. Regardless of this suspicion, the "Kothis were not only a matter for experts but were an emergent reality in streets and slums." [84]

What is important here, that Cohen is directing us towards a condition created by NGO culture, which appears to be thriving on Kothi's psycho-social vulnerabilities. I would argue, this discourse makes Kothi susceptible to exploitation and exposed them in two crucial ways. Firstly, they were confronted with a 'much discussed and recognised culture originating from the Western world that already had innate hierarchy, as it were, and secondly, it considered 'gay as a given' identity or a possible category for people who express their erotic desires towards a same-

[83] Paul Boyce, (2007), "Conceiving Kothis': Men Who Have Sex with Men in India and the Cultural Subject of HIV Prevention", Medical Anthropology, 26: 2, 175 — 203.
[84] Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*, 285.

sex person. Together these two aspects seem to have re-established the gay identity (which in the Indian context becomes queer) as being all about revolution and global solidarity, while Kothi continue to be as a marginalised and disempowered category, which continue to be summed up in this way:

> "Kothi-identified men as largely engaging in stereotypical performances of femininity such as exaggerated limp wrist, hip-swaying, and sexual bantering. Kothis often deploy the feminine pronoun when referring to other Kothis. Like many MSMs in India, many Kothi-identified men are also married, have children, and live heteronormative lives."[85]

Since the nineties were also a pivotal moment in the development of queer theory, it is necessary to return to Indian traditions, where gender has a unique history.[86] The same year as Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" made its mark, anthropologist Serena Nanda, published her monograph about a very intricate community of the Indian subcontinent — the Hijras. She defines them with a provocative expression – "Neither Men nor Women."[87] In this study, Nanda traces the lineage of Hijras to Hindu mythological texts while demonstrating a wide range of cultural practices and socially defined roles. This lineage challenges the Western belief and practice that

[85] Harjant Gill, (2016), "Kothi", *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, First Edition. Edited by Nancy A. Naples. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss059.

[86] In Hindi grammar, there are more than two genders in speech. *Streeling* (female), *Pulling* (male), *Napunsakling* (impotent), and on many occasions, *Ubhayling* (hermaphrodite) for example – crowd does not have a specific gender, nor it appears to be impetuous or a dead thing, therefore it is a 'thing' whose gender cannot be determined. An example of switching gender in Hindi could be Mango, where a 'raw' mango is female, but a 'ripe' mango is male. Another could be a 'river' has a 'female' gender, connecting to 'ocean' that is a 'male'; however, the 'water' remains male throughout this transition.

[87] Sarena Nanda, (1999), *Neither Men nor Women: The Hijras of India*, (Canada: Wadsworth Publishing Company), However, recently it has become official to write in one's document male, female, other which includes trans, Hijra or third sex. However, there have been protests and rage about the language and the bureaucratic process involved. For more on these ongoing debates, see NALSA Judgment, 2014 and Trans Bill 2018.

there are only two genders, which are 'naturally and permanently determined.' Nanda analyses the earlier accounts of Hijra that had been contradictorily recorded, and she finds associations between the Hijra practice of emasculation (castration) and mythological characters, thereby historically legitimising their presence. Nanda clarifies that:

> "Indian mythology contains numerous examples of androgynes, impersonators of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans. These mythical figures are well known as part of Indian popular culture, which helps explain the ability of the Hijras to maintain a meaningful place for themselves within Indian society in an institutionalized third gender role."[88]

Figure 4: Still from a moving image work, *"They Call it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020. It mirrors the sentiments of Nanda's quote above.

[88] Nanda, (1999), *Neither,* 20.

In her research about the Hijra population, Nanda raises ethical questions about representing a community that appears to be 'exotic' to the Western eye. She also expresses her concern about how the West may read or misread them. For Kira Hall, the socio-linguistic dimension of 'doing' gender has been fundamental in understanding Hijra (and Kothi) identity, which is frequently produced through language. Therefore, her research offers us a nuanced interpretation of a cultural phenomenon that is often gets lost in the slippage of the English translation. Hall emphasises that the Hijra subjects can interchangeably use their gender, while she is also suggesting that Hijra's insolent vocabulary comes as a defence especially when reclaiming city spaces.[89]

Hall noted that "the Hijras have a privileged position with respect to the linguistic gender system, their experiences on either side of the gender divide allowing for strategies of expression unavailable to the mono-sexed individual."[90] Hijra presence destabilises the two-sexed social framework. Moreover, some commentators also observed that Kothi and Hijra have closely knitted relationships, and an individual's identity often overlaps.[91] Kothi, therefore, also presents a multi-layered (dimensional) gendered subjectivity, which refuses to be "tamed" and

[89] "The Story of Her," see: Charan Singh, (2021), Photographic Rehearsal: Still Unfolding Narrative: at quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0011.105/--photographic-rehearsal-a-still-unfolding-narrative?rgn=main;view=fulltext#N12-ptr1, (Last accessed on 12th September 2021).
[90] Kira Hall, (1997), Go Suck your Husband's Sugarcane: Hijras and the Use of Sexual Insult. In "*Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*," eds Anna Livia and Kira Hall, Oxford University Press, 430-460.
[91] Boyce, (2007), Conceiving Kothi, Cohen, (2005), Kothi Wars.

"behaves" in a pre-defined fashion.[92] Hall's work suggests that Hijra culture has a distinct microcosmos that mirrors aspects of Indian society in many ways.

queer: as the new vocabulary of dissent

> "In India, this form of political assertion started with the labels lesbian and gay and broadened to include bisexuals (LGB) and transgender (LGBT). Then there was the realisation that the identities of Kothis and Hijras were left out, leading to the coinage LGBTKH. The identity of 'queer' has the potential of stopping this ongoing process of adding alphabets to the acronym."[93]

Queer has arrived in India and become a homegrown term — a shortcut to freedom. Above is an explanation provided by human rights activist Arvind Narrain, who insists on using the term queer, instead of the ever-expanding acronym.

Although, in another paper Narrain makes a distinction between queer and the others by using the term *queer* with a prefix 'subaltern,' when he discusses the issues faced by Kothi, Hijra and MSM population.[94] So, this way, we have two kinds of them: the powerful *Queers,* who have a voice and the oppressed *Subaltern Queers*, who are silenced, but who need to be defended. There has been extensive use of queer in legal proceedings in the Courts ever since then. Thus, it is not a surprise that it is now used to mark the 'changing of the discriminatory law' and its

[92] See: Singh, (2021), *The Story of Her*, (supra: note 87), also see: Akshay Khanna, (2009), "Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A Political Economy of Development's Sexual Subject," Development, Palgrave Macmillan; Society for International Development, vol. 52(1), 43-51, March, 2009.
[93] Arvind Narrain, (2004), "Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change. (India: Books for Change), 11.
[94] Arvind Narrain. "The Articulation of Rights around Sexuality and Health: Subaltern Queer Cultures in India in the Era of Hindutva." *Health and Human Rights* 7, no. 2 (2004): 142-64.

history at almost all major Pride marches in the country. Similar to earlier categorisations such as homosexuality, MSM, and others, the 'Queer' category may be viewed as an inadequate replacement for previous labels imposed by liberatory projects; one category replaces the other.[95] Therefore, the term 'Queer' has also been spoken and written phonetically across India.

So, in a way, to summarises this political position in an Indian context, the popular notion of *Queer* has been understood as a very broad, political response to a compulsory hetero-patriarchal discourses. Everything that 'questions' the repressed and biased society based on a rigid class, caste, religion, and gender is now being considered within a queer spectrum. In contrast, Kidwai & Vanita expressed their reluctance to use the term, they stated:

> "Queer," has been favoured by many scholars today because it is deemed wide enough to encompass any unconventional or strange sexual behaviours and self-constructions, which would not work for their inquiry as it is not only too wide, but it would also include all sorts of behaviours, from fetishism to exhibitionism.[96]

As such, 'Queer' is fixed, opaque and premeditated category which may protects those who have access to privacy, whereas 'Kothi' and by extension MSM are inherently occupy 'closet' spaces.[97] This does not make a radical category, because

[95] Queer here includes lesbians and gay men and trade unionists, (heterosexual) human rights activists, Dalit (untouchables) activists, and people in inter-faith and inter-caste marriages. Also, regardless of their gender and sexual preferences and expressions, this included neoliberal heterosexual couples who join hands as queer allies but only appear in the queer movement at their convenience.
[96] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same Sex,* xxi.
[97] A detail discussion will be in chapter four of this thesis.

Queer does not have a history of widespread use of the term as an insult in India outside of its elite as it had in the West. Sometimes, however, those queers who carve out their own niche middle-class spaces distance themselves from the Hijra insult — an insult deeply rooted in Indian society.[98]

: re-construction of privacy

On 2nd July 2009, the Delhi High Court decriminalised consensual sexual acts between adults in private, in a historic decision regarding Section 377.[99] It was a crowning moment for queer activists in India. Many, at the time expressed that they had no hope of ever experiencing such a moment in their lifetimes.[100] It was also significant because the High Court made references to Kidwai and Vanita's book, and that a certain queer history became part of this first judgement. What was new in the ongoing queer and human rights debates is the inclusion of the concept of 'privacy'.[101] The right to privacy was recognised as fundamental to all citizens, which

[98] Didier Eribon contextualises experiences of an "Insult" and how it constructs identity in his book, see: (2004) *Insult and the Making of Gay Self*, (Durham: Duke University Press). Translating this insult into an Indian context would be "Hijra", the absolute insult for a man. As I explain Gandu which would be closer to English term "bugger", but it has also been used in other social contexts. Therefore, Hijra which implies that one is impotent, or another Hindi term that suggest one is "Na-mard" – the un-man, non-man.

[99] Naz Foundation, an organisation, working with HIV and Human Rights, filed a public litigation against the National Capital Territory of Delhi Government to rid of Indian Penal Codes section 377 defines as: "Unnatural offences — Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine." See: "Naz Foundation vs Government of NCT of Delhi", at orinam.net/377/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Delhi_HC_377_Judgement.pdf (last accessed on 3rd August 2021).

[100] At the time, friends and colleagues expressed these sentiments, for example, was captured in my collaborative project, "*Delhi: Communities of Belonging*" in which one the subject called, Pavitr, a gay man who is in his mid-forties, reflects on what it meant to be decriminalised after 2009's judgement, but he also laments that the hope to be a legal citizen and celebrate his sexuality was taken away when the Supreme Court of India upheld the anti-sodomy law in 2013. He says – "I did not expect us to get the first judgment, but when we did, it was incredibly emotional. It made me feel a lot more hopeful about the kind of life I could have. It legitimised us, which was great for everyone." See: Sunil Gupta, Charan Singh (2016), *Delhi: Communities of Belonging,* (New York: New Press), 79.

[101] There will be a detail discussion on the notion of privacy in chapter four.

needed to be guaranteed by the State. It was noted that such legislations are "unjust infringes" upon human dignity, the judgment also emphasised on the provision to protect "the sphere of privacy allows persons to develop human relations without interference."[102] This idea of privacy was not limited to people's homes but, by extension, it was also a promise to protect and safeguard human dignity in public spaces. As a result, queer desire, and intimate relations were legitimised, in 'private' spaces, and at least a section of queer people could acknowledge who they are.[103]

However, Section 377 was reinstated in December 2013, with an unfortunate decision by the court. Justification for this reductive reversal was based on majoritarian prejudices that only "a minuscule fraction of the country's population constitutes lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgender" people.[104] Since their preferred sexual acts are unnatural, and they hurt the sentiments of Indian society; it cannot be used a sound basis for declaring the constitutional provision invalid, and such provisions thought to be "legally unsustainable." Nevertheless, after a long

[102] "Naz Foundation vs Government of NCT of Delhi"

[103] Queer meant to suggest middle classes who have access to privacy; as we will learn in later chapters, Kothi and MSM did not have that privilege, yet they were why the Naz Foundation made the original petition. One of the critical arguments in the Section 377 case at the Delhi High Court was that there was an urgent need to address public health, i.e., the prevention of HIV/AIDS and the risk posed to large numbers of males and their families who were defined as 'the homosexual class'. This category referred to LGBT groups, and sometimes there would be a further division into MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), *Hijra*, Transgender, and *Kothi* persons, who were also (implicitly) poor, disadvantaged nearly all were performing their sexual identities in public spaces. Above all, they were the subjects of HIV/AIDS NGO projects and belonged to easily identifiable communities. See: Puri, (2016), Sexual States; also see: Kapur, (2018) Fishbowl.

[104] "Suresh Kumar Koushal vs Naz Foundation", Supreme Court judgment on 11th December 2013, ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/of-koushal-v-naz-foundations-several-travesties-discrimination-and-democracy/ (Last accessed on 22nd August 2019).

statutory process, on 6th September 2018, homosexuality was decriminalised once again by the Supreme Court of India.[105]

: a precursor to the privacy turn

On 14th August 2004, almost five years prior to the first judgement regarding the anti-sodomy law, a UN employee, Pushkin Chandra, and his partner were found dead in the former's house.[106] It sparked a tabloid frenzy of speculations. And by emphasising the victims' sexual practices, relationships, and lifestyles, the overtly moralistic mainstream media began to sensationalise this news. Pages of details were printed about the corrupting and sexually debasing influences of upper-middle-class gay men on innocent lower-income men. The victims were allegedly engaged in an immoral and 'un-Indian' act. Yet, the media salaciously wanted to know what these men were up to behind closed doors. Some of these discussions drifted away from the crime itself and became quick guides to gay sex and the 'act of cruising.' "Darkness at dusk for gays", "Courting strangers and danger" and "A reckless life behind a ruthless murder?" were some of the headlines the mainstream newspapers splashed across their front pages, perhaps hoping to titillate their readers' suppressed sexuality and vivid fantasies of gay life.[107]

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[105] Navtej Singh Johar vs Government of NCT of Delhi, See introduction.
[106] Telegraph India (2004) How Gay is their world: petitioners in court challenge law against homosexuality. telegraphindia.com/opinion/how-gay-is-their-world-petitioners-in-court-challenge-law-against-homosexuality/cid/1020904 (Last accessed on 3rd August 2021).
[107] Dutta gives us a detail analysis of how English language press were sensationalising the murder of two male lovers. See: Aniruddha Dutta (2004) Homosexual Victim Exposes the Delhi Press. asu.thehoot.org/story_popup/homosexual-victim-exposes-the-delhi-press-1293 (Last accessed on 3rd August 2021).

Queer and independent journalists sought to combat such stereotypical and sordid narratives to offer alternative perspective. The debate about this case, however, largely limited to the middle classes since the English language remained dominant in such media coverage. Consequently, this private sexual relationship between two men became a source of censorious editorial stories for the English media. In hindsight, this has resulted in an enthusiastically visible discourse around gay sexuality, subjectivity, and subtext.[108] The media, indeed created a space to discuss gay issues with the public. In the past, it used to be very esoteric and limited to public health professionals and queer activists. At first, these discussions were confined to the English-language media.[109] The vocabulary of queer rights, eventually overflowed into popular culture and became commonplace.

I intend to draw upon these historical examples to provide a passage into the problematics of language and the limits of the legal campaign, which not only informs my practice but rather becomes my practice.[110] In addition, it has been a useful strategy to shed light on the modes of knowledge production and how such knowledge has been disseminated. I have tried to show how disparities get exacerbated when other modes of governance, such as caste and religion, are overlooked, especially, when studying the margins. It also demonstrates how these modes, rooted in colonialism and neo-colonialism, continue to marginalise

[108] See: Gopinath, (2006), *Desire*, and Dasgupta, (2019), Digital India.
[109] Dutta, (2004), *Homosexual Victim.*
[110] In chapter four, I will be illustrating this point in detail.

underclass queers, the Kothi and Hijra, the very groups that remain the primary identities which are referred to in order to secure the representation of the LGBT community in India.[111] Considering them at the 'disposition' to win debates of the law, the media and academia. As an example, when an NGO asks for people's trust and participation, their plea would inevitably be disguised as the 'common good.' Saying it differently, Kothi's own powerlessness becomes fuel for the machinery that oppresses them, even if the system is helping them, it will inevitably subjugate them yet again, this will be seen as being in the interests of the common good. Unless the marginal community revolt against the system, unlearn oppression and learn to see the sideways.

Figure 5: Stills from a moving image work entitled *"Kothi,"* 2016.
This was one the first attempt to combine glossary and video work.
This is my own version of glossary imitating dictionary entry.

[111] See: Puri, (2016), Sexual States, also see: Shah, (2015), Neoliberalism.

Interruption poetic no. 5

"Sometimes, I wonder about slippage in language.
Could it be possible, that the word 'gay' have entered Indian languages?
Because.
The phrase "*main gay hoon*" (I am gay) is commonly used.
But its use has not necessarily been associated with the gay movement.
However, this has replaced the long-standing Hindi slur *Gandu*,
which means 'sodomite.' I remember a time when *Gandu* was used in many
different ways, ranging from banter among friends – referring to someone
who abandoned their masculinity, and not trustworthy or even quit,
and someone lacking manliness or betraying their words.
But the contemporary usage of this term is impossible without a sexual
connotation, specific to sodomy. Meanwhile, I notice even Kothis says
"*Hum Bhi Gay Gain*" (we too are gay).
Perhaps, the word 'gay,' has an aspirational quality to it, not because
it is originating in the West,
but because it is a symbol of upward mobility.
Perhaps the word 'gay' provides a common language for of sharing
common experiences and connecting to the larger world."

She reminisces, while sitting at her favourite bench.

CHAPTER TWO

Going Sideways: Learning how the crawl becomes the leap

"When you look for beginnings, you become a crab"

Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

: politics, pedagogy, and re-examining difference

The discourse around lesbian and gay activism in India began to emerged after the first documented public demonstration organised by ABVA on 11th August 1992 in Delhi.[2] Up until this point, even liberal feminist and other social movements avoided discussing the taboo subject — same-sex love.[3] Thus, attempts to instigate gay activism were never formally visible or sustainable.[4] Within a few years, however, the arrival of international HIV/AIDS funding generated a discourse around gay men's sexual health. This change, even if it helped to initiate a dialogue for some

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, (2005), "Twilight of the Idols" in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other writings*, eds by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press), 159.
[2] ABVA staged its first known protest against police harassment of LGBT people in India. The police raids were targeted on men cruising and subsequently arrested in Central Park, Connaught Place in New Delhi. The protest was held at the police headquarters in the ITO area of Delhi. See: orinam.net/indias-lgbt-activism-history-early-1990s/, (Last accessed on 12th September 2021). But gay activism only gained momentum after the Lucknow arrests 2001 and then Pushkin murder in 2004. Also see: Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta eds, (2011), Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law, (New Delhi: Yoda Press), xxii-xxiii.
[3] Ruth Vanita, (2000), "The Straight Path to Postcolonial Salvation: Heterosexism and the Teaching of English in India Today" in Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English: Positions, Pedagogies, and Cultural Politics, eds by William J Spurlin, (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), 272–287.
[4] Advocate Shomona Khanna speaking about the events leading to the first petition against Section377 in 1992, which was unfortunately dismissed in the court. See this detailed interview: youtube.com/watch?v=tSY_rplwOqs (Last accessed on 27th July 2021).

segments of society, it nevertheless contributed to the historical misconception that homosexuality was brought to India by the West.[5] This conjecture coincided with an epistemic shift in politics towards neoliberalism, at the same time, a revival of Hindu nationalism also occurring in India. The former has a vested interest in capital, while the latter promotes conservative values.

An eruption of hatred led to the suppression of the film "Fire" when it was released.[6] All its screenings were withdrawn when raging mobs tried to burn down cinema halls. The decade leading up to this moment had already created a climate of hostility towards minorities, and anything that helped to liberate the 'woman' and the 'lower caste.' The anti-Sikh Riots, the Anti-Mandal agitation led by upper caste youths, the demolition of the *Babri Masjid*, and the growing conflict in Kashmir and other states in Eastern India are some of the flash points, all of which contributed to emboldening those on the far-right to react more aggressively.[7] This was indeed "the rise of a fascist Hindutva brigade and a strengthened upper caste, middle class allegiance to Hindu majoritarian ideological and political formations."[8]

[5] See chapter one for examples of Kidwai & Vanita's work. Also see: Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*.
[6] John and Tejaswini describe an incident that occurred a week after the release of "Fire," a fictional film that revolved around two sisters-in-law who formed an intimate relationship. Erotic scenes between the protagonists named Radha and Sita (named after Hindu goddesses) caused fury among the Hindu Nationalists. Mary E. John, and Niranjana Tejaswini, (March 1999), "Mirror Politics: 'Fire,' Hindutva, and Indian Culture." Economic and Political Weekly 34, nos. 10–11, 581–84.
[7] The rise of Hindutva has been noted by many left scholars. See: Narrain, (2004), Articulation; also see John and Tejaswini, (1999), *Mirror Politics*;
[8] Uma Chakravarty (1998) "Inventing Saffron History: a celibate hero rescues an emasculated nation." in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, eds by Mary E John and Janaki Nair, (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 234–268.

Amidst these social and political transformations another challenge arose: the influx of immigrants and refugees.[9] The increase in internal migration from rural to urban areas and especially to metropolitan cities like Delhi, was also alarming.[10] Migration, even if internal, was marred by a whole host of issues related to immigration – not having the 'proper' and required documentation to access services, being socially isolated and racialised (as mentioned in the introduction), being poor and living on the outskirts or in urban slums, and facing linguistic barriers.[11] Therefore, one has an ethical responsibility to consider marginalised groups and their complex histories, when producing knowledge that can serve this population. More importantly, 'migrants' were also the 'original' HIV high-risk category before the emergence of the label MSM.[12] And as noted by Alok Gupta and Jyoti Puri, most of the time, *so-called subaltern queers* were (and are) more affected by vagrancy laws (another colonial law to keep the riffraff out of the cities) than from Section 377. To explain his point, Gupta goes on to say categorically, that:

> "Vagrancy laws essentially target people wandering on the streets with no purpose. However, the 'wanderers' are selectively identified as migrant labourers, poor people, beggars, urchins, thieves and mentally unstable persons. The 'undesirable' vagrant now also includes the 'queer' on the street."[13]

[9] Jyoti Puri writes about Bangladeshi refugee crisis in chapter one but more specifically illustrates how the state apparatus functions in her concluding remark entitled "afterlives." See: Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*, 150-164.
[10] Even after the employment guarantee and right to work initiatives, the migration of the poor in distress was still on the rise. See: Jean Dreze, (2010), "Employment Guarantee and the Right to Work" in *Politics of India*, Jayal and Mehta.
[11] The current National Register of Citizens bill in India, to provide residential documentation is among many such hindrances, that makes emigrants second-class citizens in their own country.
[12] Das, (2019), *Teaching*, 6.
[13] Alok Gupta, (2011), *Law Like Love*, 132.

Yet, the queer elites were enthralled with legal victory and celebrated their right to remain private, even if this version of queerness falls short of its promise. In other words, it signals an uncritical queerness, what queer theorist Jasbir Puar calls the emergence of a "homonormative."[14] While, this new normativity is not caused by a lack of solidarity on the part of the queer elites, it certainly shows a lack of understanding of the priorities of the subaltern groups and it does comes across as a less inclusive gesture. Although, this language of claiming 'difference' and 'minority' have often been used by the LGBT movement in their rhetoric, as noted by Sedgwick.[15] This marginal position has also been utilised in India, whether it was to repeal Section 377 or to organise Pride marches across the country.[16]

A group of activists initiated the Delhi Queer Pride in June 2008 to mark the anniversary of the Stonewall riot which has become "a symbol of LGBT standing up for their basic human rights."[17] This celebration was also an opportunity to strike alliances with a global LGBT movement. The Pride parade also contextualises their protest to the law and compels people to use the language of activism, the "we." Before examining the peculiar politics of 'we,' I wish to emphasise the paradoxical nature of "we" and the inherent unexamined solidarities that undermine the nuances of the lives of Kothi and MSM (also referred to as subaltern queers) that are

[14] Jasbir Puar, (2007), *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, (New York, Duke University Press).
[15] Sedgwick, (1990), *Closet*.
[16] Delhi Queer Pride was a result of a group of activists coming together to reclaim public space. Gay pride march debuts in Delhi – news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7480648.stm (Last accessed on 11th September 2021).
[17] On June 28th, 1969, the death of legendary gay icon Judy Garland led to an emotional response by mainly Black drag queens at the Stonewall Inn in the West Village, New York during which a police raid escalated to a riot and arrests of gay men and transwomen as they fought back. This event has become known as the Stonewall Riot. The first DPQ, handout, 2008 marked this historical event as a starting point for such protest.

rarely discussed beyond NGO frameworks. Most often, these NGOs define themselves as health service providers, with an intent to bridge the gap between public services and their beneficiaries. To accomplish this, they work closely with government institutions. As a result, many NGOs unwittingly or accidentally align their objectives with the government to serve a (supposed) national interest. In some cases, this falls under conservative government policies which often support neoliberalism, the very structure that queer communities are supposed to critique.[18]

It is therefore useful to reopen a few questions regarding modes of knowledge production to have a better understanding of the context that led to this research. While highlighting differences, post-colonial pedagogy imposed a clear binary divide between — pre and post colonisation. As a way to depart from neo-colonial linearity, in such political conditions "time must be conjured not only as nonlinear, but also as nonmetric."[19] However, looking at the emerging situations in India described above, it is evident that the oppressive regime perpetuating severe restrictions on caste, ethnic and religious minorities operate in a seemingly continual time. And for this reason, my work uses discourse analysis to resituate the problematics of representation of Kothi.

[18] Nirija Gopal Jayal & Bhanu Pratab Mehta eds. (2010), The Oxford Campanian of Politics in India. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), This collection of essay deals with various dimension of politics that affect people and the nation in multiple ways. This thesis mounts an argument how the aspect of politics implicates institutions and movements.

[19] Puar, (2007), *Assemblages*, xxi.

: becoming crab

In the late seventies Edward Said launched his project *Orientalism*. In this foundational work, Said draws primarily upon Foucault's notion of discourse and offers a lens through which the scale of imperialism and its entangled modes of knowledge-production can be laid bare. Orientalism highlights the imperialist knowledge/power nexus and illustrates expansively how discourses have been controlled by a range of actors and institutions. Said claims that not only was this knowledge managed by the Europeans' power, but was also produced "…politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" and continued to be exercised in problematic ways.[20] Since the publication of Orientalism, scholars have used discourse analysis as method. And as we have seen in the previous chapter, it has become almost imperative within queer and sexuality studies to demonstrate the fluidity of identities and the multitudes of the subject of desire through discourse analysis.[21] In relation to this form of knowledge production, it is pertinent to note that it has primarily been associated to post-colonialism and post-structuralism at large.

[20] Said, (1978), *Orientalism*, p3.
[21] Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same Sex*; Narrain, (2004), *Queer*; and Narrain & Bhan, (2005), *Because*. Together they form an Indian (homegrown) discourse of queer scholarship. Also, please note that Serena Nanda, (1990), *Neither*; and, Kira Hall, (1997), *Go Suck*, had been working on Hijra since the 1990s.

However, in India, postcolonial and queer discourses, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, often foreground inequalities and differences. They deconstruct hierarchies but at the same time they solidify oppression, while leaving no or very narrow room for emancipation. In fact, the discourse surrounding *Queer* often entails narrow coherences. Legal and Human Rights scholar Ratna Kapur has referred to these tendencies as "neoliberal rationalities" whereby believing "that freedom rests in the accumulation of rights." This makes these discourses even harder to penetrate since often they get trapped into a straight-jacketed thinking machine, and by implication the debate around "identity" becomes frozen and at times, it seems unhelpful categories.[22]

Thus, my project, in a minor way, shares an affinity with the 'appreciation' of queerness in its radicality as opposed to the 'accumulation' of right which reduces its multidimensionality. This approach foregrounds the risk and courage that is required to tell the stories and to engage in queer life, and its continuing evolutionary nature. Following Golding's terms, this 'appreciation' might also be called an 'encounter,' which becomes attuned to the multidimensionality of queer-becoming, and this is what is being proposed here.[23]

My work uses the concepts of 'discourse as a passage' not only to problematise but also to re-situate the dialogue to address subaltern subjectivity, particularly in relation to sexual identity and storytelling for that purpose. Through

[22] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 5.
[23] Golding, (2018), *Friendship*, 262-276.

storytelling, I am not just creating stories, but creating informal and perhaps queer 'knowledge systems' rather than applying a dialectical approach to knowledge. By telling underclass stories, I intend to establish something that circulates as a knowledge system, but that is very delicate.[24] This could also be called 'a queer wisdom', revealing unexplored dimensions of anxieties, fears, vulnerabilities and shame, as well as friendship, courage, and erotic pleasures; a slice of queer subaltern history. Using this knowledge system, it is possible to create some sort of interface — a bridge perhaps, between the NGO's data, reports, charts, and diagrams, and the human body which occupies material spaces, bodies that breathe, bleed, and breed, and have other lived-realities. [25]

Interruption poetic no. 6

The bridge not only, literally, *bridges-the-gap*,
but also liberates. It offers a choice,
by making both sides visible to the subaltern subject.
The bridge is where one encounters hope to re-invent oneself,
thereby making that very encounter alive, which precipitates
the emergence — a queer-becoming.

[24] After: Barthes's Lovers' Discourse, Ann Cvetkovich's Archive of Feeling, Johnny Golding's Eight Technologies of Otherness,
[25] This idea of bridge is intended to converse with Walter Benjamin, (2002), Arcade Project.

This project is simultaneously interrogating and invoking post-colonial critiques.[26] Some of which I have discussed in previous chapters: on the one hand they tend to deconstruct the histories of colonialism, but on the other hand they create falsely constructed timeframes, delineating a clearly defined pre-post binary experience. This arbitrary split of time causes what Sara Ahmed calls "the failed historicisation of post-coloniality." Ahmed deems this misleading timeframe as problematic, especially:

> When post-colonialism is assumed to be referential – we are in a post-colonial time or place – then it does become deeply conservative: it assumes that 'we' have overcome the legacies of colonialism, and that this overcoming is what binds 'us' together. [27]

In line with Ahmed's view, this project too aims to unlearn imperialism and its modes of knowledge production. My refusal to adhere to archaic terminologies, however, stems from a greater affinity with Achille Mbembe's concept of "post-colony" than "post-colonial." Mbembe, like many other postcolonial thinkers, further complicates this pre-post binary divide. He explains that "[…] the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an

[26] Gandhi, (2019), *Postcolonial*; Ahmad, (2007), *Encounter*; and Spivak, (1999), *Critique*.
[27] Sara Ahmed, (2007), *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. (London: Routledge), 11.

entanglement."[28] This aspect of my resistance is vital to this project. It is due to the origin of this study which is still ingrained in the coloniser's ways of producing knowledge. Therefore, the challenge for my project is to ask — how can we "invent" and "make use" of a knowledge system that stems from stories?[29] It is also a question of how to mark this rupture in our historical time, resulting in a continuum and transformation of neo-colonialism and the "power/knowledge" nexus that Foucault, followed by Said and then many others who have warned us about in the past.

For these above reasons, engaging with modes of creating new and delicate knowledge, which I have termed 'a queer wisdom' (a knowledge system that relies on storytelling) requires an approach that is flexible enough to stop-and-start, pause, and suspend. So, in light of Nietzsche's earlier comment, I propose that to remain alive against the tide of systematic oppression, one must have the ability to become a crab going *sideways*.[30] Let me make one more attempt to understand the atmosphere in which one hopes to do things differently: what if one is out-of-line and out-of-order? Because this question is all the more pressing in India, where society tirelessly maintains discipline despite its apparent chaos, it is a society where adherence to its norms and confinement within its boundaries are prerequisites to remain on the right track.

[28] Achille Mbembe, (2001), *On the Post Colony*, (Durham, USA: Duke University Press), 14.
[29] I will discuss the use of stories and how they function in my project in chapter three.
[30] Nietzsche, (2005), *Twilight*, 159.

This line of questioning leads us to examine what might be considered a 'minor' political climate within a dominant, and neoliberal context. More accurately, we might call this a 'subaltern political climate.'[31] Hence, this project is an attempt to grapple with the tension that continually alienates and reproduces the Kothi as a subject of inequality — or as they were called the subaltern queer.[32] In spite of the fact that the Kothi and MSM do not seem to play an active role in the mainstream queer movement, by which I mean they do not have a voice in the movement, they still invoked and get implicated within the pedagogies of queer discourse. This has trapped Kothi and MSM in an AIDS NGO discourse. Not only that, as a part of leader-led debates on queer issues in India, the Kothi is often contextualised as a subjugated group, when they get compared with the Western category of gay men. Thus, this thesis urges the use of a gentler tone to acknowledge Kothi presence and avoid making them the subject of a liberation movement without giving them any passage for their arrival. To put it simply, this thesis requires an ethical register of storytelling. My practice exposes a side of the Kothi stories that has been obscured by the grand narrative of NGO-visation. Hence, the minor gestures, such as these could lead to an entirely different register of queerness.

[31] See: Deleuze & Guattari, (1986), Kafka, and see use of minor frequencies, in Campt, (2017), *Listening;* and Harney & Moten, (2013), *The Undercommons*.
[32] Narrain, (2004), *Articulation*.

Figure 6: Scene from a typical neighbourhood where such NGO centre would be located.

Interruption poetic no. 7

One day Maya came to the NGO centre and asked:

"I would like to learn how to write my lover's name. His name is Karim."

She had no idea how his name would look like a written word.

Her only connection with his name

was the sound of her own voice when she used to call him.

When she first saw the written word, she was a bit suspicious,

she even contested, wondering how his name would appear?

To make sure she is not being made to look like a fool,

and that this is the name of her lover, she went to seek advice from others.

The following weekend, she came back with

his name tattooed

on her hand with *Henna.*

She was showing a friend her palms

covered with his name,

above which an arrow cut across a heart.

A symbol of dying in love.

She was amused,

but also,

content.

As the purpose of this project is to discern the troubling disjuncture between everyday realities and the political life of Kothi through a sideways approach to these problematics. The task then is to resituate a discourse that tends to be confined within the NGO-vised world. This is a discourse in which Kothi arose but were omitted from visibility on their own terms at the same time. As I have pointed out with a range of examples, the governing apparatuses of this world continue to erode their lived experiences, making them invisible, non-evident, and thus untraceable.[33] As such, it is an act of "coercive invisibility."[34]

For an explanation of this archival invisibility, I turn to Writer Saidiya Hartman who notes that sometimes these archives, "rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity."[35] Hartman proposed a way to overcome these constraints and deprivations of the archives by deploying a creative methodology "to illuminate the practice of everyday life" that she later described as a "critical fabulation."[36] She situates her work by acknowledging that "there is no historical document that is not interested, exclusive, or a vehicle of power and domination" but fighting against these imposed constraints and invisibilities, she hopes that "…freedom might unambivalently announce itself," by constructing a usable past through the process of fabulation.[37] Hartman also notes

[33] See: Arondekar, (2009), *Record.*
[34] Leela Gandhi, *Invisible, Inc.* A keynote lecture at the Paul Mellon Centre, United Kingdom, May 2021. youtu.be/ddn-PqolnU0, (Last accessed on 12th September 2021)
[35] Saidiya Hartman (1997) *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 3-12.
[36] Saidiya Hartman, (2008), Venus in Two Acts, Small Axe, Number 26 (Volume 12, Number 2), 1-14
[37] Hartman, (1997), *Scenes of Subjection*, 12.

that "the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes."[38] In the context of my research this understanding highlights the *urgency* of the need to rethink and identify new and creative ways to imagine a subaltern presence. Therefore, my practice, is an intervention that creates multidimensional portraits instead of replicating parochial representations of Kothi. In other words, the sideways method is also a refusal to produce work that continues to show Kothi in their original victim context, and by doing so, continue to maintain hierarchies.

My sideways turn also benefits from Christina Sharpe's ardent work titled 'In the Wake,' in she argues that in order to complete this task one needs "…a method of encountering a past that is not past."[39] Sharpe, like Hartman, insists on the necessity of 'sitting with' the archives to 'plot, map and collect' and to create fictions through analytic reading of these archival gaps and erasures — create fictions. A reading of Hartman and Sharpe's work has helped me to understand Kothi's misrepresented histories or rather the absent histories in queer discourse emerging from India. Their analysis has been advantageous for my project as it allows me to create narrative that enables the Kothi voices to be heard. Since I use fabulation and fiction as my methods, it is pertinent to mention Gilles Deleuze who theorised both concepts, who uses fiction as a verb, under the premise that "each

[38] Hartman, (1997), *Scenes of Subjection*, 10.
[39] Christina Sharpe, (2016), *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, USA: Duke University Press), 13.

fiction entails the fictioning process."[40] Therefore, this project deploys fabulation and fictioning not only to produce artistic work but also as potential means of knowing or even revealing the truth about subordinated subjects. In a similar, Deleuzian vein, the task of writing in such a way means for Yve Lomax, a visual artist and writer, "…to unravel and recount entangled histories" which requires "the making of a narration that is imaginative and open to taking risks with respect to the story that it puts forward, or in other words, proposes."[41] From the beginning of this project, it has been my intention to make an "ethical departure" from NGO frameworks which often exploit incidents of violence and struggle so that it could create celebratory survival narratives that generally focus on a small part of our life. However, when you are confined long-enough in these imposed dark territories, you begin to see what is hidden and this is precisely what my project is proposes. Thus, considering Hartman, Sharpe, Deleuze and Lomax's formulation, this work seeks or perhaps offers emancipation through a "fictioning" of the archives, where the "encounters" happen. I would even go further to say that my methodology might even be an anarchist approach, that insist upon forging, these missing archives. However, this encounter is not the "end" of something but an erotic and creative "catalyst," thus, "…their theatre will be the rehearsal, not the finished spectacle."[42]

[40] Jeffrey A. Bell, (2006), *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Difference*, (Canada: University of Toronto Press), 83.
[41] Yve Lomax, (2005), *Sounding the Event: Escapades in dialogue and matters of art, nature and time*, (London: IB Tauris), 63.
[42] Augusto Boal, (2008), *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer, (London: Pluto Press), 120.

Interruption poetic no. 8

"As an individual, you are governed by multiple discourses – for example:
caste, class, culture, race, religion, politics, capital, and neoliberalism.
The best way to ensure that you follow in society's footsteps
is to learn your place within its structures.
But if you choose not to follow.
You assess your own ability to oppose these rules, you will also consider what
options are available to you, and what is viable for you.
Even if you adhere to these norms, you will always live in fear of failing to comply,
and you will not be able to avoid this. You will fail eventually.
And then you may exhibit non-normative behaviour.
It is possible that you will step out of line. The line society has set for you.
As well as supressing your desire and ways of express your love
for others, you would also ignore your vulnerability to the illness.
You might also be refusing intimacies with others.
Also, you may be living in denial of AIDS and your sexuality, unwittingly
contributing to a culture of shame. In such situations you wish that you could go
back in time and change your future.
Although, even if you go back, there is nothing but a wreck.
The past is ruined by your fear.
Start again. If you refuse to comply what society expect of you,
you will be deemed unruly; thus, no-longer-a-good-person.
Remember that this system has overpowered you for years,
so perhaps, you will not be able to disobey. However, let me ask you: will it ever be
possible for you to betray the victim identity that is being assigned to you?
Another way to ask this question is,
has refusal ever been an option for the oppressed?

And the answer is – No!"

: becoming necessity

"Tomorrow means I might
have her forever. Yesterday means
I say goodbye, again.
Kal means they are the same.
I know you can bend time.
I am merely asking for what
is mine."

— Fatimah Asghar [43]

The 'necessity' of freedom gives birth to power that is soft, hard, indecipherable, and continuously shifting. This desire to be free can also be turned into an instrument for change, but this necessitates an imaginative intervention. One that exposes the implicated nature of historical accounts that have been perpetuating invisibilities. Histories, often paired with many nouns, which also includes the amorphous term 'time' — the spectres of past, present, and future. At this pivotal juncture in my research, I find that both past and future have often been called as 'alternatives.' But relationships to the past and the future often have an ambiguity, which can be blurred in language, especially when they are referred to in Indian languages. This section will examine how this kind of ambiguity forms a crucial aspect for defining 'necessity'. It is especially true in Hindustani, sometimes also called Hindvi, the language that Khusro mastered, in which both yesterday and

[43] Fatimah Asghar, (2018), "Kal", If they Come for Us, (United States of America: One World, Random House, and Penguin), 20, (kindle version).

tomorrow are expressed as "Kal." Only the context can determine the exact meaning of the word. This form of time that is multi-dimensional and has something to do with space, and so in this sense, thinking sideways is a spatial turn, but space here is not a stagnant category. Thus, it's a spatial turn that enables time to shape-shift. In fact, approaching time and space in this way allows space to become movable – a shape-shifting time. This is when 'time' becomes entangled in 'language.' The stories I am interested in have the ability to create the unimaginable, the unattainable, as well as to leap into an abyss that takes you to the future. With few intermittent gasps, one tends to enjoy these knowing that they are not real, merely alternatives that one can easily reject.

In a similar manner, since the inception of queer theory, *queer* has also been considered an "alternative" to the mainstream. In fact, in the Indian context, queer is commonly referred to as the alternative sexuality, which places queer and homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality, thereby creating a strange binary, subsiding queerness, and queer potentiality altogether. Would our perception of sexuality have been very different if "gender" (constructs we are trained to inhabit) and "sex" were "not fixed but serially mutable?"[44] In fact, that is the argument put forward by scholars of sexuality in India, who display a lustrous history of eroticism.

[44] Ursula K Le Guin, (2019), *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Introduction by David Mitchel, (New York: Ace Books), (was originally published in 1969), 8, (Kindle version).

Interruption poetics no. 9

"But let us take a pause…" she says.

"And imagine, what if those alternatives were realities of the real world?"

"What if that 'leap into the abyss,' is all one needs to see above and beyond the horizon, to deceive these perpetually engulfing narratives of hegemony?"

"And perhaps an act or an encounter would lead us to a place of hope, even if it is a temporal one — which could render the unimaginable into minor forms of literature, gesture, and resistance…"

Figure 7: Stills from a moving image work entitled *"They Call it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020. The two different temporalities merging into one – Kothi and the Courtesan, together they create an unruly queer gesture.

In chapter one, we noted that the subjects of desire analysed by these scholars were inevitably belonged to the upper class thus castes.[45] In spite of this erasure, the 'radicality' and 'queerness' of Kothi have survived, and they are visible in their stylistics of existence. They have invented their ways of forming friendships and learning intimacies through cruising, while at the same time, they are bending the social norms. Consequently, my project is also an attempt to translate, reiterate, and *presence,* this radicality and queerness of Kothi, through storytelling.

Firstly, thinking "sideways" is ethical but also a creative turn, allowing us to go not only backwards and forwards in time — returning to the past but also imagining a future that holds (a queer) promise, that is always already a queer-becoming, thus, it's a temporal move. Through fragmented and kaleidoscopic stories this project seeks to rehearse a future — improvise, and also to listen again. Secondly, the thing to keep in mind is that even though the stories are sideways, on-the-loop, rehearsed, and are intended to be repeated, this project does not intend to build a pyramid (a leader-led scenario where only a select few have the right to tell stories). Rather, it uses stories as "scaffolding" to build horizontally stable architectures, where each component is equally important. Thirdly, it does not rely on tools such as charts and statistics, provided by the NGO world to understand queerness. It's a move towards the everyday and lived "reality." In order to accomplish this goal, one might rely on fabulation and fictioning of the

[45] Roy, (1998), *Kāmasūtra.*

everyday, since it is a move to presencing the subaltern subject of desire, a presence that is absent in the archive.

Finally, even if this project is not able to resuscitate, it certainly insinuates that the queer subject is also a sexual being. This subjectivity and erotic energy are what the encounter brings forward, and these are what society and the state fears, the one they are always striving to tame. Therefore, it is important to discuss this aspect of queerness, because when "queer" is used as "method," it loses its lineage which is rooted in "same-sex" sex-ness, and that is what is at stake on the bench in the cruising park. And to remember that the anti-sodomy laws specifically prohibited non-procreative sex, the precise language was used to erase same-sex.

In the following chapters, I will contextualise this aspect of queerness to in Indian settings and demonstrate how their rawness is expressed. But before that let me praise the courage and creativity of Kothis who have invented their own language of intimacy, so that enables them to hide in plain sight. Queer theorist Leo Bersani suggests "Cruising like sociability, can be a training in impersonal intimacy" but it can also be a method for surviving the state oppression."[46] In the jungle of patriarchy they are able to camouflage within and found a way coexist. "This ethical relation requires perceptual training in recognizing the sameness, one could say the imminent heterogeneous oneness, at the heart of the world."[47] In

[46] Leo Bersani, (2009), *Is the Rectum a Grave*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 60.
[47] Tom Roach, (2012), *Friendship as way of life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*, (New York: State University Press of New York), 131.

Foucauldian terms, this shows, that Kothi have found a way to imagine their own "stylistics of existence." Whether to call underground or above the ground, or even exposed, through cruising and taking up the public spaces, they have bent modes of governance daily, even if the change in sodomy laws were unable to offer them privacy. Furthermore, this work of fabulation and fictioning rejects their invisible existence by reclaiming the dignity of an underclass queer life, which are often reproduced as *survival stories*. And by refusing such narratives, one must tell a story that sheds light on their dynamic and multiverse cultures.

One last thing, from where to begin? And so.

Interruption poetic no. 10

And, while sitting on the bench next to him, I asked.
"So, what would you like to do?"
"I would like to tell a story. However, unlike all other stories, this one does not have a beginning or an end. My story can, in fact, be told from any given point, and it could have multiple endings before returning to the beginning.
In this entangled time, things – neither ascend nor descend.
Instead, it unfolds, and expands, and continues its journey on – sideways,
until it reaches the horizon of hope and possibilities,
and then it goes far and beyond."
He replied.

: founding rather than 'finding'[48]

A place: where one makes friendship, builds, emerged, and gets found.

On these furtive grounds the sideways moves get established.

Figure 8: Still from a moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros"* 2017.

It is the demands from a methodology (of a research project), that one must always-already know "what comes next," but on the contrary, an encounter sparked by "going sideways" or following a "queer path" leads to the emergence of the "next." This turn to encounter is (rooted in) the turning away from dialectical reasoning and embracing an uncertain but queer precision. Imagine it this way: this method insists on "listening-with" and if step one is listening then step two is — what are we listening to? In this sense, *listening* is already defined as a form of "encounter" *listening-with* or *listening-to*, since within the political realm — one cannot listen by oneself. Accordingly, this listening is always plural, which foregrounds a collective effort, and which does not reinstate individualism. In fact, it is a type of frequency that occurs among people and communities. Therefore, once this connection is established, which is called *encounter* here, *emergence occurs*.

[48] This move has evolved by a series of conversations, and a close reading of the work of Johnny Golding, specifically: (1997), *Otherness*, (2018), *Friendship* and (2020), The Courage to Matter.

So, founding in simple terms, is this *in-between*, eros, energy which comes to life once encounter happens. It is a most important point that, "going sideways" emphasises friendship, and different ways of being, forming relations and cohabiting spaces with other beings. It reflects upon the personal consequences of queerness and queer practices of resistance as well as from being at locations other than the centre such as the sites of cruising.

Interruption poetic no. 11

She speaks again:
"Let me be clear about it again,
it is not a destination
but a journey towards hope and possibilities,
that seeks to resist to
abstract interpretations of Kothi life.
This journey is anchored in
up-until-now silent peripheries,
therefore, offers
a certain kind of resistance to the discussion.

Perhaps it is not a confusion at all
– rather, it is an entanglement.

: becoming: memory 'when I am'

"Remembrance of things past is not necessarily
the remembrance of things as they were"

Marcel Proust [49]

Where one is required to be aware of one's surrounding, one must experience the space, through — a sense of smell, sight, touch, and an experience of the energy of the space. However, when we allow our intuitions to be entrusted to time, a persistent phenomenon, we can glimpse infinite possibilities and configurations that unfold through time. However, their spatiality would be difficult to understand on its own, in such iterations, as time (tends to) attach (itself) to another dimension of the – – *When*. Thus, memories and remembering becomes a useful apparatus for determining how one relates to the space one occupies. But even then, *memories* cannot be trusted fully, as Marcel Proust eloquently illustrated in his ground-breaking novel — *In Search of Lost Time*. Throughout the series of novels, he artfully introduces the unfathomable notions of memories and their various functions in one's life. While Proust's work suggests memory is fundamental to our consciousness, it is, still, not a reliable source, rather it is confusing. This is expressed in his words — "then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke at midnight, not knowing where I was, I could not be sure at first who I was... "[50]

[49] Marcel Proust (2003), *In Search of Lost Time*: Sways Way.
[50] Proust, (2003), *In Search.*

In praise of this evocative work, Walter Benjamin describes Proust's style of writing as the "Nile of language," as it was adding layers of emotions and meticulous details to the narrative, and due to his ample use of language, which at times appears to be forensic and that "overflows and fructifies the regions of truth" but in turn makes its readers the obsessive stalkers of his characters, which are unfolding onto page after page of his allegories.[51] In Proust's writing, Benjamin sees almost an act of meditation, a yearning for an Image.[52] It is often difficult to locate Proust's voice in his work, especially in the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. For instance, sometimes, striking a difference between the voice of the teenage boy who is about to go to bed, and his older self, remembering experiences, is challenging, which becomes my cue for my writing strategies. These problematics of self are crucial in the practice of storytelling.

In the context of my practice, I often find myself switching from saying "I" to saying 'we/us', when I describe incidents, I had with other Kothi. The 'I' and the 'we' struggle, they fight with each other, and the 'we' always wins. Not only that, I also often refer to the economically and socially vulnerable state that has been highlighted by NGO literature. A conflict arises when I find their tautologies overshadow my own everyday experiences, and I am left wondering, "Have I truly felt vulnerable?'[53] Or was it something I learned from the NGO reports, that I am

[51] Walter Benjamin, (1999), "*The Image of Proust*", in Illuminations, (London: Pimlico), 197-210.
[52] Benjamin, (1999), *Image*, 197-210.
[53] It is illustrated in practice component in "the story of she," where she tells her friend about exposing her vulnerable self. She has learned that if "it doesn't show, it wouldn't sell."

vulnerable and feeling perpetually discriminated? In our struggle against homophobia, it is as if, we all got infected with a virus of fear — the fear of proximity, love, care, trust and when it comes to extending solidarity to others, it immediately sinks us into an incessant state of helplessness. NGO-supported AIDS activism presents the rhetoric of not knowing what is good for oneself. However, the question remains — where, or at what point should one begin to question? These narratives are set even before you encounter them, as a result, one transforms oneself into a victim to conform to such narratives.[54]

In such a political climate, you are expected to continuously produce testimony as victim. It is the only way for you to exist, to "become visible," and it is the only way through which you are granted permission to exist. Since you have already been conceptualised as a 'vulnerable' population, you tend to share accounts of violation, pain, and trauma, in order to receive support and care.[55] You cannot sell yourself unless you express your pain, your vulnerability, and your dependency.

[54] See: Judith Butler, (2015), Senses of the Subject, (New York: Fordham University Press).
[55] Disobeying victimhood is not an option, as mentioned earlier in *Interruption poetic no 9*.

Figure 9: Stills from a moving image work entitled *"They Call it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020.

Interruption poetics no. 12

So, then we must ask ourselves, how can a person 'knowingly' want to be so inferior as to be considered disgusting by others? And not once but for the rest of their life? How are just a few people able to decide that the rest of the population is vulnerable, when by nature all human beings are vulnerable?

"But. Before I, the author, say anything further, I would like to make a confession that all my 'I's and 'We's are confused. They have been interchangeably used in my work. And 'I' the author, who is 'Me' in front of you, I am perplexed. 'I' am not sure what could be done about that. Perhaps, 'Me' the author does not remember, who he is anymore.

Sometimes I think it is a problem with the English language where 'I' remains 'I' and 'we' remain 'we'. Unlike Hindustani, where one can swap between the 'Main' aur 'Hum', which translates as 'I', and 'We' and usage depends upon the user's regional dialect or sometimes according to their social and class status. However, now the language of unknowing, somehow, unintentionally feels more inclusive. And maybe in this confusion of I and we, this work presences a more ethical, sentient, and collective voice.

Now we begin again." [56]

[56] This is a dilemma. This is where my "I" and their "them" meets. Spoken Indian language, previously known as Hindvi, the lingua franca of Northern India and Pakistan, and the language for which Khusro's poetry became popular.

becoming: refusal rather than survival

> "The desire for surplus recognition presupposes a permanent gap between the elite and the subaltern cultural aspirations for recognition. This desire for surplus recognition forces the modern social elite to produce a new form of reduction, rejection and exclusion sustained by modern conditions" [57]

Feminist practices of resistance to cultural and political hegemony have taught us that we cannot talk about marginalities without acknowledging the complexities of the population concerned. These complexities require us to not only appreciate, and confront, but also to identify ways to "speak with" and to write about these "discrete histories for which there was neither a readymade method nor a short cut."[58] It is important to keep in mind the context that determines the notions of collective national pride — a form of Hindu pride, it also rationalises and creates conditions for the *humiliation* of others.[59] As we know that humiliation and shame are attached to a homosexual body.

[57] Gopal Guru, (2011), Humiliation: Claims and Context. Ed Gopal Guru, (India: Oxford India Paperback), 211.
[58] Kumkum Sangari, (1999), *Politics of the Possible*, (India: Tulika Publication),
[59] Uma Chakravarty (1998) "Inventing Saffron History: a celibate hero rescues an emasculated nation." in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India.* Mary E John and Janaki Nair, eds. (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 234–268.

Interruption poetic no. 13

Jatin says: "But are we given the opportunity of a *listening–encounter*
that is not destroyed by either power or capital?"

What must it feel like to carry the burden of remaining voiceless constituencies?
What might be the life of the dispossessed apart from being reduced to a number?
What might a body be, beyond being a beneficiary of a social services project?

And what is the subject of desire in this monolithic queer history which speaks
for this part of the population?

"All I know is that this NGO culture has turned friends and lovers
into beneficiaries and clients, who needed to be registered in the records
to be provided with sexual health services."
Sigh!

Let us, for instance, explore these layered systems from the perspective of another marginalised group that has been the object of extreme humiliation — the body of the untouchables. Over the centuries, violence and atrocities have been committed against untouchables in India. Although all citizens are equal in the Indian constitution, however even in this version of the public, a life of desire would be highly unequal, (as mentioned earlier). Even if the NGOs are perceived to be ameliorating the conditions of the oppressed, people continue to function as victims of their grand narratives, and there is no other way to exist for a subaltern subject of desire, without a radical turn. In Gopal Guru's evocative formulation, such

oppressive conditions "leads the victims to adopt an attitude of resigned fate.[60]" My temptation here, is not to overstate the matter but rather find a language to comprehend this complex subject of desire, which often are reduced to acronyms and euphemisms in NGO premises. In the coming pages, I will demonstrate how the subaltern subject of desire were reduced to mere numerical figures and how their dismissed pleasure and erotic energy can be recognised and celebrated.

To begin with, we must ask a few pertinent questions: How do we make sense of the images created through AIDS/NGO discourses? How do these images, function? One of the ways, it can be understood by turning to Michel de Certeau's cautionary words. He says: "We must first analyse [the] manipulation [of an image] by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization." [61] With this project, resistance is highlighted in the telling of a story that has the potential to become a gesture of emancipation. In this sense, the queer resistance proposed here is a profound rejection of self-victimisation that permeates all the survival narratives assigned to the subaltern bodies. Such subjects can only turn away, move forward once they assert their refusal. When understood within this context, the *Refusal*, is a conscious and political act that conjures up its power in its everyday struggle. But there must be a recognition of the 'capacity to refuse' which almost always precedes one's ability to act.

[60] Guru, (2011), *Humiliation*. This form of resignation in fate also lies within the philosophy of Karma. See glossary
[61] Michel de Certeau, (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (USA: The University of California), xiii.

emergence: the temporal space of hope

Figure 10: scene from the future.

> "DART turned out to be an NGO funded by the Delhi government whose main business was AIDS prevention, and it sent out groups of young boys to places where men sought sexual partners, to distribute free condoms. But every Sunday afternoon, DART transformed into something else – a space where men and transsexuals and *hijras* came together to cross-dress and sing and dance." [62]

No single beat goes missing when she is on the dance floor. The rhythm in her moves is electric. Everything obeys her: clapping, drumming, and even the singing of the roomful of chorus. The future is here and now. (a regular scene at dart) when

[62] Development, Advocacy and Research Trust (DART) was one of the community-run organisations in Delhi which started lobbying with government institutions advocating health services for Kothi and MSM population. Butalia's essay is about a legendary Hijra named Mona, who visited this centre. Mona often referred as transwomen, but her gender is more complex and part of longstanding culture. Urvashi Butalia, (2011), Mona's Story, Granta Magazine, granta.com/monas-story/, (Last accessed on 28th July 29, 2021).

writing about this weekend's gathering at the community centre, Feminist writer Urvashi Butalia describes it as a 'place' transforming into "something else." I would like to define this as a queer-becoming, something that is evolving and becoming a continuum. Butalia refers to "a space" as if it were something that she could not label, as it transforms as time goes by — a space that shifts its shape and becomes an opportunity for the otherwise subaltern subjects. For me, this space consists of erotic energy and a multitude of transgressive bodies. These bodies, 'mould into' and 'break away' from the norms of society. Many of these bodies are *rehearsing* their desired gender beyond the protocol of theories — doing and undoing — gender, simultaneously.

In this sense of the collective euphoria, what emerges is a 'potential'. We are allowed to see and experience a glimpse of 'that' something 'together' which can also be called the 'future.'[63] The future of this 'togetherness' that everyone in the room is striving to attain and sustain. This vision of the futurity that is conjured up by this togetherness is "not a question of "hope"— though it is certainly inescapably intertwined with the idea of aspiration."[64] Sometimes, this sheer disbelief in the present, maybe mistaken for turning away from the realities of life. The 'present' in this case, also refers to the 'system' that subjugates people. This disbelief may also appear as a way of evading or shying away from responsibilities, as is often found in

[63] Muñoz, (2011), *Utopia.*
[64] Tina Kempt, (2017), *Listening.*

these conversations, but the truth is quite the opposite since this disbelief can serve as fuel for asking questions. Nevertheless, sometimes, this fledgeling promise of unattainable futures serves as a lure to those who have no other means to manoeuvre their destiny. So, this glimpse of the future is like the net that a fisherman throws into a pond, without intending to catch fish out of the water; instead, he leaves it as a lure for fish to enjoy. Though the *system* does exactly the same, this lure to see tentative and unattainable futures becomes a remedy in a place where there is no window of hope. Maybe briefly, but it does pacify the expectations of the marginalised, which appears to be a better reward for some than having none. This attitude, however, generates judgemental reactions and a disapproving statement such as this: "they got what they deserved."

This lack of sustainable demand for any rights tells us about a culture that was so ephemeral at the time that it could not be captured. Like sand. When you try to hold sand in your hands, it inevitably slips away after a moment. Again, sand-like. These communities pervade every corner of the city yet are invisible. But one forgets that sand can also cause discomfort if left inside satin shoes (of the system). In the context of the status of "untouchables" in India, sociologist Ashis Nandy, argues that they have "a power to pollute" which the twice-born upper castes fear.[65] Whereas, this pariah-ness Guru considered as a form of politics, when the

[65] Gopal Guru quoted earlier in the context of surplus and the karma. See: Guru, (2011), *Humiliation: Claims and Context,* (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperback)

untouchables reclaim the power to pollute and "act as a poisoned weapon to produce the crisis…" But this fear of contamination has a pre-condition, it applies if only both sides are aware of it, at the same time.[66] The material realities, however, reveal a different picture, which implies that this power (if we can call it that way) is only available to those who realise that they possess this ability. More importantly, to expose these apparatuses, this sideways turn becomes essential. To put it differently, it is as essential as a paved runway for a flight to take off.

Now, as we return to the room full of Kothi at the community centre, we see that they may or may not be aware of this potential to access their futures. Which in fact, as we have seen, through discursive pedagogies how accurate they can be when corroborating with the notions of the 'lack of awareness' or perhaps, subaltern queer pretends not to be aware of this internal radical potential, because they are exhausted by being in a rage. Could their culture be held responsible for this deception?

Perhaps not. As the erotic energy of bodies created a space that offered a hope that was not there in the system, a hope that was carried by the rhythmic dance, claps, music, sweat and smell on the fertile ground of friendship, a hope that arose every time you entered the space, and encountered its energy. But why is it only in that space that there is a sense of freedom and euphoria? In spite of the fact that hope is not always sufficient on its own, there are still potentialities in that

[66] Gopal Guru (2011) *Humiliation*,

temporal space of hope. Something which has been realised. An unusual bond is formed somewhere between the beat of the drum and the singing. The key trick is to endure a bit longer so that when you turn sideways there is hope, in the room full of people at the community centre.

In a similar vein Leela Gandhi provides a compelling account of queer resistance. The essential starting point for Gandhi is friendship as "a lifestyle that favours horizontal alliances and cultures of friendship between strangers and groups traditionally unfamiliar with each other."[67] Friendship, according to Gandhi, functions as a vector for change and offers radical potential. Through my work, I propose that it is possible to break the societal structures and hegemony and find belongings through friendships. However, friendship has its limitations as this *seeking* and the *urge* to seek primarily come from privileged positions. For the disenfranchised, it can remain an unattainable and an impossible desire. Therefore, this peculiar relationship between human rights and queer culture, which is a recurring theme in this inquiry, cannot be dealt with in a linear manner. The sideways moves are indispensable to lend expression to lives that are being questioned and to create a multilayered atmosphere in which they become a presence.

[67] Leela Gandhi, (2019), *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Second edition, (New York: Columbia University Press),

At this point I would like to confer with José Esteban Muñoz about seeing something above the curves of the oppressive structures of power and patriarchy and seeking a (queer) way out. In his formulation 'queer in a straight time', Muñoz proposes that *queerness* can be achieved if it is imagined as the *horizon*. He explains:

> "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. […] Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present." [68]

My insistence on emergence here is, in fact, used in a broader sense – encompassing encounters with a specific geographical location, time, space, rhythm, and emotion as well as functionalities of people within that space. As an example, the people at the community centre have a certain purpose, they provide body to the centre's life. For regular attendees and for occasional visitors, it is in this atmosphere that a particular encounter, experience and belonging happens. In what ways do they contribute to or refrain from forming the MSM identity beyond the NGO premises? The language of MSM could only be used within NGOs. When one leaves the premises of an NGO, the hopes, rights, and benefits that come along

[68] Muñoz, (2011), *Utopia*, 1.

with it have to be left behind. The incompleteness of this inquiry offers us a queer relevance. Queerness here, always already comes into being as a form of emergence — queer-becoming, which I define as an intervention, thus a non-closed meditation.

In my concluding chapter, I will discuss in more detail at the last and show how these elements conjure up a space, in which my practice functions as a poetics of togetherness and queer-becoming. By dissecting reductive pedagogies, which, then break-open the possibilities for hope, is it then, this space becomes an atmosphere that enables a listening encounter. As such, it serves as the mechanism for generating and activating sideways movements of queer-becoming. Since I am creating an atmosphere in which the reader can attune to these proposed sideways moves while interacting with storytelling, a glossary, and video work. These strategies make some of these latent histories that we have discussed earlier, reappear in the present, thereby contaminating discourses of the future. In the absence of an already existing model, it raises new sets of questions and open ups new lines of enquiry, thus, new possibilities.

Interruption poetic no. 14

'It has been nice spending time with you, but as all good things must come to an end, this has to come to an end too. And so, for the moment, we must say our goodbyes.'

'Well, yes or do you want me to sing a song for you? What was that song, ah… "*Aaj Ki Mulaqat Bas Itni, Kar Lena Baatein Kal Chahe Jitni*." (today's meeting must end here, tomorrow you can talk however much you desire)

'No, no, I can sing for you, '*Abhi Naa Jao Chhod Kar, Ke Dil Abhi Nahi Bhara*.' (don't leave me yet, my heart is still unfulfilled)

'Aww, I want to have you in my life forever.'

'Yes, I would like that too.'

'Then, let me stay.'

CHAPTER THREE

Of the Poetics and Politics of Storytelling: the wisdom

"And history is a story which has many beginnings but no end."
Hannah Arendt [1]

: storytelling as a political act

Proposing this—immediately forces us to raise at least two sets of questions, if not more. The first set of questions consist of whose stories are being told and what kinds of politics can storytelling foster? How do stories manifest themselves? Some of these questions I have situated in my earlier chapters. The second set of questions and perhaps a more pertinent dilemma for this chapter is how to tell a story of a past that does not exist in the archives? What is the point in talking about endless freedom without a tangible shift in thinking that could bring sustainable changes? But also, how can we even talk without acknowledging dark, delicate, emotional spaces of the past? Particularly those without a past? Their deprivation of history affects their presence and future, and so, can storytelling be a viable tool at all, for them to gain visibility? The embedded questions regarding the politics of "historical discourse" and in storytelling are also vital because for every story we unearth, hundreds more go buried and unremembered.

[1] Hannah Arendt, (1994), *Essays on Understanding 1930 – 1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, edited by Jerome Kohn, (Schocken Books: New York), 320.

Previously, I addressed some of the key objections that have shaped my research, particularly, the relationship of sexuality "discourse" that has been employed by analysts.[2] So, based on my earlier discussion, I would like to highlight that "[…] history has become a crucial site for retrieving an erased past."[3] Although, this too poses a question, as to, whose history it is that we are unearthing — and even though "history tried to solve the perplexing problem," however, history still "owes its existence to men."[4] Therefore, this limits as well as takes us back to the questions of power and the rigidity of the discourses, and also ties into a broader question of access. It is my intention by drawing attention to these dimensions of the Indian subcontinent to suggest that underclass histories are routinely "erased and reconstructed" by a wide range of institutions.[5] These systematic erasures of evidence, coupled with the loss of lives, is why this project requires an additional move — the fictioning and 'critical fabulation.'[6] Now to put into a photographic context, I relate to my encountering to this cultivated archival darkness imposed on to subaltern subject, I see it as a possibility, to use that darkness to create images.

[2] For example, see: Kidwai & Vanita, (2000), *Same-Sex*, Narrain, (2004), *Queer.*
[3] Mary John and Janaki Nair (1998) 36.
[4] Hannah Arendt, (1998), *Human Condition,* 184.
[5] Although Parera talks about 'working class' which I have been arguing is the 'underclass' as their possibility has been suspended due to the NGO-visation. Sonali Parera (2010) "Of Moments, not monuments: Feminism and Activism in Postcolonial Sri Lanka," in Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose, eds., *South Asian Feminisms*, Duke University Press. New York, 116.
[6] Hartman, (2008), *Venus*. Also see Bell, (2006), *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos*, and Burrows & O'Sullivan, (2019), *Fictioning*. They all build on Deleuze's notion of Fiction and Fabulation in their own ways.

: a story

For this project, Hannah Arendt's work on the importance of the story of a human life and the politics that unfold in-the-telling of a story has been a cornerstone, and particularly for this chapter, I will keep returning to it. Arendt considered storytelling as a crucial tool throughout her work, and in particular her book the 'Human Condition', as it provides the foundation to render her political thinking and illustrates the potential of restoring history, the past, and memories.[7] This point of view in Arendt's work was "derived from a clear acknowledgement of the fragility and contingency of human affairs."[8] And, like everywhere else, in India too, stories are being told repeatedly to build a common understanding of an event. Stories have power. Using stories, simple events and utterances can be transformed into a monumental historical narrative. Although Arendt emphasises, "the importance of factual truth, before the onslaught of political power, facts and events are much more fragile than axioms or theories and that, once lost, no rational effort can recover them."[9] Therefore, this project's aim is to convey a humane story of the population which was termed a "silenced community" and in doing so, it is "talking back" and "talking-differently" to the system that makes them unheard and mute.[10]

[7] Hannah Arendt, (1998), *Human Condition,*
[8] Fina Birulés, (2009), "Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt", http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/149/264 (last access on 4th August 2021)
[9] Birulés (2009), *Contingency*, 5.
[10] Speaking with Arvind Narrain, (2004), *silenced community*; Bell Hooks, (1989), *Talking Back*; and Sharmila Rege, (1998), *Talk Differently*.

: ephemeral

The act of storytelling in an aphoristic way honours the "ephemeral" nature of queer desires and the encounters that occurred on the bench of a cruising park in India.[11] It is where, the encounters between bodies creates a temporal space. It is crucial for this act of storytelling to listen with intimacy and care. In keeping with this spirit of queerness, I hold close to a sideways methodology that specifically consider the Kothi's socio-political location. It is a movement that must be repeated, not just once, but again and again, only after this repetition can one create a more empathetic encounter. I have termed this aspect of my practice as rehearsal. The "rehearsal," by which I mean the act of *re-hearing* and re-listening and an improvisation, if necessary. So that in this process of telling-stories one finds a "political-becoming" which Muñoz considered to be a crucial imagining of a queer future.[12] Therefore, the title of this inquiry indicates a process, and the "going sideways" is a queer act.

[11] My use of ephemeral is indebted to Muñoz's work. See*: Cruising Utopia,* (2009).
[12] Taking ques from Muñoz's reading of the performative, my insistence has been on "rehearsal." See*:* Muñoz (2009), *Cruising Utopia.*

: oral, intimacy and wisdom

Stories required to be told among two people or more. These exchanges of stories are situated within the oral traditions of India that are rooted in ancient philosophical disciplines. In Sanskrit, this is referred to as *śruti* which means "what is heard". [13] Spivak describes śruti as the "most sacred kind of wisdom" which has the possibility of oral dissemination of a "profane" knowledge.[14] The reason I embarked on this project is to bring forward these stories of queerness as a challenge to norms embedded into modes of knowledge production in India. The listening is considered divine in this tradition of *śruti*, so if these elements are brought to the project one can almost trace voices that have been eliminated from the scriptures, or, in this case "the canon," the orators of these stories — the Kothi.

[13] In fact, much of the philosophical traditions relied on two modes transmission of the knowledge: *śruti* – that which is heard and *smriti* – that which is remembered.
[14] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (2008*), Other Asias*, (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing), 175-208.

Interruption poetic no. 15

At the outset, I must acknowledge that, 'language'
has made it possible to express desires, loves,
identities that are otherwise not permitted to exist.
In a society where particular desires are prohibited; language offers a tool
for the utterance of those desires. In this way language,
not only becomes an 'origin,' but also acts as a journey to carry those desires,
and ideas, forward. This, though, requires a purpose, a vehicle of intentions,
whatever they might be, that drives language from one place to another,
and finally, it needs a 'destination' to arrive at – an individual,
perhaps, to whom the language is addressed — an act of listening.
In the absence of the individual, language goes into the wilderness,
it becomes meaningless, it withers, and it dies.
Thus, speaking — language requires a listening-encounter.

However, language can also be a means to govern, to give instructions
and to establish institutions. The language of law may forbid us to utter anything
outside the accepted norms, this may also turn us into the prisoners of our own
language. This power of language lies in its capabilities to reveal that is hidden,
unuttered. But it also has the authority to expunge the undesirable
from our collective memories (and thus, the histories). These suppressions
could result in forced silence, or even a persistent denial.
But in some cases, language could also mean taking the ultimate steps towards
undesirable populations that are deemed unworthy,
bar them from an entry into society, take away their presence,
and mounting an absolute erasure.

: an event

A history is made up of events. The "event" — writes Veena Das, "… narrates the lives of particular persons and communities who were deeply embedded in these events, and it describes the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary."[15] Das begins her discussion by illustrating how violence has been re-imagined and re-configured as an issue that permeates not only the larger narratives but also the lives of individual, simultaneously, since its invention. As mentioned earlier the keywords that characterise Kothi lives are frequently associated with forms of violence, limited or no freedom, no rights, and often in need of emancipation. In other word, using Das's formulation, this project situates these questions in a larger context that has a multiplicity of effect on queer lives and gets transmitted only through violence and violation.

Conceptualising Kothi as a victim, which appears to be serving the interest of the common good, while also requiring them to remain within NGO premises. This can be traced back to those neo-colonial discourses mentioned earlier. Thinking about Kothi within existing frameworks, has also meant that their location and language were always already consisting of 'stigma,' 'discrimination,' 'violence,' and sometimes 'inclusion.'[16] Yet, even though "inclusion" is part of a liberatory

[15] Veena Das, (2007), *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, (USA: University of California Press), 1-17. See also Gilles Deleuze, (1990), *The Logic of Sense*, (New York: Columbia University Press),148-153.
[16] Narrain, (2004), *Articulation.*

terminology, it nevertheless implies that there was an exclusion in the first place, which does not get discussed, as to why Kothi live on the margins and had to be included. The use of these keywords also implied that it was almost impossible to render their stories without pity. Additionally, a specific type of protocol has been developed around Kothi, almost as an economy, highlighting their socioeconomic strata, where the seriousness is used to seek legitimacy of the subject matter. Thus, it is why it is crucial to tell stories about Kothi without using such language, not to erase but to imagine possibilities for like in a different way.

In this way, my practice develops from mundane everyday things, the events, the utterances, that exhibit a different story of the queer subaltern – which of course includes the bench, the bus, and the seemingly futile attempt to save a pickle-jar from birds. My intention is to mark the ordinariness of Kothi lives and by relating them to the idea of stories in their everyday sense, I am able to imagine them as political subjects of their own narration. Here I turn to Walter Benjamin who once suggested that "a story is different", it does not get dispersed or disappeared on its own, since, we seem to have our allegiances to stories and the myths they create about us.[17]

In fact, Benjamin writes, that a story "[…] preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."[18] One may ask, what

[17] Walter Benjamin, (1999), "Storyteller: Reflection on the works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illumination*, eds Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, Random House), 83-107
[18] Benjamin, (1999), *Storyteller*, 90.

(event) constitutes a story, how will it be narrated and disseminated, and who will survive to share their story? Given already existing hierarchies in society, and all the reasons for what is worthy of a story, who gets to tell it and to whom?

The answer I turned to is by Arendt. She argues "that every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and end", and that "is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of history".[19] In spite of the fact that this life does not exist in isolation, it functions through a certain kind of 'togetherness and intercourse'. That, deep down inside everyone, there is a story waiting to be told. In its very essence, each 'unique' life has a 'story' to tell, which "philosophy fails to express," and to compensate for the absence of histories, "a life-story, therefore, offers an alternative sense to politics."[20]

In the Indian context, however, any sense of togetherness with 'the different and unequal' has been repressed and thus, eliminated via the *Vārna* doctrine, (the caste system) which maintains the purity of mind and the upper caste individual at the top of a hierarchy.[21] The Brahmins, people from the *priest caste*, also known as the Brahmanas — had a "monopoly over the explanatory framework of caste and therefore laid considerable emphasis on education—or more aptly knowledge,"

[19] Hannah Arendt, (1998), *Human Condition*, 184.
[20] Adriana Cavarero, (2000), "Introduction", in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, (New York: Routledge) trans and intro by Paul A Kottman, vii-x. Kottman introduces philosopher and feminist thinker Cavarero's work engaging into the question of storytelling.
[21] B. R. Ambedkar, (1989), Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches, Vol 5, Compiled by Vasant Moon, (New Delhi: Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment). Also see glossary at the beginning of this thesis, and also see: What is "VARNA SYSTEM" / वर्ण व्यवस्था? https://medium.com/thehinduhub/what-is-varna-system-वर्ण-व्यवस्था-a34e37a88b1 (Last accessed on 12th September).

writes Uma Chakravarty, who also called our attention to the need to challenge hierarchies "which alone could break this monopoly," an advice given by Savitri Phule to the oppressed castes.[22] In the caste system, this also meant that not only which stories could be told, but who had the right to tell their stories was also governed by the Brahmins. One might ask, what is the purpose of contaminating "queer" with caste—an archaic concept and how does it relate to my project? It is because, the Indian queer discourse has maintained a silence until recently.[23] And, also because:

> "…the historical advantages of the upper castes in relation to education and professional occupations through making use of opportunities provided by the colonial regime—as they were already advantageously placed—means that they continue to wield enormous social power." [24]

Therefore, I intend to expose this paradoxical structure of class, caste, and the kinds of forms of power and disparities they hold. Caste in fact, becomes a measure, that determines an individual's status within society. Although the liberalising of the economy has often been discussed, caste has largely been ignored within HIV narratives. It is a known fact that caste often controls class, and that certain communities of queer people have inherited their status. As a result, it should come as no surprise since "caste has showed an amazing resilience. It has survived

[22] Uma Chakravarti, (2018), *Gendering*, 115.
[23] Rahul Rao draws out attention to a moment of 2015 that occurred at the Queer pride in Delhi when three young Dalit queer activist reclaims the space. See: Rao: (2018), *Out of Time*.
[24] Chakrvarti, (2018), *Gendering*, 134.

feudalism, capitalist industrialization, a republican Constitution, and today, despite all denial, is alive and well under neoliberal globalisation."[25] In other words, despite all the upheavals, colonisation, and reformation of India, the caste system has survived. Today 'caste' defines all human lives in India, it comes with their names and therefore permeates all forms of institutions, including the judiciary, it is built into in the constitution, and it is negotiated concurrently in parliamentary politics.[26] Consequently, caste has even affected how democracy manifests and functions. This is a system that feeds itself. The age long struggle between classes intensifies when it is paired with the caste struggle. It has also been noticed that for several years, more and more people, have been seen chanting "*jativad se aazadi*" (we want freedom from casteism) during protests across India.[27]

: who is speaking

> "…mainly a conversation of `us' with `us' about `them,' of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man... in which `them' is silenced. `Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless... `them' is only admitted among `us', the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an `us'..." [28]

[25] Anand Teltumbde, (2010), *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*, (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing), 9-39.
[26] See: Teltumbde, (2010), *The Persistence.*
[27] Javed Iqbal, (2016), India's Dalits demand freedom from caste discrimination, Al Jazeera, aljazeera.com/gallery/2016/8/16/indias-dalits-demand-freedom-from-caste-discrimination, (Last accessed on 12th September).
[28] Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism,* (USA: Indiana University Press), 65. Minh-ha's critique of the discipline of anthropology because of the way in which Kothis have been studied. Minh-ha's work reveals the very crucial and inherent problem of speaking on behalf of others which is to do with assuming a universality of the subject.

Kothi's intelligibility — their ability to speak is impeded as it were, by the structure of violence, not because they are the victims of this 'supposed' violence, but rather because they have only been conjured up by the queer discourse to represent a certain kind of subject whose "rights have been violated." Therefore, they inhabit a condition of perpetually being illustrated as a form of victim narrative. The upsetting thing about this version is that even middle-class queers were deprived of representation, even the examples of poetry shared by the elites were in private, there was no public representation of their sexual life, so why does Kothi become a victim?[29] Furthermore, I have also demonstrated just how blurry these identity lines are among the Kothi, that they have merged into one producing a homogeneous subjectivity. So, how would we able to define the composition of a political identity–– and what would be a political stand in such a situation?

We will need to return to the question of caste and therefore also class in order to examine the subjugation of the Kothi population. This way we will learn how class location limits *her* ability to claim self-representation.[30] Therefore, representing *identity* becomes a new form of doing politics. This brings me to a very important and sensitive question: who gets to represent whom and how? "…you were the first—in your books and in the practical sphere—to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others." Says

[29] See chapter one, and even the poetry was only circulating among upper class women in private.
[30] Kothi is and has been a gendered identity, but as we have seen in previous examples that Kothi seems to be appear almost gender subject, I am restoring her gender, in the thesis. (Penetrating gender into the thesis)

Deleuze to Foucault.[31] This friendly exchange between two French intellectuals (as referred to by Spivak) elicits a thorny debate over "representation as 'speaking for', as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation', as in art or philosophy."[32] Their positionalities were criticised by many postcolonial thinkers, including Spivak in her influential essay —Can the Subaltern Speak? Spivak, in her condemnation of their disavowal to speak, calls it an "epistemic violence" for "ignoring the international division of labour" and a failure to recognise their privilege, which perpetuates colonial projects. Moreover, she also exposes their use of conflated language and well as their projection of Western-centric knowledge onto Third World countries.[33]

Yet, these characteristics of representing the "other," as "over there" or the amorphas elsewhere are still evident today, especially among activists, artists, and academics who continue to fail to identify this problematic of speaking. Often, such speaking not only demands but also extends legitimacy to the dominant speaker over their subjects, while existing oppressed and subjugated groups are consequently forced to confer and to provide evidence of their lives to negotiate their inclusion into the community or society. Since "such speaking for others does nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces," writes

[31] Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, (1977), "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press), 205-217.
[32] Spivak, (1988), "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (London: Macmillan Education Ltd), Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson eds. 271-313.
[33] Spivak, (1988), *Subaltern*, 271-313.

Linda Martín Alcoff who proposes a "ritual of speaking." While agreeing with Spivak on the some of the aspects of the question of speaking, Alcoff suggests "…we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others."[34]

: what is being said?

Irrespective of all the existing hierarchies of culture and race, in the end, if one cannot understand what is being said, then the language is no more than gibberish to its recipient. And perhaps, that is true for all languages — as Agamben argues "all languages are jargon and argot."[35] But, if that is the case, then how did the English language emerge as a symbol of power and become an instrument of colonisation of the modes of knowledge production? Who decided that? What are these unspoken rules that have become a "given" for the oppressed? Finding an answer would take us back to Macaulay's report. However, another radical response would be to tell stories, which is what I am doing with this project—telling a story. In my attempt to answer these questions, I choose to offer a radical possibility through art, which has the potential of expressing the unspeakable.

[34] Linda Martín Alcoff, (1991), "The Problem of Speaking for Others", *Cultural Critique*, no. 20, University of Minnesota Press, 5–32,
[35] Gorgio Agamben, (2000), "Languages and Peoples" in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, 62-69.

Interruption poetic no. 16

Imagine this scene.
A culture where almost all available lifesaving information on HIV/AIDS was inaccessible. If available, then often it was in English, otherwise if would be translated to people in the most cryptic way — failing to reach those who needed it the most. This issue becomes more urgent when one realises that there are many people who lack literacy skills within these so-called high-risk groups, so the modes of knowledge production did not necessarily resonate with communities.
And in the nineties, many of these people, often, could not even pronounce the terminologies they were supposed to be fighting against or educating about —
"Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome,"
many did not know what these words meant.

That is why, there was a great pressure to learn and speak a language that was not one's mother-tongue. It doesn't end here, imagine your skills and knowledge being determined by your fluency in English, which also determines your career prospects and achievements. Language is not a tool to express oneself, but it has been used as social, cultural, political, and economic power. Now, to return to the project and to think about the problematics of language in the context of HIV/AIDS.

: said, again and again

The awareness campaigns in India were based on the belief that people would learn by heart, memorising the modes of HIV transmission, since a large part of the population was illiterate. Employing skewed approaches to awareness, in fact, were also true on a global scale, where key messages that were brought to public attention were often "hedged with euphemisms ("avoid exchanges of body fluids") and moralism," this was the case even in the progressive societies of the West, as confirmed by the work of Simon Watney, Douglas Crimp, Jan Zita Grover and Paula A Treichler.[36] In India, it meant that this information had to be translated into regional languages before it could be distributed by health workers of the "AIDS service industry."[37] However, access to this information remains difficult in many cultural settings due to religious and cultural practices.

Take this as an example of cultural misreading: HIV is a virus which affects our immune system's ability to fight against an infection. The formal Hindi term for immune system is – "*Rog Pratirodhak Shakti*" a *Sankritised* linguistic term which is inaccessible to a layperson, who would generally be seeking this vital information at an NGO centre. A further complexion arises when it is translated in Hindustani as *Androoni Taqat*, and in more everyday Hindi as *Bheetari Shakti* – as in some

[36] Zan Zita Grover, (1987), "AIDS: Keywords", October-43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism, (New York: The MIT Press), Edited by Douglas Crimp, Joan Capjec, Rosalind Krauss, and, Annette Michelson, Vol. 43, Winter, 17-30. An important collection of essays on the issues of AIDS.
[37] This term is theorised by Cindy Patton, (1991), Inventing AIDS, (New York: Routledge).

contexts, for example, *Androoni Taqat* can also refer to a power that you possess inside, and a more literal English translation of this would be "will power." [38]

The use of performative aspects of language to demonstrate the exchange of knowledge is misleading in this way. The distinction between "performance" and "competence" is further emphasised by Michel de Certeau, who argues the two terms are not interchangeable.[39] The fact that we perform a speech act does not guarantee that we understand what is being said, in a particular language. He writes that "the act of speaking (with all the enunciative strategies that it implies) is not reducible to a knowledge of the language."[40] The result of this is that native speakers would often not accept the burden of a language that was foreign to them.

By ignoring this basic demand from language to be understood, the problem was compounded by the convoluted jargon used in AIDS-NGO literature. Hence, the phrases such as "Universal access – inclusion of all high-risk MSM" with "multiple vulnerabilities" were and are widely used. As Certeau points out, uttering a language is not necessarily a guarantee of knowledge for both the people who give and those who receive that information. So, people may have learned HIV/AIDS related terms by heart and were able to utter them as frequently as they

[38] My analyses and reflections come from experiences and knowledge accumulated over the years of working and travel in various AIDS projects and travelling across the country. Reading and reflecting on past memories is one of the methods that is been used to write stories. Since this is an art project and not an ethnographic study, I yielded the stories to liberate themselves from institutionalisation of Kothi-life. Hence, they are non-co-operative or perhaps disobey victim narratives.

[39] Michel de Certeau, (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell, (Berkeley, USA: University of California Press).

[40] Certeau, (1984), *Everyday*, xi - xxiv.

were asked, however, they may not necessarily have the right tools to adapt the information to their everyday lives, especially if that knowledge is not customised to their socioeconomic and cultural location.

: task of the translator/translation

At this point, it will be helpful to return to Benjamin to understand the issue of 'translation,' which is imperative in this context. In the 'Task of the Translator' Benjamin writes that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" and concludes that a translation can only provide a resemblance of the original text.[41] He explains:

> "While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien."[42]

This inquiry concerns a persistent problem: language, with all its corruptions and iterations. I would also like to stress that in the context of this project, this issue of "language" has been confused too often with the question of translation, not only 'Hindi vs English', but also, for example 'Hindi into Hindi.' As I have illustrated earlier, not all formal Hindi texts are easily accessible. This is due to the use of

[41] Walter Benjamin, (1999), "The Task of the Translator" in *Illumination*, eds Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, Random House) 70-82.
[42] Benjamin, (1999), *Translator*, 76.

vocabulary that derived from *Sanskrit*, as the origin of "formal" Hindi, which tries to keep the purity of the *Bhasha* (language) by limiting its use to academically inclined oral and written texts. Thus, my use of unruly language is determined by its relation to power and forms of queer politics.

Interruption poetic no. 17

"But the thing that I don't understand is,
do you think, if culturally specific translated?
education materials had been provided to people,
the outcome of the HIV outreach would have been different?"

"No, one cannot say this with surety." She replied

"But one cannot also discount the fact that this knowledge,
would have sparked a change,
turning this information into sustainable actions.
It would have brought one closer to the desired goal
for such a knowledge-transmission exercise.
I speak.
So, it would have had helped
if it was more meaningful to people
instead of being complex and illocutionary acts."

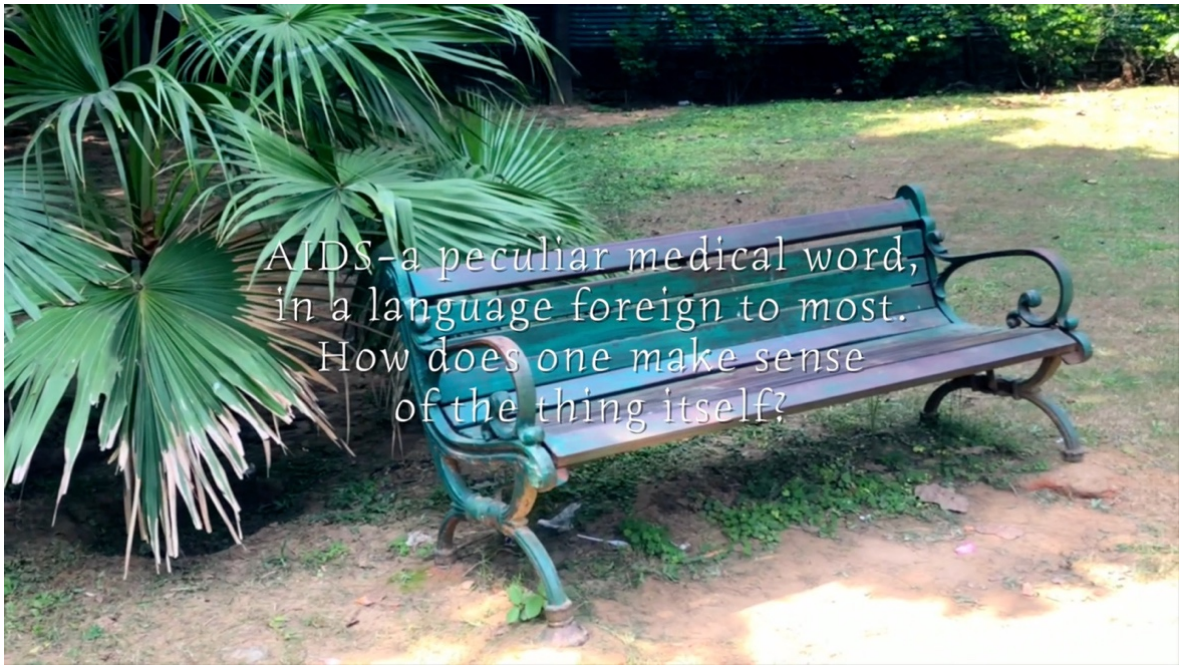


Figure 11: Still from moving image work entitled *"They Called it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020.

My work is often punctuated with a glossary.
Sometimes the definitions — appears on a still and at other times they are superimposed on the video itself, suggesting the evolving nature of the definition and our understanding of the term.

Interruption poetic no. 18

"So, how can we contrive our energy to challenge this cultural hegemony?
And how do we make sense of the very possibility of sexual pleasure,
that has been turned into tyranny for people like us?"
This time she has a question.

: making use of a story

The stories in this project act as a first departure point. However, they immediately get caught in the barbed wire of subjectivity. That seems to imply a western philosophical tradition emphasising abstract subjectivity, therefore, relying on a universal human subject, or in Spivakian term "Europe as Subject." But then the question arises: how have the Kothi and MSM been represented over the years? Since, their stories are only an expression of the 'inclusion of the marginalised', when it comes to their voices. From pathos, they can only move to didactics and a 'cleaned' testimony of their sexual lives, proving how their lives have been 'improved' after taking shelter in a 'safe space' provided by an NGO.

The problem with such standard responses is that they favour the organisation's goal, rather than laying stress on creating spaces. This for some becomes a positive cliché such as 'progress' and 'target achievement' which are mere "ignorant speculation."[43] But an honest and sincere account of the Kothi lives require a far more humane and thorough approach. This is a representation of the time and space when we used to say, "*these lives,*" but now it is time to claim that *our* lives, which we would lead on our terms. Because, by reducing an entire population, such as Kothi to their status as beneficiaries and forcing them to make an institutional story their own, almost obliterates them from language. They cannot

[43] Spivak, (2008), *Other Asias*, 9.

'speak' themselves and would not have 'spoken.' It also reminds us of Spivak's cautionary warning about the structure in which to speak as a subaltern subject is an impossibility.[44]

The stories in my practice, are a form of political and intellectual discourse through which I draw discursive portraits that attempt to make lives visible in language. Whilst taking a turn in ethical representation, I use language as "a gesture to recognize the unstable and provisional quality of historical truth" therefore, also optimistic that this "narrating would become an act of the imagination that shaped elements from the past without trying to restore it."[45] Because, as Benjamin remind us "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[46] With this promise of a grounded and an ethical representation in writing, one is able to create a world, one without pity.

[44] Spivak does not say that subaltern is unable to speak, she rather talks about the conditions of the possibility in which subaltern voice cannot be heard. Spivak, (1988), *Subaltern*, 271-313
[45] Birulés, (2005), *Contingency*, 5.
[46] Benjamin, (1999), "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illumination*, eds Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, Random House), 245-255.

Interruption poetic no. 19

So, one way and perhaps, the only way the subjects of human rights can make sense of their lives is by deliberately 'not knowing.'

"Is that what you are suggesting?"

Even if they know, they might opt for the phrase such as "how does it matter?" or "this is life" for the immediate remedy. Behavioural categories like MSM were considered as self-identified terms, even if they were invented for them, soon their categories became an identity. But, as discussed previously, most MSM and Kothi rarely had an opportunity for self-representation. In most incidences they were duped by the readily available narratives:

"Achcha, Toh Hum Jaise Logon Ko MSM Kahte Hai Videsh Me?"

(Oh, I see, so people like us are called MSM in foreign countries?)

Very often people were trained to tell their stories in a specific manner – in the third person. In their representations, were they reflecting their own vulnerability and pain? Was it their own voice being heard? To understand this, we may have to understand the context in which these lives have been lived. What were their living conditions and what was the environment including the institutional structures in which they made their choices? Did they even make choices or were they trapped in passivity, did they let the course of things define their lives? However, and to some extent, there are notions of the politics of refusal that lie in their attitude, even though that may not be apparent.

: a rehearsal, and wisdom

One of my preoccupations has been how to represent subaltern lives. Signifying something requires the presence of, 'that something' already present. However, as I have been resisting the available (also parochial) representation of Kothi, so in this situation, I choose to invent. And through the creation of stories, there is a possibility that their representation can emerge that is not dictated by the governing apparatuses. in this way, rehearsal and improvisation give subaltern protagonists a voice by re-situating their stories. While at the same time, my practice challenges grand narratives which thrive on exposing the marginalities of people who have encountered HIV/AIDS interventions and revealing the [one-sided] way their life stories have been documented. Therefore, my practice of telling stories is fundamentally tied to places that are inhabited by Kothi and MSMs. This work argues that for any coherent understanding of the discourse requires a return to the location where such belonging may have developed.

It is not so much the NGO premises that are of interest to me, but places such as cruising sites, streets, staircases, rooftops, and drop-in centres that possess a transient quality. They have the potential to become something else, a place where encounters happen – between bodies. The ability to transform, a quality, something Butalia notices when she walks into a room full of Kothi, shapeshifting, changing places into spaces, making them into spaces of becoming-together, a queer-becoming. (See chapter 2). Moreover, the work urges us to take into account

as to 'what' or 'who' might have made these encounters possible. It is in this spirit that the stories need to be told as well as rehearsed to persist and continue to be in a state of 'becoming.' In this sense, rehearsal becomes absolutely an essential part of my project, by which I am implying the act of *re-telling* and re-listening and with an improvisation if needed.

Storytelling, therefore, carries out a labour that constantly "transforms places into spaces or spaces into places."[47] These are the places and spaces where queer lives can thrive and exemplify what Golding describes, firstly as "story-making as the triangulated ability to grasp the listening-encounter, to be grasped by it and to pass it on." Secondly as "story-making as the informal glue of how one comes to know, invent or discover what one can be or become." [48] In addition to this, I extend another queer dimension, and therefore, thirdly becomes story-making; my practice of storytelling foregrounds the oral tradition of sharing knowledge, a gentle form of "knowledge system" can be established through this orality.

[47] Certeau, (1984), *Everyday*, 118.
[48] Golding, (2018), *Friendship*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Who Inherits the Closet: a little secret

"As a modality of liberalism, rights have without exception demonstrated an imperialistic trajectory and an understanding of freedom as a technique of governance as opposed to liberation. They have continued to be mapped and deployed along the axis of inclusion and exclusion – a discriminatory heuristic that is integral to the human rights endeavour, rather than a detour from or failure of the project."

Ratna Kapur [1]

To be "gay," I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.

Michel Foucault [2]

The stories that have been told about underclass queer males, whose voices these stories carry, whose rights have been affirmed in the name of the struggle for legibility and entitlements for the masses, how then, unknowingly, have the Kothi inherited this location called – the closet. The next two stories, that follow briefly draw out manifestations of the public life of the so-called 'subaltern subject.'

[1] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 8.
[2] Michel Foucault, (1997), *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Work of Michel Foucault*, 1954-1984, edited Paul Robinow, (New York: The New Press), 138.

The Bus

June 2004.

late summer afternoon

incident on a running bus

In June, according to the weather reports, the monsoon should be here, meanwhile, it is still sultry, hot, humid and 43° C without any sign of the clouds kissing the city. At the ITO bus stop, three outreach workers (identified as A, B and C) board an overcrowded bus, route number 740 (connecting east and west in this mega city) Delhi.[3] Midway on their journey, one of them (A) finds a seat, the other two (B and C) are still jostling with the crowd, keeping their bags secure, whilst holding on to the upper bar with their other hand. There are other details.[4] But to keep this story to specifically in the moment of this incident, which can also have multiple versions, however in this version, the triggering moment was that 'B' made eye contact with another man just a little longer than one typically would have. That resulted in a probing – "what are you looking at?" asked by the '*other*' man.[5] "Who me? Nothing! Replied 'B' in haste and turning their face away and carrying on humming something. This response sets the *other* man off in a rage, and he starts verbally abusing ("*Saale Gandu*") and slapping 'B.'[6] The *other* man not only breaks the social codes of the bus but also exposes (what Sedgewick termed homosexual) paranoia caused by the closeness of a feminine man (B), what could be called fem-phobia in gay-speak today. Immediately, 'C' intervened and confronted the other man and

[3] ITO (income tax office), This landmark site become known by the name of the building, is located on a cross-section of a train, and connecting to the city: Also, the sight of ABVA protest that held on August 11, 1992. See: orinam.net/indias-lgbt-activism-history-early-1990s/, (Last accessed on 12th September 2021).

[4] There are so many other details, perhaps irrelevant, or it may sound an apology concerning the incident if I start explaining them as to why it might have happened. Details – such as hot weather, sweat makes their hands slippery, people typically travel for two hours to get to their work, the driver was racing with another bus, which they often do, that makes the bus-ride bumpier more than usual, in the afternoons people carrying many things etc.

[5] Again 'other' here is signifier of a generic (all-purpose) man.

[6] There is no literal translation, but an equivalent could be "you cocksucker," even though the 'slur' is to refer a sodomised.

told him to stop. Some other passengers also spoke up and eventually made this *other* man get off the bus. Their journey resumed. Nevertheless, 'A' remained silenced throughout this episode.[7] 'A's fear was that it would identify them as a group of feminised men, who are carrying condoms and safe-sex handouts and other informational material on AIDS, which perhaps may cause more trouble if this matter reaches the police. Proximity with 'B' exposed the '*other*' man's vulnerability. He seemed emasculated by a mere glance by 'B' who embodied femininity. In a way, the *other* man's reading of B's gender was accurate, which the other passengers could not (or were unable to) read. Perhaps, for them masculinity existed in variant gender forms.

Buaji

July 2009.

among the crowd,

at the bazaar.

Contrasting the bus incident with another snapshot from an inter-state consultancy for NACO.[8] I was assigned to visit an AIDS project in a small town in the state of Bihar, very closer to the Nepal border. I was assigned to evaluate the service delivery and other aspects of the NGO-run project. On the second day, the NGO staff insisted that I should meet their '*Buaji*.'[9] They explained to me that she is very influential among the community and has been supportive of the NGO work. Everyone calls her *Buaji*, not only

[7] But also, A's fear of speaking comes from the lived experience. On the one hand, this fear has come from the police raid and then torturous arrests of NGO workers, in a neighbouring state, just a few years ago. On the other, a certain degree of police violence and fear is widespread for poor people; it gets heightened when sexuality or religious minorities are involved. See Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*.

[8] NACO is liable to provide funding support and oversee state level implementation of HIV prevention work. See: naco.gov.in (Last accessed on 8th September 2021).

[9] Bua is a father's sister; the suffix 'ji' is typically added to anyone when spoken with respect and admiration.

within MSM groups but among the local leaders, police, and the local population in town. I was intrigued by the story of her influence. Later that day, *Buaji* turns out to be a curvaceous person with a heavy moustache on their face, emerging from the crowd at a city square. They were wearing a half-sleeved shirt exposing their hairy forearms and a wristwatch, lower body wrapped in a blue sarong and a yellow scarf around their neck. It was an unremarkable, an almost emblematic choice of male attire for this part of India, that there was nothing 'out of the ordinary' in their presence. However, their gender was performed, asserted, and accepted without hyper-femininity. Which normally would be expected, or in other words, there would be specific roles assigned to her gender and her appearance. Since it was post 2009, I earnestly wanted to congratulate her for the recent verdict and talk about how things were at the centre after the legislative victory.[10] It was no surprise that she, like so many others, was unaware that it was illegal in the first place,

let alone that there had been any amendments in the lawbooks. She said, "*Hum Toh Khud Hi Kanoon Hai Yahan Ke*" (I am, the law here) and then burst into laughter. In this incident, *Buaji's* gender is a part of public knowledge, which does not comply with predetermined norms,

she has nothing to hide, nor does she have enough privilege to hide,

to pass, and to be private.

It other words, *Buaji* was hiding in plain sight, 'camouflage.' People were either not bothered by it or have accepted it. The 'Law' as we know it, exists in English, which creates an insurmountable distance between the centre of power and the people to be governed. However, this also shows that her gender and sexuality existed without her knowledge of the governing law.

[10] In 2009, when the Delhi High Court decriminalised homosexuality for the first time, it applied to other state governments too. See: "Naz Foundation vs Government of NCT of Delhi", 2nd July 2009.

: a step to take flight

The stories above begin to address the social codes and their manifestations in which one expresses one's genders and sexualities in the public sphere in India. A country that has its own set of societal norms, gender expressions, and notions of queerness. And as it turns out in the above examples of Kothi life, it comes without the act of speaking, as it were, but their queerness was already known and understood.[11]

While we are at it, if we examine rights-based, queer movements, they have assigned themselves the task of visibility, and consider becoming 'visible' an essential part their identities, thus, queerness. Nonetheless, this was also demanded in the December 2013 judgement, when the Supreme Court referred to "a minuscule minority."[12] Though, on the one hand, such reduction undermines the presence of a minority that is forced to live on the fringes of society (this was the case in the above incidences). However, on the other hand, it "emphasizes the crucial role of queer visibility and an aggressive strategy based on rights claims for ensuring queer legitimacy and equality," which also ignores long-standing social and economic discrepancies.[13] Moreover, this struggle of legibility derives from Western formulations that revolve around the act of "coming out."[14] In order to

[11] Brown's analysis of closet is useful to understand how Kothi inhabit and at the same time, is able subvert the closet space. Michael P Brown, (2000), *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*, (New York: Routledge).
[12] See: "Suresh Kumar Koushal vs Naz Foundation: Supreme Court of India" Judgement in December 2013.
[13] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 56.
[14] According to a statement published in their first newsletter in 1975, the Gay Left considered the movement emerges from "its two unifying elements: the emphasis on honesty and openness in our gayness (coming out); and

create an easily identifiable, therefore predetermined, narrative of the queer movement, the task falls into what Foucault called "the traps of visibility," thereby reducing it to a branding exercise for queerness.[15] However, in such articulations of queerness the problem is that they compartmentalise visibility from invisibility. While disregarding not only individual's capacities to resist and overcome social norms, but by also erasing historical inequalities, such as caste and class location, which have a decisive bearing on everyday life in India. In other words, it demands that we to leave behind all endemic violence to achieve this common 'we,' that is this amorphous 'visibility.'

My reason for retuning to economic struggles, is that the 'form of queerness' that I am articulating does not exist outside of the caste-folds, which has a material quality.[16] So, my practice is an intervention that seeks to undo and unlearn the dominant subject position, which often demands compliance with universality, as well as disregarding geographies, histories, cultures, and how they shape us. The rigid societal norms caused paranoia on the moving *bus*, which resulted in to a trounced 'B' and prevented 'A' to protect their friend, but it can also be moulded to take other forms where some of these norms can be tamed, purged, and countered by courage. In the next chapter, I will be briefly discussing photographic visibilities

gay pride, with its combination of solidarity and togetherness." See Gay Left Collective Website at gayleft1970s.org/issues/issue01.asp, (Last access on 7th September 2021).

[15] See: Michel Foucault, (1995), "Panopticism" in *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison,* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House), trans Alan Sheridan, 195-228. Also see: Kapur, (2018), Fishbowl.

[16] See: Gail Omvedt, (2009), *Understanding Caste: Buddha to Ambedkar to Beyond,* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan).

and will try to illustrate what kind of "visibility-trap" was installed for the underclasses.

: the turn to the rights

The nineteen-nighties economic liberalisation had created spaces and possibilities to resume the gay rights debate in India.[17] During this second wave of activism, the acronym "LGBT" was replaced with "Queer."[18] A human rights lawyer, Arvind Narrain re-inaugurated the term in 2004 with a publication of the same name — "Queer" (also see chapter one).[19] A year later, Narrain and queer activist Gautam Bhan edited an anthology entitled "Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India," in which queer identity was extensively celebrated through a range of painfully personal essays.[20] From this point on, furthering queer lives emerged as a political project. However, Queer subjectivity became popularly understood as belonging to the predominantly English-speaking urban middle classes (who already had access to privacy in comparison with subaltern groups). Although it was noted in his discussion, while examining the limits of law, Bhan suggests that legal language can act as a trap, especially when delineating notions of privacy. In addition, Bhan raises an essential question in the context of India:

[17] See: Suparna Bhaskaran, (2004), *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
[18] Gautam et al, (1991), *Less than Gay.*
[19] Arvind Narrain, (2004), *Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change.* (India: Books for Change).
[20] Arvind Narrain & Gautam Bhan, (2005), *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, (New Delhi: Yoda Press).

> "What does this understanding of privacy imply? Let alone that for most queer men and women outside the middle and upper-middle classes, the notion of privacy is far from the reality of their everyday lives, or the fact that even the homes of Hijra sex workers are not considered private since the police have the right to walk into any suspected 'brothel' without even a warrant. The real question here is simple — is an appeal to privacy any different from an appeal to modesty?" [21]

Interruption poetic no. 20

After a long silence, in the weekly meeting on "Law and Us" he finally speaks:
"Why can't they see it?
"They are only stopping the law from entering the premises of the privileged.
They are not protecting the ones who continue to be harassed on the street.
The Rights still seems unaffordable to most."

"Also, their proximity to the centre, capitalism, and neoliberalism are built upon the foundation of discriminatory practices –
how exactly they are planning to include all of us, in their version of queerness?"

His silence from a moment ago,
…. have spread across the room.

Despite this, the subjects of these human rights remained people from the underclasses, who rarely shared their needs and urgencies with the middle-class Rights activists. Since the emergence of AIDS activism and the proliferation of the MSM category in India, human rights activism has operated in what one may call a parallel world. As a matter of fact, until the Lucknow arrests of the AIDS NGO

[21] Narrain & Bhan, (2005), *Because*, 40-48.

workers, this second wave of queer movement had not been fully attuned to the AIDS crisis, but this incident became the "inaugural moments of queer activism."[22] However, the memories of the arrests had just begun to evaporate when the murder of an elite gay man in August 2004 sparked the urgency to react on section 377.[23] It prompted the queer movement to concentrate from the smaller cities into the big metropolises.

These events have brought privacy to the forefront of the rights debate, as it is an infringement of rights aligned with a global human rights discourse. However, according to her critique of being an obligatory inclusion of the diversity population on the agenda of institutions or movements, Ahmed says, "Consultation can thus be a technology of inclusion: you include ''the others'' in the legitimizing or authenticating of the document whether or not their views are actually included."[24]

Within sexual politics as well, this class of activist also assumes a minority status, however, such formations of identity have been under criticised as assuming a perpetual minority position, which Sedgwick describes as a 'minoritizing view.'[25] In relation to collectivising a politics of identity and calling it as 'we' and 'one', will that be alluring; for example, the people in the bus assault incident – will there be other people who would lend their voices fa or their minor causes? I will reiterate Sontag's

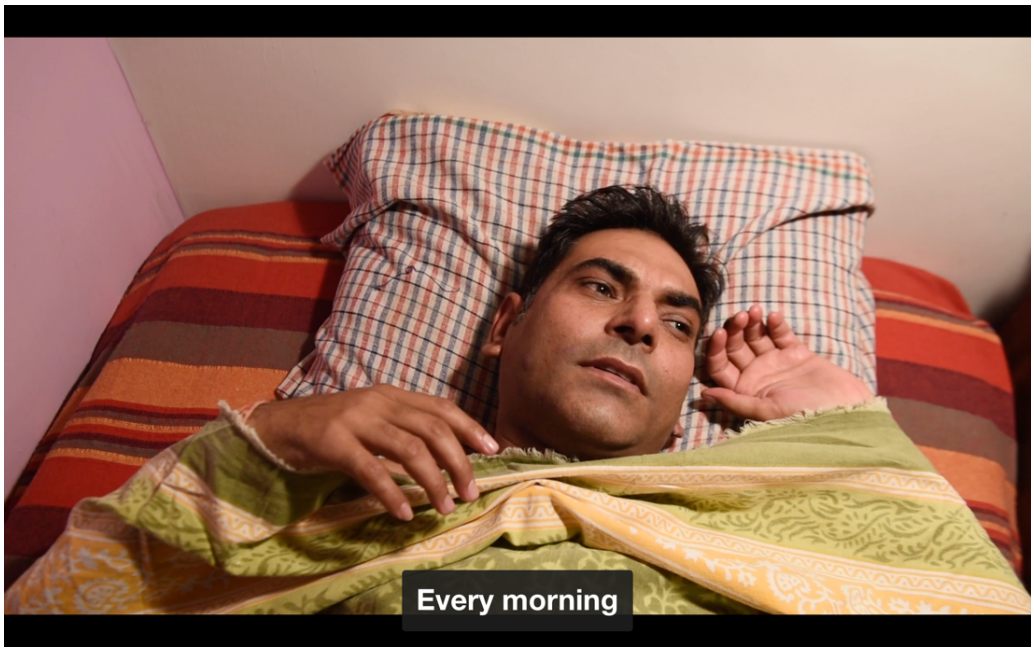
[22] Narrain & Gupta, (2011), *Law Like Love*, xxv; Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*, 271; also, Dave, (2012), *Queer*, 90.
[23] These two incidents were crucial juncture among the queer activists and NGO groups come together. See: chapter one for detail discussion; also see: Lawrence Cohen, (2007), "Song for Pushkin". Daedalus, Vol. 136, No. 2, On Sex (Spring),103-115.
[24] Sara Ahmed, (2012), *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, (London: Duke University Press), 94.
[25] See: Eve Kofofsky Sedgwick, (1990), *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

suggestion that "no 'we' should be taken for granted" in the sense that we must consider such consolidating forms of identity in the context of ethical reflection.[26] And, continuing this discussion of self, another point to consider is a remark made by Bersani. In his self-reflective and evocative terms Bersani says, "I discover, in re-reading myself, that I have become an ambitious "we" — a fact, I both welcome and find somewhat troubling. Who are these others I repeatedly add to myself?"[27]

For my conversation here, it will also be helpful to invoke Jacques Rancière, who reconfigures the question of the subject of the rights of man. While engaging with political thinkers such as Marx and Arendt, Rancière describes the emergence of the "new landscapes of humanity" upon which he expresses his suspicion of this idea of the 'rights of man' now extended to the right of citizens. As he put it, "What lies behind this strange shift from Man to Humanity and from Humanity to the Humanitarian? The actual subjects of these Rights of Man became Human Rights."[28] As he discusses Arendt's work in 'Perplexities of the Rights of Man,' where she equated "abstractedness" with "men's rights," Rancière calls the 'abstract life', a deprived life, a life away from politics, or the private life.[29] His work has been extremely valuable to me in understanding how human rights and marginalisation intersect within HIV/AIDS and NGO spaces. According to Rancière, "what is given is not only a situation of inequality. It is also an inscription, a form of visibility of

[26] Susan Sontag, (2004), *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London: Penguin Books), 6.
[27] Leo Bersani, (1995), *Homo*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 7.
[28] Rancière, (2010), "Who is the Subject of Human Rights of Man?" in *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*, (New York, London: Continuum International Publishing Group) trans. Steven Corcoran, 62-75.
[29] Arendt, (1998), *Human Condition.*

equality."[30] In the concluding chapter, I will briefly discuss notions of visibility and what is at stake in making marginal communities visible.



Figures 12 and 13: Still from moving image work entitled *"They Called it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020.

[30] In the following chapter, I will briefly discuss visibility and what is at stake in making a marginal community visible. Ranciere, (2010), *Who*, 62-75.

In following what Rancière has outlined, I come to this analysis that neoliberal humanitarian attitudes towards the underclasses make them more susceptible to exploitation. Consequently, the underclasses (sometimes proactively) expose their vulnerability even more, to access their 'rights' (to be human) which are the opposite end of the same — *we*. Saying it differently, inhabiting vulnerabilities under these conditions is a predetermined agreement by which the underclasses are made legitimate, thus the system marginalises them further. In the 'Powers of Freedom', Nikolas Rose describes this condition as a "regime of civility" in which minority groups remain outside. In addition, Rose explains his observation of the status of the underclasses within the governing architecture of the state, that — "the 'urban [underclasses]' becomes a new way of codifying this socially problematic and heterogeneous population of anti-citizens."[31]

: public, private and queerness

The foundation of such liberatory political practices as we can see, was laid down much earlier.[32] Practices like these tend to fetishise "possibilities and hopes" in the same way that the NGOs have attempted to restore faith in the same system that creates inequalities and maintains them. The lawyers and activists who vouched for this, believed in a much broader notion of privacy, that travels with you, where you

[31] Nikolas Rose, (2004), *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), reprint, 88.
[32] ABVA, (1991), *Less than Gay*, (supra: chapter 1:74)

go.[33] However, in material terms these concepts operates differently. Privacy – at least in Indian context, refers to something enclosed, and in-between, such as a closet — thus invisible. Jürgen Habermas's concept of the 'Public Sphere' in which he traces its genesis can be a helpful tool here to exemplify my point about how these 'very-exposed-out-there-lives' of the underclasses, were made invisible. Habermas suggests that "bourgeois individuals" are principally "private individuals", who assemble themselves to form a public, who manipulate opinions and put pressure on the public sphere, which then "privatises" (meaning makes invisible) the interests of the poor and marginalised.[34] Although, his inquiry into bourgeois society reveals that these privatised individuals were "not reducible to "society"; they only entered into it, so to speak, out of a private life that had assumed institutional form in the enclosed space of the patriarchal conjugal family."[35] Arendt, also noted the "privative" nature of privacy, and its absence of something in life, and in the context of my project here, I would like to emphasise that this 'something' is the visible social lives of the underclasses. This is something that one only invokes to protect the privacy of the middle-class people.[36] However, promises were made to the underclasses to ensure their safely from the law's tyranny.

[33] In this short interview for 'Youth Ki Awaaz' (voices of youth), Arvind Narrain discusses the notions of privacy according to the Naz, 2009 judgement. See: youtu.be/7ZNhSXMxGik (last accessed on 8th September 2021).
[34] Jürgen Habermas, (1991), *Structural Transformation of Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* (New York: MIT), 27-129. The thesis is taking issue with this as the Kothi and perhaps many other so-called 'subaltern' groups or collectives are only ever 'public.'
[35] Habermas, (1991), 46.
[36] Such as the case of the ABVA petition, followed by the 2009 verdict emphasising privacy as core value.

Arendt says provocatively is that they (the oppressed communities) were "deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, […] …private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist."[37] Furthermore, in "the politics of storytelling", Michael Jackson, while reading Arendt, observes the tension between private and public interests. Jackson says that the "power relations between private and public realms imply a politics of experience."[38] Thus, inescapably so, these public litigations seek the provision of privacy, in exchange, for protecting the closet. Whereas Kothi continues to bend the rules and occupy the public space in the plain sight, in fact turning public into the closet.

Figure 14: Still from moving image work entitled *"They Called it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020.

[37] Arendt, (1998), *The Human Condition*, 58.
[38] Michael Jackson, (2002), *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press), 11.

interlude: garden of eros

I looked at him closely and more quickly
(One can, without taking one's eyes off an object, look very quickly.
At that moment my "gaze" swooped down on the image).
In a few seconds he would disappear from the screen.

"Go ahead. You can pick him off."
Jean Genet[39]

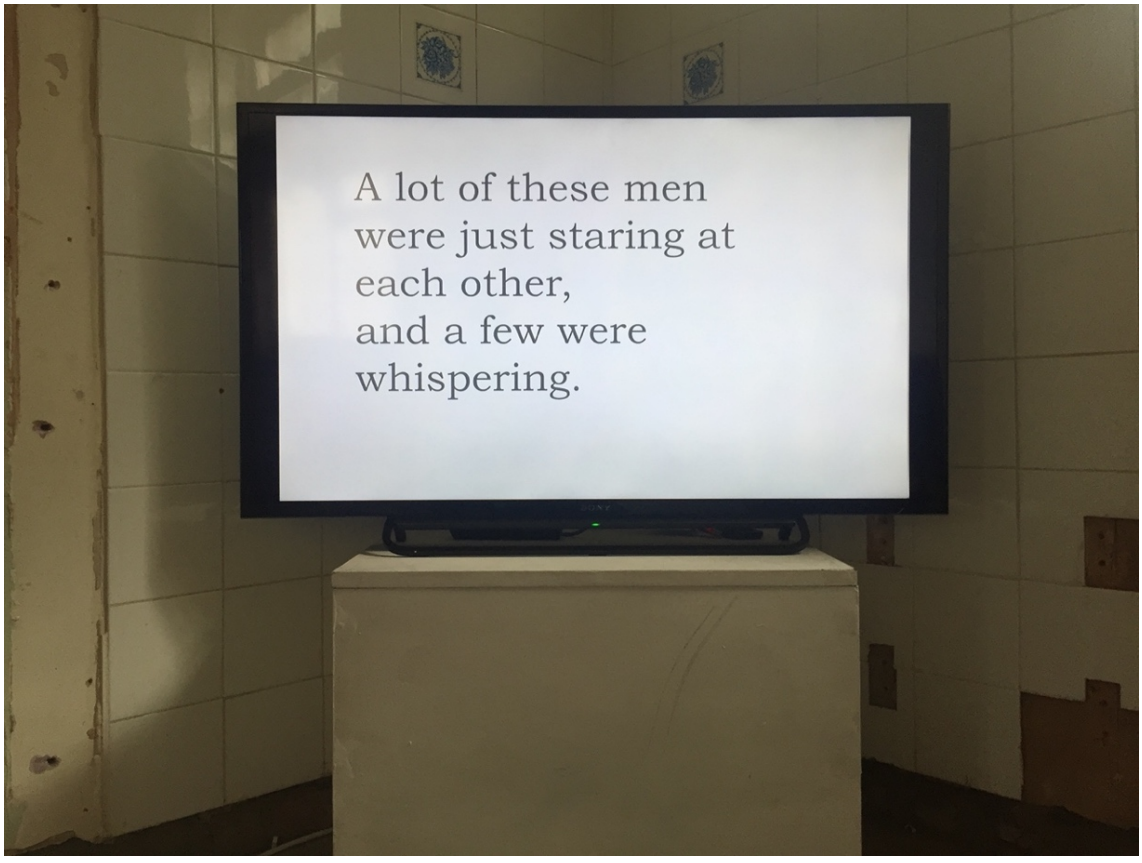


Figure 15: Installation stills of a moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros,"* 2017.

This work is a result of walking in the cruising sites of Delhi. The story came first, see poetic interruptions no. 21. On a later walk Polaroids were used precisely to capture the ephemeral nature of queerness in these spaces. They are devoid of any identifiable markers to keep the anonymity of the place. It was sheer coincidence to find affinity with expressions in Genet's Funeral Rites. I wrote the story during the first year of my PhD, but the video was made a year later. However, they were still my early years of using the English language.

[39] Jean Genet, (1969), *Funeral Rites*, (New York: Grove Press, Inc), 50, (kindle version).

Figure 16: Still from a moving image work entitled "Garden of Eros" 2017

Interruption poetic no. 21

Bus stop that leads to the *Garden of Eros*, 1995.

Hawa Main Udta Jaye Mera Laal Dupatta Malmal Ka, Ho Jee… Ho Jee…

(Be My Red Muslin Scarf that Flies in the Air, Oh Listen…)

A young, pretty boy walked past Amit,
singing this song from a 1950s Hindi movie.
Amit's temptation to hear a little more, made him to follow *that* pretty boy.
Not knowing where this path led. Soon he realised that he ended up in a park,
where a lot of men were roaming around, all behaving strangely.
Many of these men were just staring at each other, and a few were whispering.
Some disappearing and reappearing from the bushes.
As if, they were all under some spell. They seemed possessed by this supernatural
power, just like science fiction movies. It was very peculiar to see this.
Then one man smirked at him and slurred — *first time huh?*

Another man smirked and then stared some more, ambiguous but continued, indeed "cruising is not an easy art of looking."[40] Kothi have found a way to mark their existence, even if it is a most unflattering one, their campness makes them visible.[41] A homage to all the lovers who have cruised before, the Garden of Eros, is an allegory of one of several walks, around cruising sites in Delhi, where I encountered people — who were just like me. I began walking on these furtive grounds as a meditative method, which is also deeply personal for my story-making practice.

But these walks are more than just a mere method, they are most certainly a form of resistance, since there is a risk involved. A risk of being exposed. A risk that was noted earlier by Alok Gupta and Jyoti Puri that most Kothi and Hijra are implicated and arrested under vagrancy laws for loitering and becoming public nuisances rather than booked under the section 377. Therefore, this 'walking' becomes a political gesture to assert one's presence, to 'be', and to be constantly in the process of becoming. And, in this queer-becoming one finds endless stories that emerge into the practice. Perhaps, this is a minor form of resistance, but resistance, nonetheless.

During these walks, I am triggered to remember certain things. My stories are a reflection of those memories. These memories will show how lives are narrativised

[40] Nicholas de Villiers, (2007), Glancing, Cruising, Staring: Queer Ways of Looking, https://brightlightsfilm.com/glancing-cruising-staring-queer-ways-looking/#.YT_KwC1Q1QI (Last accessed on 13th September, 2021)
[41] Susan Sontag, (1964), *Notes on Camp*.

and mixed, fictionalised in the strangest sense. It will also illustrate how chronologies of life events overlap, dither, and merge. The 'rehearsal for life' starts to play when *Kothi* and MSM express their narratives. These stories or anecdotes based on memories elicited by the walks make them a form of 'living archive' and a source of knowledge. Sometimes they are directly featured in the moving image work, such as the in case of the "Garden of Eros."[42] My practice of storytelling involves exploring notions of belonging and a sense of self-worth among *Kothi* and MSM communities. These notions are especially crucial in locations where sexuality, identity and self-hood are being formed, such as cruising parks, NGO centres and HIV clinics. The purpose of this exploration has been to show how these types of sites function in relation to representing Kothi and MSM communities. This is because the narrative has only been written from the perspective of the people behind the HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

[42] Charan Singh, (2017), Garden of Eros, 3 minutes (an extended and updated version will be screen in an online exhibition). See for further details in the List of works.

Figure 17: Installation stills of a moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros,"* 2017, was exhibited at daybreaks. http://www.provarca.com/events/daybreak-2/ (This work will be screened in an online exhibition)

: law, as a (pre-)occupation

This is a meditation towards understanding what seems to be nothing but persistent disparities. In this way, the legal system becomes the site of a continual struggle.[43] Consequently, it occupies our imaginations. For example, in "Sexual States" Jyoti Puri demonstrates through her extensive research on how the governing sexuality is tied to the invention of modern state apparatuses and their implementation.

[43] Although, homosexuality is decriminalised but the fights for marriage equality continues to occupy space within the queer movement in India. The lawyers Menaka Guruswamy and Arundhati Kutju were invited to the *Oxford Union 2020* to speak about what they called "the marriage project." See: youtube.com/user/OxfordUnion/videos, (Last accessed on 4th August 2021).

> "Even though MSM and other socially disadvantaged groups were the basis on which the Naz Foundation writ moved the Delhi High Court, working-class gay men and MSM are the ones least likely to have access to the privacy of a home or a hotel, leaving them exposed to the threat of Section 377. In fact, sexual contact, especially among working-class, non-English-speaking males, Kothis, and hijras, frequently occurs in public settings such as parks and urinals, which adds to their vulnerability from the police and cancels privacy in the sense of safety from intrusion." [44]

Puri witnessed that the "policing related to Section 377 likely imperils those (Kothi, Hijra, Dalits and religious minorities) communities that are seen as inherently hypersexual and criminal."[45] It is evident that police violence is widespread, and in fact, one of the reasons that the passengers of the *Bus* incident (as told in the beginning of this chapter) had refrained all three NGO workers from any police intervention. In Puri's words, "police violence was openly and unapologetically endorsed in the case of Hijras," and I would emphasise that this includes those who appear to be Hijra, or non-normative male or female.[46] It is precisely due to the inequalities that are inherent to the rule of law and its apparatus that human rights are not always equally extended to everyone.[47] The subaltern continue to struggle with the politics of 'we.' Through section 377, the 'we' also was being adopted into the language of the 'closet' and 'coming out', adding another layer of challenges to

[44] Jyoti Puri, (2016), *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 143.
[45] This danger is something that I have become familiar, while working with Kothi and Hijras population. Puri, (2016), *Sexual States,* 75.
[46] Puri, (2016), *Sexual*, 92.
[47] See a detail analysis of persisting inequality within human right. Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl.*

the underclasses while they lacked ethical reflection. It is a challenge, alas, that the 'they' are often not even aware of this paradox that I have demonstrated earlier, in the form of a question asked by *Buaji*. In the fight to uphold the constitution, the legal judgements going back-and-forth created a number of riddles that became visibly challenging. At last, on September the 6th, 2018, Section 377 was lifted, and homosexuality was decriminalised.[48] At the time of the first judgement in 2009, it was unpredictable that a 105-page document would be reduced to a soundbite. This 2009 judgement said categorically that *the consensual sex between two adults in a private space, has been decriminalised*, but this became more apparent after the Supreme Court's 2018 verdict.

: the closet[49]

A conundrum of opacities and transparencies, the closet has served as a "defining structure for gay oppression in this century" according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the author of 'The Epistemology of the Closet', a foundational text in queer theory.[50] Closeted-ness in her work is theorised as performative, which renders "speech (as an) act of a silence." The work illustrates that without the invention of

[48] During this work the anti-sodomy law section 377 in India was turned down for the second time, making the closet a critical issue, yet again. See: Navtej vs Government of India.

[49] See glossary for *Closet*: The metaphor of the closet has been a dominating force within queer culture due to its overwhelmingly controlling nature, particularly among gay men, which portrays the overtly saturated subjective consciousness of the USA, due to the mythologisation of Stonewall. This lends itself to other English-speaking countries such as UK, Canada, and Australia.

[50] Sedgwick builds her arguments on the earlier work by the scholars of sexuality and traces the invention of the word "homosexual." It emerged within Western discourses in the nineteenth century, which congealed the "heterosexual," and to overcome this crisis she leads the conversations beyond the essentialist-social constructionist. See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, (1991), The Epistemology of the Closet, (UK: Penguin reprint), (Originally published in 1990 with Berkley: University of California Press).

the homosexual (through various power structures), the category of heterosexual is meaningless. Yet, the same societal structures pressure homosexual men to conceal their sexual orientation. The closet, at least for Kothi and probably for everyone who is oppressed and considered a 'victim' or 'target' or 'helpless' or 'untouchable' – is absolutely hiding in plain sight. This is the closet, around which to make oneself seen, requires a kind of opacity (which is a necessity). This does not mean one *must* leave the closet; it means one must occupy the present as something no longer transparent. However, drawing attention back to my project, what is perilous for the Kothi, is their gender, something, perhaps the most challenging thing they can conceal, like the way it revealed itself on a moving bus, which makes them more susceptible to public scrutiny. Therefore, the concept of the 'closet' cannot be universally applied, and it certainly does not work for the Kothis. Even though for an inquiry such as this, which has anti-imperial and post-colonial intentions, it is more complex than reducing to simply a class argument. At this point, I would like to diverge and offer another perspective on this neo-colonial project — human rights. Rahul Rao muses this eloquently, saying that there is "something ironic, maybe even embarrassing" to pursue a project that intends to critique colonialism, whilst simultaneously clinging onto neo-colonial frameworks such as coming out.[51] Thus, the liberal subjects of desire are implicated by this deep-seated colonial thinking.

[51] Rahul Rao, (2020), *Out in Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality,* (Oxford University Press, UK), xx.

: the opacity

At this juncture of the closet, Nicholas de Villiers's work on queer ethics and subjectivity could be a valuable point of departure, for this project.[52] In his exploration of the idea of opacity and its relation to the closet space, Villiers describes the idea of 'opacity' is a tactic that "allow the possibility of non-meaning and non-knowledge as 'queer' strategies" and "opacity is visible only outside of the purity of the opposition opaque/transparent itself."[53] Opacity is an effective tactic, to conceal but also to reveal queerness, it becomes a 'necessity' – a concept discussed earlier.

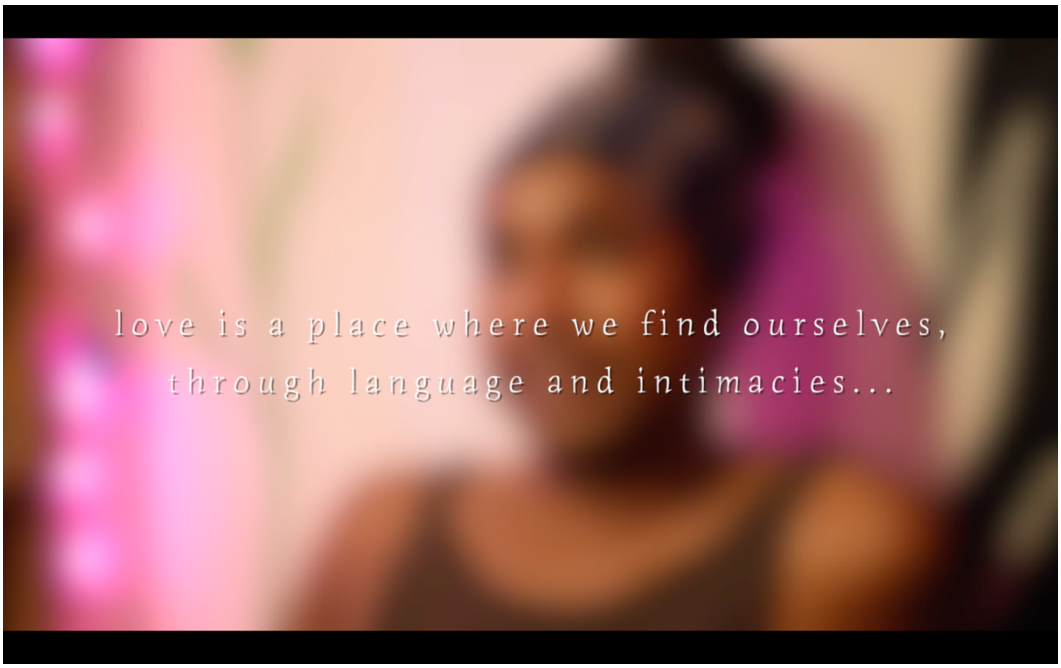


Figure 18: Still from moving image work entitled *"They Called it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020. This section of the work trying to have dialogue with the notions of opacity theorise by de Villers, but at the same time offering my homage to Derek Jarman's Blue.

[52] Nicholas de Villiers, (2012), *Opacity and the Closet: Queer tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press).
[53] Villiers, (2012), *Opacity*.

However, metaphorical understanding tends to alienate what Michael P Brown calls the "material dimensions to the closet", for which he relies on "geographic contexts" (locations, space, and places) to be able to illustrate the spatiality of the closet and to understand what social consequences it can have.[54] This work presents a critical 'geographic reading of desire,' one which complicates the closet by looking at race, class, and gender, while acknowledging the relationship between the globalisation of queer culture and postcolonialism (for example, we have discussed imperialism through language and culture in chapter one and three). Thus, Brown characterised this while referring to Butler's "work on performativity to date has made it difficult to envisage the closet as anything but a dead metaphor"[55] In contrast, Villiers' concept of 'queer opacity' and tactility for me is crucial as it continues to respond to the rhetorical ambiguity between speech and vision.[56] Since, as we have already explored a range of examples and perspectives on MSM and Kothi in the context of India, can I ask the question, 'if someone is out of the closet or not', be considered in isolation, ignoring the person's location? And, in different socioeconomic contexts, how do the concepts of public and private operate?

[54] Brown, (2000), *Closet Space*.
[55] Brawn, (2000), *Closet Space*, 28.
[56] Villiers, (2012), *Opacity*.

: who inherits the closet?

After AIDS the empirically recognised identity — Kothi, became the epitome of AIDS vulnerability in India.[57] Thus, a multi-layered sexuality and gendered subjectivity was created. By presenting text-based work in the context of the overtly produced victim narrative of *Kothi*, I have attempted to subvert the one-sided access to 'their' (Kothi) lives. In this regard, this framework of opacity emerges as a useful device to create a 'listening-encounter.'[58] It forces the reader to spend 'time' instead of merely 'passing' through the image. Therefore, in is a tactic to 'cannibalise' time, and the meaning of the work is shaped by the reception and the time spent. In other words, time is an important apparatus that feeds-off from the time we spent with the work. The multidimensional and unfolding nature of the textual work confronts the reader with unexpected events, which they tend to avoid in a two-dimensional sphere. For example, in "They *Called it Love, But Was it Love?* I have employed 'opacity' in a very literal sense (see figure 18), precisely to activate the notion of *waiting*, which in turn facilitates listening in my practice. Especially video work such as this, where one expects a dénouement to be revealed on the screen, but the duration of the work demands a wait, a suspension, a surrender.

To arrive at my critical conclusion in this chapter, I have argued by situating those ethical choices concerning the "closet" for an Indian context that would

[57] And since as the post-colonial sibling nations 'we' have the same cultural roots, other South Asian countries has their variants. See: Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*; Boyce, (2007), *Conceiving*; also see Khanna, (2009), *Taming*.
[58] Golding, (2018), *Friendship*.

ultimately be the subject of this supposedly dark and repressive space — the Kothi. As I have also demonstrated, in India, 'queer' emerges as an exceptionally opaque political identity and allows the middle classes to metaphorically impose 'coming out' as a critical event to create another trial for the marginalised and economically challenged populations.

Figure 19: Still from moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros"* 2017.

When we try to understand a person's inability to confront their sexuality, we often tend to generalise their situation by emphasising their oppressions, which are easier to comprehend by a wider audience. Hence, I argue that suspending the question of a clearly defined identity is not the same as repressing it. It cannot be delineated as a repressed identity. It does not suffocate, it is a more pragmatic but truthful

rendering of the closet, allowing more space for contemplation. Golding provides us ways to comes to terms with:

> "…the closet, with its secrets and wounds and dreams and escape plans, inserted neatly between shoes, trousers, shirts and suits. Each [of which] has its own set of rules and regulations, its own dangers and provocations, its own pungent aromas, mess, and light source poetics."[59]

Through such propositions, I would like to locate the closet inside-out, on the bus, in the small town where Buaji lives, and on the street, in public places where '*She*' (from the story of *Her*) would stand and listen to the music and hum. People who embody these utterances and their relation to the economies of culture, and geographic locations, constitute a radical resistance. Even though the location of the bus stop is the exact location of the first gay protest in Delhi, however, all three protagonists came from the "margins" and brought their elsewhere-ness with them, into the "centre", which they disrupt by their presence, they no longer embody the "closet". The ongoing demand for visibility also suggests that the closet is not an outdated subject at all.[60] Through this project, the underlying intention has been to identify the gaps and slippages that have long been ignored within the technologies of doing queer politics, vis-à-vis AIDS activism and human rights discourse.

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[59] Johnny Golding, (2013), "~~After~~ the Dark Room: *Ana-materialism and the Sensuous Fractalities of Speed & Light* (or does the image still speak a thousand words?)", in *On the Verge of Photography*, Daniel Rubinstein, Johnny Golding & Andy Fisher, eds. (Birmingham, UK: ARTicle Press), 141. The *Closet* for Kothi in this sense is both a hiding place but also works as a public and open space, which make it breathable.

[60] See: Brown, (2000), *Closet Space*; and Villiers, (2012), *Opacity*; also, Golding, (2013), ~~After~~ the Dark.

"Visibility is an inadequate rubric because of an old liberal predicament—visibility invites surveillance—but also because regimes of affect and tactility conduct vital information beyond the visual."[61] In the next chapter, I will discuss concepts of visibility, representation, and their implications on underclass queer lives. However, first, to reflect on the usefulness of opacity and to summarise it in photographic terms, let me say, that it is the darkness of the room that makes the image visible, without which no image would have been possible, and the image, a symbol of something present, would not have existed. And without darkness we would not have been able to understand the importance what it means to see the light of day.

[61] Puar, (2007), *Assemblages*, 187.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Riddle of Visibilities: an ethical turn

"Here, we have a double problem—vilifying earlier gay communities' lifeways and responses to state violence, a problem that stems in part from the perpetual adoption of the narrative put forward […]"

Cindy Patton[1]

"Yet this desired 'turn away' from queer 'illegitimacy' – and the 'turn towards' rights and becoming a 'successful' queer – might be understood as the manifestation of a struggle and a search for legibility, rather than for freedom."

Ratna Kapur [2]

"… but scholars have not clarified how the different element of subjectivity braid together historically and culturally."

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson [3]

The question of visibilities has been a concern within queer politics for a very long time. This preoccupation, as is often the case with subaltern discourse, is that it is inclined its interest towards the differences, gaps, holes, absences, and intervals — that were left open. Yet the question has been uncritically maintained despite of the apparent lack of interest in the common good or perhaps, this is precisely a way of persisting with absence. It does, however, suggest that there is a relationship,

[1] Cindy Patton, (2020), "Foreword," in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crisis*, edited by Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, Nishant Shahani, (Durham: Duke University Press), xi.
[2] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 232.
[3] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, (2020), *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World,* (New York: New York University Press), 10.

nonetheless. Taking my cues from this visible invisibility, I have set up this project to tell stories in such a way that not only makes representations visible but also invents a gentler 'knowledge system' as discussed earlier. I rely on the *makeshift-ness* of the project, it allows me to imagine this radical relationship, which is a particularly useful aspect of my work, as it speaks on a minor frequency, avoiding grand claims, while at the same time, it is committed to creating cracks and ripples.[4] In order to do this, it is absolutely essential to complicate queer histories and go beyond the flawed process of merely evidencing something. So, if we are to consider the task of an ethical visibility, it is important to remember that "when previously hidden people rise into the public eye, it functions as entertainment; it is part of the violence of life."[5] Thus, as I have shown, since the construction of identity thrived on the differential quality of the political, these arguments alluded to binarism – 'us against them.' I have also shown, without much effort, one can find a plethora of representations of queer people that are reductive – sometimes they start with phrases such as "a woman trapped in a man's body."[6]

These forms of visibility strategies not only trivialise queer people's desires but also devalue their fight for dignity by depicting them as unhappy in their body.

[4] On Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *minor literature* and *crack* see: Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature; and A Thousand Plateaus (respectively), also see, Leela Gandhi's theorisation of *makeshift* nature of the postcolonial thoughts, see: Postcolonial Theory, 2nd edition (2019).

[5] Reina Gossett, Eric A Stanley, Johanna Burton, (2017), *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, (USA: MIT Press), 191.

[6] Like in many other parts of the world, this phrase has been used in many ways in India since the beginning of the 1990s to describe homosexual, gay, transgender, MSM, transsexual. Even after sex-change surgery, people have often been described in such a way. Surabhi Rastagi, "Growing Up As A Girl Trapped Inside A Boy's Body Was Not Easy: Gazal Dhaliwal," https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/gazal-dhaliwal-transwoman-screenplay-writer/ (Last accessed on 12th September 2021)

That is where the limits of visibility end, where the conversations around visibility get 'stalled' and instead of helping visibility can turn into a harmful tool, as it is designed to serve a specific purpose that is not necessarily aligned with community needs. During this research, I come to understanding which suggests that these NGO driven labels were blurry – they were confusing, and overlapping, thus were mis-read most of the time. Moreover, these labels were used in multiple ways by not just the populations they were meant to refer to but also by the administrative bodies created to govern them.[7] Take this example of a publication from 2017, which used the words 'Kothi' and 'ladyboy' interchangeably. Here the author makes an arbitrary claim, which comes from similar unnuanced readings of Hijra and Kothi culture:

> "Such terms are more in usage among the hijra/transgender community or gay men belonging to the lower strata. The majority of educated or middle-class gay men do not prefer to be addressed as kothi or panthi. For them, these terms are replaced by the western terms "top" and "bottom." […] …Hence, use of terms like gay, panthi, kothi, top or bottom and active or passive, although common to all, have become more subjective."[8]

While this may state a certain degree of facts, but still does not ask the question — why some communities remained poor? Again, the author suggests in an insular

[7] It was noted by Khan, that "…the generalization of the term "MSM" has implications for studying HIV risks as well. This behaviour-oriented term has effectively masked the sexual identity of men who engage in same-sex behaviour, potentially impairing long-term goals of self-actualisation and social justice" Shivanada Khan and Omar A. Khan, (2006), "The Trouble with MSM", American Journal of Public Health. 2006 May; 96(5): 765–766. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470585/ (Last accessed on 12th September 2021).
[8] Yeshwant Naik, (2017), *Homosexuality in the Jurisprudence of the Supreme Court of India*, (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing), 119-120.

way, that the role of "a *Kothi* or a *ladyboy* helps in getting the right Sari and jewellery for the Hijra to be worn…"[9] As if the Kothi could only exist either through feminine gender roles or when suffering oppression. There seems to be no other avenues for them to become visible. Moreover, this marriage of gender roles and oppression does not indicate resolution, but merely demonstrates 'an' inability. In spite of the way Indian feminists uncompromisingly critique "the manner in which concepts developed in the global North" have always assumed "universal validity," it is difficult to overlook some queer activists who may be tempted to seek legitimacies from the global North by installing concepts such as the 'closet', without applying an ethical lens to their theorisation of the subaltern subject.[10]

> "There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself. And everyone knows that to go somewhere else there are routes, signs, "maps" – for an exploration, a trip. – That's what books are. Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds." [11]

[9] Naik, (2017), *Homosexuality*, 182.
[10] Nivedita Menon, (2015), "Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India", Economic & Political Weekly, April 25, 2015, vol L no 17, 37-44.
[11] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, (1986), *The Newly Born Woman*, (Eng. trans. Betsy Wing), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 72.

Figures 20 & 21: Still from moving image work entitled *"They Called it Love, But Was it Love?"* 2020.

Therefore, it is important to underscore the questions of the void in representation; the strategies that have emerged in queer culture in India, especially when these issues attach themselves to human rights discourse "where non-liberal epistemological spaces are often equated with illiberalism, primitiveness, irrationality and threat."[12] Because of these reasons, it becomes crucial for the subaltern to seek refuge in places other than the NGOs, without such scenario they would be continuously mediated through their vulnerability.

I have demonstrated this specific paradox by giving an example of how the term "queer" and "subaltern queer" were often used among activists in India. This became more apparent in their grand gestures of 'reaching out' or 'platforming the marginalised', which began to whisper that there is a separation between two kinds of queers, even though the language of 'we' persists in their articulation of queerness.[13] In such circumstances, it is difficult for people to initiate dialogue to deconstruct identity politics. Whether it is the identity of a nation, of a culture, or of a particular community, the structure around us forces us to stabilise identity. In other words, we are conditioned and intuitively compelled to stabilise identity based on what we have experienced over time. It does not come without punitive measures, as noted by Bersani, who said that the "…stabilising of identity [is] inherently a disciplinary project."[14]

[12] Kapur, (2018), *Fishbowl*, 13.
[13] See: Cohen, (2005), *Kothi Wars*; also, see: Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*.
[14] Leo Bersani, (1995), *Homo*, 3.

Therefore, ethically speaking, subaltern queers are not represented on their own terms from the courtroom to academia, media, and culture, even if they remain very much part of the discourse.[15] In other words, underclass queers continue to represent the socio-political configuration of the law — but they are visibly invisible within the discourse of queer desire and pleasure. Therefore, in this project, use of language is imperative, as it can break-open this discourse of representation, for which I propose an instrumentalised language in the making of the many folds of one's identity visible. Furthermore, Teju Cole pledges, in the following evocative terms, that to use such tactics makes us witness and appreciate that there could be "a conflict at the margins of modern life, visible only in speech."[16]

In these conditions presencing through storytelling, a true or rather meaningful solidarity would be an understanding of 'ethical-sameness' that not only acknowledges differences but also gently invents a way to bridge the space in-between. This invention is not something someone 'comes-up' with on their own. It is the very essence of an 'encounter' that I have proposed in this work, makes possible, the emergence of a collective care and pleasure.[17]

[15] The Kothis, Hijras and other marginal groups regularly provide a 'body' to speak of, as 'evidence' to the arguments concerning state violence, police harassment, rape, and murder. See: Puri, (2016), *Sexual States*; Also see: Svati Shah, (2015), "Queering Critiques of Neoliberalism in India: Urbanism and Inequality in the Era of Transnational "LGBTQ" Rights", Antipode Vol. 47 No. 3, 635–651.
[16] Teju Cole, (2011), "Fourteen," *Open City: A Novel*, (New York: Random House), 270, (kindle version).
[17] See Muñoz, (2011), *Utopia*; and, Golding, (2018), *Friendship*; and also see Puar, (2007), *Assemblages*. By representation I mean an intellectual visibility, as in terms of photographic or visual schema, even the middle classes are deprived of representation, this too is noted by artist Sunil Gupta in the eighties when he embarked on his quest for a gay image (as mentioned in chapter one).

Interruption poetic no. 22

"So — rather than saying
LGBTKH or
using the more popular term LGBTIQ+,
could it be HKLBG that is
the Hijra, Kothi, Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and the rest."
She contemplates.

the image: writing

> "An image is powerful not necessarily because of anything specific it offers the viewer, but because of everything it apparently also takes away from the viewer."
> Trinh T. Minh-ha[18]

Considering that although, 'visibility' is a fundamental component of queer political and rights-based discourse, it has limits as a form of representation. In fact, the term itself has been overused. Although, as I seek to represent the Kothi, I do not assume that this subject already exists. Thus, I approach my work within the realms of 'speaking-with' rather than 'speaking for', it allows me to create a more nuanced representation of some sort, that gradually unfolds. By which I mean that I refrain from the kind of reductive representations that are readily available. Instead, the subaltern subject of my creative inquiry emerges, as one encounters my work. It mediates the relation between reader and text. This renewed sense of visibility

[18] Trinh T. Minh-ha, (1999), *Cinema Interval*, (New York: Routledge), xi.

directs us to a more ethical way of making images and using language as theorised by Jacques Rancière who observes that, "words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. […] There is [a] visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words."[19] Instead of assuming an exempting 'power' and authority over a subject to represent him or her, we should undertake a responsibility towards the subject, a responsibility that comes with accountability and ethical engagement. [20] This requires that we listen, reflect, and learn.

Figure 22: Still from moving image work entitled *"Garden of Eros"* 2017.

[19] Jacques Rancière, (2007), *The Future of the Image*, Translated by Gregory Elliott, (New York: Verso), 7.
[20] See an example of my writing practice in which I try to find an ethical way to counter the problematics of naming. Charan Singh, (2021), Photographic Rehearsal: A Still Unfolding-Narratives, *Trans Asia Photography Review*: Volume 11, Issue 1: *Trans*, Spring 2021.

Interruption poetic no. 23

Love; attempt #2

(Epiphany. probability. pure want)
"I am a very rational person,
and I don't believe in love at first sight."
He told me and insisted that

"I must think twice before falling in love with any strangers that
I meet at the park."
And I said to him that
"I do not contemplate, it just happens.
I have no control over it, the ache doesn't let me decide,
nor let me sleep until I see a glimpse of him before my day finishes.
Even in my dream I long for him.

The constant biting of the nails, the waiting for his text message,
even hoping that those annoying marketing calls would be his,
and unconsciously making two cups of tea in the middle of night,
even if I'm alone in the house; what is all that?

About which, he said
"I have seen too many Bollywood movies; I should stop watching them."
And then he laughed at me.

Ultimately, as a visual activist, I must question the modes of representation that are available to me to in order to ensure the Kothi's dignity is preserved. So, to make subaltern lives visible in language, to contain their queerness gently, I often returned to Benjamin, who noted how stories are an incredibly powerful tool. The use of storytelling in my work has been an exploration of what it can facilitate for queer politics and discourse that Kothi have inherited.

It has forced me to reconsider the questions of how NGO narratives have presented a certain kind of story about the Kothi population. Hannah Arendt (mentioned earlier in chapter three) reminded us that history is a "piece of a story" which could have many beginnings, but it does not depend on an end. So, how can these rigid narratives be subverted? Given my intention of speaking in a minor frequency it requires an additional move — a meticulous rehearsal.

My resistance is therefore amplified through writing, which in turn leads me to improvise as I write more and more. As mentioned earlier, these stories offer a subjective point of view, which perhaps might be able to create a *possibility* for change, rather than being a mute object or an ornament in someone else's narrative. This rehearsal in writing (stories) allows the Kothi to speak. The question then becomes how does a sideways move — re-situate discourse in order to activate the notion of encounter, and how these temporal gestures of reading and encountering work produce a more gentle and more fluid way to understand one's identity. However, this has nothing to do with a lot of dystopian fiction written that

seeks to dismantle the order of patriarchy, especially by feminist writers, for example 'Sultana's Dream', a novel in which a female protagonist dreams of a genderless society.[21] On the contrary, I believe that even after enduring oppressive regimes of power, the Kothi refuses to be tamed and is capable of subverting gender.

In fact, the perversity of Kothi's dream as it were, lies in his/her ability to switch and manipulate gender, a world that Kothi sees for themselves has infinite possibilities. Therefore, going sideways does not entail a landing nor does it imply returning to the concept of individualism, rather it calls for an ethical listening-encounter. A queer turn, an impulse — to step away from power, and in that profound silence, one is able to hear Kothi's mumbles and their *inaudible* voices.

[21] Originally publish, in 1905 in 'The Indian Ladies Magazine' was tide turner. In this feminist utopia, Hossain talks about a "Lady Land", where woman does not have to vail, it was riveting, at the time, this text become template for many feminists' fiction to come. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, (2018), *Sultana's Dream*, illustrated edition, (Chennai: Tara Books Pvt Ltd.).

Interruption poetic no. 24

The Story of Her

(Unknown Date of Birth – 17th July 2004)[22]

The more I observed her closely, the more I realized that she did not need theory to exist, to belong, to perform desire, or to use the erotic to express, nor did she need to make any excuse to undo, her gender. At the same time, whenever she felt like it, she kept evolving and manipulating gender. She did not rely on anyone's narratives to make her presence.

I noticed how effortlessly she switched genders as she meandered between the bangles, on her way to the vegetables and through the music shops, only to switch again before returning home. Her final stop used to be the cassette store, especially if they played songs such as *Main Teri Hu Jaanam* and *Ramba Ho.*

She particularly liked the verses of *Ramba Ho,* a Bollywood rendition of *I Feel Love* by Donna Summer. While we stood on the street, she tried to lip-sync.

I could almost feel the music coming out of her body, swaying so close to the loudspeakers, sweeping away the dullness of the day, and turning everything afresh.

No matter how often she tried, she never got the lyrics right and confessed that, "only much later did she realize that those were English lyrics in a Hindi song," and it was a constant switch between the two languages.

"No wonder the English (lyrics) were not able to fit in my mouth," she said.

We both laughed and then sighed.

[22] I am influenced by in Hervé Guibert's writing, I intend to have dialogue with his work through my writing. Here, is an excerpt from an ongoing work, written in the form of an obituaries in the memory friends who passed-away due to medical complications caused by HIV. First published with Trans Asia Photography Review, Volume 11, Issue 1: *Trans*, Spring 2021, quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0011.105/--photographic-rehearsal-a-still-unfolding-narrative?rgn=main;view=fulltext#N12-ptr1. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021). See the Annex 1 for further context.

The neoliberal technology of visibility makes it difficult to discern — life from pathos, but this revisiting has helped me to tell the stories in the way I did. Thus, this project offers a critical tool to address key themes that have emerged in this thesis — a presencing of the voices of Kothi. This reflects in the ongoing nature of both the act of storytelling and the analytically constructed glossary provided at the beginning of the thesis, which, I argued is a 'queer tactic' that allows me to develop a multi-dimensional notion of queerness. Hence, 'Going Sideways' takes us to anther realm of possibility, pleasure, and subversion. Sideways is also akin to the notion of a horizon for me. It is always a process of queer-becoming, which often begins with an encounter. So, it is possible to say that these 'Sideways' strategies are capacious, perhaps they are borderless, and its porous edges can absorb desires that are yet-to-come and yet-to-be-expressed.

In this context, going sideways becomes an imperative tool to navigate this ongoing incompleteness, a world where one is always *becoming*, queer. Therefore, as Tessa Boffin so eloquently noted "… in a game of chess, the knight can move to the side as part of a forward advance."[23] But remember, this sideways game started with a foot soldier. Hence, it is the rise of a "foot soldier [who] moves to pawn; pawn takes queen (and indeed, becomes the queen)."[24] En Passant move – the 'going sideways' of reclaiming power, identity, and pleasure. It is exactly this move

[23] Tessa Boffin, (1992), "The Knights", Move, in *Stolen Glances: Lesbian Take Photographs,* eds Tessa Boffin & Jean Fraser, (London: Pandora, Harper Collin Publisher), 42-50.
[24] Johnny Golding, (2005), "Raw(hide): World War IV, Part 3, the Sequel," *positions: east asia cultures critique,* 13, no. 1, 263-284. muse.jhu.edu/article/185286.

that is sideways game, and that is why my stories that break into the thesis, along with the glossary offer tools to enable the visibility, sensuality and nuanced shifts in communities that are hidden in plain sight, therefore the emergence of this work is always-already sideways.

: poetics of resistance

> "Queerness […] there is no exact recipe for a queer endeavour,
> no a priori system that taxonomizes the linkages,
> disruptions, and contradictions into a tidy vessel."
> Jasbir K Puar [25]

Queerness indeed, is *tentacular,* which cannot be contained.[26] It comes with impossible possibilities – although it is a sweet paradox, not because it cannot be fixed but because it is brimming with possibilities to desire the impossible. Perhaps that is the only way to describe it as it involves intimacies of feeling, touching, caring, cruising, sex, and skin, but also extending solidarity, resisting, agitating, unarchiving monolithic histories, and of course continuous questioning. I have argued in this thesis that after the first judgment in 2009, there was a surge of a certain kind of queer representation, which assumed homogeneity of queer subjects in India, that did not speak to the margins. In fact, this sort of representation often

[25] Puar, (2007), *Assemblages*, xv.
[26] Donna J. Haraway, (2016), *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (New York: Duke University Press)

ignores the margin, by glamorising their challenges. Therefore, this thesis sought to reveal approaches that instead of opening were narrowing the way queer was understood, at the same time that rights were deferred, and queer realities were augmented. The translation of these realities informs my writing, filmic, and photographic practices. As an artist, I tried to find a way to register the violence of unsaying, and biased visual practice of unseeing the presence of Kothi and Hijra bodies. Especially at the juncture where the victim narratives have taken over the image of the Kothi. I do this through a story-telling practice where the 'closet' is in fact open but also hiding in plain sight. Stories that can enable a discourse of access to rights, and emotional poetics of a culture are heard. Stories that can produce a gentler knowledge system and have power to challenge the system that tries either to eradicate or to homogenise.

'Going Sideways' seeks to break the barrier that has led to misidentification and misrepresentation, thereby mistranslation of a minor culture of Kothis, that is intrinsic to the Indian subcontinent. In this analysis, I have tried to highlight the processes of a radical translation of queer lives as the primary tool to speak about the inadequacies of the global (and, by extension, colonial and neo-colonial) language for expressing gender and sexuality in India. In other words, this work also functions as a crucial framework that influences the way certain gender categories are seen and unseen.

'Going Sideways' is an artistic intervention. The form of this creative meditation is a collection of 'utterances', which I have called 'a rehearsal' for creating life, that is capable of conjuring up possibilities for subaltern queers. My works attempts a meditation, a contemplation of what we hold dear, the things that matter to us. It explores the notions of what we want to talk about ourselves – the poetics and politics of friendship, the eros and finding ways to extend solidarity with others at the periphery.

Thus, the key for my research has been speaking, sharing, and using language creatively. I tried to facilitate conversations about queer lives and enable a *listening-encounter* between people from across classes and cultures. The figure of the Kothi in my stories has often been seen to resist, reinventing themselves by reclaiming their rights and asserting their identity, instead of remaining obscure and unsayable. At last, I have also suggested we, as 'the subaltern,' are capable of integrating diverse voices though using a sideways method to create resistance between the forms and shapes that embody queer desire, despair, discontent, and dreams.

Interruption poetic no. 25

In our hope and despair

In pain, in sorrow,

In fear of indictment and intimidation,

We mourn, we cry,

We hope, we mumble,

We stammer,

And we speak – the truth to power…!

And, to remain a queer-becoming.

List of Works*

Photographic Rehearsal: A Still-Unfolding Narrative, 2021

How might photography illuminate the complexities of identities obscured and even erased by the legacies of empire that have shaped the very language within which we come to know and name our desires? In this an important critique, I consider the overlaps and contexts in which multiple identities can be claimed despite the challenges that a dominant English language culture poses for expressions of gender and sexuality.

Publishes at Trans Asia Photography Review, Volume 11, Issue 1: *Trans*, Spring 2021, quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0011.105/--photographic-rehearsal-a-still-unfolding-narrative?rgn=main;view=fulltext#N12-ptr1. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021).

They Called it Love, But Was it Love? 2020, 9 minutes

They Called it Love, But Was it Love? depicts scenes from the lives of 'Kothis' living in India. Reduced to a "risk group" by public health campaigns and misunderstood through Western notions of gender and sexuality, these protagonists have real lives and inhabit unique worlds with their own quests for fulfilment and love.

Commissioned by: Visual AIDS for Day With(out) Art 2020: TRANSMISSIONS, vimeo.com/476954118. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021).

Conversation: Among Four Friends, On Curating, 2019

This immersive conversation work explores the fluid nature of language and identity as mediated through the economy, education levels, and social locations that are not central to most conversations about HIV/AIDS. The conversation begins in a hospital room, amongst HIV positive people in Delhi; talking about the virus, the response from non-governmental agencies and the role constructed identity plays in their everyday life.

on-curating.org/issue-42-reader/among-four-friends-conversations-before-and-in-a-hospital-waiting-room.html#.YT0XYy1Q1QK. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021).

Lover's Quarrel, PROVA 4, 2018

In this dialoging work two lovers are rehearsing for their love and failing at the same time. This text accompanies a glossary on love, that is made up of several attempts on the subject from different viewpoints.

PROVA 4, School of Arts and Humanities Research Journal, Royal College of Art, 106-109. provarca.com/prova-journal-2/prova-4/. (Last accessed on September 11, 2021).

I Swallow Your Pride, Solitary Pleasures, 2018

This text is a confession taken from the diary of protagonist who lives in an Indian city, exploring desires, and myths around self-pleasure. It was written in diary-form as part of the solitary pleasure symposium that later was extended and included in the catalogue which coincided with the exhibition held at the Freud Museum, London in April-May 2018.

Edited by Marquard Smith, (2018) Solitary Pleasure, (London: Live Art Development Agency).

Garden of Eros, 3 minutes

This image and text work describe a typical day at a cruising park in Delhi. encountering other men man's perspective who is visiting this park for the first time. Locations such as these were frequently visited by HIV/AIDS workers distributing safer-sex leaflets.

provarca.com/events/daybreak-2/

Kothi, 2016 5 minutes

This works explores childhood memories of encountering autobiographical events of three individual. This work illustrated the idea that when one felt different; that difference was not always easy to describe.

Glossary

This glossary aims to contextualize this research project, so that the telling of the stories can flow smoothly without too many sub-explanations. It is an ongoing project which is continuously evolving. It is also necessary to examine simultaneously multiple histories, numerous cultural entry points, and the trace back of lost things in between languages, all of which are playing a role. The fragmentary and unfinished nature of the work perhaps will invite contributions from the reader. It might also demand HIV/AIDS interventions be more humane rather than purely functional as a mechanised industry. With a disposition to rupture presupposed queer representational politics in India, it would pose further questions.

****Please note: all works are available online as cited below and are available for preview prior to the Viva. At www.charansingh.net**

Annex 1

Notes on Practice:[1]

In this project, I have examined how Kothi and MSM 'identities' have been constructed, while focusing on a populist and a highly gendered narrative through AIDS anthropology studies in India. They often emphasised the precarity of people in societies, to formulate them both as subjects of public health and human rights discourse but also as the other. Thereby, creating a conceptual dwelling where society can send all its moral anxieties related to deviant behaviours to be confined. This, as I have demonstrated in the thesis with a detailed analysis, fosters a sense of elsewhere-ness in their stories. Due to these ethical concerns regarding the representation of vulnerable communities, I have eschewed a photographic portraiture approach, even though, my formal training was in portraiture, which has been a key form of representing queer identities among artists, such as Duane Michel, Zanele Muholi, Sunil Gupta, Lola Flash, Ajamu and some of my own earlier work.[2] However, finding a voice in my practice has tilted more and more towards 'text-based' works, which allows a certain kind of voice to exist. Since then, I have been exploring various forms of writing, some of which are included in this thesis.

Other than my artwork and stories; my main contribution to the field is a way of approaching *queer* that is *sideways*. My work gives voice to those queer communities that do not fit in, neither in the major nor minor way in which queer is understood. It also takes on board how discourse theory has been used to show the fluidity of identity and the postcolonial subject. But the way in which the discourse gets established is problematic because it doesn't take in the nuances of what's going on. I explain this with a range of examples while using discourse analysis

[1] This note includes some sections of my presentation I made during my final viva examination and the discussion that followed. I also summarise and re-emphasise key points that are being made throughout this thesis.
[2] Charan Singh, (2013), *Kothis, Hijras, Giriyas and Others*. This was discussed during my viva, because it was part of show called, *I am a Camera* (2015), where my portraiture and video work *Do I Know?* was featured with artist Zackary Drucker & Rhys Ernst, Frédéric Nauczyciel and others, with a special screening of Jenney Livingston, (1990), *Paris is Burning*. It highlighted similarity between Kothi culture and 'the ballroom scene.' See here: https://www.facebook.com/events/1652633314974223/?ref=newsfeed. This work has continued to be exhibited along with some of new work. My latest work *They Called it Love, But Was it Love?* (2020), was show at the Schwules Museum Berlin. See here: https://www.schwulesmuseum.de/ausstellung/mercury-rising-inter-hermstoryies-now-and-then/. Also see www.charansingh.net

and postcolonial critiques of caste, class, and peripheries, this is primarily in the context of India, of course, which could also be relevant to other marginal communities in other locations. More importantly, it deploys rehearsal and stories as methods to create a gentler knowledge-system. For this precise reason, at the beginning of my dissertation, one encounters a glossary, which forms a crucial part of my artistic practice, as well as the methodology.

The practice of stories as mentioned in thesis has been inspired by a range of sources both oral and written. For example, Indian texts, specifically Mahasweta Devi's 'After Kurukshetra,' have inspired me greatly. Devi weaves stories which have the essence of minor forms of literature that break open the Indian epic saga – the *Mahabharata*. Her work lends a voice to subaltern protagonists. This is similar to my project which intends to dismantle and rupture the grand narratives that thrive on exposing the marginalities of people who came into contact with HIV/AIDS intervention programmes and reveal the one-sided way their life stories were documented.

At the beginning of this project, I used to get asked very often to explain the terms I use such as Kothi, Hijra MSM, and how the HIV crisis has manifested in India? And what are the legal implications, etc? However, the subjectivity I intended to bring is a different experience than pre-existing scholarship, which I have discussed already at length. So, this is when I started thinking of a glossary as a possible tool to destabilise terms and this is how my 'glossary' began to emerge in 2016 (see figure 4). In this regard, Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse,* Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy,* and Raymond Williams's *Keywords* are a few examples to understand how a glossary could function as provocations and profanations which also have resonance in my practice. It is a 'scaffolding' and not a pyramid style arrangement, which enables a *sideways* encounter to gently manifest, to advance new meanings. I chose the terms carefully, about the definitions that were and continue to be differently understood. I have deployed another radical tactic – the *interruption poetic*, which I have briefly mentioned in the introduction. There are twenty-five poetic interruptions, interspersed into my thesis. Sometimes they are about

a dimension that I want to emphasise, but on some occasions, they are *the dimension* that had been unnoticed. Both glossary and poetic interruptions are a methodological tool that invokes complex histories, otherwise ignored or unheard. And instead of closing, the *glossary*, and the *interruption poetics*, keeps that passage open for an ongoing dialogue. I think of this as a doorstopper, so when one reads my thesis, one would remember how I have set up a particular term. They all come together in the shape of this performative thesis; therefore, this thesis is a work of art, and itself is part of my practice.

For film practice, one of the challenges was the language of the work. The first video work *Kothi*, 2016 is narrated in English, which I found was unable to communicate to the Kothi. The second project *Garden of Eros*, 2017, was situated in a familiar territory and recognisable music to them. However, in the third and final project *They Called it Love, But Was it Love?* 2021, I decided the work should be in a language that the community can access, in which the *art world* becomes the outsider. I deployed the queer tactics of multiple resistance, opacity and waiting, especially given the work was made for an international audience, and in an AIDS cultural context. I chose to set the story in a minor note, rather than setting it against grand incidents. My intention is to carve other venues in which Kothi can be seen, rather than remain in their original context, the one in which they were invoked in the nineties. Kothi have already been in that context for several decades. Thus, the person in the film, wakes up on a regular day and has a reflection on what it means to live with HIV. I situated the story in the early morning as the protagonist is still not fully cognizant of their surroundings but are having a moment of time for themselves. A world in-between the worlds. Other than being exhibited in museum and other art venues across many countries (as part of Visual AIDS film programmes), this work was circulated among queer people as a link to their mobile phone so that people could access it. I wanted to find a life, if it exists, even if it meant a move, a hope, a desire to be called by their own name.

Annex 2

Kothi

(the afterthought of a thriving lesbian and gay movement)

"No one came looking for me, I was always there in front of them, with them; until the AIDS money arrived. And then everything changed. For me. For them." She reminisces, a time, before. The much mythologised figure within the HIV/AIDS NGO culture and the gay rights movement in India – the Kothi.

Only stereotypes could describe her. Kothi is 'apparently' a self-identified term used by underclass, homosexual men in India. Underclass because this group of people lives below the poverty line. falls in the cracks of hope and dreams that were shown to them in the surge of a neoliberal society. Many of whom are married to women, while continuing their love interests with men, on the side. They are usually feminine, use a feminine name and the feminine pronoun when they talk about themselves, and most importantly who are the "natural" subjects of HIV programmes in India.

Since the Kothi hail from the margins of society – the underclass as it were, they have unequal opportunities to sustain their interest in education and personal-growth which would have helped them attain financial stability. Given the lack of such choices, they remained at the margins, where having a good fate was a perpetual dream. Where they get consolidated as a category by these NGO programmes who have good intentions. Only a very few could break away from the vicious cycle of this unyielding poverty.

The term Kothi refers to an identity whose origins are shrouded in legend. One such fable is that traditionally there were boys at Hijra households who were called Kothi as a term of affection, The Kothi would help them to dress up and ran errands for them. Kothi share cultural and contextual affinities with Kathoey in Thailand, and Meti in Nepal. But unlike Kathoey; the Kothi does not have an explicitly visible cultural presence with her name in Indian societies. In parts of India, Kothi spell out as Kōti which in Telegu (a language from southern region) is a term for monkey. Which is also generally used by elders of the family to refer to children as a term of endearment at times or to a child who is being playful.

In parts of Northern India, a Kothi, with a specific sound 'thā' of the Hindi consonant (tha) is also the term for bungalow – a free standing house in Hindi, a female gendered noun. The term Kothi is very similar to 'Kotha' in Hindi, the ironically masculine term for a house of ill repute, a brothel. However, contemporary usage particularly since the 1990s, Kothi emerged as an indigenous term for feminised men, who often have familial relationships with the Hijra community. Very often, Kothi are mistaken for Hijra population by mainstream society depending on the degree of their effeminacy. Although not all Kothi would like to be associated with Hijra, necessarily, especially the one who are married to a woman or of a respectable age, however, Kothi form the larger segment of the visible 'MSM' constituency.

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