

Queer Patchwork Assemblages: Three poetic vignettes

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Abstract:	<p>Between 2011 and 2023 I was traveling between New Delhi and Kolkata to research queer male intimacy and community making in India especially in the context of burgeoning digital queer spaces and queer organising around section 377. The poems here which come out of ethnographic vignettes during this work transcend traditional frameworks and delve deeper into the lived experiences and conditions that shape the possibilities for queer lives. They strive to understand the everyday realities and spatial dynamics that influence the quality and conditions of queer lives offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding queer existence within the geographical context of India. Taken together these three poems work as patchwork assemblages. It points to the multiplicity and often dispersed and messy networks of affective encounters and queer belonging.</p>

Queer Patchwork Assemblages: Three poetic vignettes

A mini drama

When Oroon uncle found out

Harish was living with another man

He called up *mejo mama*

To confirm if this was true

They would not look directly at *baba's* eyes

Who Harish heard wept and paced around

They went straight to *Gurudeb's* house

Asking for amulets and bloodstone rings

To lure their son out of this

Unexpected shame

Too much education and freedom in the west

said Gopa *mashi* as she sipped her elaichi tea

Maa quietly hid Ruth and Saleem's book¹ away

Why confuse the uncles and aunts she reasoned

Harish wears the bloodstone ring now

Other than gasps of admiration from friends dancing at the RVT²

He thinks it has done very little to 'cure' him

¹ Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. 2000. *Same Sex Love in India*. London: St Martin's Press

² Royal Vauxhall Tavern

Tripty Bar

I stand a few minutes in front
of an overcrowded room
Smoke, sweat and old monk
hang unnervingly as we try to find a table
after an evening of film screenings at Dialogues
Did Shakti Sen really drink here
asked T as we sat down and ordered
two pegs of blue label.
The smell of officegoers here is very off-putting
he said, as he made his way out of the door



[Figure 1: Tripty Bar, Kolkata]

Rabindra Sarobar

J and L were still navigating their relationship

Not really sure where this was leading

We smoked menthols as J described

the gay bars of Soho where

muscled men danced

to pings of grindr

L was late to

pick up *puja* supplies

which Maa had repeatedly

reminded him to make sure did

not come in contact with anything 'impure'

How would she know he was on his way to the lakes



[Figure 2: Rabindra Sarobar, Kolkata]

Ethnographic statement

Between 2011 and 2023 I was traveling between New Delhi and Kolkata to research queer male intimacy and community making in India especially in the context of burgeoning digital queer spaces, film festivals and queer organising around section 377.

Researching queerness in contemporary India requires interrogating the power dynamics inherent in these spaces and understanding how linguistic, regional, and social disparities contribute to contested queer identity formation and (un) belonging. The repeal of anti-sodomy laws within the Indian Penal Code, are pivotal arenas where the juridico-political construction of rights-bearing queer subjects unfolds but these legal struggles do little in when it comes to challenging regimes of caste, class and religious discrimination prevalent within queer spaces (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018). By examining these various dimensions, these poems confront the ways in which power operates within queer domestic spaces, legal systems, and societal structures, and seeks to challenge that.

Niharika Banerjea and Kath Browne (2023) introduces the concept of queer liveability as a critical epistemological perspective prompting us to delve into what constitutes a life beyond mere legal rights, political frameworks and survival, expanding our exploration beyond juridico-political boundaries. They remind us there isn't a simple linear hierarchy and normative temporality between surviving and living. Interrogating queerness in contemporary authoritarian India also acts as a lens to raise questions that extend beyond conventional notions of equality, rights, and state-sanctioned forms of inclusion.

Rabindra Sarobar is a popular lakeside queer cruising area whilst Tripty Bar is an 85-year-old working men's watering hole in Kolkata frequent by some gay men where I hung out and met some of my informants. The first poem is based on an interview with an informant who jokingly mentioned how he navigates his queerness whilst living with parents and if legal rights had made any real difference for gay men like him. Taken together these three poems work as patchwork assemblages. It points to the multiplicity and often dispersed and messy networks of affective encounters and queer (un) belonging.

The poems became a form of ethnographic tool to better understand the queer experiences of my participants where the words can stand on their own without the need for scholarly interpretation. They transcend traditional frameworks and delve deeper into the lived experiences and conditions that shape the possibilities for queer lives in non-linear ways. They strive to understand the everyday realities and spatial dynamics that influence the quality and conditions of queer lives offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding queer existence within the geographical context of India.

References

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