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# Walk on the Rainbow: Queer Orientations and the Ethics of Everyday Intimacies in Kolkata

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of Anthropology Durham University

# Declaration

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Anita Datta

31st January, 2024

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# Abstract

Under the banner of the rainbow flag, LGBTQ* movements around the world have raised discourses of human rights, personal freedoms, and national identity. In India, this apparently global movement has steadily gained momentum since the 1990s, securing the decriminalisation of the colonial-era anti-sodomy law and lobbying for legal protections including the right to marry. In the process, queer activists have publicly confronted hegemonic and ascendent religious nationalist formations of gender, sexuality, and the family, to raise an alternative vision of contemporary Indian personhood for the post-colonial era. In this thesis I draw on a decade of ethnographic engagment with queer communities in Kolkata, West Bengal, to analyse the ways in which queer orientations to questions of 'identity', rights, love, and community are lived out in the daily lives of queer-identifying people. Taking an approach inspired by Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and Michael Carrithers' analysis of culture as rhetoric (2005b, 2009), I locate activism as an ethical practice that is played out in everyday interactions with social others in shared spaces. Beginning with the large-scale, public-facing event of Kolkata Pride, I assess how aesthetic choices and practices of kinesis, including dance in its various forms, can express and indeed constitute ethical precepts. I show how the ethics of aesthetics and movement play out in the dialectical relations between bodies and the spaces through which they move, and claim these as the fabric with which people, places, and communities are continuously re/made. **While speaking of relations through visuo-spatial metaphors, I also seek to take seriously a the call for a "sensuous scholarship" that descends into the tastes, smells, sounds, and tactile senses of the body as ways of knowing. This is expressed both in my writing style, the fragmented structure of my thesis, and my attention to the multisensory experience of being human.** I conclude by drawing these ideas into the intimate

plane of the everyday, considering habitual bodily dispositions, private repurposings of ancient rituals, and personal expressions of affection. In offering up a polyphonic impression of the diverse queer life of Kolkata, I press towards a social manifesto of love, friendship, and radical empathy as the basis for creating social worlds wherein people might dwell with one another.

*"Pareilles aux kaléidoscopes qui tournent de temps en temps, la société place successivement de façon différente des éléments qu'on avait crus immuables et compose une autre figure"*

"Like kaleidoscopes which turn from time to time, society successively rearranges those elements which we would have thought immutable, and composes a new image"

Marcel Proust[1], *A La Recherche*

[1] AD's translation

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# Ethnographic Timeline

This thesis is the result of iterative ethnographic immersions in the queer activist life of Kolkata, India. Whilst aspects of the city of Kolkata were familiar to me through my visits to my biological family members, I first established contact with an organisation working on LGBTQ* issues that I shall call *Diana* during a personal trip in the summer of 2012, when I went to meet them with a view to return for research purposes the following year. I arrived at *Diana* by following a line of enquiry that evolved from my curiosity as an undergraduate student about how Western discourses of transgender identities interacted with the historically instituted figure of the Indian *Hijra*[2]. After an invitation to *Diana*'s offices, to which I was escorted by a protective but liberal-minded brother-in-law, my request was accepted and I subsequently spent three months in the office over the summer of 2013. My days were spent hanging around in their offices, reading through the library and archive, shadowing the organisation's employees and attending external queer and feminist demonstrations with them.[3]

[2] The *hijra* is a particular transfeminine identity that can be traced back even to the ancient texts and Vedic scriptures. Often translated in 19th and 20th century Orientalist writing as a 'eunuch', *hijra*s are people who have been assigned male at birth but feel themselves to have a feminine identity, although some also identify with non-binary transgender formulations of gender. Historically, *hijras* performed respected ritual functions similar to certain kinds of priest and served as guards and companions to noble women, since they were thought to have the strength of a man but be sexually non-threatening. Following the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act through the [Colonial British] Indian Penal Code, Hijras were forced to the edges of society and their means of income reduced to begging and sex-work, with which they are now almost exclusively associated. Although this law was repealed in Independent India in 1949, hijras continue to face huge amounts of stigma within society and most places will not offer them opportunities in education or employment. This stigmatisation frequently extends to other trans people by association. Since *hijra* represents a lifestyle as well as a transgender experience, in recent years transgender communities (including *hijras*) have begun to describe the label *hijra* as a 'profession', not a gender identity.

[3] See Ch4, especially 4.I

During this and subsequent visits, my own relationship with Kolkata was substantially transformed. In 2013 I made new and important friendships, both with people I met through *Diana* and across the wider queer community. Many of these relationships have endured and become of central significance in my personal life. My understanding of myself was also reoriented during this first research trip, both through the new relationships I made and the experience of Kolkata as a colleague and peer to the queer people I met through my association with *Diana*.

After the 2013 trip the nature of my visits to Kolkata itself became more complex and multifaceted. Although I would often stay with my biological family members and spend a considerable amount of time with them, I would also meet up with friends who I knew from queer contexts and attend queer or feminist activist events that fell during these 'personal' visits. It quickly became impossible to say whether I was present in such contexts as a 'friend' or as a 'researcher', since both fed into the other, overlapping as I grew into both roles simultaneously. Moreover through these relationships I had begun to understand myself as queer,[4] and so too the boundary between ethnography and a kind of auto-ethnography became increasingly hazy. Such visits took place every 6–12 months for periods ranging from 3-8 weeks. My

[4] It is of great relevance for the evolution of my relationship to the community in Kolkata that this form of this queerness is one that I had not before experienced in the British regional context in which I grew up. To a greater extent, apart from a few South Asian LGBTQ* acquaintances, I have rarely encountered peers whose aesthetics and embodiment of *queer*ness is similar to that I have come to know in Kolkata.

perspective is therefore longitudinal, encompassing the possibility of reflecting upon changes and developments over almost a decade of sustained relationships and participation.

In 2018-2019 I made what I refer to as my 'long fieldwork trip' with the express intent of engaging ethnographically with queer activism in Kolkata to inform my doctoral thesis. I rented a flat in a south Kolkata which I lived in on my own, and to which I was able to welcome friends from the queer community, rehearse with musician friends in my spare time, and to host occasional visitors from abroad. I had planned this trip around *Diana* and their resource centre *Deepon*, imagining that my 'research' time would take a similar shape to the visit undertaken in 2011. However, as I will describe in Chapter 4, I quickly realised that this was no longer the most fruitful environment to observe and participate in the kinds of activities I was interested in. Gradually the scope of my ethnographic engagement bled outwards from this initial focal point, until I was inhabiting the broader reaches of the loosely defined network of people who referred to their amorphous social connectedness as a 'queer' community. The long fieldwork trip quickly became much more self-directed than the earlier dedicated field trip, as I chose for myself what events, gatherings and social appointments to keep on a day-by-day basis. As a result, the ethnographic experiences from later fieldwork periods are increasingly dependent upon my positionally within a network of friends and the broader queer community than those from earlier years.

Since my ethnographic knowledge on certain themes or subjects is formed over periods of time, the structure of this dissertation is not chronological. Although certain chapters are elaborated in relation to a particular moment in time, much of my understanding and theorisation is developed by comparing and contrasting similar events over time. My ethnography therefore jumps between salient moments across a 10-year time span. Whilst older reference points are reconstructed from contemporaneous field notes, they are necessarily refracted through the lens of my memory in the moment of writing, and are surely coloured by the experiences that have followed them. I therefore consider the older material that appears within my work as archival, an artefact of interest not only for its content but for the fact of its preservation. When evaluating the evidence I present I must ask myself, and encourage my readers to join me in considering, why certain moments should have stayed with me in such stark intensity whilst others have faded.

Moreover 10 years is a long time, and my relationships with people and organisations in field have naturally fluctuated, as all human relationships do. The people who I felt closest to in 2013 and those I feel closest to in 2023 are not necessarily the same people, either literally or figuratively speaking. It is therefore also important to acknowledge that my positionality within the text, my own position in the queer community, and relationship to others within it are in constant flux across the events about which I write; so too are the relationships of people and organisations to one another in Kolkata's 'queer

community'.

The people I have encountered in these various contexts range from lower socio-economic backgrounds through the Indian middle classes (see Chakrabarty 2008, Platz-Robinson 2014), covering various religious identifications and caste backgrounds. Many have complicated positionalities that are not easily subsumed into simplistic sociological frameworks of social class, particularly those whose life choices and educational trajectories have resulted in their having a social consciousness and earning capability that differs considerably from their parents and the families in which they grew up. In the dissertation, while I have located my informants loosely within the context of the communities I discuss, I have also refrained from furnishing details that might compromise their anonymity due to the distinctiveness of their life stories. This instinct, arising both from my ethical obligation as a researcher and my personal protectiveness of my friends and community, is heightened because of various instances in the recent past where identifying details, real names, and life events of Kolkata's more visible queer community members have been written about by academics without full consent. This has made the queer community in general much more cautious and even suspicious of researchers. Keeping their trust remains a core value, and has been foundational for this research. At the same time, it is important to highlight the intersectional socio-economic dynamics of my interlocuters whose voices intermingle throughout the dissertation. Indeed, for those queer people whose caste and socio-economic class privileges afford them access to

spaces, events, and other resources, the ethics and aesthetics of queerness may emerge quite divergently to those who neither hold this symbolic capital, nor are able to *pass* in this way (see Dasgupta 2017, Boyce and DasGupta 2020).

It has long been understood that the ethnographer's personal identifications, characteristics and experiences affect what field sites they can access, and what they see within a given field site (*c.f.* Abu-Lughod 1986, Tsuda 1998, Thiranagama 2011, Navaro Yashin 2012, Lal 2018). In my case, Kolkata as a 'field site' is available to me perhaps only because of my family history, linguistic heritage and cultural identifications. Whilst I initially sought out organisations working with Hijra communities, I do not view it as a coincidence that I ultimately found myself at first in a female and transmasculine dominated, feminist organisation oriented towards academic understandings of gender, sexuality and discourses of rights.

I am sure that it would have seemed bizarre to my younger self that *Diana* is not the main site and locus of this PhD thesis. After all, my experiences at *Diana* are undeniably formative in the way I understand queerness both in Kolkata and in my own personal life. This is, therefore, another way in which the constitution of this text is iterative. Since my first journey to a queer Kolkata was as an impressionable 19-year-old, my personal understandings of feminism, of queer ethics, and even my conception of **my own self** have been profoundly and fundamentally shaped by my interactions with *Diana,* and by my queer Kolkatan friends and chosen family. My own current understanding

of myself as a queer South Asian woman emerged over the course of these interactions, in view of which I make sense of my peculiar gendered and ethnic identifications and culturally specific desires. These ways of knowing myself had been invisible or obfuscated in my earlier life, rendered illegible by the post-industrial, North of England context in which I grew up. Although I encountered queerness there and occasionally dabbled in local LGBT hangouts, queer femininity in Kingston upon Hull looks quite different to my own and that of my friends at *Diana*. **I am deeply, multiply and unapologietically implicated in the life of queer, activist communities in Kolkata, and this implication is both what renders this ethnography possible and what has shaped me both as an anthropologist and as a person. Despite longstanding debates around the extent to which researchers' embroilment in the worlds they study extends or obfuscates meaningful insight, like scholars such as Bergé (in Stoller 1994), I consider this messy entanglement to be the very foundation of this particular scholarly enterprise.**

This dissertation is about how queer people in Kolkata come to identify as *queer*,[6] how they develop a sense of self, by what they find themselves moved to action, and how they then act. If I am able to tell that story it is because within these communities, and through a committed, deeply personal immersion with them, I have come to understand and know myself differently, and found people with whom I feel I can belong.

[6] As we shall see, they do so very often by using this English term, even when the main language they are using is Bengali.

## A Note on Language(s)

Despite appearances, this is not an English language manuscript. My informants and I communicate in a combination of 'Indian' English, Bengali, and 'Bengalish',[7] slipping between them sometimes within the same sentence. Moreover, the English language as spoken in India is a distinctive set of dialects in itself. I have found that in writing this text, I also at times rely on 'Indian' English as well as the English of the British Academy, and embrace this multi-lingual mish-mash as a feature of the vernacular for my context. This text can therefore be read plurally, in various dialects of English, in Benglish, or in Bangla, with all the tendencies of poetic ambiguity inherent in the Bengali language.

When presenting an extended statement made in Bengali, wherever possible I present the quotation in three forms simultaneously, showing the original Bangla, transliterated Bengali, and translation into English simultaneously on the page. This provides greater information to those who are most fluent or literate in the Bengali language, whilst offering as much by the way of translation to those who are not. Readers may follow whichever text they are most comfortably able to access. This three-way presentation of the material has been much appreciated by my research interlocuters, many of whom are keen to read the dissertation and have offered essential contributions to the formation of my thoughts and this text. All transcriptions and translations

[7] A light-heartedly identified macaronic mix of Bengali and English

from Bangla into English are my own, and I include footnotes to provide further context for Bengali words or phrases that carry meanings that cannot be fully expressed in English. Where referencing the Bengali language I use first and foremost Bengali script, because my inclusion of these details is principally for Bengali speakers. I include transliteration according to the conventions most commonly used by Bengali speakers for the benefit of *probashi*[8], diasporic and non-native speakers who may have not developed proficiency with written Bengali. As evidenced in the sentence before last, I make a handful of exceptions to this rule where I consider that a word of Bengali origin has come to function as a dialect word within English as used in the Bengals (such as *probashi*). In these instances, I provide the Romanised version of the word in keeping with the flow of the manner of its everyday linguistic use.

Transliterations of given names are styled in the form used by the individual themselves. Where an extended macaronic dialogue is offered in English translation, wherever possible I underline those words that were delivered in English to distinguish between the speaker's own words and my translation.

[8] Ethnically or culturally identified Bengalis who grow up outside of the Bengals. Many *probashi* Bengalis speak Bangla to some degree, but may not be able to read or write it. Others have a more fragmented relation to the language and culture mediated by the locality in which they have been living.

# ভূমিকা (Introduction)

On 2nd July 1999 fifteen young men wearing bright yellow T-shirts with the slogan "Walk on the Rainbow" marched a lap of the great, grassy oval of Maidan, a large open park in the centre of Kolkata. Very few people noticed them, and those who did paid them little attention. After all, the students in this city were known to be particularly enthusiastic about politics. They always seemed to be demonstrating about something, whether that was to express concerns with local politics or to show solidarity for events in seemingly unconnected places like Argentina and Vietnam. These young men however were exuberant, riding a thrill of nerves and excitement. This small joyful and defiant act was South Asia's first Pride walk, and this audacious band of comrades was making history.

Twenty years later, on the last Sunday in December 2019, I cut through the heaving crowd that swarmed in a side street by Muhammad Ali Park, turning every two minutes to greet another familiar face I had missed since my last trip back 'home'. Androgynous, non-binary, cis female, lesbian, kothi[9], transgender, gay, cis male, genderqueer, hijra, and kinky bodies of every description stood side by side, filling the streets with an **intense diversity of colour, texture, sounds and energies** that exceeded and exploded even the

[9] A regional gender identification, indicating an effeminate man who takes the receiving role in sexual intercourse with other men. Some kothis identify as transfeminine and may use female pronouns, others speak of their gender in terms of ambiguous, non-binary, or effeminate male constructions. See Boyce (2007) for a thorough discussion.

most exoticized stereotypes of Indian modernity. The official annual Pride Walk in Kolkata is now the largest and most spectacular of a whole array of LGBTQ* related events, demonstrations, protests, conferences, meetings and festivals that take place in Kolkata over the course of each year. An enormous lorry, decked up as a float, was rigged with multicoloured spotlights, a DJ and sound system, and decorated with images of clenched fists in rainbow colours. In the peak of the afternoon sun, the lorry began to **rumble steadily** through the streets of the city, and the people – around 4000 in number – moved too, walking, cheering, and dancing in the road. While most of the revellers appeared to be from urban middle-class backgrounds, less privileged segments of the socio-economic spectrum were also well represented, and older queer folk walked amongst the lively parade of participants in their teens, twenties and thirties**. The ginormous speaker stacks project sound in a wash from the float's open deck, a playlist of music smothered across the surrounding area like a blanket, periodically interrupted by the reading of a script explaining the purpose of the walk declaimed in English and then Bangla from the float. The text had been written collaboratively by the collective that organised the event**. The tracks of the playlist had been chosen the week before by popular poll disseminated via email and social media. The selections were mostly Western popular music but also a range of Bollywood hits and, very occasionally, Bengali songs.

Kolkata's Pride Walk is a distinctive event that draws together queer-identifying people from many walks of life. No other single event in the city's calendar showcases the diversity of the ways that its population may identify through any and every conceivable combination of gender, class, sexual preference, profession, language, regional culture, and so on. At the same time, it is a performance of calculated and defiant unity. **The thousands shout, sing and cry out; sometimes a polyphonic cacophony, sometimes together with one voice. The undulating mass of dancing, mincing, prancing, posing, shuffling and strutting bodies dazzles the eye, a kaleidoscope of motion, the fluid irregularity of an advancing swarm.** The only organisational banner permitted is that of Kolkata Pride itself; the only logo is that of the collective that exists solely to facilitate the organisation of this annual event. What then does it mean to call this multiplicitous mass of people a "community"? For that is how they speak of themselves: the queer community. This rhetorical manoeuvre of self-hailing prompts a range of questions for the anthropologist. Who are the 'they' in question, and what motivates these people of all ages and from various corners of society to get down on the street and shout publicly about their right to private sexual expression? This too in a country where, despite a booming population, there is a culture of silence about even the most socially normalised forms of sex?

LGBTQ* activism is often understood within the frameworks of 'identity politics', in that the mobilisation invokes identity categories based on people's sexual desires and/or gender expression. Typically, LGBTQ* activism hinges upon human rights discourses, drawing attention to social and political exclusions of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people, and claims their right to life, privacy, and personal expression. This necessitates therefore a discussion about the nature of selfhood, and the ways in which people relate to others in society who may be similar to or different from themselves. By now, the critiques of 'identity politics' as a tool for liberation are manifold (Butler 1990, Alcoff and Mohanty 2006). Despite this, the appeal of discourses of freedom and human rights continue to shape the desires and demands people make of their governments, and their fellow members of society. These ways of conceptualising self, other, and the organisation of the social are so pervasive that it can be difficult to speak about issues of justice, politics, and social being without recourse to the structuring concepts of European Enlightenment philosophy (Winnubst 2006).

This presents LGBTQ* activists with a problem of how to identify themselves in relation to categories that define their identities according to heterosexist values that they wish to challenge. It also presents scholars like me the problem of how to write about queer mobilisation and activism in words that open the way to new possible ways of conceiving people and the world they live in, and resist the framing of the hegemonic paradigms that structure our current models of the same. Since language structures thought (Vygotsky

2012), and is meaningful only with reference to shared concepts (Wittgenstein 2009), conventional language often upholds the hegemonic worldviews that already exist even when they argue against them (see Lakoff 2014). I have therefore sought to rely upon the language developed by scholars who, like me, seek to keep open the possibility of different ways of conceptualising self, other, society, and the world (*c.f.* Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Ingold 2000, 2006, 2009; Winnubst 2006; Ahmed 2006; Carrithers 1992, 2005b, 2009; Das 2020). **Furthermore, I continue to grapple with the apparent contradiction inherent in writing about non-verbal, aphasic, and sensory phenomena in a form that is recognisable as the necessarily ordered English-language, scholarly thesis. Throughout this text I therefore experiment with the evocative potential of the written word, striving to conjure up and convey the textural, sensory, affective, and experiential dimensions of the worlds I descended into while researching this thesis.** Before I do, however, I must begin by laying forth the theoretical **and sensorious** insights that have allowed me to think queerly about the underlying categories of personhood that make social thought possible: the Self, the Other, and the Relations between.

## Querying the Neutral Human Individual

Anne Salmond has suggested that since Decartes, the conception of the self in Western philosophy has been 'self-evident' (Salmond 1995, p.23), its construction easily taken-for-granted and a precondition for thought itself.

The categories of Self and Other have traditionally formed foundational axes of enquiry in social anthropology, and in Western philosophical traditions more broadly. Explicit understandings of the nature of selfhood as constituted in relation to the Other emerge in Philosophy in the 20th Century, around the same time as the anthropological discipline, **even within those strains of philosophy that have consistently challenged Descartes' abstraction of the mind from the body** (*c.f.* Heidegger 1927, Derrida 1967, Levinas 1969). Indeed, postcolonial and subaltern scholars have provided critical commentary on the ways in which, through anthropology, the Other has served as the object that constitutes the consciousness of the Western Self (Pandian and Parman 2004, Fardon 1990, Said 1978, Asad 1975). This is achieved with greater felicity, and in higher definition, when that other can be described as exotic, savage, or simply just odd (Salmond 1995). The surge of mobilisation around the globe within what has been framed as 'identity politics' suggests that the relations between Self and Other might not be so easily taken-for-granted in the historic present moment.

As I shall show over the course of this thesis, queerness is one of the routes through which the binary Self/Other configuration manifests and is further complicated. This in turn threatens to destabilise the implicit, foundational logics of Western philosophical and sociological thought, structured as they are through the ontological principles of post-enlightenment liberalism. This threat – or, depending on your point of view, this opportunity – is very great indeed, since it is these same principles and logics upon which our current

transnational, late capitalist, global order is predicated and by which its hegemony is sustained. As such, queerness has occupied a central position in many of the major philosophical, academic, and socio-political debates about being and personhood, since the latter half of the 20th Century (c.f. Foucault 1979, Rich 1980, Warner 1999, 2002, de Lauretis 1994, 1985, Butler 1990, 1993). Over the course of this thesis, I shall use an array of public and personal social discourses about the experiences of queer bodies, pleasures**, sensations**, hopes, relationships, joys and desires, to reconsider the possibilities of being one's self and relating to others. Further I hope to do so in a language that opens thought to the possibility that such ways of being **that might facilitate a (re)shaping of co**nceptions of space, place, and the nature of the society itself (Ahmed 2006). **Since an ontological enquiry of this nature necessitates attention to how people relate to themselves and one another, I have found it impossible to avoid reflecting upon the ethical possibilities that are afforded or proscribed by particular conceptions of self, other, and world (see Mattingly and Throop 2018).** Therefore in this thesis I contribute not only to ethnographies of queerness, postcoloniality, **the body,** and intimacy, but to a broader discussion on the ethics of personhood and of being, with others, in the world.

In her monograph *Queering Freedom* Shannon Winnubst shows how particular logics derived from European Enlightenment philosophy underpin and structure the 'Order of Things' in social and intellectual life. She achieves this through analysis of the work of Locke, Lacan, Irigiray, Hegel, and others,

tracing the lines of reasoning by which thought and social action are drawn continually back within the realms of a hegemonic, racially supremacist, patriarchal worldview and way of being. She compellingly makes the case that this mode of understanding personhood, which is often constructed and presented as neutral and ahistorical, must be read for its historical and cultural context. She undertakes this task with reference to Foucault and Bataille, in order to understand the ways that such logics underpin and sustain what she calls *cultures of phallicised whiteness*. Winnubst makes her analysis in the context of the US specifically, but I consider it appropriate as a starting point for my ethnographic analysis both because it pertains to the language and logics of the European Academic tradition in which I am writing and in which LGBT* activist discourses around the globe are predominantly articulated. Moreover, as a post-colonial nation **that is still extricating itself from the debris of colonial structures (Stoler 2008),** much of India's legal, political, and social infrastructures are either derived from such logics, or exist in a complex continuing relation to them. This holds true even where these logics have been domesticated, adapted or overlaid with other ways of thinking about India and Indian society. I therefore follow Winnubst's outlining of the dominant conceptualisation of self, other, and *identity* in normative and academic thinking. I then continue to suggest how Phenomenological approaches to understanding, describing, and valorising experience might offer a way forward in the context of queer desires, pleasures, and expressions of selfhood. In this turn, I follow the line traced by Sarah Ahmed in her writings on *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which serve as a

starting point to rethink not just the nature of the self, but the relations between self, other, objects, space and time.

Winnubst (2006) draws our attention to the way in which, in the received order of thinking established and entrenched by the European Enlightenment, the self is conceptualised as an individual. In this tradition and its subsidiaries, the individual as a taken-for-granted and often unquestioned entity serves as the basic unit of society, who is the bearer of rights and the owner of property (Bromley 2013). This individual is furthermore conceived as the author and master of their body, and of the self that resides within it. This is despite the 'peculiarity' of such a conception of the person in the history of the world's cultures (Geertz 1974). The liberal individual thus conceived is a discrete, autonomous, self-mastering entity, who is defined or dividuated through their relation to others and their belonging to the various distinct and bounded categories of race, gender, class, nationality, and (more recently) sexuality. The authority over the subject position of the individual, according to the ideal type logic of this system of thought, lies with the individual themselves. This formation of the subject's position, and the characteristics that mark it, is one way of understanding what is referred to within this order of thinking as *identity*. However, I am concerned that it does so in ways that uphold culturally specific, politically charged conceptualisations of the person through their own semantic logics. Throughout this thesis I shall explore the ways in which people understand themselves through their relationships with other people, and seek to change

others' perceptions of themselves by dynamic interactions. **Since I focus my attention on various aspects of the lives of queer people, communities, and activists in Kolkata, this exploration is undertaken with those who are often variously subjugated, excluded, or marginalised within the phallocentric, heteropatriarchal hegemonies that this particular ontological order conceals. Consequently the work of activism surfaces as a necessity not least because of the existing perceptions social others have of queer folk. One of the primary challenges in writing this thesis thus arises in the idioms of the academy itself, since to revert always to the language of the 'individual' would inherently limit my discussion, returning me always** to the same possibilities.

*Identity* categories and the subject positions they demarcate shape the way in which the individual relates to themselves and to others. These relations are frequently expressed in orientations of sameness and difference, operating across boundaries of *identity* or within the limits of group membership proper (see also Sökefeld 1999). According to this logic, the subject position of the individual is, like the individual themself, conceptualised as unitary and distinct. It is this structural dependency upon boundaries and the de/limiting of objects, entities and individuals that Winnubst (2006) refers to as *the logic of the limit*. The modern individual thus emerges from these rational, ordered logics as a bounded entity, a body whose limits are bound by skin (Irigiray 1985), and through their relations to others, specifically located in space, time, and the matrix of society. These social relations are undertaken in the context

of expectations, beliefs, knowledge, and ideas about what it means for certain kinds of Self to relate to certain kinds of Other, what constitutes a proper relationship between two subjects who occupy particular *identity* (that is, subject) positions. This underpins the claim I shall elaborate over the course of this thesis, that what is at stake in the conceptualisations of Self, Other, and the relations between, is nothing less than the existential fabric of the social itself. This is why, if we are dissatisfied with the possibilities afforded by society or the subject positions assigned to us within it, then alongside activists of various kinds, we may find it necessary to engage with the ethical work of reconceptualising the nature of selfhood itself **(Mattingly and Throop 2018)**. Therefore, throughout this thesis I avoid describing people and their characteristics using the terms *individual* and *identity*, and present them in italics where someone other than myself speaks or writes of them in this way.

Queer desires and subjectivities inherently destablise the certain boundaries and contours of liberal individualist categories of Self and Other, and trouble the relations between such units. Queer desire, for instance, is concerned with **who desires whom**, where the Self as a sexually desirous being is oriented otherwise, either towards the category of the *same*, or to that which is somehow *different* than the prescribed and proper Other. Desire is thus, we see quickly, at heart a *relation* rather than a subject position (see Winnubst 2006). However, Foucault (1978) has elucidated how in the historical conditions of late modernity, the 'homosexual' has been instituted as a subject, by transforming this relation of desire into a concrete and deterministic *identity*

position. When individuals orientate themselves towards same-sex identified others through expressions of desire, this relation is solidified as if its existence were reducible to a characteristic of the desiring individual, identifying them by categorisation and marking the ways in which others can (or should) relate to them. Thus, same-sex desiring people may be bounded and categorised as Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay, which are now legible and locatable as subject positions in social space. Indeed, such *identity positions* may even be claimed by individuals with enthusiasm and aplomb, and raised as banners of resistance in the hope of social transformation or notions of 'progress' (Winnubst 2006). This solution, however, is unstable, and further destablised when same-sex desiring individuals refuse to occupy legible, consistent, and intelligible subject positions, or when these subject positions interact with other *identity* categories that would normatively preclude same-sex relations.

Transgender or gender non-conforming identifications similarly trouble and complicate the relation between Self, Other, and the durable, unitary nature of the individual subject. Trans gender subjectivities emerge when an individual asserts **who they are**. This assertion is typically made in defiance of the categorisations and subject positions assigned to them by authorised Others, who have been socially endowed with the power to impose limits, boundaries, and *identity* categories on particular bodies. These others may include doctors, parents, school teachers, priests, and psychiatrists. In proclaiming an understanding of selfhood in contradiction to that authorised

by Others, transgender and gender non-conforming identifications expose the fiction by which the individual Self is conceived as autonomous and self-governing in the liberal individualist Order of Things. The transgender relation to the self destabilises the unitary and durable nature of the categories of *identity* (i.e. gender), and exposes the structuring role that relations between Self and Other play in the constitution of the individual as a subject.

Queer desires and trans gender identifications thus both problematise the neat ordering of the Self's relation **to** the Other as the basis upon which society is constituted, and point towards an understanding of Self **by** Relation to the Other. If the self can be sustained as an independent individual who relates to other autonomous individuals and objects, the illusion can be maintained that each individual possesses masterful ownership over one unitary, true, autonomously defined Self. If however the latter proposition is sustained, and the Self is in fact conceptualised by its relation to the Other, then there may be as many Selves as there are Others to relate to. **This proposition would be absurd and unthinkable for a Western, rational, intellectual, boundedly coherent ontology;** and would have disorientating consequences for the order of society at large. And yet it is towards such a proposition that I will begin to argue, through a close study of the relations between queer identifying activists in the city of Kolkata.

## Orientating the Self, Re-Orientating the Other

In order to turn away from the logic of the limit that individuates the person

by enclosure, I re-orientate my focus from the subjects thus constituted to their orientations towards other objects, how they take up time and space, and **how they feel the textures of the world around them**. This approach follows**, in part,** that laid out by Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which takes "the "here" of the body and the "where" of its dwelling" as "the starting point for orientation [;]… the point from which the world unfolds" (p.8). I engage deeply with queer peoples' **sensory** experiences of their bodies, and their experiences of space, time and social others that they encounter through their bodies. Particularly, I trace the ways in which people take up and reshape the phenomenality of space with their bodies through dance, aesthetic expressions and everyday movements. I turn towards the emotions and feelings that queer people articulate and seek to realise through the relations they pursue with others. These engagements lead me to circumvent wherever possible, the Cartesian disavowal of the body and focus on somatic experiences, emotions, aesthetics, and orientations, **relaying descriptions of sight, sound, smell, feeling, and vague or abstract perceptions (Stoller 1994)**.

In adopting the language of orientation to situate her phenomenological enquiries, Ahmed expands the conceptual metaphor utilised in everyday parlance when we speak of desire in terms of *sexual orientation*. Sexuality thus described becomes about whom one is attracted towards. Moreover, as sexual orientation comes to be historically translated into a form of 'being', for Ahmed "then "being itself becomes (sexually) orientated" (p.69). Like

Winnubst, Ahmed reminds us that heterosexual orientation is allowed to occupy a neutral positionality, drawing a 'straight' line between members of binarily opposed and bounded genders. Meanwhile a 'queer' orientation is not simply the mere inversion, but instead anything that *deviates* from that line, anything that is out of line. Ahmed notes the social impulse to bring what has deviated back into line (e.g. through compulsory heterosexuality or conversion therapy), through analysis and narrative explanations (e.g. Freudian explanations of homosexuality (see Ahmed 2006 pp.74-79), and through interpreting the line differently (e.g. homonormative understandings of 'butch'/'femme' lesbian or 'top'/'bottom' gay male pairings; the oft-asked question "which of you is the man?"). In this way, when faced with a line that would point towards the unthinkable (in Winnubst's terms), people will often **seek to 'tidy up' (Manalansan 2015),** to undertake the work of re-orientation by bringing that which is queer and deviant back *into line* (Ahmed 2006). To turn from the line that is given, and which orientates one towards a certain point of view, might bring other worlds into view.

Like all orientations, sexual orientation and the orientation of being constrains our field of vision, allowing us to see what we are turned towards, producing what is in front of us as objects, but also producing a background by relegating things to the *behind*. Thus, orientation, reorientation, and maintaining one's point of view requires *work*. The production of an object by bringing it into view, or the relegation of an object to the background, occurs through a process of attention (Ahmed 2006, Csordas 2002, Merleau-Ponty

1962). I therefore understand attention as an active process, and open the possibility for *paying attention* to be understood as one of the actions undertaken by my queer 'activist' informants (Narrain 2004). However, I am interested not only in the way my informants turn, but in how they undertake the work of turning themselves and others towards objects and ideas, particularly those that might be out-of-line or have been relegated to the background through repeated acts of turning away. I am interested in how my informants reorientate themselves and seek to reorientate others from the point where their world unfurls.

In occasionally using the visuo-spatial metaphors of Ahmed, Winnubst, and other similar thinkers, I wish to remain conscious of the seductive power of established linguistic idioms to return us always to a veiled version of the selfsame dominant model we seek to escape (Winnubst 2006). In describing re/orientation and attention as work that produces particular relations and sensations, such a formulation may allow the metaphoric space and time of the world to be passively conceived, taken-for-granted as already there. Just as I resist the ontological givenness of the self, I hope to resist wherever possible any assumptions of givenness of the spatio-temporality of the world in which people live out their lives (De Certeau 1984, Das 2012, Manalansan 2015). **Just as the self has been broadly understood as a subject and an experience that is created, I follow these and other scholars who understand peoples movements through the world as an active, world-creating phenomenon. I perceive a kind of lineage of thought between mid 20th**

**century French scholars who conceived of life in the world as a creative, dialectical practice (*c.f.* Bourdieu 1997, De Certeau 1984, Bachelard 1994) and more recent scholarship that speaks of "worlding", that is, the ways in which people produce and create both the worlds around them and imagined worlds spatially or temporally beyond their immediate conditions (Chakravorty Spivak 1990, Manalansan 2015).**

**Further drawing from these scholars, I take seriously the messiness that may result when we do not seek to bring deviant traces back into line. A queer worlding, that could be visualised as a metaphorical extension of lines in all directions, brings us to the Deleuzian notion of rhizomatic connections (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and within anthropology Manalansan's (2015) notion of queerness as mess, and mess as generative, a creative end in itself.**

**Describing the chaotic, improvisatory, and apparently disordered life conditions of working-class queer people in Manila and New York, Manalansan notes that global, metropolitan formulations of urban life often produce a tidy, ordered, and well-honed image. Accounts or experiences of messiness, of disordered spaces and practices, are all too frequently presented as a precursor to a 'tidying up', a prelude to an end point of rationalised, or at least managed order (Manalansan 2015). Contrary to this aesthetic habit, Manalansan urges an investigation of mess as generative, as a worlding practice in and of itself. Heeding this call, throughout this thesis**

**I will seek to resist the urge to causally organise or unpick the relations between epistemology, ontology, ideology, ethics, aesthetics, desire, and sensibilities expressed or apparently emerging my experiences of Kolkata's queer community, and the experiences people have shared with me. While I understand all of these elements to be connected and mutually shaping, I have relinquished the tempting project to order them into a causal relation, or to bring them into some sort of line. This refusal to organise thought in this way may be a source of frustration for some readers; I hope it will be a source of motivation and inspiration to others. I turn away from linear structures to the mess of rhizomatic connections and lines of flight. This accords more sincerely with the iterative and patchy bricolage of ideas, senses, movements, and people within Kolkata's queer and activist worlds, and thus I hope will assist me in presenting a more honest representation of the creative ideas and possibilities at stake, for all of its chaotic untidiness.**

## Openings of Opportunity: Sensuous Epistemologies

**On the fourteenth of August 1947, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharla Nehru made his inaugural address to the nascent nation, of which perhaps the most quoted line runs: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." Taken out of context, in this utterance Nehru may be interpreted as straightforwardly identifying the midnight hour as the moment at which one age ends and another begins. This interpretation however belies a thorough engagement with the insight that the leader of the Indian Independence Movement offered into the**

**nature of colonialism and the messy, arduous, and enduring work that would be necessary to extricate the idea of India from that forged through imperialism (*c.f.* Nandy 1988, Stoler 2008, Bhabha 2012). Indeed, the opening line of this famous speech lays out the expectation that while the stroke of midnight will be the time for redemption of the pledge of freedom, it will be a redemption "not wholly or in full measure", a caution that is repeated in almost every paragraph of the address. Nehru emphatically asserts that "The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity… The past clings on to us still in some measure and we have to do much before we redeem the pledges we have so often taken." Characterising the newborn India as a "nation on the verge of advance" with "hard work ahead," Nehru demonstrates an understanding that the effects of colonialism on the political, economic, social, moral, and personal dimensions of every aspect of Indian life are in fact pervasive, and require contining and arduous work to counteract. This work, he is clear, *begins* with India's formal political independence, and is not in any way fulfilled or satisfied by it.**

**A reading of Nehru's text offeres a salutary insight into subsequent critiques of the generic reliance upon 'postcolonial' as a category of analysis from social, literary, and historical scholars. If, following Wendy Brown (2010), we understand the condition of post-ness to indicate a state of being that is distinct from but fundamentally shaped by what came before it, then claiming independent India as a straightforwardly 'postcolonial' nation**

**becomes theoretically problematic. Extrapolating from Brown's analysis of 'post-ness', deploying the notion of the 'post-colonial' would take for granted a wholesale separation between the period of direct colonial rule and of independence. However, in the vein of Nehru's full address, a number of thinkers have criticised the straightforward division of the colonial and the postcolonial for failing to capture the persistent effects of colonial occupation on formerly colonised countries, and the imperial nature of global modernity. In particular, various concepts such as the nation, nationalism, globalisation, freedom, capitalism, and social identity have been analysed as routes through which relations of dominance recognisable as imperial in nature persist and are perpetuated (*c.f.* Chakravorty Spivak 1990, Prakash 1994, Stoler 2008, Bhabha 2012, Seth 2013). As such, I contend that to understand India and other formerly colonised countries as straightforwardly 'postcolonial', as shaped by but separated from colonial structurations, is a blunt and misguided mode of analysis (see Stoler 2008).**

**The context in which I conducted my ethnography was profoundly shaped by the fraught culmination of a multi-generational struggle with the legal infrastructure of Indian Penal Code, Section 377. Adopted into the would-be postcolonial nation from the British Penal Code, this section effectively criminalises all penetrative sexual contact except peno-vaginal intercourse, even between consenting adults[11]. After several decades of legal and social**

[11] Section 377 was introduced to India in 1861 under the British Penal Code, which applied to the entire British empire. The clause is modelled on a 16th Century 'Buggery Act', and reads:

**lobbying by a network of lawyers, social activists, journalists, and other professionals, this law was read down by the Delhi High Court in 2009 to exclude acts between consenting adults in private. This judgement was reversed in 2013 by a small bench of judges in the Supreme Court, leading to years of appeals and challenges, that produced much comment in the wider media and public sphere. While the reading down of the law was upheld and cemented in 2018 with reference to India's robust constitution, substantial media coverage during these many decades debated what practices, identifications, and relationships between people could be claimed as properly 'Indian', and which were colonial or otherwise imperial Western imports.**

**This cultural and political discourse, which I discuss in greater analytical detail in Chapter 1, is one example from my research context that informs the theoretical tendency of my analysis towards messiness and entanglement, and away from (ab-) rational, order-seeking epistemologies. I have noted , through my engagement with Winnubst and queer phenomenological schools of thought, my foundational concerns with the imperialistic nature of the constraints that that the linguistic and**

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**377. 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.
**Explanation**: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.
Section 377 passed in Indian law at Independence, and persists in varying forms around countries formerly colonised by the British. It has been used to criminalise and persecute homosexual and transgender people in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka (As the reformulated 'Section 365'). Although the formal number of arrests and convictions in India was quite small, the existence of the act shaped and justified conservative social beliefs about homosexuality, and was invoked by law enforcement agents, family members, and strangers to harass, disposess, extort, blackmail, and otherwise disabuse queer and trans people (Gupta 2006, Li et al 2017).

**epistemological frameworks of the European enlightenment place upon thought, enquiry, and therefore on knowing. This hesitation persists in tension with both throughout the discursive form of my written exposition, and the ethically driven desire to salvage concepts such as 'freedom' that I, my informants, and other scholars variously express (Winnubst 2006, Chakravorty Spivak 1990, Prakash 1994). This hesitation therefore does not mean I can pretend to have found a tidy solution to my own, and the anthropological discipline's, dependence upon and debt to these and other philosophical concepts associated with Enlightenment ideologies. Chakravorty Spivak articulates the necessary use of concepts, language, and forms loaded with meaning through their development in relation to Enlightenment ideologies as a 'double bind', and encourages scholars aspiring to subalterity and counter-hegemony to use them cognisant of the challenge this double bind imposes. She advocates for relating to Enlightenment philosophy through "ab-use" of ist concepts; that is a motioning away from them as a point of origin[12]. Thus, where I depend upon such concepts to communicate my ideas to my readers in relation to the greater body of anthropological, historical, and political literature, I appeal to my readers to identify this deployment as an 'intentional mistake', an 'ab-use' in the sense advocated by Chakravorty Spivak. In her critical relation to the Enlightenment, Chakravorty Spivak goes into greater detail regarding her the methods by which she perceives Enlightenment**

[12] Chakravorty Spivak is emphatic that she intends this formulation only in terms of the semantic affordances of the prefix 'ab-', and not the unfortunate neographism of 'abuse' that could be infelicitously inferred with reference to the English language context (Chakravorty Spivak 1990:4).

**philosophies to institute and re/produce 'the order of things'. In particular, she identifies aesthetics and an aesthetic education as central to the shaping of desires, habits (both intellectual and physiological), and epistemological outlooks, that serve and sustain both capital and unequal relationsfo power between nations and peoples (Stoler 2008). For Chakravorty Spivak, moving away from Enlightenment epistemology is essential not only for the conceptual and analytical project of a scholarship that displaces European economies of knowledge, but "to rearrange desires (1990:11). It is at this rhizomatic, messy connection of epistemology, aesthetics, and desire, that I strive to begin my project, by inverting Chakravorty Spivak's supposition: If epistemological change would rearrange desires, would it not follow that a rearrangement of desires might lead to epistemological change?**

**To aid my movement away from a rationalised, bounded, and ordered epistemology, I will seek to undertake the hard work of descending into the senses of the body, and the mess of the social world. While the phenomenological literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries has sustained a critique of Cartesian and European Enlightenment ontologies, a handful of thinkers have critiqued phenomenological writers' dependence on visuo-spatial metaphors and abstract analysis as curiously disembodied (Stoller 1994, Brownell 1995, Sparkes 2017). Stoller (1994) in particular calls for a 'sensuous scholarship' that attends to heart as well as head, and foregrounds through language the tastes, smells, sounds, tactile sensations**

**and other sensibilities as ways of knowing about the self, other people, and the world. While Stoller's work is informed by apprenticeship to Songhay sorcerors, who describe knowledge of skill or other people through the metaphor of 'taste', Stoller's more general point urges indulgence in the sensorious experiences of researching, knowing, and interacting with other people as a methodological and epistemological approach. Whilst restrained by the double bind of written language, I will attempt to respond to this call through multi-sensory descriptions of my own and others reported experiences, in the hope that this will extend my movement away from the colonial ruins that dominate the landscape of the contemporary ethnographic project.**

**I assert that this approach to the hermeneutic project of ethnography is particularly appropriate for my research context, since in the South Asia region the dominant mode of expressing and interpreting the rhetoric of cultural performance is through the ancient aesthetic 'Rasa' theory. Particularly associated with drama and music, its earliest recorded appearance is in the Natyashashtra (attr. Bharata Muni), and is perhaps most famously elaborated by 10th century dramaturg Abhinavagupta. According to rasa theory, emotion (*bhava)* arises in response to the perception of objects the course of life, ranging from the presence of a lover, to the loss of wealth, to encountering dangerous animals and fulfilment of personal desires. These emotions are manifested throughout the body as *rasa*, sentiments that are expressed and may be interpreted by spectators,**

**that pertain to the mental state of the one experiencing emotion and living out its effects through their body.**

**Bharata Muni compares the process of expressing and interpreting rasa in a metaphor of cooking and connoisseurship, whereby the skilful combination of spices and other ingredients results in a taste that is both distinctively made-up of its many components and distinct from any of them. When tasted by an appreciative consumer, the contributions of these various base components maybe divined, and the inherent beauty of their unique creation is co-experienced and appreciated. Abhinavagupta pushes the philosophical implications of rasa theory even further, asserting that the mental states of people cannot be expressed or understood in rudimentary language, and therefore may only be accessed by act of attention from spectators who infer the mental state of others through sympathy with the ways in which the performing body manifests familiar sentiments. This position is strikingly similar to Wittgenstein's claims about the unknowability of another's experience of, for example, pain, and to the phenomenological approaches in Western philosophical tradition that lead into formulations such as affect theory.**

**Furthermore, Abhinavagupta challenges the notion that artistic performance is imitation, since the performer cannot know the state of mind of the inspiration for a given character otherwise than the audience member can know the mental state of that performer, that is, through**

**personal interpretation of the bodily manifestations of sentiment. Instead, he shows how the manifestation of a particular sentiment (rasa) or emotion (bhava) is essentially consubstantial with the experience or state of being thereof. This formulation resonates strongly with the Heideggerian critiques of Cartesianism, and the mind/body separation that structures much Western thought following the European Enlightenment. Thus Abhinayagupta asserts that Aesthetic objects have their own independent existence in the world that differs from the world of everyday life, existing as it were in an 'aesthetic world'.**

**Kalpana Ram (2011) has asserted that rasa is the primary mode of spectatorship in Indian society. Taking her assertion seriously, I extend this to explicate my attempt to develop a theoretical framework that draws from phenomenological and affect theory literatures from the Western canon, alongside and subordinately to the precepts of Rasa Theory as articulated in the Natyasastra and elsewhere in ancient Indian philosophical texts. In viewing culture as rhetoric, and rasa as that "special aesthetic of the senses" (Das 2006:68) by which cultural meaning is expressed and inferred, I extend the insights of rasa theory beyond the boundaries of artistic events into the creative landscape of rhetoric culture as practised in everyday life.**

## The Aesthetics of Persuasion

**What then is the place of language in a senuous, messy, aesthetically unstable thesis? As Das (2012) has noted, one of the particular challenges of**

**understanding and capturing something of the essence of human life is that people have both a sensorious, experiential life, and also a rich life in language. The life of language is moreover, as Das expresses it, an arena engaging particular cultural aesthetic senses (Das 2006). However, the very conception of what constitutes 'culture' continues to be debated and reformulated along with the anthropological discipline. For the purposes of this thesis, I lean heavily on a conception of culture as a form of rhetoric, that draws on cultural memories and aesthetic education, creating yet another node amidst the rhizomatically shifting elements of experience laid out above.**

**The rhetoric culture movement makes the case for understanding culture as a form of rhetoric deployed in the creation of worlds and peoples themselves, emphasising a conception of humans as not simply culture-bearing beings, but as culture-creating and culture-changing beings (Carrithers 1992, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, Strecker and Tyler 2009, Albaladejo 2016). Thus conceived, rhetoric culture may be another means by which people are involved in practices of worlding, and a means by which we may speak of how people contribute to understandings of themselves, others, and the world that unfurls around them.** Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is a moving force (Strecker in Carrithers 2005b, Oesterrich 2009); it pushes people towards or away from others and objects (Carrithers 2005b, 2009). Principally understood as a spoken art, Carrithers and others in the Rhetoric Culture movement have urged for an understanding of all human interaction as

rhetorical. In this way, non-verbal components of action are also understood as a means by which people undertake cultural work while others are worked upon, persuaded towards a particular perspective or orientation, **towards a particular view of and within the world**.

If orientation places us on the lines that we follow to arrive where we do (Ahmed 2006), and if cultural rhetoric is a moving force by which we are turned and by which we turn others (Carrithers 2005b, 2009), it follows that the location of the self might also be better understood as a rhetorical effect. Earlier I relied on Shannon Winnubst's exposition of the neutral human individual to show how conceptions of the person, arrived at by following the line of European Enlightenment logics, is imbued with *identity*. I have italicised the notion of *identity* to indicate that I identify it as a historically situated notion, refusing its givenness and attending to it as a culturally specific state of being that must be actively produced. I shall uphold this pattern throughout the thesis, speaking of cultural, sexual, and other forms of personal identification as processual actions, leaving them unenclosed and open to further reorientation. This allows me to write in a language that shows how people negotiate different cultural notions of personhood, and grapple with social morality as they seek to lead ethical lives directed by love and pleasure.

I begin by turning my attention to the point from which the world of queer Kolkata unfurls, the bodies and somatic experiences of various members of

the city's queer community within specific spatio-temporal contexts: that of Kolkata Pride (Chapter 1), dance in its many forms (Chapter 2), everyday activities in the city space (Chapter 3), experiences of enclosure of public and private Spaces (Chapter 4), and through notions of Everyday Ethics, Love, and Radical Empathy (Chapter 5). Let us then turn to love, and orientate ourselves towards the East of India, towards Queer Kolkata.

# Chapter 1
# Pride: Global and Local Articulations of Queer community

In this **chapter** I describe the annual event of Kolkata Pride, which affords a rare opportunity to contemplate a great breadth of the diversity encompassed by queer-identifiying people from across West Bengal. I examine the process of community organising to consider how spatial and aesthetic practices relate to local and global political histories, and draw upon diverse cultural schema to manifest and inhabit ethical dispositions. I contemplate the co-constitutive relation between people and spaces through the lens of the socio-spatial theories of Ctcheglov (1953), Debord (1955), Bachelard (1992) and De Certeau (2002). I subsequently posit the ethical quality of being oriented in, and inhabiting, particular places. Through this discussion I show how the use of the body in culturally meaningful tropes can function as a cultural rhetoric to reshape spatial and social contexts.

There could be no better experience to introduce the queerness of Kolkata than the annual Pride walk. Not only does the event draw together a diversity of queer-identifying people, but the process of planning and executing the parade offers insight into the practical effects of the social and intellectual changes that the various parts of this population explore in their lives and work. Over the course of this chapter, I will first and foremost introduce to you the 'Queer Community' in Kolkata. In doing so I will offer an insight into the diversity of ways that people in Kolkata might identify themselves as queer and align themselves with others who identify similarly. The question of what constitutes a 'community', and in what ways people group themselves and are grouped as 'queer', will continue throughout this text. I do

not envision that I will be able to offer a hard rule for membership of the 'queer community'; indeed I shall at times even question what beliefs and ideas permit us to sustain the claim that such a community even exists. Rather, by introducing the ways in which people refer to the existence of a 'queer community' in Kolkata, I will begin an exploration of modes of belonging, personal and group identification, and the ethics of friendship.

**Alongside this ethnographic approach to exploring Queer Community in Kolkata, I offer as a starting point the analysis of 'community' in the work of Niharika Banerjea, who like me balances a longstanding personal and professional engagement with queer activitst communities in Kolkata. Banerjea also notes that the coalitions around the decriminalisation of gendered and sexualized forms of marginalisation that have been taken through a human rights framework since the 1990s have contributed to an emergence of a visible queer community (2015). One of the ways in which this queer community becomes identifiable, according to Banerjea, is through "spatial modes of organising" including Pride, protests, and demonstrations, as I shall show in this chapter, and also in the media through markers such as dress, rhetoric, and demands, aspects of which I shall discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. However, unlike in America and Europe, Banerjea cautions against the assumption that the media and spatial appearances of queer community in Kolkata are not linked to urban transformation and territorialisation in the Indian context. Banerjea thus indicates a gap in normative analytical and theoretical understandings of community, especially queer community, that emerges from a Western-centric**

**model of identifying, understanding, and living out queerness and [queer] community organising. As such, my contribution in this and the following chapters seeks to respond to Banerjea's call for a scholarship of queer communities that is not limited to territorialised groups of queer citizens. In discussing Kolkata pride as an ethnographic appartion of queer community in Kolkata, I draw anthropological attention to what Banerjea refers to as 'nonspatialized communities', and queer activists who organise in "ordinary spaces" (1059).**

**The route of Kolkata Pride is a connect-the-dots of ordinary and extra-ordinary places. As I progress through the thesis, I will follow some of the characters we meet in Kolkata's streets into different kinds of spaces that we might recognise as ordinary – offices, tea stalls, and homes. I suspect that when Banerjea here refers to 'ordinary spaces', however, she in part is emphasising her formulation of Kolkata as an 'ordinary city'. She renders Kolkata as ordinary in order to decenter the city from urban theorisations dependent on developmental or universalising approaches to cities and the urban experience. In other words, she seeks to hold Kolkata apart from notions of the global or metropolitan city, or from a theoretical framework that would locate Kolkata as if on a trajectory towards metropolitan norms (Manalansan 2015).**

As a visual spectacle, Pride is a flashpoint of queer aesthetic display. I will make a detailed analysis of the ways in which personal aesthetics and styles of

bodily adornment may be used or interpreted as a rhetorical device that identifies a person's position in a social and cultural context. I will consider how apparently individual, whimsical sartorial choices and the kinesis of the body may be understood in relation to serious ideological negotiations about national identity, political ethics, and the navigation of global and local discourses of proper personhood. This introduces one of the most prominent arguments of this text, namely that the use of the body in space is a fundamentally ethical practice, and one that can consciously be constructed as a tool for activism.

I will also explore the form of protest, of walking, as a performative and rhetorical act that brings into view a vision of queer life in the normatively coded public space of the city. Expanding on the well-known formulation of De Certeau (2002), I will examine not only the spatial rhetoric of the Pride walk, but also the ways in which the use and styling of the walking body influences the meaning and effect of the territorial movement through space. I shall use this as a starting point to claim activism itself as a *rhetorical* social practice, entailing a process of persuasion on a social and emotional level. This claim is one that I shall develop over the course of the thesis, here through discussion of walking, dancing, and loitering, and in later chapters through discussions of more formal activist organisation, the cultivation of friendships, and the private reshaping of traditional rituals.

## 1.I Vignette: Pride then and now

**December 2019**

The mood at Pride events in Kolkata is ecstatic. Members of the organising collective dance and shout slogans from the float, encouraging the crowd. The attendees on the ground below are loosely contained by a long six-striped rainbow flag many metres long that is unfurled from the back of the lorry and surfs on the raised arms of the crowd trailing behind it. People carry home-made placards with humorous, witty, and defiant slogans about queer gender and sexual identities, and about love. An improvised cordon keeps revellers in a loose column, attempting to prevent them from stopping the traffic entirely. The parade is far from orderly, however. Queer folk spill ahead and around the truck, cut up onto the path to overtake or move backwards through the throng, and in various places the lorry stops for dance performances which may take place on the float, below on the road, or using both spaces.

The visual spectacle of queer bodies in public space is exaggerated through the creativity expressed in choices of dress and bodily adornments. People of all genders sport hairstyles, clothing and make up of all styles. Rainbow colours are everywhere, painted on faces, woven into gorgeous fabrics, cobbled together out of whatever could be found at home. This globally recognisable marker is joyously and wittily reinvented, adapted and

reproduced by the people of Bengal in the streets of Kolkata. Pride thus breaks into public space as a wave, flooding the streets with colour, ideas, and noise. Pride is a protest and a celebration, a chaotic co-mingling of outlandishly heightened selves and those who sidle up to the crowd and seek to hide themselves behind the colourful display of others.

Remembering the first Pride walk of 1999[13] Pawan Dhall, one of Kolkata's earliest openly gay activist figures who had participated in organising the event, explained to me that the Stonewall Riots that are commemorated by American and most European Pride celebrations were a marker only in orienting the choice of a date for that fateful procession. Styled as a "Friendship Walk", the format was inspired in the mind of its progenitor Owais Khan by the marches with which M. K. Gandhi and the satyagrahis[14] initiated their campaign of peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience against colonial British rule, which are known variously as the Dandi or Salt marches. "[Owais's] main idea was that in my own history, in our own history, we have a Pride march, you know which is a salt march, a Dandi march, which was an inspiration for so many. And it was about exerting your rights, exerting your

[13] Kolkata's 1999 Pride lays claim to be the oldest Pride walk in South Asia.

[14] '*Satyagrahi*' was the name given to those who participated in non-violent acts of resistance as coordinated by M.K. Gandhi in the context of the Indian Independence struggle. The first and perhaps most iconic of these were the *Dandi* or 'Salt March', in which thousands walked from Gandhi's ashram near Ahmedabad to harvest salt from the sea (c.240 miles away), in protest at the colonial taxes on salt. This resulted in the arrest of some 60,000 Indians including Gandhi, since British laws at this time also made it illegal for Indians to collect or harvest salt. Gandhi named anti-colonial non-violent forms of resistance '*satyagraha*', which translates literally as 'truth struggle', but can idiomatically be conceived of as a struggle for righteousness, justice, or that which is good/proper. *Satyagrahi*s therefore are those who struggle or that which is good, right and just. The march itself is sometimes also referred to as a Satyagraha, a struggle for truth, and so walks like these can come to represent a very specific kind of moral, nationalist dissent in the Indian context, employing a cultural rhetoric that posits the object of such protests as a truth or value to be struggled for.

right to life, [your] right to freedom of expression, and we should take inspiration from that as well. So the date could be [roughly around the] Stonewall Riots, but the mode of protest is very much Indian." So too today Kolkata Pride remains a protest and a celebration in which a dizzyingly diverse and at times contradictory bricolage of influences commingle to express a mode of life that is concerned not only with queerness, but also with what it could mean to be Indian.

## 1.II A Queer, Indian Movement?

The official Pride Walk event gives an insight into the diversity of queer-identifying experience across the various layers of society in Kolkata and the surrounding areas, more so than any of the other LGBTQ* events in the city. As such, it provides an interesting starting point to consider the difficulties of describing the parameters of the chaotic, diffuse, and ever-emerging network that is generally referred to by LGBTQ* people as the 'queer community' in Kolkata. Speaking of a queer 'community' in Kolkata, as in any context, is fraught with caveats and ambiguities, and perhaps refers as much to a wish or an ideal as much as to any given entity or locatable social network. Over the course of this thesis I shall explore the ways in which a 'queer community' and associated queer 'activist' movement emerge in various urban centres of the city of Kolkata, and how queer socialites interact with discourses of identity, belonging, human rights, nationhood, and ethics. It is difficult - if not impossible - to do so without referring to the 'queer community' under consideration. Therefore, although I write about a 'queer community' and 'activists' following the idiomatic models I learned from my friends and informants, this use of language does not necessarily reflect a pre-emptive intellectual conviction about the ontological basis of either. For now, I turn back to Kolkata Pride, with its seemingly limitless manifestations of queerness across this putative 'community', not least through the embodied, aesthetic expressions of its many participants.

Pride, like a religious festival or a wedding party, is an occasion for "decking up". Most attendees put careful consideration into their costume for the event, whether their personal style is casual or flamboyant. In seeking to be a space for the expression of suppressed selves, Pride provides a space for sartorial and physical experimentation, for challenging social norms about the presentation of the body in public space. Thick kajal under the eyes of cisgender queer men wearing brightly coloured silk dhotis and kurtas harks back to the flamboyance of the long-haired Bengali Babus, Indian men of earlier centuries whose "femininity" was mocked by British colonisers. The soft fluidity of their bodily movements, the gentle angles at which they hold their heads to smile, and the addition to their costume of ornate jewellery in the Indian style, challenges a hegemonic 'macho' masculinity that presses into social norms both through Western colonial and contemporary mediascapes, and also from Hindu nationalist gender roles that are pornographic in their fetishization of hyper-masculinity. Trans women, tall and slender, wear short western dresses or long intricate anarkalis[15], defying regional stereotypes of transfeminine people as unable to meet stratospheric national and international standards for the glamour of properly 'female' bodies. Other transfeminine folk trash these gender norms. At the front of the float, a pair of kothis dragged up as a Bengali bride and groom take turns to ride each other's shoulders, their friends giving loud ululations (*ulu*) as they garland each other in an absurdist parody of Bengali Hindu marriage. The 'bride' wears a sweat-

[15] A full-length empire-line ornate dress, usually worn over tight-fitting cotton or silk trousers (churidar) with a dupatta or veil. It is associated with Mughal historic dress styles, and was particularly popular with Kathak dancers.

stained *genji* - a man's cotton vest - under their makeshift red sari and glittering scarlet veil, grinning with subversive pleasure through the quintessential white Chandan-paste adornments and মুকুট (*mukut* / bridal crown) framing their face. Short-haired butch lesbians exude cool in jeans and plain cotton kurtas[16] alongside trans masculine teenagers bhangra dancing in leather biker jackets, while a young trans man with long darkened eyelashes fluttering amongst pale pink and blue face-paint walks calmly with his girlfriend, showing that trans men can be femme too. Long-haired lesbians wear saris and colourful embroidered maxi-skirts. Non-binary and androgynous people span the limitless range of possible ways of dressing.

Frequently at Pride events, participants apply small rainbow patches to each other's cheeks with face paint. Others wear the rainbow flag draped from their necks or sew capes out of six colours of tulle. Bystanders who pay close attention will notice people wearing multicoloured bangles to create jangling rainbows along their forearms. Rainbow scarves are worn as dupattas[17] over salwar kameez[18], stoles over brightly coloured kurta pajamas[19], bound round peoples' heads as turbans. One young woman struts up and down in a rainbow sari. Emerging from the US in the 1970s, the six-striped rainbow flag has become an internationally recognised marker for queer social movements

[16] Long, plain cotton tunic cut with vents from the hip. Typically worn over trousers and originally associated with masculine dress codes.
[17] A cotton or chiffon scarf, worn across the chest, shoulder, or as a veil over the head, traditionally to preserve a woman's modesty
[18] A tunic and loose trouser suit
[19] A matching kurta and trouser set, usually styled with churidar (tight-fitting cotton or silk trousers) and sometimes an ornate stole

and those who identify as LGBTQ*. Here on the streets of Kolkata, this global marker is adopted and creatively reproduced in distinctively regional modes of dress. Pride in Kolkata is thus unmistakably part of a scape of ideas of global reach, and yet it is also unmistakably Indian, some say unmistakably Bengali.

## Walk On the Rainbow

LGBTQ* movements across the globe share symbolic and historic resonances linking back to the American tradition of Stonewall and subsequent annual Pride Marches, often exemplified most clearly through the motif of rainbow colours (*cf.* Gross 2014; Newton 2015; Laskar Johansson and Mulinari 2016). The six-striped rainbow flag, which has become emblematic of LGBTQ* and otherwise queer identification across the globe, was itself unveiled at San Francisco Pride in 1978. The ubiquity, and globally recognisable status, of the rainbow motif seems to attach LGBT activism to the American-centric genealogy of LGBT rights, even where regional modes of queer identification are asserted. However, Dutta (2012, 2013) has shown how this transnational model can have troubling neo-colonial effects, as regional non-heterosexual and transgender modes of personhood may come to be read as local 'versions' of implicitly Western identity categories (see also Chakrabarty 2008, Platz Robinson 2014). Furthermore, the association of LGBTQ* subjectivities and desires with a 'Western' centric narrative of liberal progress is problematic in the Indian context, where the historic institution of laws and categories that

first criminalised homosexuality were imposed by British colonisers, and where in recent decades conservative discourses have associated homosexuality with licentious Western excesses.

In the 1990s, resisting the representation of queerness and homosexuality as an imported Western affectation was a central concern for queer activists. One strategy taken up by academics and writers, within the movement was to research erased or forgotten texts and artefacts from the Indian continent's precolonial past to develop a story about the history and heritage of Indian queer identities, desires and practices. Historian and prominent Delhi-based activist Giti Thadani has photographed a number of homoerotic temple sculptures, and identified many instances where ancient carvings were adapted during the colonial era to bring them in line with heterosexual erotic representations (Thadani 2007, 2016). Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai (2000) have compiled multiple textual references from Islamic and Hindi traditions, including Ismat Chughtai's (1942) Urdu short story *Lihaaf* ("The Quilt"), which in 1944 was brought before Lahore Court for obscenity in a case whose conventional case title, *George the Sixth vs Ismat Chughtai*, **the author herself declared to be "absurd" (Patel 2001)**.[20] These academic texts are known to many queer activists as well as some in the wider community, and copies of these books sit in the library of *Diana*, an NGO in Kolkata that works for the rights of queer women and trans men.

[20] Chungtai and her lawyers won, quite literally laughing the case out of court. See Patel 2001, Bhatia 2020.

## Indian and Lesbian

For queer women in particular, the emergence of an Indian lesbian subjectivity is almost everywhere anecdotally connected to the events surrounding the 1998 Indian release of *Fire* , a movie by the Indo-Canadian film maker Deepa Mehta, loosely inspired by Chungtai's *Lihaaf* (Patel 2004, Gopinath 1998, 2005, Akanksha and Malobika 2006, Dave 2006, 2010). The film depicts the unfolding of an intimate relationship between two sisters-in-law and their negotiation of their feelings towards one another in a conservative Hindu household, which they eventually move out from together as a couple. Public protests led by right-wing Hindu nationalist party *Shiv Sena*[21] broke out in Bombay around the film's release, including vandalism and arson attacks within cinemas showing the movie. Hindu nationalists claimed that the film defamed and misrepresented 'Indian culture', denouncing the portrayal of female homoerotic sexuality on screen and especially in relation to the Indian/Hindu family (Gopinath 2005).[22] Similar protests were made across the country, with Hindu nationalists claiming that lesbians did not exist in Indian society and describing the film as a violation of Indian family values. Ironically, these protests served to hail the Indian Lesbian, bringing same-sex desiring women out into the streets in counter protests. An image of a woman holding a placard that simply states "Indian and Lesbian" was widely circulated in the national press (Patel 2004). The clash of discourses around

[21] Shiv Sena ("The Army of Shiva") is a regional Marathi Hindu Nationalist political party founded by cartoonist-turned-politician Bal Thackerey in 1996.
[22] The Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Manohar Joshi (Shiv Sena), congratulated those who had shut down cinemas, claiming that "The film's theme is alien to our culture" (India Today, 1998) https://www.webcitation.org/5xcpYTW5N?url=http://www.india-today.com/itoday/21121998/cinema.html

what within the film was 'Indian' and what was, in the words of Maharashtra's Chief Minister Manohar Joshi, 'alien to our culture' sparked the first wave of organisation around the issue of Indian female same-sex desire under the banner of the English word 'lesbian'. This discursive and ideological struggle over the meaning and genealogy of culture was played out in the territorial occupation of public space, just like a Pride parade.

Pride, as a historic and ideological act that is physically played out across the urban landscape, is one example of how modern Indian *identity* may be rendered in a queer imagining. Thus the possibilities of contemporary Indian identifications that the act of Pride might proffer are dependent on the careful discursive management of how the story of the precedent for such an event is told, with relation to global and local historicised narratives. Participants feel strongly about how the form Pride takes relates to their self-identification and values as queer individuals living in an urban centre of the Bengal region. However, I do not wish to give the impression that the 'queer community' and those within it all imagine this queer personhood and its mode of representation in the same way. The matter of what constitutes a global/Western or local/Indian cultural aesthetic plays a considerable role in the negotiation of these contested subjectivities. This is undertaken in a number of strategic choices about the adornment and presentation of the body, and the way in which bodies move through particular public spaces.

As we shall see, individuals and organisations selectively adopt and deploy a

range of cultural signifiers through aesthetic decisions that can be connected to political and ideological positions in their own minds, and in the minds of those who observe them. I shall consider the various ways in which particular actions, symbols and other aesthetic dispositions are discussed and understood in contextual relation to notions of global, local, national and regional identification. Further, since debates about the place of same-sex desire in Indian society have typically drawn heavily on narratives of belonging or foreignness, I will show how apparently individual expressions of style may form part of a strategy for negotiating discourses of the place of queerness in these conceptual geographic and social spaces. This will afford us an entry point to understanding the body in space as a tool for ethical, and perhaps activist, practices.

**Some of the key questions that have prompted my inquiries attempt to pick up on those threads left open by Canadian anthropologist and philosopher Naisargi Dave, at the end of her monograph queer activism in India. Dave's extensive ethnographies provide a useful historical and contextual background to my own enquiries, although undertaken mostly in Delhi and Mumbai in the 1990s and early 2000s. Dave was at that time working closely with some of the first collectives to form around queer activism in North India's urban centres at that time. On the one hand, many of the concerns of her informants mirror those of my own, such as ambivalent negotiations around professionalisation and funding sources, and the grappling with local and international practises of naming and identifying queer gendered**

and sexual subject positions. On the other hand, a number of her broader claims are in contradiction with the professed experiences of emergent queer groups that were based in Kolkata around the same time. For example, she asserts that "Lesbian activism in India, like lesbian activisms the world over, grew both out of and against the norms of the women's movement that presaged it." (598) However, according to the founder members of *Diana*, their motivations were less related to the women's movement per se than in dialectic with the organisations available for gay men in the city at the time. Akanksha explained to me that key motivating factors for the six founder members to seek others had been related to a sense of general isolation and of not feeling able to identify with any other movement, considering organisations such as "counsel club" [footnote and ref to Paul's work], predominantly catering to the needs of men who have sex with men, to be their nearest associates at that time. Furthermore, although Dave's informants found considerable tension with prominent feminist activists in their cities, Kolkata's overarching women's organisation *Maitree* in fact welcomed *Diana* into their collective and showed support at a number of their events, making the organisers honorary secretaries of the broader collective in a year where scandals around the rejection of lesbian organisations from feminists conferences and events was occurring in Delhi. Therefore, although I follow and hope to extend Dave's general line of theorisation about activism as a creative ethical practice that imaginatively resists and transfigures social norms, considering further stark differences in the concerns, histories, trajectories,

**and practises of queer activist communities between urban/rural, regional, cultural, linguistic, class, and caste groups in India, I distance myself from the temptation to generalise from any site of action in India to another. Instead I favour of a much more situated perspective in the material I present, focussed on the city of Kolkata itself. If in doing so I am able to offer comment on the idea of 'India' or 'queer activism' in India overall, it must be from the perspective afforded from a central base in this very particular location. I contend that such formulations are instructive precisely because of the insight they might afford into regional biases, not despite it.**

## Bannerless Pride

In 2019 Kolkata Pride Walk almost didn't happen. Certain long-standing and arguably intrinsic tensions around the form, tone and scale of the event reached a peak when a prominent member of the community announced a fundraising party for the event in September via Kolkata Pride Collective's (KPC) mailing list, naming a date (the last Sunday of December) for the walk itself. Since 2011 Kolkata Pride has always been organised by a non-hierarchical, loosely formed collective of volunteer individuals and representatives from across the queer community. This organising group styled itself as KPC, and exists principally to organise the annual Pride walk. Funds are raised through donations, and the event is strictly a "bannerless Pride", meaning that no individuals or organisations may attach their name to

the occasion[23]. The individual in question, Saurabh, is the organiser of the high end 'Pink Parties' that occur every month in a bar and nightclub attached to a luxury hotel. These parties have a 500Rs entry fee and feature DJs, drag artists and other performers often brought in from other urban centres such as Delhi and Mumbai. They are attended in large numbers, though mostly by cisgender gay men from financially established family backgrounds, and conspicuously not by the more familiar core of activists and community members who organise and attend other LGBTQ* events.

Although Saurabh is an active and vocal participant in the organisation of the main Pride event itself, on this occasion he had presumed to announce the final date of the Pride walk before any organising meetings had been held or even called by the collective. From a certain perspective this presumption was not utterly outrageous, since for the previous few years Pride had been habitually held on the last Sunday of the year,[24] and notwithstanding a major change of direction could be assumed to fall on or around that time with more or less security. Since the actual finalisation is always fairly last minute, in practice most queer individuals and LGBTQ* NGOs operate on this assumption for personal and planning purposes. However, in presuming to refer to the date as a given and to initiate a fundraising process before a democratic meeting had been called, Saurabh was interpreted by most list-

[23] When I have heard individuals ask the reasons for this, in meetings or in small groups of friends, the response from longstanding members of the collective has been that this one event is intended to show the unity of the LGBTQ* community and therefore the only banner should be the banner of the Pride walk itself.

[24] This typically falls neatly between the university examination periods at the start of September and end of January, whilst avoiding the holiday period of the New Year. Holding the event on a Sunday affords greater convenience for those who travel into the city from elsewhere to attend the event.

members to have violated the principles of the group as a democratic, non-hierarchical and community-based forum.

An angry series of emails followed, including a call to boycott the meetings Saurabh had attempted to set up to discuss the contentions and move the planning process along further. The discord led to several members who are usually silent on the list weighing in to express their sadness that miscommunication and (what were perceived to be) egotistical or political manoeuvring were breaking out within the community. Meanwhile several others responded asking to be removed from the mailing list and its prevailing unpleasantness. In an astounding move the KPC issued a statement to the effect that they would not be calling the first organising meeting for Kolkata Pride. They explicitly framed this as a protest at what they perceived to be an attempt by Saurabh to forcefully take ownership over the organisation of the Pride event. At one stage it was suggested that Pride would not go ahead if it could not be arranged democratically. At another time it seemed that a split would emerge, and two separate Pride events might run in parallel.[25] Eventually a meeting was held, and tensions de-escalated enough for the date to be fixed as the last Sunday of the year by stakeholder consensus, and for fundraising and organising to begin in a communally sanctioned manner. As I was in England at the time, I kept pace

[25] One of the main reasons that this was resisted, from all sides, was from a universally shared desire to retain a unified front in wider society despite the considerable heightened tensions playing out within the collective. Various members expressed concern that two Prides would give a 'confused' message, and could provide conservative voices an opportunity to criticise the queer community by characterising it as infighting, which meant that this model (which was never quite a real possibility) was ruled out and forgotten within days.

with all of these fraught developments through the mailing list, as did most of the wider queer community from their locations in West Bengal and elsewhere.

## Kolkata Rust

Despite the tensions, as I have recounted, Kolkata Pride Walk 2019 was a joyous occasion. There were more attendees than ever before,[26] and the various parties involved in its organisation (including Saurabh among the KPC volunteers) cordially welcomed guests, announced the entertainment pieces, and cheered the crowd on taking turns to occupy the float. Afterwards however reviews were mixed, and in personal conversations a number of members of the community mentioned that they had felt uncomfortable with the style of celebration and form of queer 'identity' expressed at Pride. These comments hinted around a sense that Pride in Kolkata was becoming increasingly 'Westernised', taking on a model of Pride imagined to be more like American or European Pride celebrations. Such comments echoed similar remarks made with reference to Pride in 2018, but with greater intensity.

When the subject of Pride 2019 came up in the context of a discussion about dance, my close friend Sayak commented that "this year's Pride programme was… a little different than what we have been experiencing for so many

[26] This was partly attributed by the organisers to the recent reading down of Section 377, which was conventionally understood to have led to more people coming out either to their families, or feeling more comfortable to participate in public queer events.

years… it was extremely westernised, very Americanised, and I missed out a lot of things from this particular programme...". He went on to describe the programme as "commercialised.. really anglicised" and "more like selling than celebrating." He also directly attributed the style of presentation and performance to the dominant influence of a figure associated with industry [i.e. Saurabh] in planning the event. He commented particularly on the use of the float mainly for dancing and entertainment, rather than as a platform from which to "speak about the struggle", give instructions, and call slogans.

In this description, Sayak makes associations between commercial interest, dance performances, and a Western model of celebrating Pride, perhaps even Western models of queer personhood. Yet despite his misgivings about its use, he also described the float as "amazing" and giving out a "beautiful vibe", showing an ambivalence about the overall effect of these interventions. Sayak, known for his eloquence, struggled uncharacteristically for words to describe precisely what about the Pride parade had left him feeling lacking. He suggested that the Pride programme, in recreating the kinds of gay parties enjoyed by nightclub-going social elites, was "making the people know that this is how you have to celebrate pride, that this is exactly how it should be done… it was very dramatised… but we did not find that beauty of spontaneity… It was very posh, ok. I… I missed that rust. I missed that very earthy Kolkata flavour in that float."

Sayak invokes "spontaneity" and "rust" - aesthetics that diverge from the

slick and the saleable - to represent the “Kolkata flavour”. Without this, he seems to feel that something fundamental is missing, and so the Pride event is difficult for him to fully relate to. Journalist and author Amit Chaudhuri has written how the “appeal of shabbiness” in postcolonial India can be traced to the civic morality of Nehruvian socialism and Gandhian austerity, where the appropriate aesthetic for the middle classes is one of simplicity and restraint. This, he suggests, is taken to greater heights in Kolkata, with its Communist political history and popular image as a decaying shade of its former glory. Rust, dust and decay may thus become unlikely symbols of a peculiarly Indian modernity, and of resistance to globalisation (Majumdar 2013:135-168). Might we then interpret Sayak’s discomfort at the party-like excesses of Pride as a complaint against globalised, capitalist influences on Kolkata Pride?

It has been noted that Chauduri’s theorisation of Indian modernity as “urban decay” is tied to a poetic sensibility of Bengali nostalgia that harks back to the idealisation of Kolkata’s former glory (Mitra 2019). Colloquially referred to as *Bangaliana*, this particular form of nostalgia draws upon a romantic notion of Bengal as a historic region of arts, literature, leftist political mobilisation and intellectualism. It evokes a nostalgic mythology of regional identity[27] (see Anderson 1991) beginning with the ‘Bengali Renaissance’ under colonialism and continuing through a narrative of Bengali thinkers’ role in the

[27] Although language, food, and certain folk and artistic cultures may be used to conceptually draw the two Bengals together still, certain differences remain in the ways in which a regional ‘Bengali’ identity are conceptualised from the standpoint of Bangladesh compared to West Bengal. These include particular historical or literary reference points, and in some cases different aesthetic focuses. That is to say, *Bangaliana* in Bangladesh has a separate history and political meaning than *Bangaliana* in West Bengal, given the former’s history of partition from present day India and the latter’s continuing enclosure within it.

independence movement, unto the present day. This nostalgic aesthetic also manifests more widely through a recent revival of interest in Bengal's folk art traditions, including techniques for working textiles, clay and copper, forms of visual art, and folk music such as Baul sangeet. This influence can be seen making its way into everyday fashion in Kolkata with a resurgence of tourist and elite facing boutiques, and the expansion of the city's existing coffee house culture.[28] In the present moment, the nostalgic aesthetic of *Bangaliana* provides an alternative historic foundation for modelling cultural identity to the Hindi-speaking, North Indian imagining of modern Indian identity propounded by Hindu nationalism. At the same time, it appears to resist a globalised model of progress in the mould of Western neoliberalism (Majumdar 2013). This however is not without some irony, considering the relationship between the thriving period of the Bengali Renaissance and Kolkata's place in the British Raj.

Sayak's lamentation of the absence of "Kolkata rust" from Pride 2019 suggests that particular cultural aesthetic codes are associated with, and per/formative of, particular cultural subjectivities (Mookherjee 2011). His discomfort at the celebration of queerness through what he perceived to be Western aesthetic norms hints to the intertwining of cultural identification and aesthetics. Considering the role of 'shabbiness' in modern Indian aesthetic expressions, Chaudhuri refers to an excerpt from Tagore's novel ঘরে বাইরে / *Ghore Baire*[29] in

[28] The coffee houses in Kolkata (particularly Indian Coffee House opposite Presidency University) are associated with the historic intellectual movements in the region.
[29] The title is sometimes translated as "The Home and The World".

which the landowning character Nikhilesh scolds his wife for replacing a simple Bengali-style brass vessel for a colourful English glass vase. He says to her, "the brass pot is as unselfconscious as these flowers. But that English vase of yours proclaims too loudly that it is a vase…" (Tagore 1916 in Chaudhuri 2015). Chaudhuri notes how ironically, it is by "strategically choosing" this expression of 'authenticity' that Nikhilesh actively creates the 'unselfconscious' character of his home, and by extension of himself. Similarly, it is also of note that Sayak says he felt that, through a more 'Western' stylisation, certain people were making known how Pride *should* be celebrated. This suggests notions of properness, even of morality, may be imposed through aesthetic decisions. In this case, it is that the globally recognisable aesthetics of Euro-American queerness may be experienced as colonising, rather than liberating, when encountered in the South Asian context.

Indeed, I would like to suggest that much of the early resistance to Saurabh's perceived 'taking over' of Pride in 2019 related to the perception of his aesthetic preferences as aligned with elite Western modes of queerness. Whilst the core concerns expressed by various members on the mailing list heavily emphasised dissent at the undemocratic way in which Saurabh had, without wider community support, decided to call a first meeting for the fundraising and organising of Pride events, his association with nightclub and fashion events were frequently referenced apparently incidentally by various

dissenters.[30] In subsequent years however Saurabh's influence on the queer scene in Kolkata has continued to grow, and the frequency with which he hosts club nights, pool parties and fashion events at upmarket locations across the city has increased. Such events have become hubs for a young middle class subsection of the city's queer population, whose increasing visibility in the public landscape of the city contrasts with the more fragmented appearances of queerness in everyday contexts, such as those I shall discuss in Chapters 3 and 5. The strategic use of these middle and upper class forms of queerness, which are associated with narratives of Western progress, celebrity, and material luxury, have long been a prominent part of queer activism in Mumbai and Delhi, though until recently much less so in Kolkata.

As this discussion continues, I would like to suggest that the performance of gendered and sexual identifications through aesthetic practices can thus be understood as an important mode of producing and reproducing particular forms of personhood. Indeed, we may even come to consider how aesthetic expressions act as rhetorical devices through which people identify themselves and seek to shape the world in which they live out their existence. This will be significant both at the level of the individual person, and on the level of group, community or national identification.

[30] These references appear in emails and messages shared on a closed list, that it would not be appropriate to reproduce here.

## একলা চলো রে / Go it Alone

Sayak was not alone in his point of view about the aesthetics of Pride 2019, as became apparent in certain aspects of the feedback KPC sought from the wider members of the queer community. Even though the playlist was compiled through the open popular suggestions of the KPC Forum, after the event respondents particularly singled out the lack of Hindi and Bangla tracks amongst the music, and by implication amongst the dance and celebration style, at Pride. Here, as in numerous personal conversations I had with friends and wider community members, the predominance of certain types of music and dance forms such as voguing[31] were identified with a 'Westernised' model of queer celebration, even here where they were chosen on the basis of the personal preferences of the aggregate of forum members. In response the individual who had compiled the list pointed out that there were few Hindi songs, and almost no Bangla songs, associated with queer love or queer identity. Notably, the main Bengali-language song that was played was not so much about love, but rather spoke of carving one's own path.

একলা চলো রে /*Ekla Chalo Re* (Go it Alone) is a well-known song by the Bengali writer and composer, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Written as a protest song in the context of the movement against the Partition of Bengal in 1905, it was later also associated with the struggle for Independence from the

[31] A style of dance developed in the 1960s Harlem Ballroom scene. Characterised by improvisational angular body movements emphasising the face and parts of the body, it received mainstream attention in the 90s with Madonna's hit song 'Vogue'. The style is decisively associated with black and latinx LGBTQ communities in America.

British. I had been standing atop the float in a bright yellow sari with a garland of rainbow-coloured flowers pinned into my hair as the version popularised by Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan struck up. The atmosphere shifted perceptibly, a gear changed, and the entire parade began singing from the pits of their stomachs, swaying with their arms raised ecstatically into the air. Although the Bachchan version is usually met with scorn by discerning Bengali audiences, the powerfully amplified track was soon barely audible beneath the voices of the crowd several thousand strong, heartily projecting every word. The songs of Tagore are perhaps one of the strongest catalysts for a particular kind of *Bangaliana* or Bengali nostalgia. The crowd's passionate singing of this song could therefore be seen both as an act of multiple simultaneous personal identifications, and a more general rhetorical manoeuvre about the experiences of being queer and Indian. Used in the context of Kolkata Pride, the song *Ekla Chalo Re* simultaneously hailed a regional Bengali, national 'Indian' and ideologically protesting subject, whilst contextualising the rejection and loneliness often experienced by queer people at the hands of their families and wider society. Language and literature scholars have frequently described the broad interpretative potential opened up by intentional ambiguity and plurality of meaning in Bengali poetic forms, especially in traditional song texts (Sengupta 2015, Saloman 1995). The text and the history of the song may be variously interpreted[32] as drawing together acknowledgement of queer peoples' ostracism from the heteronormative, patriarchal systems of Bengali society, with a re-assertion of personal strength

[32] Other scholars have commented on the intentional ambiguity and plurality of meaning that

as part of a proud and putatively Bengali tradition of political resistance.

This is not to say that other tracks were not enthusiastically received by the crowds - they were. The reaction to *Ekla Chalo Re* however stood out to me as different in both form and emotional texture than other tracks, which tended to function as background to the acts of dancing, marching, and slogan-shouting. The playing of the track *Ekla Chalo Re* however functioned as a focus in itself, through which the crowd were brought together into unified engagement with the music and lyrics. This directs us to consider the issue of the role music plays in political protest, and the ways in which people form and communicate particular representations of *identity* and belonging through music in protest situations. Indeed, the feedback regarding the music chosen for KPC Pride 2019 may reflect the different role that music plays when considered in the context of personal recreational preferences, and in a context where it bears (in part) the role of representing a communal identification or political struggle. At Kolkata Pride, whilst popular American and European pop songs contribute to a party atmosphere of enjoyment and celebration, Hindi songs and Rabindrasangeet assert particular ethnic, national or regional self-identifications both within the group, and from the group to the wider public who may encounter the walk in city space. More than this however, large sections of the queer community express associations of a party or club-like atmosphere with Anglicised, American and Western European models of Pride, whilst Hindi and Bengali language songs, sloganeering and speeches are interpreted as ‘local’ modes of expression and *identity*. In this way, choices

of music for the Pride parade can be seen to trigger an array of political, ideological and aesthetic associations in listeners as a result of processes of public memory. Thus, musical choices in the pride parade may be understood as a strategic rhetorical device by which the queer community identifies itself within the wider social landscape of the city.

I noticed that in discussions ranging from the appropriateness within the Indian context of wearing miniskirts in public space, to the pursuit of a model of same-sex marriage, activist friends would fall back on comments to the effect that in 'the West' equality of gendered and sexuality rights had been more or less achieved, and therefore the parameters for fighting, protesting and celebrating in the name of sexual and gendered identity were different or incomparable between 'the West' and India. The assumptions that queer people made about what life was like for LGBTQ* individuals in countries such as the UK were rarely founded in fact or experience, but were derived from international media narratives and the conventional wisdom of popular imagination within the community. Friends were often shocked when I suggested that many issues familiar in India - including homonormativity, class and ethnic discrimination within LGBTQ* spaces, and transphobic bureaucratic and social systems - were still prevalent in England, at least as far as my own personal experience suggests.

What emerges from these awkwardly expressed feelings of comfort and discomfort, wondering aspiration and homely familiarity, is a suggestion of

how different models of understanding local and personal queer identifications intersect with formal rights discourses. For some - particularly those from middle-class anglophone backgrounds - Western music, dance styles, and club-style parties blend seamlessly with their lived experience as Indian and queer. Meanwhile for others these cultural artefacts are experienced and narrated as belonging to other peoples, and may frequently be experienced as alien and alienating, even as colonising, eclipsing and erasing regional modes of identification and older forms of South Asian queerness.

The productive and sometimes fraught interaction of the 'global' and the 'local' that we see here at work is everywhere evident in the present condition of transnational, interconnected, digital modernity (*c.f.* Appadurai 1990, Thompson 2013). In many post-colonial nations, and in India in particular, the articulation of what constitutes the *local* as distinct from the influence of 'the West' has a particular historic role in the ideological conception of the modern national identity (Appadurai 1996, Srivastava 1996, Rembold and Carrier 2011). In India, even beyond the impact of centuries of European colonisation, the continuing influence of 'the West' thus conceived is both multifarious and ambivalent. On the one hand, diasporic lifestyles and international brands function as key aspirational nodes in the imagination of middle-class Indians across the country. On the other hand, as we have seen, conservative moralities often depict the West as an immoral or even dangerous world of free licence and hedonistic individualism, which threatens to disrupt the

family and community values of respectable Indian society. This latter way of thinking is not exclusive to the ever more politically dominant religious fundamentalisms that take it to its logical extremes, but is also implicit in the day-to-day practices of most middle-class families, for example in the extent to which they do or do not monitor the comings and goings of their daughters and sons (Phadke 2005).

I am therefore less interested in genealogically tracing the purported origins of various influences on Indian Queer Activism and private expressions of queerness in the Indian context, as in seeking to understand how particular actions, symbols, practices and ethical dispositions are narrated and produced as global, local, or a fusion of the two by interested parties with differing agendas. In doing so, I partially contest Appadurai's suggestion that "if the genealogy of cultural forms is about their circulation across regions, the history of these forms is about their ongoing domestication into local practice" (1990, p.17). Rather, I suggest that the conventional understandings of the genealogy of particular cultural forms is itself already a part of the practice of local 'domestication' to which he refers. Indeed, the ways in which different groups narrate, and assert as true, the genealogies of cultural artefacts, symbols, and subjectivities is always already part of the hazardous work of cultural re/production. What is at stake in these everyday narrations of the history of cultural influence in the current Indian context is the description of the limits and possibilities of proper Indian personhood at the present moment, and the immediate future. The differing ways in which even the

attendees at Pride envision, experience, and narrate how aesthetic modalities relate to cultural identifications and ethical dispositions is one such example of this process in action.

In this way I contend that, in addition to the cultural and aesthetic significances attached, there is a process of political narrative building connected to the generalised association of celebratory and party-style behaviours to a Western Pride model, while sloganeering and raising commentary on the struggles of queer people in India is widely articulated as integral to the purpose for Kolkata Pride. This is linked to an implicit assumption that the Western Pride as Party model is appropriate for a system imagined to have 'overcome' many of the discriminatory and hurtful experiences that by contrast are held to be systemic and ongoing for Indian queer people. Indeed, after public events such as Pride it is fairly common to hear debates amongst activist and friendship groups about the appropriateness of public celebration, and the need to continue to raise awareness and support for basic rights for LGBTQ* people that are not yet secured legally or socially in the Indian context. It could be said that if, in Kolkata, Pride as party is associated with a Western model of celebrating success in rights gained, Pride as protest is associated with a grassroots Indian social movement that is still struggling for its fundamental right to existence.

By and large across India, anglophone middle-class, vernacular-speaking and

working-class LGBTQ* activists in some way incorporate an imagination of life in the West that places the UK, Europe and America on the arrow-tip of liberal social progress and human rights provision for its citizens. I suggest that by invoking this, the liberal middle-class LGBTQ* activists enfold themselves in a First World narrative of Third World 'backwardness' which, as we have seen in the events around the movie Fire, brings them into conflict both with Hindu Nationalists who assert a particular conservative narrative of authentic/indigenous Indianness, and also with liberal imaginations of a new kind of 'Indian' post-colonial modernity.

**Indeed, it may be that the various and contradictory dis/connections between such socio-political subject positions and queerness have implications not only for the identity categories and political projects at stake here, but also for the intellectual conception of the colonial and the postcolonial as analytically meaningful concepts.**

**Shortly after the reading down of IPC 377 to exclude consensual acts between adults in private, one of the statements that was widely circulated online framed the judgement as an act of decolonisation. In my own personal online sphere, this post elicited praise and statements of recognition from Indian and diasporic queer contacts, however in one memorable case it sparked a disdainful chain of comment from others with limited experience of queerness in Indian historical and social context. A queer Iranian-American facebook friend, with a reputation amongst his**

**colleagues for outspoken conservative viewpoints, reposted the statement bemoaning the tendancy he perceived for formerly colonised peoples to blame all of their country's ills on their former colonisers. After some gentle probing it transpired that his knowledge of the colonial origins of the law in the Indian context, and the multiple ways in which this edict had been applied during colonial rule, were limited. However, his complaint parallels a number of notable examples whereby spokespeople and sympathisers from colonial polities distance themselves from the structures that endure in formerly colonised countries even after their formal independence. Stoler (2008) analyses a parallel example from a speech delivered by then French President Sarkozy during a state visit to Senegal. In this widely criticised speech, he was at pains to separate France's historical colonial occupation with contemporary ills of 'Africa', presenting France's colonial relation with Senegal as a separate, closed chapter. Asserting a disconnect between colonial occupation and the continuing ruination of colonised countries in this way serves to maintain relations of force through moral logics. Such a manoeuvre also facilitates a slippage or *aphasia,* such that reflection upon the ways in which imperial processes "saturate the subsoil of people's lives and persist" in the material, ontological, and psychological structures of populations is evaded (Stoler 2008).**

**Similarly I suggest that, in viewing the reading down of IPC 377 as an act of decolonisation, the original poster of the statement I describe undertook an**

**analysis of imperial formations in India that aligns with Stoler's call to understand imperial processes as continuing, rather than a vestige or spectre from a closed-off historical era. The creator of the original post takes for granted that persistence of IPC 377, formerly British Penal Code Section 377, is an example of "the rot that remains" (Walcott 1987 in Stoler 2008) after the ejection of colonising armies; a ruin around which the independent nation of India was necessarily structured. This colonial ruin, continuing to stand and be reabsorbed into the juridical landscape of independent India, has continued to shape public discourse and private thought about non heteronormative desires and relationships long after 1947. Thus understanding IPC 377 tool for the oppression of same-sex desiring and gender non-conforming Indians is an example of the ways in which extrication from the 'colonial debris' that pervades societies is only achieved slowly and unevenly, in processes that continue beyond the declaration of independence.  At the same time, my facebook contact's unwillingness to acknowledge connections or continuities between IPC 377 and its associated ideologies as a tool of oppression and global imperial formations, plays into the psychic hegemonies of colonial, which seek to sustain notions of imperial beneficience (Stoler 2008).  Since the mental and social effects of IPC 377 extend throughout society, and will likely continue to do so for some time after the law's reading down, the negotiation of queer Indian personhood through aesthetic and cultural performances of self and community in Kolkata Pride might also be proffered as an act of contuining decolonisation, or of seeking independence.**

The planning and performing of Pride demands an annual head-on grappling with these complex and contradictory concerns of colonisation, decolonisation, history, national identity, modernity and individual rights discourses. I therefore propose that the Western model of queerness and sexuality is doubly colonising in the Indian context. Historically, it was with the British administration in the 1800s that India's contemporary models of gender and sexuality came to be violently policed by the Victorian moralities of the country's colonisers. In 1908 the Hijra communities that had thrived and participated in designated ritual roles across Indian society were criminalised under the "Criminal Tribes" act, precipitating the decline of these clan-based third gender communities into ostracism, and association with begging and sex work (the only professions remaining available to them). As several scholars have recounted, the perceived effeminacy of Indian men was used as a trope to justify the British domination over Indian people (Sinha 2017, Nandy 1988), and it was the British who introduced the anti-sodomy law criminalising non peno-vaginal sexual activity in the same article as bestiality and rape. By contrast in the present moment the UK, America and Western Europe are imagined as world leaders in LGBTQ* rights. With the widespread normalisation of marriage equality, LGBTQ* parents, and other protections from discrimination in those countries, contemporary Euro-American models of queer rights movements are often invoked as aspirational and inspirational by many LGBTQ* activists in India. Ideas about possible queer lives in those contexts often become knowable through diasporic connections, and in more recent years 'queer culture' from the UK and

America tantalise the imaginations of queer Indian youths through social and mass media dissemination (Kole 2007, Dave 2012).[33]

'The West' as historic coloniser and contemporary role model therefore chastises Indian queerness on both sides. At the same time, the centuries old internalisation of homophobic attitudes within the normative conservatism of modern Indian social discourse posits homosexual desire and sexual activity as a Western vice, further complicating the discourses of homosexuality's possible relationship to modern Indian personhood. In the public domain, Indian queer activists must both challenge the historical colonial erasure of Indian queerness and resist the claim that queerness is a Western import in the present. Thus, a disjunction emerges whereby Western models of rights, and the imagination of societies in the West that have fulfilled them, are held up as aspirational. Meanwhile Western queer aesthetics occupy a more ambivalent position in the queer community, being experienced as eclipsing or alien to some, yet enjoyed and creatively adopted by others, especially queer middle class urban youths. The evident influence of flows of knowledge, people, culture, images, aesthetics and ideals from Europe and America into Indian LGBTQ* movements also strengthen homophobic Indian nationalist discourses that cast homosexuality as a Western import (Kole 2017). In part, this backlash accounts for many of the strategic manoeuvres that queer groups and individuals in India have made in order to distance themselves from Western aesthetics and models of queerness; doing so is

[33] For example, American TV shows such as Ru Paul's Drag Race and Queer Eye are extremely popular with middle-class urban queer adolescents and young adults

often necessary to authoritatively identify oneself as Indian whilst also identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer.

Pride in Kolkata treads a hazardous path in making visible and embodied the claim to a legitimate modern Indian queer identity, whilst demanding a place for queerness within Indian modernity. In doing so, it both co-opts, uplifts, and challenges certain central tenets of the imagination of Indianness, Bengaliness, love and desire.

## 1.III Psychogeographies

Deciding the route of Kolkata Pride each year is one of the main tasks of the organising collective, and divisions pertaining to the geography of the city emerge every time. Kolkata as a city is spatially, and arguably culturally, divided into North and South. It has been so since not long after its institution, with the North/South divide mapping more or less neatly onto the earlier division of the 'White' and the 'Black' town during the city's development in the 18th century.[34] South Kolkata sits below and adjacent to the colonial Central

[34] Kolkata is an extremely young city by Indian standards, having been founded in 1686 by Job

area of College Street, Fort William, Park Street and Esplanade, constituting a decidedly urban Indian landscape with metropolitan aspirations. Glamorous malls, wide roads, prestigious colleges, and the old colonial clubs at Tollygunge and Ballygunge represent a middle-class, anglophone dominated culture that is connected with flyovers, taxis, extensive public transport and communications systems in dense networks that loop over and around itself in self-congratulatory embraces. North Kolkata is a different world. Peri-urban, but claiming historical precedence to its flashy Southern and Central cousins, here it is often easier to travel by cycle rickshaw amongst the old bazaars, narrow streets, and winding spirals of residential galis.[35] Many iconic landmarks and cultural treasures of the city are found in the North, including the Howrah Bridge and Dakineshwar Kali Temple, Rabindranath Tagore's house at Jorsanko and - according to North Kolkata dwellers - the best Bengali sweets. The pace of life beats slower, and travel beyond the immediacy of the *para*[36] is more effortful. To South Kolkatans, friends who live in North Kolkata seem always to be somewhere on the bypass road in a taxi, travelling between their home and some task or rendezvous in the Centre or the South.[37]

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Charnock, a representative of the British East India Company who set up a factory there.

[35] Narrow roads or alleyways off a main, named road.

[36] A para is a small, localised area within the city. Historically *paras* may have been more or less self contained, and different paras have particular characters, lending a sense of identity to those whose home residence is within them. They are perhaps conceptually comparable to the different named areas of London.

[37] It is worth mentioning that in the last 10 years modern tower block developments have risen up in areas even further north and slightly east of what is traditionally considered 'North Kolkata' as described here. These new developments of Rajarhat, New Town and beyond do not correspond in character to either North or South Kolkata, but rather are viewed almost universally as new regions of the city of Kolkata that are neither fully a part of it, nor a part of any other place. These residential villages, accessible only by the freeway that extends into the peculiar wilderness immediately beyond the city of Kolkata, may be likened to commuter satellite villages, and are a peculiar feature of modern Indian urban development.

Every year there is some contention about whether or how much of the Pride walk should be held in the North of the city. Residents of the North of the city feel, in Pride as in most aspects of Kolkata's urban life, that it is the South of the city that dominates the conversation in terms of events, opportunities, cultural life and notions of progress. Indeed, most major public events, including the mainstream queer events, occur in the Southern or central areas of the city. However more than this, it is the sense of the Northern parts being considered second best that persists, even as the organisers of Kolkata Pride attempt to incorporate all of the complex geography of the city into its route. It is impossible to incorporate both the Northern and Southern parts of the city proper, since Pride in Kolkata is a procession that takes all those who attend along with it. It is indeed a Pride *walk*, unlike European or American Pride parades that pass through the streets with the majority of revellers looking on from a fixed location at the sidelines. To walk from South Kolkata to North Kolkata, particularly within a procession, would take too long and require extraordinary physical endurance. Indeed, Pride walks in Kolkata often take four to six hours to complete their course, which usually ranges between 2.5km - 3km in length.

The vast majority of Pride Walk routes have taken place entirely within the Central and Southern parts of the city, with the notable exception of 2015 when the march started in northern Shyambazar -  but only after the original starting point of College Square was rendered unfeasible by a clash with a visit from the country's then Prime Minister to Kolkata on the same date. The

insistence amongst members of the queer community that Pride move through North Kolkata is suggestive of the potential power of the Pride Walk as an act upon and about the locations that it passes through, and of the meaning of the line it enunciates on the city's landscape as imagined by its inhabitants.

Geographical sensitivities rippled through the first planning meeting for Kolkata Pride 2018, which was held on a November evening in the park opposite *Ranu Chhaya Mancha,* a popular spot for creative and ad hoc protest near Central and Southern Kolkata. Dark had already fallen, and I was about to give up on finding the meeting when I recognised a couple of familiar faces amongst a gathering of around twenty people on some grass just inside the park gates. The attendees were mostly young men, with only one or two older gay men and younger women/trans women present besides myself. After ideas for funding were discussed, with the emphasis firmly on keeping the Pride 'bannerless' and non-corporate, the issue of planning the route was raised. Although some members pressed for North Kolkata to serve as at least a start or an end point, that year it was decided that Pride would remain mostly in South and Central Kolkata. In truth, North-South sensitivities arise even in the planning of the first meeting itself, as meetings are typically held in central areas of the city that prove more challenging for North Kolkata dwellers to attend than their South Kolkatan counterparts because of infrastructural and cultural differences. Thus, even within self-consciously anti-hierarchical, democratic fora such as KPC, shades of infinite kinds of

hegemonic relations emerge and unsettle the pursuit of an all-encompassing inclusivity. And so, whilst earlier incarnations of Kolkata Pride traversed only the Southern and central parts of the city, in recent years organisers have begun to consider routes wending through or to the North of the city. The power to enunciate queerness within the city through Kolkata Pride is extended, willingly but with difficulty, into the North of the city. This itself requires active resistance against the planning and history of the city which always sought to politically divide inhabitants and seems to perpetually suck political action proper back into the South.

It is worth noting that the longstanding history of political activity in the Southern and Central areas of the city has produced locations whose identity has become synonymous with demonstrations and protests. These include The Fine Arts Academy at Rabindra Sadan, *Moulali*, The Writers Building, and the open spaces of *Maidan* to name a few. A self-reinforcing dialectic emerges, since the regular use of these places by social movements is partly a result of their position with the city as a whole, the visibility they offer and proximity to landmarks of political or intellectual relevance, and their accessibility as a gathering point through the wider infrastructure of the city. For example, Moulali is a large crossroads that precipitates a neat route to the central areas of Esplanade; Maidan is a large, busy open space that enjoys proximity to iconic city landmarks and institutions of social discipline such as major police and military bases. Moreover, the repeated use of these spaces for social activism has resulted in them being practically better equipped to support

demonstrations and protests. They therefore come to represent an easy and obvious option for activist activity. The space in front of The Fine Arts Academy, for example, is an open courtyard near a busy road with a raised concrete platform (known as *Ranu Chhaya Mancha*) that sits between St. Paul's Cathedral, the Academy itself, and Nandan, an open space associated with the film industry and other arts in Kolkata. The first time I attended a queer demonstration there in 2013, the seasoned activist from *Diana* who had taken me along proudly informed me that the space was famous for its political protests, particularly the left-wing anti-capitalist protests for which the West Bengal region became notorious in the 1970s. The space is always equipped with a microphone and speakers and, as we shall see, is the go-to place for activist activity in the city. I suggest that this location serves as a default not only because of convenience, but also its psychological and spatial association with political movements that have changed Kolkata's social history. Whilst it is certainly not unheard of for activism to take part in the North of the city[38] it is easy, conventional, and effective to organise demonstrations and activist walks in spaces such as these in Central and South Kolkata.

At the planning meeting one adolescent gay male, who had informally taken a leading role in determining the course of the agenda, invited suggestions of a starting point for the walk. The speaker remarked that a good starting point should be central enough to be well known, and should offer a space where people could gather before the parade departed. Various parks were

[38] Certain, specific places are also psychologically marked by association with histories of activism, including for example Shyambazar Five-Point *Mor* (Crossing), and Sealdah.

mentioned, and I ventured the suggestion of Rectangular Park, a small public green near my family home. In my mind, I reasoned that it met all of the speaker's criteria. It is 5 minutes' walk from the large 'seven point' intersection in the heart of the city that connects major routes including Park Street and the Gariahat Road[39]. As I spoke it also occurred to me that, to the best of my knowledge, Pride had not passed through that part of the city before, despite its proximity to culturally prestigious parts of Kolkata's landscape.[40] A few times I made this suggestion aloud, seeming not to be heard as the speaker repeated his question to the group. The third time this happened, Pawan Da,[41] who had been standing nearby me, spoke to draw attention to my desire to contribute.[42]

With the attention of the speaker, I repeated my naive suggestion of the park, pointing out that it fitted the objective location criteria as the type of place the speaker had outlined. Without missing a beat, he said that it would not be possible for "us" to go to Rectangular Park because of a "certain type of crowd there that means it won't be very safe for us." The conversation then

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[39] Park Street is the 'main road' par excellence in Kolkata, comparable perhaps to Oxford Street in London or Princes Street in Edinburgh. Gariahat Road is a main highway leading to the area Gariahat, which is considered the city's main central shopping and commercial district.
[40] Despite this close proximity, it is worth noting that Rectangular Park is at the boundaries of the areas that are now somewhat run down, despite having been more affluent in colonial times.
[41] In West Bengal, it is customary to refer to those older than oneself using common kinship terms, with older brother (dada, here contracted to 'da') and older sister (didi, which may be contracted to 'di') being preferential, except where the age gap is more considerable. Such terms may express a range of affective dimensions to a relationship, from a distanced respect to a warm, more emotional connection. Within the queer community, the use of 'da' and 'di' sits in the blurred affective space between friendship relations and family, varying on a case-by-case basis. In Kolkata and even beyond Pawan Da is universally regarded with respect for his measured and intelligent perspectives on the life of the queer community, and his role as one of the earliest active, out queer thinkers in India.
[42] I am grateful that Pawan Da, who was otherwise quiet for the duration of the meeting, used his voice to create space for me to speak. The peculiarly imbalanced gender dynamics of the meeting, within which female voices were not given as much space as male voices, were commented on by several of the attendees in personal conversations afterwards.

continued as if I had never spoken. I remember an unexpected feeling of deep disappointment in my gut, laced with mild irritation. That my *para* was so quickly judged to be so self-evidently inappropriate a space for "us", where "us" purported to include all those who might attend Pride, left me feeling numb and out of place. After all, Rectangular Park marks 'home from home' for me. It is the hub of my biological family, with whom I identify and feel a sense of belonging.

In this moment I appear not as an anthropologist but as an ethnographic character, a young queer woman whose naive and emotionally inspired hope is that that the Pride parade would pass through the part of the city she most intimately knows. In reflecting upon this occasion, I do not seek to examine the 'correctness' of the assumptions made in the speaker's response to my suggestion. Rather, I wish to further examine the ways in which certain localities are assumed to afford or prohibit certain kinds of civic performances or ways of being. Further still, I wish to ask what this exchange reveals about how geographical spaces emerge in relation to those who dwell in them.

The Rectangular Park area is mostly inhabited by working class Muslims. I can only assume that they are the 'crowd' to which the speaker referred. In stating that such an area is unsafe for the would-be attendees of Pride, despite their vast numbers, the speaker seems to me to present the hostility and non-queerness of the *para* as an ideological *fait accompli*. Declaring the area unsuitable for Pride, the speaker seems to posit a limit to the transformative or

activist potential of Pride per se, containing it instead within a remit of more or less 'safe' locations. Could it really be that Pride would not 'work' in the area around Rectangular Park? More than this, the speaker's ruling out the possibility of Pride passing through Rectangular Park on the basis of the people who inhabit it seems to proscribe certain kinds of subject from certain kinds of queerness. Referring only to the 'kind of crowd', and not explicitly the assumed Muslim and working-class *identities* of Rectangular Park's main inhabitants, the middle-class, cisgender, Hindu male speaker forecloses boundaries around the Pride project, and the 'Queer Community' who are thought to participate in it.

The persistent maintenance of the majority of Kolkata Pride's pathways in the South or Centre of the City, and the refusal to entertain the idea of its coming to areas such as Rectangular Park, is also one of the ways in which the Pride Walk functions as an act of place-making in the city of Kolkata. Decisions about routes through the city re/produce boundaries between different communities and the affective meanings of certain places, even as they are influenced by unspoken conceptions of existing personal and spatial *identities.* What I am beginning to describe is a kind of 'psychic geography' that, interacting with the physical geography of the city, means that certain spaces offer possibilities more straightforwardly than others to those who would use the city space. Although it is in certain ways no less possible to undertake a political rally in any given area of a city, an effort of the imagination is required to drive a social movement through a space not already associated

with activist politics, and for the occupiers of that space to mentally receive it. The history of political action can be said to imbue certain places with particular associations that become part of the poetry of their place-ness. These memories and ideas are invoked and become a ghostly presence, like the resonance of a ringing gong, whenever similar activity is undertaken within them (see Bachelard 1994).

Mid-century French theorists developed the term ‘psychogeography’ to refer to the effects of particular geographical environments on the emotions and behaviour of the people within them. ‘Psychogeography’ was explained to be what one experiences as the ‘atmosphere’ or ‘ambience’ of a certain place (Debord 1955). This, they implied, was particularly created by inevitable, ubiquitous encounters with the ghosts and memories of those who formerly inhabited such spaces, “bearing all the prestige of their legends” (Ctcheglov 1953). Indeed, Ctcheglov went as far as to claim that the urban landscape is always already a closed landscape, whose landmarks draw its inhabitants towards the past, allowing only fragmentary and shifting glimpses of original conceptions of space. Building upon this, I suggest that we might consider ideas, memories, and public meanings as elements in space just as much as physical, geographic or organic features. Pushing Ctcheglov’s analysis, I draw attention to the ways in which not only the ghosts of past inhabitants, but the people who now dwell in them, dialectically shape the affective profile of places. This in turn can be seen to affect the possible actions available within a space, affording or constraining behaviours, allowing some to extend into it

and not others (*cf.* Heidegger 1971, Bachelard 1994, Ahmed 2006). When planning events in the city, activists therefore interact not only with the physical and infrastructural layout of the city, but also with the social, psychic and affective elements in the landscape that, conceived together gives, those spaces their quality of 'place-ness' (Bachelard 1994).

## 1.IV Claiming the City

Over a year later, Kolkata Pride Walk 2019 commenced at Muhammad Ali Park[43] and concluded at Baghbazar in the north of the city. Taking the usual format, the Pride float departed from the starting point around half an hour late. This is practically punctual, in the Indian Bengali context. It proceeded steadily, crawling at a couple of miles an hour, setting the pace for the procession that follows behind it. That year the walk snaked through the centre of town, moving towards the North, with music and slogans projected alternately from the float. Passing through Sonagachi, Kolkata's red-light district, the float stopped, and the music was turned off. From the float, one of the KPC volunteers called out in solidarity to the sex workers, and invited them to come and "walk with us".[44] For some time, the float remained stationed at a road junction in the district, and the slogan "sex work is work" (in English) was chanted repeatedly by the MC and echoed by the crowd.

At another stopping point, the crowd were dancing particularly ferociously, and whilst periodic pauses are normal this stoppage seemed to be especially long. "That is the RSS[45] headquarters," a friend explained to me, with a

[43] It happens that Muhammad Ali park is named after Muhammad Ali Jauhar, who in 1911 founded an English language newspaper called *The Comrade* that urged Hindu-Muslim unity within India and was overtly anti-colonial. With its left-leaning political sympathies, many in the queer movement ideologically align with communist values and may lightheartedly refer to and address one another as *comrade*. Many Parks in Kolkata are named after activists and freedom fighters associated with Indian Independence, and I am certain from the discussions that led to the finalisation of the route that it was the suitability of the park in terms of geographical position and spatial properties that influenced its selection, not the provenance of its name (which was not once mentioned).

[44] It is unclear whether any sex workers responded to the call by joining the parade.

[45] The RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) are a far-right, Hindu nationalist, voluntary, paramilitary organisation active across India. Founded in 1925, the organisation was modelled on European fascist

pleased expression on their face. Party political slogans had been called throughout the march, but now the crowd were screaming a string of anti-government slogans without drawing breath.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **BJP ধিক্কার** | **BJP DHIK KAR!** | **Shame on the BJP!** |
| ধিক ধিক ধিক্কার ! | *dhik dhik dhik kar!* | Shame, shame, shame on them! |
| **অমিত শাহ মুর্দাবাদ !** | **AMIT SHAH MURDABAD!** | **Down with Amit Shah!** |
| মুর্দাবাদ ! মুর্দাবাদ ! | *Murdabad, murdabad!* | Down with him, down with him! |
| **নরেন' মোদী হায় হায় !** | **NAREN' MODI HAI HAI!** | **Down with Naren[dra] Modi!** |
| হায় হায় ! হায় হায় ! | *Hai hai, hai hai!* | Down with him! Down with him! |
| **RSS হায় হায় !** | **RSS HAI HAI!** | **Down with the RSS!** |
| হায় হায় ! হায় হায় ! | *Hai hai, hai hai!*".[46] | Down with them! Down with them! |

Slogans also targeted a recent government attempt to create a list of Indian

movements and aimed to provide training for the [masculine] Hindu character (Andersen and Damle 1987). The RSS is widely involved in the social policing of minoritised groups, including Muslim and Queer communities (see Das 2008, and Chapter 5 of this thesis), and upholds a normative, heterosexual masculinity that stands in caricaturish opposition to the Pride walk here described (see Anand 2008). It is associated with a number of other younger Hindu nationalist groups known as 'the Sangh Parivar', which includes the Bharat Janatiya Party (BJP), the ruling political party at the time of writing.

[46] Hai hai is particularly challenging sound to translate, since its is more a vocalised expression of anger, disbelief, and outrage, calling down shame and rejection on the acts of the person or organisation it is aimed at. It is usually used in relation to an authority figure, especially when calling for their overthrow.

citizens, administered in a manner that would almost certainly strip many minority groups (including Muslims and, for example in North Bengal, ethnically Nepali people) of full Indian citizenship.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **হিন্দু মুসলিম জানিনা ,**<br>**NRC মানছিনা !**<br>হিন্দু মুসলিম জানিনা , NRC মানছিনা !<br>**CAA CAA , ছিঃ ছিঃ !**<br>CAA CAA , ছিঃ ছিঃ<br>*Arrey,* **CAA CAA , ছিঃ ছিঃ !**<br>CAA CAA , ছিঃ ছিঃ | **HINDU MUSLIM JANI NA, NRC MANCHI NA!**<br>*Hindu Muslim jani na, NRC manchi na!*<br>**CAA CAA, CHI CHI!**<br>*CAA CAA, chi chi!*<br>***Arrey, CAA CAA, CHI CHI!***<br>*CAA CAA, chi chi!"* | We know not [difference between] Hindu and Muslim, we won't accept the NRC [National Register of Citizens]!<br><br>CAA[47] [Citizens Amendment Act], shame shame! |

As we passed into the North of the city, towards the end of the route, the float stopped one last time beside the giant golden statue of Bengal's heroised military leader, Subhash Chandra Bose.[48] A group of us took pictures from the

[47] This slogan also further ridicules the Citizens Amendment Act by drawing out the pronunciation of 'CAA' and reduplicating it to make it a homophone of 'caca', a slang reference to shit in many various languages

[48] Bose is a celebrated Indian Nationalist with a complex legacy. Educated in Kolkata and Cambridge, he joined the Indian National Congress in the 1920s and engaged in political action in pursuit of Indian independence for which he was imprisoned several times. Congress praised his ideological position, but sought to distance themselves from his methods and his aspirations of greater personal power, for which he gained the epithet 'The Rebel President'. Specifically, Bose allied himself with the Nazi Party in Germany, Japanese Fascism, and Soviet Russia during his campaigns for India's

back side of the statue, with the comically large testicles of the horse in full view. "Even the animals have masculinity…" a dada remarked to me, laughing.

In his reminiscences about the first Pride walk in Kolkata, Pawan Da had confessed to me that he had initially been sceptical about whether the form of a 'walk' would be at all effective for Pride. Given that this was (and remains) a common and standardised form of public protest in Kolkata, which he jokingly described as possibly the protest capital of the world at that time (i.e. 1999), he had felt that the 'Friendship Walk' would lack distinctiveness among all the other political marches. "There were so many protests happening and people are sick and tired of those… so I had my doubts about processions being a way of conveying this message. Of course, after the first experience, and then the subsequent years, just the thrill of walking and expressing yourself openly in a public scenario kind of washed out all those doubts."

Pride in Kolkata is a shimmering and powerful event that works hard in various ways upon the social, spatial and political urban landscape. In the act of stepping out in public and moving as part of a body or community of queer identifying people, for many walkers participation delivers an adrenaline rush, a moment of self-affirmation, a rare chance to celebrate themselves in a temporarily protected space-time event that is supportive of their chosen

independence, and never publicly denounced the atrocities and anti-semitism of these states. Today, even those on the political left are sometimes reluctant to recall this significantly troubling aspect of his ideology.

identification. In this sense Pride has something of the Carnival in it, a turning upside-down and inside-out of the implicit heteronormative regulation of everyday space. However, unlike archetypal seasonal carnivals of the anthropological canon, Pride in Kolkata is not simply a structural pressure-releasing device that, breaking from the social order, returns to it once the season is over (*cf.* Leach 1968, Durkheim 1912, Bakhtin 2000). As an activist event, Pride can be said to articulate an ethical statement about the heteronormative structure and marking of public space, and a demand for change that is itself as transformative as it is transgressive. The route, which varies each year, is a rhetorical enunciation of the queer life that resides in the city, concealed everywhere like moss under rocks. The movement of the Pride walk through the streets of Kolkata is like the gesture of a magician revealing a marvel to captive and acquiescing onlookers. It reveals what was known to always be already there, but it also creates.

Kolkata Pride sheds light on De Certeau's (2002) claim that walking is a performative act (see also Lee and Ingold 2020). Just as a speech act brings into being that which it enunciates, walking the city with Pride can be said to performatively bring into being a queer Kolkata. De Certeau analyses the multifaceted aspects of the performativity of walking; how it realises certain possibilities and creates new detours and short cuts, how it turns away from routes normally considered obligatory and forges through prohibited pathways. He remarks how the lines on the map fail to depict, predict or contain the act of walking, which is what has brought and continues to bring

such lines into being. That is to say, Kolkata Pride's route becomes a route only through the planning and walking of it. In this way walking in a city, interacting with space, can be understood a dynamic and creative act much more complicated than the simple 'use' of pre-existing systems.

Drawing on Foucault, de Certeau describes the city as a disciplinary structure that attempts to impose order upon space by establishing, naming and ordering the relations between the elements and people within those spaces. However, in a challenge to Foucauldian notions of discipline, De Certeau's premise is that the use of these spaces does not usually conform to the disciplinary regulations of the city space as organised through plans and maps. The practice of walking can be understood instead as a tactics of 'anti-discipline' through which users of city space manipulate events, elements and the would-be rules of the planned space to create opportunities, using these forces alien to them to their own ends. Kolkata Pride is an extreme example of how the co-option and use of the city can be a creative tactic, an act of resistance that is as ideological and ethical as it is physical and spatial. Since the act of walking decides either with or against the conventions and intentions of city planners, De Certeau describes walking as an ethical and legal rhetoric enunciated in and through spatial practice. Tracing walkers' decisions about where to go and how, and about where to avoid, inscribes meaning, order and shape to city spaces, creating and re-creating the places that the very same act of walking brings into being.

What De Certeau somewhat skirts around is the way in which choosing particular pathways through a city is not only a rhetorical enunciation of space, but also potentially a rhetorical act of self-identification. The ways in which people 'use' city space, heeding or subverting the legal and ethical dictates laid down by city planners and ghostly legends, renders their being as one of the elements whose place in the 'order' is worked upon. The painstaking process of choosing a route for Pride could be said to involve a collective imagining of what the politics and ethics of queerness might be (e.g. pro sex-work, anti-BJP), and how these relate to the physical and psychic geography of the city. The very act of taking to the streets is a rhetorical claiming of the streets, of the public city space, as belonging not only to heterosexual and cisgender people. The 2018 Pride walk, for example, concluded at Dhakuria Lake, a site with a long history of queer cruising that has been somewhat quashed in recent years by the literal policing of public space. In concluding at this site, the parade overtly pointed to this commonly-known 'secret', refusing to follow the moral imperative to veil homosexual desire in public spaces. The route each year can itself therefore be seen as a claim about the nature of queerness in Kolkata, its political *orientation* to and within the city, and what kind of people they are who walk. The city turns to orientate its gaze upon Pride, and the queer community orientate themselves within the city space.

The column of Pride walkers moves slowly through the city, but it bursts with an energy unlike the normal act of walking in this context. As we have seen,

the crowds that follow behind the truck use their bodies in a real-time collage of non-standard ways, dancing, pumping their arms up and down to ripple to long rainbow flag, rushing ahead through the crowd or pushing backwards against the flow to find lost friends. The gait of some revellers is saucier than is usual in public space, hips swinging, strutting in high heels worn in a street paved too poorly to make such a task easy. This is all the more remarkable since queer individuals in India (and indeed around the world) ordinarily report self-consciously moving through public space in as inconspicuous a fashion as possible in order to avoid attracting undue attention and hostility (Valentine 2002, Binnie 2003). Pride is an ordered display of disorder, a communal rebellion against the bodily norms of the street. In this regard, even amongst the familiar protest processions that appear in Kolkata's highways from time to time, Pride is unusual.

Consider as a point of contrast the Rally for Peace that departed from Moulali and moved towards Esplanade following the Pulwama terrorist attacks of 2019. These attacks stirred careless cries for war between India and Pakistan from right-wing Indian nationalists.[49] Therefore the Rally for Peace was organised by the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), a longstanding left-leaning Kolkata based activist organisation. The rally was attended by people of all ages and walks of life, including a few members of the queer community (including myself) whose ethical orientation was towards peace and dialogue between the two nations. The walk was an overt

[49] I describe and analyse this event in detail in section Chapter 5.

enunciation of political opinion, and the transgressiveness of its ethical position was made evident not least when a group of young men physically attacked the column, decrying participants as 'anti-national'.[50] However the use of the body did not waver from the standard idiom of walking in public space. Even as the violent youths physically apprehended and began to tear at the clothes of participants, cries not to retaliate, to continue the walk, enforced the peaceful use of the body and its meaning for the March. Similarly, the angry protests against the proposed introduction of the Citizen's Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 saw enormous numbers of people coming out onto the streets of cities and towns across India in processions and sit-ins in public space. The fact of the occupation of these spaces was irregular, but in most cases the comportment of the body during the occupation was normatively, or perhaps extra-normatively, disciplined.

I have considered Pride as an activist event that draws attention to the ways in which the act of walking as a performative, creative act unfolds on city space in an activist context. However, whereas De Certeau focuses on the act of walking, it is also relevant *how* we walk, and *who* walks. In his familiar discussion of Techniques of the Body, Mauss (2020[1937]) drew attention to the different ways in which people walk and how these embodied characteristics are the product of a physical, technical education. He claimed, for example, that he could identify convent-educated women from the way

[50] The APDR claimed that the men were associated with the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the paramilitary social organisation associated with the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). Both groups are considered to espouse a Hindu Nationalist ideology. This claim was not confirmed by the police, or in the media reports on the incident.

that they held their hands in fists and moved with a particular gait. In consideration of the differences between the walking styles of Chinese athletes compared with the typical Chinese walking style, Brownell (1995) explicitly develops the connection Mauss implies between manner of walking and moral or ethical orientation towards the world. She links the flat-footed, round-shouldered movements she typically observed amongst Chinese people to traditional martial arts, and the agricultural norm of carrying objects from a pole across the shoulders, both of which emphasise a low centre of gravity and require a firm placement of the whole foot on the ground. She also connects the curving of the shoulders and position of the upper body to the customary physical demonstration of social defence and social relationships through bowing. She contrasts this with the ways in which Western walking styles reflect an expression of social hierarchy by literally pushing away from the ground, which is trained through physical education in schools and daily practice (see also Ingold 2004). Although it is normally an unconscious disposition, the movement and posture of bodies in public settings is the result of a physical education that embodies moral norms of the societies and circumstances in which those bodies have been raised. Resistance or modification of the norms of body culture can therefore represent a significant divergence from the ideological norms expressed within it. We might therefore consider such divergent postural and aesthetic uses of the body as an ethical practice.

The usual idiom of walking in Kolkata is often ponderous, necessarily

cautious. This is no city for casual flaneurism. Inhibited by uneven road surfaces, pedestrians must take creative circuitous routes around the semi-legal street stalls which occupy most of the pathways and trees bursting through bricks that would seal them into the dusty ground beneath. To rush is to risk an accident amongst the obstacle course of irregular surfaces and the life of the streets. The typical manner in which Kolkata's residents walk about the city also generally communicates a principle of non-engagement with others in the public space that is even more pronounced in the case of women (Phadke et al. 2011). In all protests and demonstrations however, the body is turned upwards and outwards, displaying banners and shouting slogans that hail the attention of those in the areas around. In the ADPR Peace *Michhil*, the disciplined bodies of the protesters were emblems of their gravitas and respectability. The steadiness of gait communicates the gravitas of the participants as citizens, and embodies their ethical maxim of pacifism. Pride walkers on the other hand pop and grind and gyrate and slink. They wave their arms, they might even kiss in the streets. They bare their shoulders, arms or legs in unusual costumes. They shimmy at policemen, and stop in the middle of busy roads. Their manner of walking is perhaps the loudest slogan in Pride as an act of resistance, because it rejects the unspoken moral imperatives embodied in everyday comportment that, at logical extension, confer legitimacy upon certain bodies, sexualities and relationships to the exclusion and condemnation of others. Yet again, the physical use of the body in public space seems to suggest an ethical orientation to the unwritten 'rules' by which bodies in space are disciplined according to heteropatriarchal logics

(see Bell and Binnie 2000). Dancing, flirting and strutting the Pride route could be seen as a celebratory rejection of the association of properly disciplined bodies with proper citizenship and a right to life.

Foucault argues that in modern society, the comportment of the body can be a demonstration of the moral worth of the individual, and of their ability to properly execute their role in society (1977, 1998, 2008). Speaking of the use of the body in military parades, he claims that the display of properly disciplined bodies may stand as a metaphor for control over baser human needs, instincts and desires (Foucault 2008). This is in turn understood to indicate those bodies' social class and moral worthiness (Goffman 1956, see also Brownell 1995). The LGBTQ* activists who organise Pride, and generally speaking the community who attend it, fall within a group of individuals for whom the implicit, proscribed disciplines of social propriety preclude and erase their personal desires and experiences of love. LGBTQ* activists in Kolkata often speak about the right of the individual to make positive choices about their own body and to exercise their right to have a consensual relationship with a partner of their choosing. However, heteronormative bodily impositions in public space have a logical extension into private life that results in the preclusion and oppression of LGBTQ* identifications and desires. As it moves through Kolkata's streets, part of the performative power of Pride is the way in which the event is an occasion for the embodied expression of the personal freedoms that queer activists seek to institute in society. Taking pleasure in their bodies, Pride walkers resist the discipline of

the heteronormative public culture by subverting the rules of bodily comportment in public space.

# Conclusion

We might then say that Pride is an anti-discipline tactic par excellence, an enunciation of queer ethical dispositions that resist the heteronormativity of public space and the disciplining of queer bodies and sexualities. It is a personally affirming experience for many that participate. Pride's route expresses political and ethical convictions that are imagined to be held by all participants, through a rhetorical enunciation of queerness within the city space. The route, the participants, and the manner of bodily comportment all serve to express ethical orientations to public space and normative discourses about gender and sexuality. The collective act of walking the city with Pride is furthermore a basis for the imagination of a queer community in Kolkata, a community that belongs to the fabric of contemporary Indian society. Aesthetic expressions in decorations, clothing, sound and movement come to signify fantasies of queer cultural personhood. There is little wonder, then, that the planning of Pride is occasionally a little fraught, or that differences of opinion about aesthetic and operational choices arise and become so heated. After all, in these apparently cosmetic little details, a great deal is at stake.

Pride entails a visual and ideological negotiation of what it might mean to be 'Indian' in the present time. The aesthetic and spatial choices of participants and organisers draw on global and local discourses of proper personhood, desire, and social aspirations. These manifest through comportment, choice of

route, musical preferences, personal style, and the form of the protest itself. These choices are not unambiguous, but must be located amongst conflicting narratives of colonisation, conservative 'Indian' or religious values, the history of Nehruvian socialism, and modern popular cultures played out on a global media stage. Pride is, then, not just a carnival that inverts the normative Order of Things, but a performative act of transformation that operates on and within the spaces and people it encompasses. It is an act of cultural re/production, including co-options and reframing of 'traditional' forms (e.g. jewellery, clothing), the incorporation of global symbols (e.g. the Rainbow Flag), and explicit rejection of certain cultural and spatial norms (e.g. Kolkata's North/South divide; bodily comportment in public). Pride, as an activist event, enunciates a cultural rhetoric that would reveal and persuade onlookers of possible ways of being in the joyous act of walking the city.

In the next chapter, I will pay closer attention to the finer details of specific aesthetic modes of embodied experience and movement. Specifically, I will turn to consider how gestural, postural, and otherwise embodied dispositions are adopted and expressed by queer people who dance. Dance, as we have seen, features prominently in Kolkata Pride celebrations. Dance is indeed both a common performance medium at queer activist events more broadly, and a popular recreational passion for many people in the queer community. I will elucidate these commentaries in relation to the valorised position dance occupies as an art form in the South Asian cultural landscape, whereby dance events produce a context in which personal experiences of self and public

discourses of personhood intersect with cultural traditions of storytelling, perceptions of beauty or value, and affective modes of communication.

# Chapter 2
# Dance as Visual Politics

I continue my contemplation of queer embodied experiences in **Chapter 2** by focussing more closely on personal narratives from informants who sustain varying kinds of dance practices. Taking account of the aesthetic and ethical significance of dance in the Indian national context, I consider the dynamic and dialectical role of spectatorship in the constitution of personhood and for shaping perceptions and experiences of the self. I rely upon the Vedic aesthetic theory of *Rasa* to emphasise the cultural specificity of spectatorship and the gaze (Chakravorty 2008, Ram 2011, Thobani 2017), and its instrumentality in socially structured power relations. I argue that creative, stylised, semantically rich cultural phenomena such as dance offer a precious resource that people may use creatively to explore and develop rhetorical presentations of possible selves and worlds. I consider how dance and other embodied, non-verbal cultural practices may offer particularly novel opportunities for cultural creation by facilitating communication beyond the restrictive codes of language. I show how my friends and informants use dance practices to explore and develop the parameters of their selfhood, and to persuade others how they should relate to them.

At every queer community event, from major public-facing carnivals and pride walks to plays and social gatherings in friends' homes, the queer dancing body is ever-present to the point of excess. The domination of cultural programmes by dance performances, very often given by people of transfeminine gender expression, has become a cliché among the community itself. The trope is the butt of affectionate jokes, and sometimes referred to

with exasperation by members of less glamorous subgroups who feel under-represented on these stages by comparison. Although I had never intended to study the body in motion the omnipresence of dancing queer bodies, along with my own experiences of other people asking questions about my moving body in everyday life, led me to question the relationship between bodily experience and conceptions of self. In doing so I wish to move the discussion through this chapter's consideration of queer dance performances, which could be described as an obvious point of rupture in social gender norms, towards reflections on mundane movements and everyday embodied experience in Chapter 3. In both instances, I re-examine how movement-based phenomena are intertwined with gender, cultural identifications, selfhood, and ultimately ethics.

This chapter begins with an examination of the cultural and historical resonances that contribute to the rich meanings and public memories of dance in the Indian context. I consider how the spectator's gaze can be experienced as affirming or invasive, and speak to dancers about the ways in which they seek to engage with spectators though movement. I frame dance as an orientation device, that turns people towards one another, and through which queer people draw on existing cultural forms to explore possible ways of being and their relations with others. I invite dancers to reflect on how their dance practices influence their own and others' feelings and ideas about their bodies. I end by claiming that the non-verbal quality of dance presents a felicitous, creative opportunity for manifesting possible ways of being through a part of rhetoric culture that is not limited by the hegemonic Order of Things that is often encoded in spoken language.

## 2.I Introduction to Dance in the Indian Context

## Writing the Non-Verbal

Having grown up in a diasporic Indian community, the popularity of dance as a celebration of Indian culture was so familiar to me as to seem initially unworthy of comment. That Pride, the Rainbow Carnival and other demonstrations should both feature choreographed dance performances and be an occasion for spontaneous dancing was something that I could only take for granted. Yet after my main extended field-trip in 2018-2019 I returned home to find that the vast majority of my photographic documentation consisted of images and videos of dance routines that had been taken at demonstrations and LGBTQ events. Whilst my friends and I had casually discussed dance events that we had seen together, I had not included any questions about dance in interviews or more formal conversations relating to the research. In the first instance, I was therefore forced to exercise my own judgement in interpreting and analysing performances, their possible uses and meanings. A great deal of my description here necessarily relies on my own interpretations and intuition as a culturally Indian (Bengali), queer woman, prior to my perspective as an anthropologist.

A year after my long fieldwork trip I arranged interviews expressly to discuss dance during a short trip to Kolkata in January 2020, and over Skype in April 2020. In these discussions it became quickly apparent that in general, dance is extremely difficult to talk about. Discussion about the myriad possible meanings of choreography and the experience of dance performances (as a

performer or a spectator) is not an everyday topic of conversation, and even those who practice dance tend to use movement and demonstration as a means of communication in rehearsal. I suggest that the difficulty my friends experienced in speaking about dance supports the argument I shall develop in this section, that dance and bodily movement are an originary means through which people experience and cultivate a sense of 'self'.

As a writer, I met similar linguistic challenges when I began to write about dance. Despite the well-established turn to the body in the social sciences, the moving body in general, and the dancing body in particular, remains difficult to analyse because it lies fundamentally outside of the standardised, core heuristic tools of the anthropologist. Dance is a cultural, historical, embodied expression of frequently abstract emotions, sentiments and ideas (*c.f* Reed 1998, Kaeppler 2000). Whilst it is almost always *rhetorical* (Franko 2015), it is rarely explicit or literal, taking a non-verbal form that depends upon the transmission of meanings between performer and spectator through the personal interpretations of both. This is often typically visceral and affective, rather than cognitive and intellectual (*c.f.* Cowan 1990, Chakravorty 2008, Ram 2011, Rahaim 2012). The established ethnographic methodology of the anthropological discipline, whilst going under the name of 'participant observation', in fact relies heavily on the linguistic, the verbal and the discursive, as do the text-based modes of analysis that are subsequently applied to ethnographic material (Geertz 1974, Spencer 1989, Foley 2004). Where this information is gathered through watching, and watching others

watching, it can be difficult to disentangle the complex intersubjective social processes underpinning the dance event perceived. Unspoken inferences of meaning, understandings and misunderstandings of purported intention, vagaries of social context and myriad other elements that constitute the dance act, also must somehow be described. How is this to be done with words in a faithful manner when these processes lie beyond that which is easily, or under normal social circumstances ever, articulated? Reliance on informants' narrations or explanations of social events in ethnographic information-gathering is perhaps heightened today compared to the discipline's earlier years, since anthropologists are increasingly cautious of imputing or ascribing meaning to the actions and thoughts of their informants. With this in mind, how does the anthropologist describe, decode and analyse cultural systems of meaning about which very little is *said* and about which the practitioners themselves struggle to speak?

Cowan's (1990) monograph on the social dance practises in a Greek township provide a useful methodological starting point that is sensitive to the complex and sometimes contradictory challenges involved in undertaking a nuanced and culturally sensitive study of dance in social context. She points to the polysemic and unstable nature of the dancing body, which is dependent upon - and therefore vulnerable to - the interpretations of spectators for its meaning. Spectatorship of the dance, as of any activity, entails a process of objectification and the exercise of power on the part of the spectator, in the sense that the viewer must perceive the dancing body as an object in space,

according to the spectator's own codes and values (Foucault 1963, 1975). Yet in the case of a dance event, to watch is to be drawn into the conversation, which is ultimately led and shaped by the choices and movements of the person who dances (Cowan 1990). Watching is thus an integral part of the dance activity, with spectatorship as one of the key processes through which dancing bodies are experienced as having meaning, both by dancers and in wider social context. This has considerable implications for the experience of 'self' and the role of the gaze in identifying moving bodies in social space. Further I contend that if, as Cowan (1990) argues, dance is a site of dialectic social action in which the body and society operate on one another, then spectatorship also has potential as a critical site for social transformation and the challenging of hegemonies. This may be especially true when spectators encounter dancers with a specifically activist agenda.

In India the role of the spectator takes on further significance through Rasa[51] Theory, an ancient theory of aesthetics. Associated with the Indian Classical arts, Rasa Theory understands the act of performance and spectatorship as a dialectic, communal act, wherein the spectator is not a passive observer but actively 'tastes' the performance by engaging with it. As such the act of spectatorship plays an important role in co-creating artistic performances as a shared emotional experience between spectator and performers (Chakravorty 2008, Coorlawala 2012, Ram 2011). This culturally specific construction of

[51] Rasa is a Sanskrit word literally meaning 'taste', and in this context further conveying ideological connotations of 'experience', 'enthusiasm', and 'essence' associated with the sense of taste in Ayurvedic tradition.

dance resonates strongly with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) understanding of the body and wider world as existing relationally through one another, which collapses the distinction between the individual body and the social world in which it is located. In taking the body and embodied experience to be formed through cultural and historical social processes, analysing these dancing bodies requires me to move kaleidoscopically between social understandings of the body, bodily understandings of the social, and exchanges between society, bodies, and experiential 'selves' where all are in mutually constituting processes of becoming (*c.f.* Shilling 1990, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, see also Heidegger 1971). I therefore propose to look at dance through both sides of the glass, considering the social and somatic experiences and interpretations of the spectators and the dancers themselves. For the former I will depend largely upon my own interpretations as a spectator to the dance performances I describe,[52] and in the latter I will draw on conversations with queer dancers. Wherever I offer my own - or indeed reportage of another's - interpretation of a dance's meaning, I offer it from a Geertzian hermeneutic perspective in which it is maintained that multiple possible interpretations of a cultural 'text' may exist simultaneously, and that it does not follow that we must choose, hierarchise, or totalise one in place of another (Geertz, Panourgiá and Kavouras 2008).

Finally, a note on my use of language in relation to dance and movement. In

[52] This practice, common amongst theorists of dance, is in part necessitated by understating the somatic, emotive, and intensely personal experience of spectatorship to be different from the later decontextualised discussion of such an experience in a verbal or written medium.

this chapter I wish to attempt to treat movement as a form of knowledge in its own right, and consider that any attempt to transfer this knowledge into a linguistic medium will necessarily result in the loss of the texture or essence of the embodied form. Where I offer an interpretation of the 'meaning' of a movement or choreographed gesture, I do not consider this a 'translation' in the style of dance ethnographers who have posited a metaphorical (or sometimes rather more literal) analogy of dance as a linguistic-style communicative system of discrete symbols with particular meanings (see, for example, Williams 2004). Dance performance is always embodied, and therefore perception of dance is always necessarily visceral and anchored in the senses. I hold that any intellectual reasoning, planning or reflexivity about either dance performance or spectatorship cannot be detached from the non-verbal physiological experience thereof. Indeed it is precisely for its lack of attention to the embodiment of the art form, as well as claims about specific Western cultural and structuralist theoretical biases in its assumptions, that this mode of theorising and analysing dance has been widely criticised (Kaeppler 2000, Wainright et al.2006). Rather I take a positionality similar to that of a cultural critic, who draws upon expert knowledge and experience of a particular artistic presentation to communicate something of the essence and effect of the performance to an interested audience (Carrithers 2005). By way of a solution I move between descriptive passages that seek to communicate the engrossing nature of dance performance and spectatorship, and objective analytical discussion that seeks to unpick the multi-layered nuances and connotations evoked at varying levels of consciousness by and within

performers and their audiences[54].

## The Dancing Body in the Indian Context

Queer activists in India draw on a variety of art forms to engage the public. In my analysis of Kolkata Pride, I have considered some of the ways in which activists use a cultural repertoire of aesthetic expression and spatial practices to rhetorically enunciate visions of self and society. Dance is a cultural practice in which aesthetics and spatiality are crafted into an intensely personal mode of expression, but one that is often oriented toward a spectating other. It is a particularly prevalent mode of presentation and often especially treasured within queer communities, forming the core of an increasingly visible performance culture within what might cautiously be referred to as India's broader queer culture. I suggest further that the prevalence of dance within queer Indian activism should be understood not simply as a function of dance's popularity in Indian culture more generally, but also in relation to the political and symbolic history of Indian dance as a system for imagining, expressing and producing 'Indian' modes of identification (*c.f.* Chakravorty 2008, Ram 2011, Chacko and Menon 2013, Thobani 2017).

In the Indian context dance, and particularly Indian classical dance, has an

[54] In trying to find ways to describe, communicate and 'translate' dance I have refrained from including photographs or diagrams. My reasoning is manifold. Firstly I wish to protect the identity of my informants. Secondly I consider that, like the written word, images are also a form of translation or 'framing' of the dance act, and I am not expert enough a photographer to effect this framing with due insight.

explicit relationship to the construction of Indian cultural identity that feeds into the public memory and emotional aesthetics of both the performance and spectatorship of dance events (Ram 2011, Thobani 2017). Whilst the classical dance styles (such as Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri, Bharatanatyam etc.) can trace their roots back many thousands of years, their current forms are a more recent reconstruction that has synthesized various folk, court and religious/spiritual influences into reified forms with distinctive identities (Chakravorty 2008, Chacko and Menon 2013, Peterson and Soneji 2008). This reconstitution of Indian dance came in the earlier part of the 20th Century and was supported by prominent cultural figures such as Tagore, Vallathol and Rukmini Devi (Sarkar-Munshi 2010, Kothari 2011). The re/development of classical dance forms in relation to national and cultural identity is subtly different across the diverse and varied regions of India, with differences in the practice, styles and history of the forms across different regions (Peterson and Soneji 2008, Ram 2011). In Bengal, Tagore's experimentation with dance as a frontier for the arts sought to use dance in the constitution of India's new respectable, middle-class woman (Chakraborty 2012). Previously dance had been associated with lower class women and courtesans, a view consolidated and enforced by the Victorian moral codes of British missionaries and colonial officials who decried the Indian dancing woman as an example of exotic sexual immorality (Chakravorty 2008, Thobani 2017). The new Indian classical dance as artistic expression conceived by Tagore was therefore also a self-conscious rhetorical statement about modern Indian cultural identity as linked to the past but grounded in the present, and particularly the cultural identity

of India's women in the decades leading up to independence. Later, dancing to Tagore's songs would become a political statement of Bengali identity for Muslim women in East Pakistan (Kabeer 1991, Anisuzzaman 2008).

Indeed, Ram (2011) has suggested that the enduring prevalence of Indian Classical dance forms is in part a defiant expression of Indian nationalist sentiments against Western cultural forms, thoughts and ideologies. Dance has been a particularly effective mechanism in this regard because its practice is conceptually connected to the long civilizational lineage in the Indian subcontinent in which nationalist imaginations of Indian ethnic identity are anchored. Indian Classical dance forms also draw heavily upon the region's mythology in choreographic and storytelling elements, thereby connecting to the region's broader cultural heritage. Moreover, as an embodied art form, it mobilises deeply held structures of feeling and being in the world that are both intensely personal, but also belong to the public domain as a learned repertoire of feelings, gestures and affective dispositions (Chakravorty 2008). This rich cultural lifeworld of emotion and meaning, which we might conceptualise as an *aesthetics of emotion*, is accessible and known to performers, connoisseurs and lay audience members in fluid but mutually constituting ways.

There has been extensive scholarly and media commentary on the role of dance as a practice for cultivating, experiencing, expressing and embodying proper forms of South Asian cultural *identity* in relation to diasporic

communities, but the function of dance in this regard is also applicable in the domestic context of contemporary India (Ram 2011, Thobani 2017). Today dance classes are a normal part of many middle-class Indian girls' childhood routines, and are part of a conscious cultural, as well as artistic, programme of education (Dalidowicz 2012). Despite the reformation of dance in Indian culture as a cultural refinement for respectable women over the course of the 20th Century, under certain circumstances the antecedent history of courtesans and *nautch*[55] girls may flavour interpretations and understandings of the dance repertoire. Dance thus continues to be an ambivalent space for middle-class women since, rather than understanding their practice as a refinement for marriage to be given up after the wedding has taken place, many serious students of dance say they will only marry if they are allowed to continue their dance practice. This belies the assumption that traditional or more socially conservative families would still expect a young woman to stop attending classes and giving performances as a dancer once married. Other committed dancers even choose to remain single, dedicating their lives to their art and the spiritual pursuits with which they consider it to be one (see for example Chakravorty 2008).

Although not unique to the Indian context, the ambivalence of dance events for feminine bodies takes a particular form in relation to the history of dance

[55] *Nautch* is an anglicisation of the word *nach*, which means 'dance' both in Hindi and Bengali as well as in several other North Indian languages. During the colonial period the performance of various Indian regional and folk dance forms were referred to under this name, and came to be viewed through a Victorian moral lens as a lascivious form of entertainment expressing perceived sexual immorality for the licentious pleasure of those who patronised and watched it.

in the region. Cowan's (1990) monograph on Dance in a Greek town during the 1980s notes the 'double standards' of female expressivity whereby the norms of demure and sexually restrained behaviour expected of women in daily life are temporarily and partially suspended during the dance event. In this context, carefree, self-assured and expressive bodily performance becomes praiseworthy while dancing, but only within the limits of spectators' interpretations of the individual case. The question of the appropriate expression of sexual desire and desirability in Indian dance performance is further complicated by the influence of Bollywood and 'remix' culture on most popular performances, including those given by my activist friends in queer contexts. Chakravorty (2009, 2012) argues that the eclectic contemporary dance style of Hindi films, which refers to the choreographic and affective heritage of classical dance but borrows, plagiarizes and "cannibalises" from contemporary Western styles, is emblematic of the consumer-driven, aspirational middle-class culture of Indian modernity. Internationally recognisable as a marker of contemporary India, the remixed style of Bollywood is the new frontier of this complex history of dance in relation to Indian national identity, cultural personhood and public emotion as evoked through the moving body in performance. Indeed it is remixed, Bollywood and fusion styles that were most commonly performed in the queer events I attended.

## Knowing the Body, Knowing the Self

I spread my wings

I spread my legs

My hands

My breasts

My forbidden hips

That keep shimmying

Inspite of hearing NO.

Several times

Yea look I am a BADASS

I did what you forbade me to

Mocked me

Ridiculed me

Made fun of me

Stared at me

For my fat belly

Yes, look I shake that fat belly

My ugly fat belly

I dance with all my perfection born from your perspective called imperfection

I dance because I love to dance

I fall in love with my body that

So long I thought never existed

I love to dance

I shamelessly dance

With or without music

Because in this picture you see the dance and not the music.

You don't care in which music I danced

But you dare see me dancing

All for the love of dance

Dance that taught me to embrace my body

As MY BODY

When I swing my arms

I feel my muscles the sound of cells, tissues, muscles, hair, my hairy legs, my hairy arms, my oversized saggy breasts, my hairy chin, my hairy ass, my hairy belly, my blood flowing

Like the first born wave

Since the dawn of time

I flow with rage

Rage born like phoenix

So I shake my belly in the name of dance

*Shreosi, March 2019*

The poem above was written by Shreosi, a cisgender queer feminist who worked for several years as the programmes manager at *Diana*. It was published on Facebook and Instagram along with a photograph of her in mid-performance. Shreosi's poem describes how the experience of dancing

bellydance facilitated her falling in love with her body, experiencing it as sexy even in the ways that it doesn't meet conventional beauty standards for women. Since taking up belly dance as a hobby, it has become a passion for Shreosi. She moves through everyday time and space dancing, shimmying to cross the floor at *Deepon*, and half-consciously practising hand and head movements when her attention drifts in meetings.

Around the time I returned to Kolkata for my longest fieldwork period in 2018-2019 Sayak, a genderqueer gay man and queer sibling of mine, joined a belly dance class given by the same teacher as Shreosi. In our own queer family spaces Sayak's growing body confidence and changing relationship to bodily movement was noticeable. In the first few months he would share videos from classes and rehearsals to the 'queer family' WhatsApp group (consisting of Sayak, Anubhuti and me), showing us the routines he was working on, even before they were fully perfected. Generally shy and reserved in character, in parties at home after a few drinks Sayak developed the confidence to perform for our delight, but clearly also for his own. During a focussed discussion on dance I asked Sayak how he feels when he performs. He exclaimed, "oh, I feel *liberated*, I really enjoy [it], I really enjoy the movement… when I see my body moving, in the mirror, beautifully, like something I could never even do before… I feel really nice, and that gives me a lot of happiness. So dance is more about, it makes me feel good." Sayak focusses on the movement itself as the source of pleasure and joy, initially without reference to appearances and spectatorship. Then, he introduces the

mirror, becoming his own spectator, and the spectacle of his body moving in beautiful and new ways is an additional source of joy added onto this.

It is clear that dance as a personal practice requires the person to engage with their body in ways beyond the remit of typical everyday movements. In learning, practice and performance, dancers use their bodies in novel, stylised, and disciplined ways that stretch and shape their repertoire of bodily movements. Anubhuti once jokingly told me that, in the few recreational belly dance classes she attended, she used muscles she didn't even know she had. As this statement and Shreosi's poem attest, dance also creates opportunities for dancers to consciously explore the possibilities of their bodies, ways of moving, and ways of feeling within and about their bodies. In a phone conversation two to three short weeks after joining these classes, Anubhuti told me that she felt she was "getting back a bit of a sexiness" and "connection" with her body, after a recent break-up had led to a spiral of poor self-care, including not caring about her body and feeling negatively towards it. Dance classes had made her look at herself again and to think consciously about her body. "I had this idea that I'm in my body and it's my dream body", she told me "and I'm trying really hard for the first time and thinking about it. I'm trying to break free from letting others dictate how I'm presenting my body and feeling about it." The dance classes, for Anubhuti, were an opportunity to re-connect with her [trans] body, and emotionally invest in celebrating it as beautiful on its own terms, and all the more precious because its form has been achieved through considerable personal struggle.

Shreosi, Sayak and Anubhuti all variously emphasise the transformative power of perceiving oneself anew through novel bodily movements. Their accounts acknowledge the possibility of being watched by others to varying degrees, Sayak and Anubhuti by considering their bodies as others might see them, and Shreosi by addressing her thoughts to an audience whose good opinion she openly disdains. In other contexts, the gaze of the spectator can also be experienced as affirming. I was sitting one morning sharing breakfast with Bishu, a dance teacher and performer who works independently in mainstream dance circles as well as in queer contexts where he participates and leads some of the dance troupes who perform regularly at Pride and similar events. I asked him what he feels when he dances.  Bishu paused, thought for a while, asked for clarification, and repeated the question back to me before attempting a response.

<table>
<tr>
<td>এটার খুব একটা simple answer হয় যে আমি যখন নাচ করি তখন আমার খুব... আনন্দ হয়। আমার মনে হয় যে, সবাই আমাকে দেখছে , সুতরাং,</td>
<td>etar khub ekta simple answer hoy je ami jokhon nach kori tokhon amar khub… ananda hoy. Amar mone hoy je , sobai amake dekhche, sutorang, amake dekhche, amar nachtake<br>dekhche,  sutorang amar</td>
<td>A very simple answer would be that when I dance then I feel great joy. I know that everyone is watching me, they’re watching me and they’re watching my dance, and so I have to</td>
</tr>
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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| আমাকে দেখছে, আমার নাচটাকে দেখছে , সুতরাং আমার আনন্দের সাথে সেটাকে present করতে হবে , এবং আমি তখনি এর happy মানে , happy .হবো। . আমি কি বুজিয়ে বলতে পারছি কিনা [pause ] | anander sathe setake *present* korte hobe, ebong ami tokhoni er *happy* mane, *happy* hobo…. Ami ki bujhiye bolte parchi kina …[pause] | present my joy along with that, and then the happiness in that moment means that I *will be* happy … I don't know whether or not I could explain it well. [pause] |
| প্রত্যেকটা happy মানুষ না, সুন্দর হয়। তো , আমি যখন নাচটা করি নাচটার সাথে আমার আনন্দ, এবং আমি দেখতে ভালো বা খারাপ সেটা matter করে না। কিন্তু আমার মনে হয় | Prothyekta happy manush na, sundor hoy. Toh, ami jokhon nachta kori nachtar sathe amar anando, ebong ami dekhte bhalo ba kharap seta matter kore na kintu amar mone hoy amar tokhon bhalo lagche. | You know, every happy person is/becomes beautiful[1]. So when I dance then along with that comes joy, and whether or not I'm good looking or bad looking that doesn't matter but in that moment I think, then, I'm pleasing to look at." |

| আমার তখন ভালো লাগছে | | |
| --- | --- | --- |

Despite his protestations that he didn't express himself very beautifully at all, Bishu's short and poignant explanation connects a number of factors operating in the moment of a dance event. He refers to his physical body, his feelings, his self-perception, and to spectators, their feelings, and their perception of him and his artistic presentation. All of these are interconnected and mutually influencing, focussed upon the dancing body and co-creating the dance event. The act of dancing alone is not enough to create the condition of joy that Bishu experiences. The positive and active attention of the spectators is crucial to the process of that creation, joy is co-created by the act of dancing and by being watched. Being happy makes Bishu pleasing to behold, to strike people as attractive whether or not he is conventionally handsome in terms of his physical features. The process of attention entrained upon the dancing body is, in combination with the art form, transfiguring. It alters Bishu's perception and experience of his own body.

These various descriptions of bodily and extra-bodily experience when dancing are strikingly similar to Pallavi Chakravorty's description of practising Kathak, which draws on her own experience and the personal testimonies of other committed Kathak dance disciples in Kolkata. Chakravorty describes how dance practice (*Riyaz*) trains the body in physical,

spiritual, cultural and political ways.

> "*The* personal experience of dancers (including the author) describe *Riyaz* as starting with awareness of the body, which gradually transforms into the pleasure of kinesis/movement. This pleasure is sensuous, personal, and moves away from the experience of the body (whose movement is creating it) and, through saturation of the senses, transcends the body, for the author reaching an "mystical pleasure or Ananda", an emotion and emotional memory that resides in a collective sense, is not an individual experience but resides in the public domain, beyond private memory."
>
> (Chakravorty 2008, pp.101-102)

Chakravorty's account and analysis corroborates and explains the sentiments and experiences expressed in Bishu and Anubhuti's testimonies, and in Shreosi's poem. Through total, systematised, and concentrated bodily practice in dance, the individual becomes so engrossed by the senses and emotions that they experience transcendence of that body, resulting in a renewed and fundamentally altered relationship to the body itself. Thus, dance becomes a sometimes unexpectedly important practice through which some queer and feminist individuals live out and re-learn their relationships with their bodies. This experience takes place at the affective juncture of self and other, through active processes of rich attention and public memory/emotion (*rasa*).

## Resisting the Other: Dance and Dual-Subjectivity

The ways in which my friends describe their experience of their dancing bodies resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theory about the 'dual-subjectivity' of the body. Positing that the body is the prime vehicle through which the individual knows themselves and the world around them, Merleau-Ponty also emphasised that the individual's body is also an object in the world perceived by others. Thus, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, the body has a 'dual-subjectivity'. Furthermore, as we see when Sayak delights at watching his own body in the mirror, the individual is capable of considering how their body appears as an object to others, whether or not the meaning attached to their body by others matches the meaning they attribute to it themselves. Shreosi's poem dramatises just such a disagreement, celebrating her body as an object of self-love, even as it may be an object of criticism, censure, ridicule or even disgust to spectators of the imagined past and present. On the other hand, when Bishu identifies the admiring gaze of the spectator with his body becoming handsome and an experience of joy (আনন্দ /ananda), the body experienced as an object of pleasure for others also becomes an object of pleasure for the self. Contrary to a Cartesian individualist model that locates the self as an autonomously defined persona that is both interior to and separate from the fleshy body, these various examples seem to suggest selves are complicated formations, located in bodies that are viewed and ascribed meaning by outsiders as well as by those who dwell in the world through them. The dual subjectivity of the body therefore is constitutional in the fabric

of a person's sense of self, and how a person is *identified* or becomes intelligible in social context. Following this line, it becomes possible to see that an *identification* is not reducible to one true, wholly internal, abstract identity, but that the body in the world comes to be *identified* and interpreted as socially meaningful through the dialectic processes that occur when it comes into view of others. The use of the body in mundane or extraordinary contexts is thus available as part of the rhetorical repertoire with which people seek to find and claim particular social and spatial positions, and identify as particular kinds of selves.

That the body is therefore subject to scrutiny and interpretation by those who see it can have profound implications for those bodies that are perceived to be different from prevailing norms, particularly when the response of the other is unfavourable. One such example can be seen in Cowan's *Dance and the Body Politic* (1990), where she points to the difficult-to-explain gap between the intentions of a person in a dance and the interpretation of their dance by others. She gives the example of young unmarried women at social dances, who must tread the fine line between the patriarchal double-standard of being expected to display a beguiling and open sexuality on the dance floor whilst not appearing to flirt too much or cross lines of modesty in their personal lives. The potential for wildly differing perceptions of the body is not neutral, and Cowan is clear about the social ostracism and damage to personal reputation that can result if a woman's dance is negatively 'misinterpreted' by the spectator. This paradox and the kinds of social judgements involved are

mirrored in frequent anxious discussions about whether highly sexualised dancing and dress are appropriate at queer events or in Pride Parades.

What is puzzling in this collection of examples is how, in certain cases, the gaze of the other is experienced as beatifying (Bishu, Sayak), and in others it is dismissed and scorned (Shreosi). For still others, it is not considered at all; it is rejected in favour of a deep personal engrossment with one's own body (Anubhuti). The phenomenological theorisation of the body's 'dual subjectivity' and Rasa theory both help us to consider the complicated relationship between body, self and other. On the one hand Rasa theory claims that, in the moment of artistic performance, the emotions and expertise of the artist and the spectator/auditor co-create an aesthetic experience that is connected to both parties,[56] but not reducible to either one of them. Theorising the dual subjectivity of the body, however, allows us to separate out the 'body personal' as constituted by autonomous perception of the body, and 'the body social' (Cowan 1990) as constituted through the perception of the body as an object by other people. These perceptions may converge, diverge or contradict in powerful ways. Rasa theory makes space for disjuncture between self and other, especially where artists are less skilled or audiences are less knowledgeable about the art form. However in rasa theory, disjuncture is often understood as a failure, whereas the concept of dual subjectivity essentially takes disjuncture for granted. I suggest that both models have

[56] 7 I simplify the picture by considering the spectators as a unit here. Of course, the audience is a group made of individuals sharing an experience through a particular orientation to the artist.

something to offer our understanding of subjectivity and aesthetics, in that they can be considered to complicate one another.

Before exploring how these two ideas might help us understand and explain my friends' experiences, it is important to emphasise that rasa theory is usually conceived as specifically pertaining to spectatorship of the artistic body, and in particular spectatorship by knowledgeable connoisseurs (rasikas). I however follow Ram (2011) in considering it to be the basic mode of aesthetic experience of the arts in India, across the lines of caste and expertise that the original model imposes. Dual subjectivity however is a proposition in the tradition of Western grand ideas, in that it seeks to explain the nature of self, other and the body in general. Each reflects and challenges certain maxims within their respective philosophical (and cultural) traditions. Whilst rasa theory depends upon locating the philosophical truth of selfhood outside and beyond the individual physical body, it stands at odds with certain ascetic practices such as meditation that seek transcendence through isolation and detachment from everyday life. Meanwhile the phenomenological model of dual subjectivity can be considered to challenge the dominant Cartesian model in Western thought that separates mind and body, self and physical form. Instead, it troubles the boundary between self and other in the process of identification, which is no longer thought to be entirely internally and egoistically constituted, or to somehow precede bodily experience and phenomenological perception.

This then is where dual subjectivity and rasa theory resonate with one another: each understands the self to be the product of mutually informing perspectives, internal and external, personal and social, a combination of both and irreducible to either one. In other words, both theories distinguish between a 'body personal' as autonomously defined through individual embodied experience, and a 'body social' as experienced and interpreted according to external perspectives. However, both understandings, along with the stories of queer dancers, show how the body personal and the body social are mutually informing, operate in a dynamic relationship with one another, and may even be a precondition for one another. Dance is an event that pools personal and social perceptions of the body in a focussed way, invoking both subject-body and object-body, the body personal and the body social, within a temporally and socially framed medium sustained by collective public memory. Thus Bishu and Sayak experience or imagine the approving gaze of the other as an affirming force, within which they become beautiful and appealing to the eye. In the same way, Anubhuti moves away from societal discourses about her trans and female body to redevelop a conception of her body personal that attends to new sensations and to positively affirm them. Meanwhile, Shreosi refuses the categorisations social perspectives would use to define and control her body, moving in ways that assert her experiences and ideas, pushing towards changing those external perceptions. In the dance event, the physical body is both the site of and the tool of rhetoric culture, persuading the self and the other in dialectical relation of ways to orientate towards one another.

In the context of dance, we may draw from each of these theoretical propositions to enquire into the location of the 'self'. Both the concept of dual subjectivity and rasa theory offer a way of understanding the self as emergent through the embodied practice and perception of the person in the world, rather than as a pre-existing entity that is merely expressed or made manifest through the fleshy body. In this way a phenomenologically derived understanding of self and other influenced by notions of dual-subjectivity and Rasa theory leads us towards a position whence we might critique the articulation of politics around rigid notions of *identity*, conceived as a durable, knowable characteristic or set of characteristics. Such a critique would have radical implications for any queer or LGBTQ* movement, since along with many other forms of activist politics since the mid-20th Century it is this liberal conception of a 'true' or 'authentic' self that has often served as the unit around which demands and aspirations are formulated. In particular, such a notion of *identity* typically functions interdependently with the conceptualisation of the person as an *individual,* where the conception of neutral human individual itself serves as the basic unit of social organisation and sociological analysis. Indeed, since the language and the form in which rights are bestowed (or withheld) is very often framed in terms of the *individual* and *identity*, speaking about self and other frequently returns one to a reifying invocation of the person as a particular kind of modern, liberal, intelligible subject. This process of *subjectification* typically serves to frame non-conforming identifications in the terms of hegemonic heteropatriarchal

cultures, marking them as 'other' even as it acknowledges them, and ultimately facilitates their reproduction in society through subordination to the dominant categories of the heteropatriarchal culture (*c.f.* Butler 1997, Winnubst 2006, Weir 2014, Lorde 2021). In other words, the rhetoric of '*identity politics*' may succeed in persuading the social audience of its object, but by taking the form of the hegemonic, heteropatriarchal, white western world order, it does not make for a meaningful shift in the structural or conceptual devices of that social order. The metaphysics of this way of speaking about self and other returns us always to the logics and frameworks of cultures of hegemony, in which queer genders and same-sex desire are always Other.

We have seen that dance is an emotionally expressive art form through which dancers may seek to express emotional states. Additionally, dance could be described as a medium of embodied expression through which dancers seek to manifest affective experiences throughout their body. Thus, it may be that dance is a particularly well-suited medium for attempting to make personal phenomenal experience available to others through the perceivable exterior of the body. Bishu's explanation that dance communicates directly from his heart to the hearts of his audience suggest that some dancers believe this to be the case (see also Chakravorty 2008). Furthermore, I consider that dance art forms, by tapping into social memory and emotions, may help audiences to 'perceive' queer bodies within the context of familiar structures of feeling, knowing, and being. I suggest that this may also be true for the exploration of

selfhood for those who dance. For example, on separate occasions both Sayak and another gay male dancer, Raja, suggested to me that feminine gay men and trans women may be more attracted to particular dance forms because they provide an opportunity to dress in flamboyantly feminine ways, to wear make-up and "feminize the body" in a way that would not be so easily accepted in mundane contexts. This points to cases in which dance may be used as a strategy for exploring and expressing certain identifications in socially acceptable - or at least, socially 'intelligible' - ways. I wish to push this further and suggest that, by bringing to the fore the contexts in which certain modes of being appear more congruent with accepted cultural forms, such performances may attempt to make the case for bringing those modes of being into other arenas of everyday life. This is particularly pertinent when such performances take place in the street during a demonstration or on a local playground during a queer carnival, outside the frame of the theatre or concert hall which separates art from the everyday. In such events, the rhetoric culture of dance meets the cultural rhetoric of activism, to bring new possibilities into view of the onlooking crowds.

Finally, we have seen that many of my friends speak of their experiences in the language of liberation. I suggest that the phenomenological understanding of dance I have presented offers liberatory potential through the different mode by which self, other and the relation between are conceptualised therein. In various ways, dance practices afford liberating experiences of self and the body to the queer dancers who have spoken to us about their

practices. Surrendering to the gaze of the spectator entails considerable risk (Cowan 1990). However, it also offers considerable opportunity for reconfiguring our ideas about the self and cultural personhood without recourse to concepts of self and other imbued with the metaphysics of European enlightenment ontology. As Doane (2006) comments in relation to the Swing Dancing revival in New York, in this way dance may be considered a form of 'serious play' that serves as a means of escaping social norms and rules. Dance, like spoken language, is a form of rhetoric culture; dancers draw creatively on a cultural repertoire in felicitous contexts to do social, emotional, and affective *work* on others (see Carrithers 2005b). Yet the rhetorical form dance takes is not dependent upon linguistically structured ways of thinking about the person and their relation to their body for either the dance's creator, the performer, or spectators.[57] I have acknowledged the difficulties this presents for me in writing about the subject. However, I must also acknowledge that this difficulty excites me, suggesting as it does an arrival at a crack in the limits of Cartesian logic. If, as many socio-linguistic scholars have shown us, language shapes thought (Lakoff 2010, Vygotsky 2012), and in doing so returns us to the hegemonies and hierarchies of the existing Order of Things (Derrida 1967, Winnubst 2006), a mode of cultural expression that does not depend upon language may afford a cultural language with which to think the unthinkable. It may afford a language in which to creatively practice possibilities of freedom.

[57] Of course, I acknowledge that dancers can and do speak about dance. However, this will always be a preference or a strategy to return the dancer's body to movement; it is not a necessary or primary basis for the processes I describe.

# 2.II Dance, Cultural Memory and Public Emotion

## Down with Fascism, High on Love

The day after I landed in Kolkata for my long fieldwork period in 2018 there was a march in the south of the city to celebrate the recent decriminalisation of sodomy, and thus the de facto decriminalisation of homosexuality, which had occurred the week before. The Supreme Court of India had read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (formerly the British Penal Code, by which it was introduced) to decriminalise sexual acts between consenting adults in private.[58] The legal case had been brought by pro LGBTQ* petitioners starting in the early 1990s, and had first been read down by the Delhi High Court in 2009, only to be reinstated by a first bench of the Supreme Court in 2013. After years of appeals, the final verdict upholding the initial decision of the Delhi High Court was hard-fought, hard-won, and now enshrined permanently, with the criminalisation of homosexuality decreed unconstitutional in the final judgement. To mark this occasion, an event had been organised by the Queer Rights Forum of West Bengal (QRFWB), which is a non-hierarchical, unstructured collective of queer-identifying individuals and allies organised by a public digital mailing list that anyone may join. The walk was entitled 'Down with Fascism, High on Love', and was attended by hundreds of people coming together from various organisations, and as individuals. The march was headed by a small truck festooned with balloons in various colours, bearing banners with the march's political message on the sides. The walk took almost two hours to arrive at its destination outside the Academy of Fine

[58] See footnote 12, p.34

Arts in Southern Kolkata.

The Academy of Fine Arts is an established cultural institution in the city of Kolkata, which faces onto one of the main roads of the city's affluent southern area. It faces onto an open square with a raised concrete stage known as *Ranu Chhaya Mancha*. The square's edges are framed by street vendors selling tea, puffed rice snacks and cold bottled drinks from stands that are slightly sturdier and more permanent than the usual roadside food stalls. As the winding column of demonstrators spread into a crowd, the banners were transferred from the lorry onto the railings, signalling the cause of the gathering to passing cars.  The commencement of the 'cultural programme' was announced to all around through the speaker system that serves this public political arena.

A series of dance performances followed. Although performers from diverse positions in the gender/sexuality matrix performed, feminine trans women dominated the space, seconded closely by femme-presenting cisgender gay men. The first performance given was by Taniya, a trans woman who is very visible in Kolkata's middle-class queer community for her interests in dancing and modelling. She performed in a theatrical red full-length gown, with her long wavy hair flowing loose and her face made up with dramatic eyeshadow. She danced to the recent remixed re-release of the 1990s Hindi song *Dilbar*, in which a retro Indian pop classic is overlaid with vamped up beats and rhythms suggesting a 'modern' sexuality. The audience clapped

along as she extended her arms out straight from shoulder to wrist and snapped her torso in time with the throbbing rhythm; they whooped and cheered as she faced away, bending her extremely slender body backwards to again cast them suggestive glances through thick, lowered lashes.

The most talked-about performance amongst my circle of friends was presented by a group of dancers representing a range of gender and sexual identitifications. It had been choreographed and coordinated principally by Hrithika who featured as lead dancer in the troupe. Their number began with a real-life couple (a trans man and a cisgender woman) coming together in an embrace in the middle of the stage. Wearing rainbow waistcoats over black clothing, they knotted their limbs together and, as one, tore in two a placard painted with the digits '377'. They kissed, drawing cheers from the surrounding crowd.[59] By now the onlookers included not just those who had participated in the walk, but bystanders who had been hanging around the area and had come over to watch whatever might be going on. The speakers struck up with the well-known song *Pyar Kiya toh Darna Kya*, from the classic Hindi/Urdu movie *Mughal-e-Azam*, in which a court dancer has an affair with a Mughal Prince. In the movie, the song is used subversively by the dancing character in a performance for the King, the Emperor Akbar, who disapproves of the illicit relationship between the dancer and his son. The lyrics of the refrain innocently insist, "I have loved, so what is there to fear? I have loved, I have not committed a crime". The poignancy of these familiar words was

[59] Kissing in public is unusual in India, even for heterosexual couples.

elevated by the fact that this judgement literally decriminalised acts of consensual same-sex love, and the crowd rippled with cheers. Some onlookers wiped tears from their cheeks.

Whilst in the movie the dancer is a woman, this number was performed by five femme-presenting cisgender gay male performers, later joined by Hrithika, a trans woman. The dancers wore all-black clothing in their own personal styles each overlaid with an improvised long white cotton skirt that blossomed outwards into whirling bell shapes when they turned, evoking the movement of the *Anarkali* dresses worn by classical Kathak dancers. The choreography was also reminiscent of the subdued, Kathak-inspired gestures made by the actress Madhubala in the movie, beginning with a direct replication of the familiar fluid arm movements featuring in the original choreography throughout the chorus. Once the song was finished, the soundtrack cross-faded into Celine Dion's *I'm Alive* to which, with all having discarded their flowing white skirts, Hrithika and another of the male dancers Bishu performed salsa-inspired sequences in a paired formation before being joined by the rest of the troupe. They danced as a whole group to the end of the track, joyously fusing the hand gestures of disco and the queer American dance style of 'vogueing' with the snakelike body shimmies and bhangra-style body pops that those genres have themselves often borrowed from Bollywood.

Both of these performances invoke a plethora of cultural references that draw

upon public memory to rouse particular emotions or affects amongst the spectators. This rhetorical manoeuvre draws upon associations that members of the public might have about the film, song, costumes, and dance moves that are drawn together in the performance. In performance, the spectator is wordlessly invited to make connections between themes, contexts, and social narratives in their own minds. Without specific knowledge of the important spatial, temporal, musical, cinematic and aesthetic markers/objects, the performances would not carry so many rich possible meanings for the spectators. Following Carrithers (2005b, 2009), in this section I analyse these dance performances as rhetorical events that have social influence due to the performers' creative co-option of cultural schema and images that give life to their actions. These dances, and other such acts of cultural rhetoric, creatively use what is "lying to hand" (2005b, p.588), drawing upon metaphorical, narrative and temporal schema to address an audience and persuade them towards shared hopes and expectations with the performer (Carrithers 2009).

## Queer Indian Modernity?

Whilst Indian Classical dance has served at the frontier of the arts in the construction of a properly Indian cultural *identity*[60] since the period leading up to independence, Chakravorty convincingly argues that the 'remix' style of

[60] I italicise *identity* to show that I understand it to be a reified conceptual form, rather than an expression of any person's lived experience.

dance packaged and consumed in the Hindi film industry is a feature and form emblematic of an even newer imaging of contemporary Indian *identity*. As seen in both Taniya and Hrithika's performances, 'remix' dance styles fuse gestures, postures and occasionally footwork from Indian classical traditions with disco, hip-hop and street dance in an 'anything goes' approach to choreography. Such dance numbers in Hindi films function as 'franchises' for the movies, played on music channels and radio stations as isolable units for consumption. The gyrating bodies express (inevitably hetero)sexual desire within cinematic narratives of modern love and relationships, typically portrayed by superstars in Western designer branded clothing, often in foreign locations (Chakravorty 2009). The 'modern' Indian dance style therefore can be understood to represent a mainstream aspirational form for the modern Indian citizen, modelling the persona of a globalised consumer with an international outlook. The hugely popular reality talent shows on Indian cable TV, such as *Dance India Dance* and *Dance Deewane*, are platforms in which these aspirational embodiments of modern Indian identity are reproduced by 'ordinary' Indian citizens. Such programmes further centralise dance as a means of achieving both a desirably modern Indian identification, and a kind of celebrity status. Dance is therefore a medium in which the archetypes of Indian cultural and national identity are both performed and renegotiated, and the dance performances given by my informants are presented and received within this historically and culturally precedented framework (see Ram 2011).

I suggest that the dance performances given by Taniya, Hrithika and the other members of the dance troupe can be understood to embody and enact a range of aspirations that contribute to a particular vision of Indian modernity. They take up this rhetorical form, entangled as it is with public notions of Indian *identity* and modernity, and work creatively within it to bring queer possibilities into view. This is achieved by 'queering' the hyper-heterosexual scripts of Bollywood that are often most explicitly performed through intensely sexualised dance sequences. 'Queering' is an expression popularly used by social scientists to indicate the challenging of heterosexual norms, texts and assumptions. It has come to be roundly applied to anything that appears as a non-conventional engagement with dominant modes of social organisation in relation to gender and sexuality. However, the use of the term often tells us little of how this challenge is made and received. I suggest that, in different ways, the two dance performances I describe subvert heterosexual norms in the contemporary Indian context, offering queer readings of them, and suggesting queer alternatives to them. This is achieved not least by departing from normative expressions of gender, which are usually reinforced through stylised conventions of bodily movement in the dance styles upon which their choreographies draw. I contend that, in doing so, both performances may be interpreted as suggestions of possible ways of becoming a modern Indian person.

Taniya's performance is a skilful, literal rendering of the sexy, desirable hyper-femininity familiar to Indian audiences from Bollywood item numbers.

She seems to inhabit the role of a cameo star, the celebrity whose role is to incite desire in the audience, in the knowledge of her sexual desirability. In many respects the performance followed the hegemonic choreographic scripts directly, however since it was performed by an out trans woman, we might consider that Taniya's performance is 'queered' by the person of Taniya herself. In her performance of the enticing body movements conventionally performed exclusively by cisgender women, she calls the public gaze to focus on the transfeminine body. Furthermore, her claiming of the politically prestigious public space of *Ranu Chhaya Mancha* at Nandan subverts the literal geographical marginalisation of transfeminine bodies that is effected through the naturalisation of stereotypes such as the Hijra begging in liminal spaces of transience (such as on public trains or at traffic lights). Such stereotypes commonly result from, and also consequently result in, the expulsion of trans women from their family homes and thus from the 'respectable' spaces of middle-class domesticity. Here Taniya's self-presentation is confident, and as she titillates the audience with jerking hips and languorous arm movements that seem to pull them towards her, she occupies the gaze of her spectators. Her decisively feminine embodied expression performs the transfeminine body as desirable in the terms of the dominant discourse that otherwise seeks to deny, exclude, or devalue it. As I watched her, I felt that in displaying the feminine prowess of her body she declared her womanhood through a wordless celebration. In calling upon one of the most visible, sexually enticing expressive forms of Indian popular dance, I suggest that Taniya rhetorically asserts trans women's place in India's modern sexual landscape by occupying

the role most commonly played by the idealised, hypersexual(ised) cisgender Indian woman.

By contrast Hrithika's dance troupe take a slightly different approach to celebrating and performing queer Indianness through dance. Whilst *Dilbar* was in the mainstream popular charts at the time of Taniya's performance, Hrithika confirmed to me that *Pyar Kiya* was chosen for the relevance of its lyrics and the associated film's storyline for the occasion at which the performance was to be given. Hrithika's dance number draws on familiar cultural texts in unfamiliar ways. Rather than inhabiting a conventional aesthetic form with queer bodies, it lifts existing symbolic content and reframes it in the entirely new context of queer personhood and desire. This symbolic content, or 'mental treasure', is invoked in multiple ways including through visual, musical, historical and embodied (choreographic/gestural) presentation. For a start, there is an entire emotional world attached to the song *Pyar Kiya* in public memory in India that is evoked when it is deployed,[61] and this reverberates intensely in the context of queer love stories where the song's repeated statement that to love is not a crime (कोई चोरी नहीं की/koi chori nahin ki) is no longer a statement of protest but a comment on contemporaneous events. Indeed, although the main love interest of *Mughal-e-Azam* is the Emperor's son Prince Salim, *Pyar Kiya* is an item in the film performed before the Emperor Akbar, the great Emperor referred to in the

[61] For a detailed discussion of the political, historical and cultural significance of the themes explored in *Mughal-e-Azam*, see Ch5 of Sumita Chakravarty's 'National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987' (1993).

movie's title. The entire sequence, and the forbidden love story dramatised in the film, are explicitly framed by their relation to the ultimate sovereign authority: the Emperor, the father, or indeed the State.

The tearing of the '377' placard and the romantically suggestive duet work by Hrithika and Bishu directly reference and represent queer love, whilst most audience members will associate the song with the temporal frame of the Mughal court world, represented in the historical imagination of the movie (1960s) from which it comes.[62] The use of the Celine Dion track and Salsa-inspired dance moves then expand the queered Indian identifications of the previous section into the present time-frame. This relates the choreographic and affective content to a global, cosmopolitan version of Indian *identity*, not unlike that outlined by Chakravorty (2008), through North American popular music and Latin inspired dance moves. The representation of queer desire using both artistic aesthetic codes, one distinctly South Asian and another drawing on globalised forms, could be interpreted to rhetorically posit the compatibility of queer identifications across both of these spatial and cultural frames. The visual and embodied aesthetic referents, along with the original context of the musical choices, may also invoke specific temporal associations for South Asian audiences. The layering of multiple possible meanings in this performance is in keeping with the established convention of drawing from

[62] Mughal-e-Azam was first conceived by its producer/director K. Asif in the 1944, and was produced through the 1950s (Salgia, 2005). The stakes of the historicised imagination of Mughal history in South Asia, popularly represented as a period of harmony between Muslim and Hindu populations during a period of Muslim rule, were particularly high in the immediate context of the independence struggle and partition.

mythology in Indian classical dance forms where *Mughal-E-Azam* takes the role of a kind of modern 'myth'. The demonstration of the dancers' cultural knowledge through the performance may also be understood as a claim of belonging, identifying as Indian through the imagined relation to a specific cultural past, and identifying as global and cosmopolitan through the eclectic musical and dance styles in the item number.

Hrithika's dance performance thus synthesises cultural signifiers, public memory, emotion, and historical/political contexts to 'queer' social narratives around love, desire, and Indian cultural *identity*. Whilst both performances assume particular kinds of cultural knowledge from spectators, each uses the material that 'lies to hand' in very different ways (*c.f.* Carrithers 2005, Geertz 2008). It has become very common to describe anything that disrupts the heteronormative assumptions of society as an act of 'queering'. However, through my analysis of these performances I contend that uncritical use of this phraseology, without analysing how that queering takes place, flattens the diverse and creative ways that queer activists go about reimagining and reshaping the social worlds that they live in. Dance performance appears as one of the cultural forms through which activists represent, explore and seek to proliferate the possible ways of living and being in the world. Moving outside the constraints of language and the verbal, dance may be a site for re/thinking the unthinkable through embodied and affective rhetorical explorations.

**The cultural aesthetics of gender performance have been extensively explored since Butler's (1990) much cited articulation thereof. In the Cuban context, Jafari Allen describes how his friend Octavio adopts culturally uncontested signs and symbols of feminine attractiveness and desirability in dress, makeup, and bodily movements while moving through the world as Lili. When making herself up as a woman, Lili leans into the trope of the mulata by lightening Octavio's skin-tone, wearing wet-look wigs, and lip-synching to pop diva tracks of internationally celebrated, fair-skinned mulatas. In a manner not dissimilar to Taniya's invocation of the cameo star, the ways in which Lili makes herself woman thus play out scripts of race and tropes of colour that, in some ways, make Octavio an agent of his and Lili's own oppression (79). While Lili is presented as a drag or *transformista* personality, Allen notes the similarity between Lili's choices and observations about the ways in which the construction or making of gendered selves are, for everyone, located in historical context, and have material effects. Performances of womanhood that are tuned to cultural norms are a strategy of self-fashioning for women like Lili, Tania, or Hrithika, whose womanhood is contested, as it is for cisgender women who do not wish their femininity to be questioned at all (Butler 1990).**

**Such analyses emphasise the active nature of self-making, but often assume the effects of such cultural aesthetic decisions on the observer as a passive recipient of shared knowledge. Extrapolating from the tenets of Rasa Theory, I would like to suggest that this is a significant oversight in the**

**theorisation of how cultural norms and gendered aesthetics are constructed, interpreted, re/produced and perpetuated in social contexts. Even where the reception of particular gendered aesthetics is *in line* with normative interpretations, Ahmed (2006) shows us that this alignment requires work on the part of the perceiver; it requires the observer to *read for a line*. In certain cases, a straight or straightening line may be found or negotiated, as when Tania performs as the cameo star, or Allen's friend Lili performs as the ultra-whitened Shakira in a drag bar. Such moments, as both Allen and Kolkata's critical lesbian onlookers remind us, demonstrate that agency is not always radical, even as resistance is not always intentional.**

If we then come to consider that 'queering' cannot be understood as one unified or distinctive practice then it is instructive to consider how explicit acts of queering (including demonstrations, dance, and other stylised performances) are imagined and undertaken by performers, and by what means they effect spectators. We have seen how dancers draw upon cultural schema and aesthetic histories that evoke affective and conceptual responses in audience members. However dance performances are not simply acts of culturally coded declamation. A performance is always addressed *to* spectators, usually to a specific imagined audience. Particularly in the context of activist events, we might understand that the imagined audience are to be persuaded of a particular point of view. Moreover, spectators necessarily read into, interpret and react to the performance itself which may or may not meet the performers' intentions (Cowan 1990, Ram 2011). Dance and performance

studies have been criticised for overly focussing on the intentions and thought processes of performers and choreographers, relying on the assumption that the audiences will 'read' the performances according to the intentions with which they are 'written' (Reed 1998, Kaeppler 2000). Therefore I have attempted a hermeneutic approach to considering some of the possible ways of understanding such performances, drawing on notions of rhetoric, affect and public memory. In the Indian context meanwhile, *Rasa Theory* provides a parallel model that accounts for the power of the spectators' gaze. The possible meanings and effectiveness of the dance performances I have described depends upon the intellectual and emotional engagement of culturally knowledgeable spectators. In a context where performances have activist intent, the effect upon and the effect of the spectator may prove to have consequences even beyond the site of the dance event. One performance at a time, queer dancers are using dance to proffer a vision of a different way of being, and of a different social order. Seen in this light, the ethical nature of aesthetics and social poetics comes ever more clearly into view.

## Spectatorship as Co-Creation

Performances are always directed towards an audience, and in the Indian context spectators are endowed with a much higher level of involvement in the event than in Western performing arts (Ram 2011). The Indian aesthetic theory known as Rasa Theory seeks to describe the ways in which emotions or

affects (*bhava*) are invoked in audiences by a given performance. *Rasa* in relation to dance is explored in great detail in the *Natyashastra*, an ancient treatise on performing arts dated between 200BCE-200CE that is still studied today (Nair 2014). The ancient Vedic texts about Rasa Theory posits a conception of performance not within a communication model, whereby the performer transmits a message that is received, decoded and interpreted by the audience, but as a unifying aesthetic experience. In this conception spectators and performers enter into an emotional, existential state that is mutually created through a process of attention (Chakravorty 2008, Nair 2014).

I suggest that certain tenets of rasa theory, pertaining as it does to socially constituted, emotional and aesthetic mode of consciousness, can be usefully compared (though not reduced) to affect theory approaches to socio-cultural phenomena (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Ingold 2011, Brennan 2004). Whilst Rasa theory itself belongs to a cultural epistemology that does not entirely disregard the artistic education of the audience, Ram (2011) has argued that, despite the theory's later co-option into hierarchies of class distinction, it should be understood as a systemisation of the emotion that all spectators experience in relation to artistic performances. Similarly, whilst I hold that the concept of *rasa* cannot be uncritically expanded to theorise mundane spectatorship irrespective of historical, social and cultural context, I argue along with Ram and others that it has structured the implicit basis of the performance and reception of the arts in India. In contrast to the expert

performer/novice audience model that may be prevalent in the Western Classical arts, the Indian performer both expects and desires spectators to take an active role in the reception of the performance they deliver. This reception is not simply a passive act, but an engaged, co-constitutive activity, an interaction as well as a reaction. Spectators may raise their hands in gestures of praise or ecstasy, and exclaim to show appreciation of particularly virtuosic figures (Rahaim 2012). Similarly, spectators may actively seek to 'taste' the emotions produced through the performers' skill. The implications of this in an activist context is that the political and social effects 'intended' by a given performance are dependent not only on the resolve or skill of the performer as 'author', but also on the intellectual and affective response of the audience.

Taniya's dance performance, and performances like it, call up and write over the spectators' conventional social knowledge and expectations of trans women in relation to physical space, and as objects of sexual desire. The audience, composed mostly of queer-identifying people, participate in the framing of Taniya's body as sexually desirable by whistling, whooping and cheering as she executes the more provocative movements. In occupying the role of a sexually desirable woman that would be denied her by the dominant cisgender heterosexist narrative, she refuses the implicit public narrative on the femininity and desirability of transfeminine bodies. The crowd's vocal interaction with the movements of her body suggests that they too support the refutation of this standard formulation, allowing her to successfully present herself as 'sexy'. Taniya's performance also may be seen to address

the transphobia implicit in public stereotypes about trans women, which are typically collapsed with stereotypes about Hijras as gawdy, masculine people who fail to properly inhabit a feminine disposition. In doing so however, Taniya's performance arguably leaves the mainstream sexualisation of feminine bodies unchallenged, and indeed might even be said to consciously invoke the fetishization of the female body as an object of (male, hereto)sexual desire for her purposes. This kind of choreography can be unpopular with cisgender queer women and other feminist spectators who seek to break with the heteropatriarchal sexualisation of the feminine form. Indeed, I have witnessed several discussions amongst cisgender or non-binary queer women claiming to find such performances frustrating precisely for this reason. In this sense, whilst Taniya's performance - and the audience's affirming engagement with it - could be said to 'queer' the dominant norms of heterosexual desire vis-à-vis (trans-)femininity, it perhaps does not successfully disrupt normative social conceptions of femininity itself, or even seek to. Whilst this has power for some spectators depending on their personal and ideological point of view, for others the performance may feel only partially successful, as reflected in some of the personal conversations that follow such events.

With regard to the *Pyar Kiya* number, the audience are invited to bring to their reception of this song the feelings and storylines that they already associate with it. This may include the empathy they might have for the character played by Madhubala in the film from which the song derives, and perhaps audiences might also transfer the popular support for the character's illicit

love to the desires of the performers dancing to it in the new context. The *rasika* in the audience for the *Pyar Kiya* number may read the longing and the boldness of the claim of the dancer, and associate the dance with the statement of justice ultimately borne out in the film. That 377 was a technology of state suppression may resonate with the politically motivated suppression of the court dancer's love by the King in whose palace she is a servant.

The audience are active as interpreters of and contributors to the dance performances given in activist contexts (as in any context), not simply passive recipients of a message coded and programmed by the choreographer(s) and performers. Just as the performers are engrossed by their bodies, spectators become engrossed by extension in those moving bodies (Chakravorty 2008). That concentration of attention on the dancers' bodies and investment in the performance can move spectators to vicariously experience the emotions animated through the dancers' bodies, and to contribute to[63] the meaning and effect of the performance itself. Therefore, as phenomenological accounts posit the duality of the body, I posit dance performance as a dualistic phenomenon. We have seen how phenomenological theorisations in the tradition of Merleau-Ponty conceive of the body both as the medium through which the

[63] I choose my words carefully here, describe the dancers as performing, inhabiting, animating, expressing emotions rather than portraying or depicting them. This is because in the process of writing about performance and spectatorship, I find that much of the language available for talking about these phenomena alludes allegorically to representation, and suggests a reflexive or intellectual gap between the performance's realisation and the experiences or purported intentions of the performer. I seek to use language that reflects the experiential oneness and 'being in the moment' of the dance performance reported by my informants, which is inconsistent with the implicit logic of Cartesian mind/body separation.

person experiences the world, and as an object for other people. In a parallel vein, I have argued that dance is a social experience opening out onto two topographically opposed and distinct aspects. I have shown that the rhetorical effect and aesthetic experience of a dance performance is neither reducible to the intentions of the performer, the interpretations of the spectator, or the embodied experience of either. At the same time, although the written form constrains me as author within a linear and implicitly hierarchical form of presentation, I do not wish to imply that the dance event is located more or less, earlier or later, in the experience of dancer or spectator. Indeed, as Herzfeld (2009) has suggested, it is important not to make the Cartesian mistake that the body is somehow more 'truthful' or 'earnest' than the spoken word, or any other form of rhetoric in culture. Rather I conceive of the dancer-experience and spectator-experience as mutually constituting, never equivalent and always dialectical, rather than as 'parts' of an objective whole or knowable single event.

## Dance as a Protest Tool

I have alluded to the fact that the vast majority of my friends and informants do not self-identify as 'activists'. This is despite my coming to know them through collectives, NGOs, and events pertaining to what can only be, and indeed usually are, described as queer activism. This is true also of Hrithika, a dear friend I came to consider as queer family, who has choreographed and

performed in dance routines at almost every large-scale LGBTQ* event I have ever attended since my association with Kolkata's queer community began in 2013. Over a cocktail in our favourite café one evening, I posed her a series of questions relating to her "activism", and particularly her use of dance and visual art as mediums of expression.

"I really don't see myself as an activist," she began. "I do activism, that means through my artwork only. It's not that I'm going to go out and put up a struggle, raise my voice, that's… that's an activism as well for people, but… that's not my kind of thing. I wanted to do something different that would enlighten people from the root."

Hrithika went on to say that, whilst marches and demonstrations make the news for one day only, "art is a very strong and powerful subject… that somehow helps people", and that also gives her strength. She argued that, unlike ephemeral social movements on the streets, art endures for longer and is inherently attractive to people. Thus she juxtaposes an image of art as an enduring and inherently pleasing form against the normative mode of "activism", which could be loud, even violent, and she implies has but a minimal and temporary effect. She claimed that if she could portray the social movement (আন্দোলন /*andalon*) through art, she would better be able to make people understand the tenets of that movement. In short, "people will be interested". In other words, Hrithika believes that art is a means to turn people towards the movement; we might even say, dance and other art forms

can be used to re-orientate people's views of the queer activist movement.

I suggest that understanding dance as an *orientation device* may facilitate a deeper appreciation of the activist potential inherent in dance events, and other artistic and embodied performances. As I have outlined in the introduction, Sarah Ahmed (2006) has articulated a vision of queer phenomenology through the concept of *orientations*. She understands orientation as the turning of the body towards objects, and how it is that they turn. Evidently, as an expressive art form conceived to be performed to an audience of spectators, dance events are intended to orientate those who are not dancing towards the spectacle of the dance. The dance event itself can be understood as the *object* that spectators orientate themselves towards, and the cultural norms of performance as the *orientation device* that shapes the topographical relation between dancers and spectators. In this way, onlookers from different walks of life have their heads turned, literally and figuratively, towards the dance. Ahmed also reminds us that emotions orientate us by drawing us towards certain objects through feelings such as love, desire, or pleasure, or impel us to create distance from an object through feelings such as fear, disgust or contempt. Hrithika and Bishu both remind us of the attractive qualities of dance and of dancers' bodies. Therefore, not only does dance in this context orientate onlookers towards queer bodies, but ideally it orientates them with a feeling of attraction or happiness, drawing them towards that which they might otherwise turn away from with fear or contempt. This interpretation is further supported by Hrithika's disavowal of

bodily behaviours in Pride parades that are 'unpleasant for other people', and her imputation that this makes it less likely that people will listen to or accept queer peoples' requests for rights and inclusion in society.

Shreosi, a queer woman who worked at *Diana* from 2018-2020, had similarly reflected that dance in particular has long had a place in Indian queer history. During a long discussion on the subject, she pointed out to me that dance has been a professional medium for Hijras, and that the intersection between queerness and dance has been depicted even in films. She also remarked that cross-dressing has featured heavily in various forms of Indian folk dance, including local forms in Murshidabad (West Bengal) where she grew up. She added that such forms have often been stigmatised and suppressed by the well-to-do middle classes, and that as a result despite growing up in Murshidabad she was not aware of this folk tradition until she was much older. Unlike Hrithika, who to some extent distances art from activism, Shreosi explicitly claims dance as part of her activism, describing her dancing as a "visual politics" and a means of understanding her own "political practice". For Shreosi, as we shall see, dance offers a language through which to challenge the embodied effects of public discourses about gendered bodies.

Both Hrithika and Shreosi, in different ways, suggest that dance and other artistic forms have inherently 'activist' potential. Importantly, Hrithika speaks of dance and art as forms that automatically draw people's attention. Her use of the English word "enlighten" to describe the nature of her intended

message to spectators suggests the conscious embedding of ethical messages and precepts into the work she choreographs and performs. Her comment that this enlightenment is from the "root", again using the English word, seems to resonate with the rhetoric of *grassroots activism,* and also implies that art reaches different sectors of society than the marches and demonstrations that she distances herself from.

Although Shreosi did not directly comment so much on these forms of protest in relation to dance, she did suggest that both formal protests and dance are shaped by the gaze of the *bhadrolok*, that figure who epitomises the values and aesthetics of the "respectable Bengali middle class" (Chakrabarty 2002). She reflects that "in the context of queer politics, most people are coming from an upper class, upper caste framework", and that they bring with them the "baggage" of upper class, upper caste mores about the body. This baggage, for Shreosi, can be seen in the way that "the ভদ্রলোকের/*bhadroloker* audiences… always valorise facial expression … but.. never look at other different bodily movements that can even more beautifully express different feelings". Drawing attention to the way in which Indian dance forms have been canonised as classical in relation to what she explicitly describes as "the process of nation-building", Shreosi argues that the "sanitised" history of dance in India produces a conception of the body and bodily movement as immoral, particularly as concerns the female body. This moral framing of the body that Shreosi identifies with relation to dance carries across the social landscape, is evident in the logic of protests, and in the comportment of the

body in everyday space. Thus, Shreosi's poem about her personal dance practice speaks of a rebellion against this middle and upper class '*bhadroloker*' body culture and its regulatory force on her relation to her own body. Further still, Shreosi explicitly claims that dance offers a means to "challenge this regulation and control on the body" through a "visual politics" of bodily movement.[64]

I alluded earlier to periodic expressions of anxieties around the appropriateness of 'sexy' dancing in queer demonstrations and events such as Pride. This often takes the form of discussion after the event, or a general condemnation of people who conduct themselves without 'dignity' or 'decency'.[65] For example, during Pride 2019, Hrithika's dance troupe 'House of Odd' performed on the float to Lady Gaga's 'Born this Way' in black and silver clothing that referenced kink culture and BDSM sexual practices. When the performance was repeated at the end of the programme, Hrithika prefaced the repeat by making a statement that their performance was not intended to 'hurt' anyone. I later asked her why she had felt it necessary to make this statement, and she said that some people had expressed disapproval and upset about their kinky costumes. I asked her where she thought the line was between body or sex positivity, and indecency. She sighed and said,

| "Look… suppose I'm | , "Look … suppose I'm | "Look…. Suppose I'm |
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[64] For further discussion of the *bhadrolok*, see Chapter 2.III
[65] In my experience, these are the two words most commonly used to account for anxieties around sexualised behaviours in public. See Dutta 2012 for another analysis of such notions of 'civility' and their interaction with queer activism.

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| wearing a sari with a nice blouse, কিন্তু আমার ইচ্ছে করছে আমি blouseটা খুলে দেব, blouse টা দিয়ে publicly , and লোককে বোঝা বোঝে আমি কী . That's very unpleasant. It can be very unpleasant for other people. আমি যদি আমার basic rights এর কথা ভাবি, আমি যদি decent way to fight for my rights [ভাবি] তাহলে আমাকে কয়েকটা জায়গায় ভাবতে হবে যে যেই মানুষগুলো আমার জায়গাতেও চেষ্টা করছে , যে মানুষগুলোকে decent way তে deal করা. Not যে তুমি | wearing a sari with a nice blouse, kintu amar icche korche ami blouse ta khule debo, blouse ta diye publicly, and lok ke bojha bojhe ami ki. That's very unpleasant. It can be unpleasant for other people. Ami Jodi amar basic rights er katha bhabi, ami Jodi decent way to fight for my rights [bhabi], tahole amake koyekta jaygay bhabte hobe je jei manushgulo amar jaygateo chesta korche, je manushguloke decent way te deal kora. Not je tumi erokombhabe deal korbe je ekta manush ke dekhe: 'ami transgender, tumi amake rights diyo' - na you don't have to | wearing a sari with a nice blouse, but I wilfully open the blouse publicly to throw myself in peoples' faces [lok ke bojha bojhe ami ki]. That's very unpleasant. It can be unpleasant for other people. If I think about my basic rights, if I fight for my rights in a decent way, then I also I have to think of the people who are also struggling from my position and deal with them in a decent way. It's not that you should deal with people by showing them "I am *transgender*, [you] give me rights' – no, you don't have to prove |

এরকমভাবে deal করবে যে একটা মানুষকে দেখে : "আমি transgender , তুমি আমাকে rights দিয়ো ," - না। You don’t have to prove yourself what you are, you just need to follow the basic way and right way to fight for your own rights, right? Society তে তুমি pride celebrate করছো মানে তুমি যা ইচ্ছা করে মদ খেয়ে রাস্তার মধ্যে ফেলে দিলাম ? You can’t do it! So similarly সেটা বুঝতে হবে কি করছো, কি করতে চাও, তুমি তোমার rights নিচ্ছ, right ? কিন্তু তুমি যদি সেই জায়গাগুলো maintain না

prove yourself what you are, you just need to follow the basic way and right way to fight for your own rights right? Society te tumi pride celebrate korcho mane tumi ja iccha kore mod kheye rastar modyhye bottle rastar modhye phele dilam? You can’t do it! So similarly seta ke bujhte hobe ki korcho, ki korte chao, tumi tomar rights nicho, right? Kintu tumi jodi sei jayga gulo maintain na koro, tahole manush tomay accept korbe ki kore? Tarai tomar dik e angul tulbe, je na tumi nijer jaygay thik nei, amra tomake keno basic human rights debo?”

yourself what you are, you just need to follow the basic way and right way to fight for your own rights, right? Within society celebrating pride doesn’t mean that you can drink alcohol in the road and throw your litter everywhere as you wish, you can’t do it! So similarly you have to understand what you’re doing, what you want to do, because you’re claiming your rights [tumi tomar rights niccho]. But if you don’t maintain those [things] in that place, then how will people accept you? They will show you the

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| করো , তাহলে মানুষ তোমায় accept  করবে কিকরে? তারাই তোমার দিকে আঙ্গুল তুলবে , যে না তুমি নিজের জায়গায় ঠিক নেই, আমরা তোমাকে কেন basic human rights দেবো ? " | | finger saying, no, you can't behave properly in your own place, so why should we give you your basic human rights? …" |

After responding to a few clarifications from me, she continued.

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| "There are right places, there are right timing. সব কিছু আমাকে দেখতে হবে, যদি আজকে আমাকে গড়িয়াহাট এ, মোড়ে , সব করতে পারিনা। Society  তে যদি আমি rights এর কথা বলি , তাহলে আমাদের কয়েকটা জিনিস, basic  জিনিস maintain | " There are right places, there are right timing. Shob kichu amake dekhte hobe, Jodi ajke amake Gariahat e more shob korte pari na. Society te Jodi ami rights er katha boli, [social] movements er katha boli, tahole amader koyekta jinish, basic jinish maintain korte hobe. Ajke ami amar | "There are right places, there are right timing. I have to look at everything, if I go to Gariahat crossing today I won't be able to do absolutely anything. If I talk about my rights in society, if I talk about my movements, then we have to maintain some basic things. If today at my home, in |

করতে হবে. আজকে আমি আমার বাড়ি নিয়ে, আমার মা বাবার সাথে আমি গালাগালি দিয়ে তোমার তো কথা বলতে পারিনা। আমি তাদেরকে respect করুক। So towards the society যদি তাদের থেকে basic human rights চাই, তাহলে আমার একটু respect দিতে হবে, so ... আমি একটা খুব simple example দিচ্ছি। আমার বাড়িতে, I hate calling maid servants and things. কাজ করে যারা, তাদের সাথে আমি যদি ভালোভাবে কথা বলি, তাদের সাথে যদি আমি ভালোভাবে

bari niye, amar ma babar sathe ami galagali diye tomar to katha bolte pari na. Ami taderke respect koruk. So towards the society jodi tader theke basic human rights chai, tahole amar ektu respect dite hobe, so … ami ekta khub simple example dichhi. Amar barite, I hate calling maid servants and things. Kaj kore jara, tader sathe ami jodi bhalobhabe katha boli, tader sathe jodi ami bhalobabhe bybohar kori, tara o kintu ami respect korbo. Manush hishebe jodi tader ami respect kori, without any class, without any anything, je tomar taka nei, amar

front of my mother and father, I wouldn't be able to start swearing. I should respect them. So towards the society, if people want basic human rights, then we have to give some kind of respect, so… I'll give a simple example. In my house, I hate calling maid servants and things. Those who do [domestic] work, I will speak well with them, and if I behave well with them, because I respect them also. If I respect them as a human being [manush hishebe], without any class, without any anything, then it won't simply be an exchange

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| ব্যবহার করি,তারাও কিন্তু আমি respect করবো। মানুষ হিসেবে যদি তাদের আমি respect করি , without any class , without any anything , যে তোমার টাকা নেই, আমার টাকা আছে, আমি তোমার টাকা চাইছি - no . আমি যদি তাদেরকে ভালোবেসে বলি তারা কিন্তু আমার একটা কথা শুনবে। আমি অনেককে দেখেছি , তাদের একজন মানুষজন কাজ করে তাদের respect দিয়ে কথা বলে না. "এই, ইটা করে দাও তো, ওটা করে দাও," - they are also humans. | taka achhe, ami tomar taka chaichi; no. Ami jodi taderke bhalobeshe boli tara kintu amar ekta katha sunbe. Ami anek ke dekhechi, tader ekjon manushjon kaj kore tader respect diye katha bole na, 'ei eta kore dao toh ota kore dao,' they are also humans… | of money. No. If I speak to them with gentility [bhalobeshe], they will listen to my words. I have seen many people who talk to those who do [domestic] labour for them without respect. "Oi, do this, do that". They are also humans… |
| | …respecting each other korlei jayga ta mutual hobe nahole kikore hobe, tahole toh tai bole what rights are you asking for? You … don't even know what you are looking for." | …Without respecting each other, how can it be a mutual space? If you put it that way, then what rights are you asking for? You… don't even know what you are looking for." |

… respecting each other
করলেই জায়গাটা mutual
হবে নাহলে কিকরে হবে, তাহলে
তো তাই বলে what rights
are you asking for? You
… don't even know what
you are looking for."

Hrithika's ideas reflect many distinctively modern, liberal concerns and formal discourses of democratic citizenship. These particularly include concerns with proper modes of self-conduct. Her discussion is focussed on the pursuit of 'basic human rights', although the content of these remain implicit and unnamed within this moment. Acquiring sufficient public standing to be able to demand or avail of these 'basic human rights' depends, in her discussion, on behaving and speaking with 'decency' in public. The importance of the concept of 'decency' sets certain limits on what can be considered appropriate behaviour in public space as well as the behaviour that might be acceptable and even desirable within activist activity in the public sphere. Notions of decency and dignity, particularly with relation to behavioural presentation of the self, are contentious in the queer community because such notions are associated with the conservative, regulatory norms of the affluent, English-medium educated middle classes in India. In the

context of early LGBT activism in Delhi, Dave has commented on the necessity that newly formed collectives and organisations felt to maintain dignity, decency, or respectability in their dealings with the public. This became a concern when women began to write to a particular collective requesting information about sexual practices, ways of finding partners, and making sexual requests including one writer who asked for the recipient to send cuttings of their body hair to her by return. Dave (2010) described the tension between recognising that there was a genuine need for sexual fulfilment amongst the isolated, lonely, and poorly-resourced lesbian women who were writing such missives, and the organisation's inability to respond for myriad reasons. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the limits of perceived propriety and the social necessity of navigating a relationship with the public has shaped and curtailed many aspects of the LGBT movement. In Shreosi's exposition, we saw how the hegemony of these norms was epitomised in the gaze and gossip of the *bhadrolok.* However Hrithika does not succumb to normative standards, clearly pushing and challenging the *bhadroloker* norms as demonstrated by the controversial costumes worn by her dance troupe in their Pride 2018 performance. I note that Hrithika's notion of decency and dignity is not anchored around gendered and patriarchal standards of the body; rather she develops them with relation to notions of harm, consent and respect.

Modern liberal conceptions of Human Rights frequently articulate the provision of these rights in relation to the concept of the citizen's

responsibilities. However, the most basic or fundamental human rights are often held by those who espouse them to represent a minimum tolerable condition of existence for all human beings regardless of culture or context. Hrithika's ideas reflect the notion that rights come with responsibilities. In this case, she refers to the responsibility to behave and speak with 'decency' in public space as a precondition for having one's rights recognised and granted. The notions of harm that she invokes also relate to modernist liberal notions of freedom of the *individual,* thus conceived, to behave however they wish so long as their actions do not harm others. Whilst these formulations derive from Western post-Enlightenment Philosophy, it would be an error to regard the appearance of these ideas here as straightforwardly evidence of some kind of enduring Western influence, since the modern ideologies of state and citizenship have been adopted, domesticated and developed along their own trajectory in India since the early 20th Century (Chakrabarty 2002). However, the categories do depend upon conceptions of self, other and the relations between that are derived from the models that uphold normative power structures, the Order of Things.

I suggest that what is distinctive, and perhaps queer about Hrithika's model of rights and responsibilities, is that they are founded on a notion of respect for other human beings and a regard for consent, rather than around the protection of a person's ability to possess goods, attributes or particular relations with others. Themes of harm and consent arise time and time again in ethical and ideological discussions about queer sexuality in Kolkata.  In this

way, it becomes apparent that what constitutes an ethical action for queer activists is often not predefined by the moral norms and structures of 'proper' social behaviour in a given context, even in those instances where their calls seem to align with the same. Indeed, such 'proper' behaviours are frequently expressions of the gendered and interpersonal codes that queer and LGBTQ* movements are critical of. Therefore, in the process of social critique, ethical action is creative action, taking different forms according to the actor's understanding of the various discourses that are used to constitute people as particular kinds of subjects, and their response to those. In the Indian context, dance offers many features and elements that are felicitous for such a creative ethical practice. For a start, dance has certain affinities with the techniques and priorities of more formal activist projects. Dance intrinsically entails movement through occupied space, which (as we have seen in Chapter 1) is an explicit strategy of social movements for inscribing causes and ways of being into the public domain. Inherently visual, dance events attract the attention of spectators, especially as the stylised movements of the dancing body differ from the usual movements of the body in public space. If moreover, as Hrithika argues, we assume that people are inherently attracted to and interested in creative things, dance events in public space pull focus from the mundane life of the street.

Similar to the slogans, banners and linguistic forms of communication often found in marches and demonstrations, dance has the ability to communicate messages. Whilst I have asserted divergence from structuralist analyses of

dance in relation to language, the testimonies of my informants demonstrate that performers and choreographers do aim to communicate specific messages and ideas to audiences. This may be done by playing with form, trope, and drawing in various ways upon the "mental treasure" of cultural symbology, public memory and emotion (Carrithers 2005). However, the messages and ideas taken away by audiences are not passively received but actively co-created through engaged and affective spectatorship. As Bishu has said, it is as if it goes from the dancer's heart to that of the audience. Hrithika describes this as a process of enlightenment "from the root". We might surmise that, from a position of emotional engagement and experiencing their reaction to the dance performance viscerally, spectators may indeed be more emotionally and intellectually affected by dance performances than by marches, demonstrations and other generic forms of activist mobilisation. Since matters of gender and sexuality are tied into emotional and affective experiences, this mode of expression is used to offer alternative visions of the gendered, desiring body in an affective, embodied medium. As Shreosi claims so articulately, "it may be that it's not possible to give a very good space for expressing [body politics and body positivity] through academic language, but maybe there are different languages and forms through which it can be challenged." Perhaps dance, particularly in the Indian context, is one such language and form.

## 2.III Dance as Ethical Work

## Shreosi Speaks: Dance as Personal Politics

Whilst many of my informants alluded indirectly to the relation between their dance practice and views about the body, gender and '*identity*', Shreosi explained that for her, dance was explicitly a "political practice". Moreover, she emphasised that she was less interested in performing and more interested in dance as something she could do in her day-to-day life. I have drawn on Shreosi's movements, poetry and ideas already in this chapter, but here I wish to allow space for her voice at length. Shreosi is extremely articulate and self-aware regarding her dance practice and its relationship to forms of activism. When we spoke she offered, without provocation, an analysis of her actions and an explicitly political explanation for them very similar to that which I myself had been leaning towards. As a Masters graduate in Women's Studies, she also has a developed understanding of the concepts and language of feminist scholars, sociologists and political philosophers. She incorporated these ideas into her conversational discussion of dance with me, which she describes from the outset as also a "political practice".

Whilst similarity between the speech and knowledge practices of the informants and the anthropologist can under certain circumstances present new challenges for analysis (Riles 2000), I could not find a significant discrepancy between Shreosi's position towards her words and my own. To add commentary would therefore be repetitious at best and patronising at

worst. Moreover, since my primary motivation is to uplift and amplify the voices of my friends and informants, I do not feel the need to impose my own upon Shreosi's ideas here beyond offering the occasional contextual detail gleaned from having shared certain spaces with her over many months. Instead, I present selected excerpts from our long discussion, held over Skype in March 2020, with further interference only in the form of my own translation from our mixed Bengali and English patter into English prose.

> "I learned Kathak as a child – [but] I didn't continue because dance is not really encouraged as a hobby unless you're an upper caste woman, or unless you're in a very established classical genre and become close to a guru within a *guru-shishya parampara*.[66] It's not seen as a career. Because marriageability is a concern, dancing is not much encouraged because you're working on your body. You will pay attention to your breasts, you would work on that area of the body, which … very much goes against the family values that we are taught from the beginning [as children].
>
> This is why most people do it [dance] before marriage, but discontinue it after marriage,… I prioritised studying, thinking that it would be easier

[66] Parampara means 'lineage' in Sanskrit. The traditional educational structure in Indic religions is based on the passing of knowledge from teacher (guru) to student (shishya) in a oral tradition situated in a comprehensive relationship. In the classical arts in particular, the lineage or *parampara* of particular gurus is recognisable through stylistic aesthetic traits, and particular pedagogical techniques.

to make a career from that because there was no scope for a career in dance … After being out of dance for so long I felt I wouldn't be able to return to it, because my body has changed and become heavier, but when I was in Bombay with [our friend] Jhilli[67] I went to her dance studio in the evening where she dances, and I saw that she is doing so many things spontaneously. … In those studios all kinds of people of all ages, married and marriageable age, and of older age were dancing, so I could see that dance is not an age-specific activity, and there was none of this male/female hierarchy. Until now there hasn't been this kind of secular framework for dancing [in India], and I liked it very much. Since I had been associated with [Indian] Classical dance for so long, I had kind of assimilated the idea that that it's [not] possible to learn dance at this kind of age. You know, I had internalised that grammatical framework, so I realised that I have to think outside of this, that perhaps I can fulfil something of my immediate need or desire to dance if I don't think in that classical framework…

"[Jhilli was doing] all sorts of dance that used to happen there [in Bombay]. Salsa, tango, … these social dances, cha cha, hip-hop, like that. …In the context I grew up in, these kinds of dances weren't encouraged. People who did or learned these dances were 'bad girls'[68] . These [dance styles] don't fall within the Indian Classical dance framework, and in

[67] a mutual acquaintance and member of *Diana* who has lived in Bombay for several years
[68] এইগুলো খারাপ মেয়েরা করে, মানে, এইগুলো করলে বাজে  হোক।  এইগুলো ঠিক  ভালো না।

Eigulo kharap meyera kore, mane, eigulo korle bhaje hok. Eigulo thik bhalo na.

Indian Classical there's an idea that there's only one possible way to practice. … That idea had really planted itself in my mind, so I hadn't seen anyone working outside that framework of practising every day. I had this kind of thought process that …yes, I really like dance, … I did classical for a long time, let me try this for a while and see. I don't know how, but seeing other people doing it, I thought that yes I can still do a lot more work on my body, and <u>this is something new</u>, that I can <u>explore</u> …

So like this, I came back to Kolkata, I was introduced to Kalika. …[69] The way she trained me, she used to say to me that anyone can dance Belly Dance. It's not that you have to have a specific body type, and however much you push yourself your progress will depend on that. It's not that you have to have a particular figure, and some of the teachers have a huge body, and [before] I just couldn't think of it that anybody could dance with such a body. After seeing videos I felt that this [i.e. Belly Dance] is something I could do in my day-to-day everyday, and day-to-day everyday dancing is more important for me than performing in a stage. This was very clear for me, that I don't want to be anything or get a career out of this, but at this moment I felt that there's a lot to explore, there's a lot to learn. I wanted to know the history, and somehow these things have also helped me a lot to understand my own personal political

[69] Kalika is a Belly Dance instructor based in Kolkata. She is also Sayak and Anubhuti's instructor. She trained at various locations including in Bombay and internationally. Her students attend weekly studio classes, and perform in a showcase a few times a year under the auspices of Kalika's dance school.

> practice. So that was important to me, and this is how my study of Belly-dancing began. It's not that I can say I'll do Belly Dancing my whole life, I don't know about that either way, but I really like it and I want to explore it a lot more, and I want to study and practice more within in this beautiful dance form.

When I asked Shreosi to elaborate more on the relationship between dance and her political practice, she continued:

> "The way we imagine the body, we might think that 'okay, maybe this bit of me is beautiful,' and the way we think of dance in our minds usually we think that '[dancers will have] this kind of figure, the audience expect this'[70]; and so valorisation of a particular type of body takes place, and somehow there's a modulation and regulation of the diverse forms of body and their practices. That is very much present in the Indian Classical framework if we look, even if we look at dance shows, a kind of pushing happens that [valorises/promotes] a particular body structure. 'Boys like/suit this kind of dance, girls like/suit this kind of dance[71]'. Many norms are constructed through this, but if we look from a different perspective, if we see dance in the everyday - dancing

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[70] এইভাবে চাইবে
Eibhabe chaibe
Lit. They will want it to be this way

[71] এই নাচটা ছেলেদের ভালো লাগে,
এই নাচতা মেয়েদের ভালো লাগে
Ei nachta cheleder bhalo lage, ei nachta meyeder bhalo lage
Dual reference, that boys/girls like the dance, but also that the dance form suits that kind of person (renders them attractive)

> everyday as part of everyday practices - then.. we have to *imagine*[72] dance in everyday practices.
>
> It is…something that you believe in, that every day that you do, you move, and whatever you do [you] think in terms of dance. This notion doesn't arise in inclusive or diverse contexts. I've seen through a different lens …and whereas I talk about my political practice in the context of [the] body or body positivity, nobody [else] speaks very loudly about that. So it may be that it's not possible to give a very good space for expressing that through academic language, but maybe there are different languages and forms through which it can be challenged and it can be manifested."

At this point Shreosi spoke at some length about the biases of perspectives on dance, including her own, due to the economic and class privileges in dance practice and performance. She noted that the gurus and celebrated Indian classical dancers are without exception from economically affluent, higher-caste backgrounds. She also acknowledged that the financial resource and free time required to indulge in dance classes is the preserve of the middle and upper classes only. In this way, she recognised that any discussion of dance as a practice of pleasure, personal politics, or even simple diversion was a discussion already rooted in certain kinds of social privilege. Much of this

[72] Shreosi's emphasis

discussion referred to the figure of the *bhadrolok.* The *bhadrolok* is an important figure in the Bengali cultural imagination, one that has both developed over time and continues to be subject to increasingly diverse interpretations, sometimes simultaneously. The term was initially coined by Bengali writers in the late 18th Century to ridicule the Indian petty officials and clerks working with the colonial state who thereby gained new fortunes and security.[73] At this time the *bhadrolok* were comparable to the 'nouveau riche' of Western society, with all the concomitant associations of vulgarity. However, by the middle of the 19th century and into the first part of the 20th Century this class had become well established and broadly respected by other Bengalis. In this period, *bhadrolok* signified an [English-]educated, financially secure Bengali man (for it was always a man) usually employed in government service, business or some other stable and respected profession (Chatterjee 1993). The *bhadrolok* however remained a figure of ridicule from the perspective of English colonisers, a laughable example of how the Indian 'native' aspired to be like the Englishman but could, according to them, never match the level of his intellect or cultural refinement. On the other hand, the *bhadrolok* of the early 20th Century was, for the most part in the Bengali imagination, a signifier of Indian modernity. This manifested itself also in the bodily comportment of the *bhadrolok*, who is often depicted in paintings, photographs and films to have an erect way of standing, sitting and walking.

The *bhadrolok* was the figure of a man of science and learning, with

[73] The first appearance of the term is in Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyaya's *Kalikata Kamalaya* (1823).

progressive and sometimes radical ideas about politics and perhaps even self rule. As the educated middle-classes began to use their resources, education and influence to increase pressure for independence and self-rule, the *bhadrolok* also became a threatening figure to the English colonial administration, a traitorous upstart, somebody to be watched closely. As we see in Shreosi's discussion of the *bhadrolok*'s gaze, in the present moment however the *bhadrolok* has lost the radical or progressive associations it might have had, and is in certain circles a byword for socially conservative, heteropatriarchal middle-class citizens. The *bhadrolok* now also includes the genteel wives, sisters and mothers, the *bhadromohila* (gentlewomen), whose comportment and social judgements also became central to norms of propriety and 'respectability'. *The bhadrolok* has powers of influence, what might be called in Bourdieusian terms 'cultural capital', but for politically left-leaning, feminist and queer individuals in Bengal there is a deep mistrust of the *bhadrolok*, who it is assumed will exercise this power in order to suppress alternative social discourses and enforce heteropatriarchal values and social norms. Shreosi describes how, with reference to *bhadrolok* society's moral norms, the "classist history" of Indian dance forms shape the aesthetics of contemporary dance practice in India.

> "There's a kind of dual classification where it's separated out that this dance is bad, and this dance is good[74]. Somehow Western social dance

[74] এই নাচটা খারাপ, এই নাচটা ভালো; Ei nachta kharap, ei nachta bhalo.

> practices are done by 'bad girls',[75] and these practices and these notions are somehow upheld. For a long time we also believed these things as we practiced dance, and it's very necessary to question these kinds of thinking. Yes, these class and caste issues arise from how the *bhadrolok* thought about the dances, and this has fed into the history of those dances and how we have come to see them. We have to question that framework. Many people [already] have done; we have to seek out those perspectives."

Shreosi's comments draw attention to the role of class in structuring aesthetic codes, noting the moral value attributed to those cultural forms that are categorised as 'good' within the value structures of the middle classes. In Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the same, he described how the tastes of the middle and upper classes contribute to perpetuating class distinction and the socio-economic dominance of the members of the middle and upper classes. In this case, we see the mechanisms of 'good taste', defined through the cultural dominance of middle class (*bhadroloker)* tastes, working also to shape performances of gender and the comportment of the body. Shreosi's call to question and challenge these norms, as expressed through the relative social value accorded to particular dance styles, can thus be understood as part of her ethical orientation to the intersectional complexities of gender, sexuality, and class. In questioning how certain dance forms come to be socially valorised Shreosi notices how other parts of the body and forms of bodily

[75] খারাপ মেয়েরা ,Kharap meyera

expression are relegated to the background, and in asking these questions she turns towards them, exploring them and bringing them back into view.

Shreosi continued her discussion by considering the affective dimensions of performing in front of an audience as a dancer, which for her stands in contrast to dance in the "everyday" as an elaboration of bodily movement in public space.

> "The main thing about the audience is, imagination is involved. When the audience first see [the performance] the imagination of the audience does work.[76] So, from that angle, I always felt tense about performing on stage since childhood because of anticipation about what will happen. How will the audience take it? A kind of embarrassment[77] arises because so many people have come to see me dance. So it is like you are at the same time imagining yourself as an object to be looked at….in my own childhood I wasn't allowed to go out. If I were to look in the direction of a boy or talk to him then in the same moment someone from my household would have said something to me about it and there would have been a problem. … There was lots of surveillance. I couldn't even look at a film poster because my mum told me that girls who look at film posters become bad, and I believed it at the time so I didn't look. … I believed that there are good and bad girls, but I was always questioning

[76] কাজ করে । kaj kore

[77] লজ্জা।lajja . This could also mean 'shyness', either from stage fright and/or coyness.

how our identity [as good or bad girls] is made. That's also very important because when I dance in front of an audience that is a time when I can imagine myself as a person who is performing too. …

"So from childhood [I experienced] this kind of good/bad conflict in stage performance, and the question of where I do it goes along with the question of who will be the audience. Regarding the audience, it is always as if anyone who does it for *bhadrolok* [audiences], then they're very good, they are educated[78], they understand dance, so they will understand [what I'm doing] before I step out. I really felt that, if I danced anywhere and somebody hollered or cat-called, then basically I really liked those spaces. I could identify that there was a diverse audience, that they were not like the *bhadrolok*, not all of one kind. Maybe they weren't watching the dance with some kind of 'deep philosophical understanding', but that they had come to see me, [because of] the way they were watching. So there was a desire to objectify myself and to fantasise this kind of… impossible liberty on the stage. That is why, or at least I think why, lots of performers feel very connected [when they perform onstage]. It's very much a space[79] for the expression of sexuality. Since it's a body interaction, a place for the expression of sexuality, according to me the audience reaction is very important in that way."

[78] শিক্ষিত। Shikkhito

[79] জায়গা। jayga

This reflection of the performer's awareness of, and desire for, the audience's interaction illustrates the engagement described in Rasa Theory. Unlike the unmarried young women amongst Cowan's (1990) dancers in a Greek township, Shreosi does not fear the audience's sexualisation of her moving body as a 'risk', but rather solicits and encourages it, experiencing it as a kind of liberty. Her description of perceiving herself as an object for others, that is a sexual object, is out of line with the ways in which she has been disciplined in the use of her body by her mother and in public space. This queerness is experienced, we see, as enjoyable, freeing, and exciting.

I also asked Shreosi what kinds of feelings she experiences when she dances.

> "When I'm in different moods, different kinds of dance happens. When you feel free many things can happen, and everyone can relate to that I guess. Sometimes it doesn't come to you and you have a block. These are the things that all people go through when practising any art form, I guess. Beyond this, now that I'm learning and doing dance, I feel a sense of incompleteness. I have this feeling that I am always lacking, because there's a gap between learning and practising dance. When I freestyle, or when I am learning, there's a grammar there, and if you know more and practise it your own freestyle will get better and your dance language will also increase. So there's always a sense and a feeling that I am not doing anything complete. Whenever I am doing it, maybe there are many things that I'm leaving out or couldn't do very well, so there's a sense of

guilt that works within the entire performance, and it also functions in the entire[ty] of the everyday.

"If I talk about other feelings along with that, then obviously sometimes a feeling of euphoria, sometimes a feeling of anger. Any maybe in the language of dance, anger, happiness, it depends, it can vary from form to form. When I see certain forms I think, 'wow, they expressed anger so beautifully; it can't be expressed so well in another [dance] form'. When someone dances Kuchipudi, they give such facial expressions and such beautiful facial muscle movement that I think that if somebody has to express anger, then they *must* express it like this. … so after that if I see anger in Kathak, how far can I see that going? How much does my form allow me to express anger, that which I actually feel? An intense sense of anger, which in Kathak will become very diluted. But maybe I can't do Kuchipudi. I can't do those muscle movements. So there's this constant sense of incompleteness, and in Belly Dance there isn't that much facial expression.

"In fact, Belly Dancing, … the way it shows the body as an exhibition, the body's movement - for example slipping the hip, and if you do that then obviously everybody will look at the hip - with that isolation comes some kind of expression, and there's nothing [else] that will help you express those things. So if I look at the expressionist space in Belly Dance, or if you call it Tribal Fusion, it is a very free-going movement. In Egyptian

classical there is a very sharp movement where isolation is so beautifully maintained. If you see, it's very gooey and fluid. The hip is moving in one direction and then going in another, like that, so I think that in that form how expressive can I be? As a result, from the beginning I have been using hand movements to show, for example, my sense of longing, my love, my lover[80]. That longing I will express only with my hand and arm movements. As a result, it's very appealing to me that you won't find those expressions through facial muscles in belly dancing. So you have to choose…

"These practises are very beautiful. My teacher also practices it like this. But lots of people have also asked why she dances like this. In her dance school, practice always prioritises body movements rather than facial movements … to express. You have to see this in a different sense, because in the Indian context we always have so many folklorish stories. We need stories, and we also see those stories in Kathak. Any kind of dance [in the Indian context] doesn't happen without the stories. So for those stories we need expression, everything is expressed with the hand movements… but if you think about belly dancers they were originally travelling dancers. Like how in Rajasthan they used to travel and dance. Mostly they were gypsies, coming from here and going to there, celebrating a mela in the next place, and so they showed glamour in their dancing… but this history has not been documented very clearly; it was

[80] প্রেমিক বা প্রেমিকা। Premik ba premika

mostly transmitted orally. You won't find a book about it. Still today I haven't found any research into it… anyway, I've gone on quite a tangent. What I was saying is that, the language that we are looking at as an Indian audience, the *bhadroloker* audience, they always valorise facial expression, that yes, this is a very good quality of you, but they never look at other different bodily movements that can even more express different feelings. So this is something that I also practice in myself. I think that this can be everyday practice, where you can also try to - it's not only that it's becoming a muscle memory, but the muscle memory is also linked with the context you are living in. So for us, the *bhadrolok*'s critique doesn't serve us.[81] What did we get from knowing about the history of the *bhadrolok*'s dance [forms] for so long? So those ways of seeing dance, their 'how beautiful', 'you did this', 'this looks just like *robindronriyto*[82]', in all those things that they say, no new critique has been raised and nobody is questioning this. Nobody is questioning the dancers from the point of view of their lives and experiences, nobody is questioning the context of the dancer or about their perspective, they're just discussing dance from a formal angle, so it very much deals with the political context.

"… Since all the renowned dancers are upper class and upper caste…

[81] কোনো কাজে লাগেনি। Kono kaje lage ni
[82] Rabindranath Tagore wrote several plays that were intended as dance dramas (নৃত্য নাট্য / *nritya natya*), performed either directly through dance forms or a combination of theatrical acting and dance. Tagore was particularly influenced by Manipuri Dancing, a gentle, soft and explicitly spiritual ancient dance style from the far north-east of India, and the style '*Robindronityo*' is therefore similarly neat and gentle, involving soft body postures, dainty footwork and graceful মুদ্রা /*mudras* (hand gestures).

> there are very few who came from this ground [level], so maybe this should also be questioned and we might see that coming through in dance too. I mean, in all the *bhadrolok* spaces such a revival is happening [of Indian Classical dance forms], and they make a big deal out of the thing,[83] and have given so much importance to the history of our dance. If anyone wants to question those things they also have to question the language of dance and ways of seeing. Ways of seeing dance must also be questioned, and if anybody could express [those things] through body movement, then why not? Why should that not also be the case?"

Shreosi offers a thorough analysis of the aesthetics of Indian Classical Dance forms, grounded in her bodily experience of learning Kathak as a child in Murshidabad and Belly Dance as an adult in the urban centre of Kolkata. Within her discussion she claims that the prevalence of facial expressions and hand gestures ( মুদ্রা/*mudras*[84]) is in fact a function of the deeply heterosexist morals of the Indian middle classes, epitomised by the figure of the *bhadrolok*. She critiques the valorisation of these forms above others, even as she herself admires exceptional examples, such as the possibilities for expressing anger in Kuchipudi. In Belly Dance then, part of Shreosi's enjoyment comes from the fact that this form does not depend upon facial movements and *mudras*, but requires the use of various parts of the body including the arms, chest and hips, which are not normally drawn attention to in the canonised Indian

[83] সাজিয়ে। Sajiye

[84] These traditional hand gestures used in Indian classical performing arts are associated with specific figures, meanings and affects in relation to Hindu and other regional mythologies.

Classical dance forms. Thus Belly Dance is for her also a "political practice", one through which she learns to use her body in ways that have been suppressed over the course of her life in various ways by *bhadrolok* moral norms.

Shreosi's comment that certain forms of dance afford certain forms of expression is also instructive. She also seems to suggest that the restrictions imposed on bodily movement in dance by *bhadrolok* morality limits the expression of certain extreme and intense emotions in the dance form such as anger, or sexual desire. Diluting these to make these more socially acceptable is not only understood by Shreosi on a limitation or lack within the form of dance itself, but also by extension as a restriction upon the affective experience of the dancer or audience member. This aesthetic limitation within Indian Classical dance could also be understood as a disciplinary tactic for the regulation of Indian female bodies and dispositions.

It is striking to recall that the Indian Classical dance revival emerges historically in tandem with the turn to discourses of modernity in Indian politics, around the turn of the 20th Century (Sarkar-Munshi 2010, Kothari 2011). In his modelling of the relations between power, knowledge and self in modernity, Foucault claims that the body becomes a site of force through which power works to create people as certain kinds of subject (1972, 1991). Whilst Foucault's work is focused on studies of Western Europe, if we take at face value Chakrabarty's (2002) assertion that the discourses of modernity in

India should be understood as particular kinds of domestic discourse rather than simply colonial hangovers, we can consider how Foucault's notions of discipline and the docile body within political discourses of modernity might relate to Shreosi's critique of Indian Classical dance. In this light, the valorisation of facial expressions and মুদ্রা/*mudra*s above other bodily movements can be understood as a means of producing docile bodies in the population of middle class womenfolk at whom the reformed Indian Classical music movement was aimed. These docile bodies thus learn to aesthetically comport themselves in ways that align with the moral standards of *bhadrolok* society. This highlights once again the interconnectedness of the movement and position of the body in space with ethical and moral concerns.

I also suggest that the tendency to structure dance choreography around story-telling, rather than expressions of intense personal emotions, can also be understood as a kind of disciplining of the affects of dancing bodies. Limitations within the repertoire for expressing strong emotions in female dance styles (লাস্য , *lasya*) within Indian Classical forms may also be indicative of an attempt to develop positive attitudes towards emotional restraint in women. By contrast, the masculine styles of performance within Indian Classical dance (তাণ্ডব *tandav*) are in general more energetic, robust and warrior-like, allowing for striking displays of bodily and emotional force. Shreosi is very clear about the various ways that these standards are enforced, more often than not, through surveillance and the *bhadrolok*'s gaze.

Shreosi's anecdotes also illustrate in various ways how the bodies of girls are regulated and controlled through narratives of 'good' and 'bad' girls, defined by the social perception of their actions above all else. The classification of girls as 'good' or 'bad' according to how they are seen to behave and comport themselves is far from an innocuous judgement. Indeed, in the Bengali language, young girls are often described by families as a লক্ষী (*lokkhi*) or লক্ষীছাড়া মেয়ে[রা] (*lokkhichhara meye[ra]*), with the former denoting a girl who brings good fortune and honour to her family and the latter who brings disgrace to herself and her kin. Despite the social value attached to the *bhadrolok*'s praise of skilfully executed Indian dance performances, Shreosi is personally more concerned with the gaze of the anonymous cat-calling boy, and the heterogeneous audience who watch without the pretence of a 'deep philosophical understanding'. She considers that such an audience, in coming to see her dance, does not sanitise or obscure the sexuality of her dancing body in the same way as the gaze that is interested in the dance in the abstract, elevating the appreciation of the artistic form above that of the body performing it. She takes pleasure in experiencing her body as a sexual object, and feels herself performing to these diverse characters, interacting with them through her body. In this way she questions how the identification of the good and the bad girl is made by publicly transgressing the demarcating lines set down between dance forms, ways of moving the body, audience types, and the isolation of body parts. Thus, Shreosi tells us, her dance is a "visual

politics", and "political practice" grounded in the dancing body.

## Dance as Ethical Work

Shreosi several times refers to 'everyday dancing' and 'dancing in the day-to-day', and how this is more important for her even than performing on a stage. What would it mean to imagine dance in everyday practices? Spending time around Shreosi sometimes gave a clue. Moving around the office, she would often shimmy or add flourishes to everyday tasks with her hands. More than once I saw her cross the room to the photocopier slowly, planting her feet flat on the hard floor, arms outstretched, dancing for herself. It was then not so surprising to me when, during our discussion she said,

> "If I talk about the place of dancing in the everyday[85], every day we go along doing things in a measured, planned way, so maybe we don't do certain kinds of movement, such as movements that require me to wiggle my hips; … in our everyday lives there is a grammar of movement that at *this* time, you will do this, because body regulation is so intense. … So I think that we should push in this place. We see that men, standing outside, showing their penises, urinate. So that is not being questioned, … – whereas if I go outside, [or] if anyone [female] should do some

[85] রোজকার নাচের জায়গা , *rojkar nacher jayga*

> action that is out of their way, … it is [called a] needless or an excess activity. They have put themselves in the gaze of an audience. That is always taken as …that girl has invited it [attention]. … Here a meaning is made, and those meanings, that come from a normative understanding. So when a man is standing urinating in the street as if by right,[86] why is it not questioned that this is something that is excess? Rather, someone [female] who is minding their own business and went walking outside the house in shorts, that becomes illegible or unnecessary, and something which is not … not sane."

For Shreosi, 'everyday dancing' thus is a literal challenge to the restrictions she sees feminine bodies being subjected to in everyday life. She considers the injunction to move in a measured way, without 'excess' exposure of the moving body in view of others in contrast to the public displays of the male body, which show no regard for who might be looking at them. Her pleasure in kinesis, the stylised movement of her body and the attention she lavishes on it in the course of the everyday are for Shreosi a "political practice" of resistance, an embodied expression of her ethical orientation within the world. She continued,

> "Perhaps I'm saying this from a very philosophical angle, … [but] it is also kind of a therapy, it becomes a therapy for me… I couldn't express these things so well in language, but yes, everyday dancing and

[86] দিব্যি করে , *dibyi kore*

everyday doing something excess without harming anyone is, if you like that then do it, that will also challenge this regulation and control on body, the way that visually it is imposed, you know like on the way you sit, … so I think it is a very interesting pull maybe not to be revolting against anything but still there is a spark of some language through which we can change it. Maybe through these diverse practices."

It may even be possible to consider Shreosi's 'everyday dancing' as a kind of *askesis* in the Foucauldian sense: a technique of the self that constitutes a 'Practice of Freedom'. In a thought process very similar to that of Foucault himself, Shreosi identifies the workings of power to discipline her body, and consciously critiques these. It is this that leads to her daring to learn a new, sensual dance form in adulthood, and to bring dance practise into her 'every day' as she moves about her home or workplace. Shreosi engages in a process of self-transformation, rejecting the normative mode of middle class female Indian personhood into which she was socialised and wherein the body is constrained to minimal movement and display in public. Shreosi favours instead an aspiration to excess that chimes with a dandyish aesthetic, making herself a work of art. For Shreosi, as for Foucault, this aesthetic of existence, here dancing in the everyday, is an expression of ethics that challenges societal discourses about the female body in space.

Shreosi's perspective reminds me of the critique of embodied feminine dispositions that Wade (2011) claims is inherent in performing Lindy-Hop in

the US. Wade uses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* to understand how individuals in society come to develop a more-or-less unconscious, habitual body language that is gendered and enacts masculinity or femininity that is determining, even if it is not deterministic. She describes the Lindy-Hop classes and community as "feminist-friendly", because the form of the dance and the way it is taught discourage uses of the body that conform to binary gender roles through language (lead and follow, rather than 'male' and 'female' dance roles), education both into roles and the individual use of the body in terms of stance, weight and athleticism. Wade claims that women and men dancing Lindy-Hop are both trained to break gendered rules of the body. For example, both partners must learn to perform intricate footwork and shimmies that challenge established masculine body movements, along with angular body movements, flexed feet and wearing flat shoes, all of which eschew social norms of femininity.

Following Brownell (1995), I am suspicious of the term *habitus*, agreeing with her that it has become essentially a jargon word that unnecessarily distances bodily dispositions from the concept of culture in which they play out. However, Wade here uses the concept of *habitus* to critique both the notion that body cultures are permanent and unchanging, but also to challenge the idea that resistance must be intellectual first and bodily second. She claims that Lindy-Hop audiences see, and "dancers feel, a bodily breaking of the gender binary" (2011:243) that embodies a model of "gender equality [that] was so much more developed than its [verbal] articulation [which] suggests

that consciousness raising at the level of cognition may not necessarily aways be 'ahead' of changes in the bodily collective… it may be possible for the modes of liberation to alternate or, even, *to target the body first and let the mind follow*."[87] (244) This directly contradicts Foucault's formulation of the Practice of Freedom, in which he argues that a practice of freedom can only be considered as such if the techniques applied to the body follow or accompany an intellectual critique of the dominant modes of subjectification (Markula-Denison and Pringle 2007). That Foucault, whose work consistently critiques the very same as practices of oppressive power in society, should require an *a priori* rationalist intellectual procedure in order to validate bodily acts of resistance, is somewhat ironic. Whilst intellectual critique may be a tool in resisting the discipline of the body both Wade's Lindy-Hoppers, and Shreosi through everyday Belly Dance, suggest that the practice of the body itself may constitute a practice of freedom that is itself ethical, the intellect following behind.

## Resisting Dance?

The relationship between dance, body culture and practises of freedom however is not experienced in the same way for all people. Sayak was adamant that dancing doesn't change a person's characteristics; for example,

[87] My emphasis

it cannot alter a person's sexual preferences. Coming from a male (though not masculine) person, this assertion expresses resistance in particular to ideas that dancing is a *feminine* activity, and that boys who dance - especially certain styles, such as modern or Belly Dance - will become effeminate or even homosexual if they were not previously. Sayak suggested that if young men want to dance without calling their masculinity into question, most will choose a more masculine style such as B-boying or salsa, because the stylised movements of those forms reinforce socially acceptable bodily performances of masculinity in the Indian context. Thus, despite Sayak and Shreosi's experiences with Belly Dance, dance practice need not always be experienced as inherently liberating.

Raja is a Bharatnatyam style dancer from Kolkata, currently living in Berlin. I describe his dance as 'Bharatnatyam style' to reflect his explanation that, whilst having received some training in Bharatnatyam, much of his development as a dancer has been self-directed and has unfolded within modern or fusion-dance settings. Raja explained to me that he began dancing as a child principally because he knew that he was attracted to men and therefore thought, not knowing about homosexuality, that he must be a girl. He started learning dance by watching the young girls of his *para* at their weekend classes, because he had taken on the social maxim that the ability to dance is a good virtue for a girl. When he became older he learned about homosexuality and realised he was not a 'girl' but gay. Nonetheless because he loved dance he continued to practice and perform, but mostly after leaving

India for the UK and later Germany. After completing his school and bachelors education in Kolkata, Raja studied in England for several years. We would later realise that our paths crossed at this time when he came to dance for our community's celebration of Diwali in 2009, when I was sixteen years old. Not knowing his name, I nonetheless remembered his performance from amongst many, the distinctive way he held his tall body and his languorous hand movements that seemed almost scandalous to me for reasons I couldn't then articulate. Nine more years passed until we connected in 2018 through Facebook after beginning a conversation in the comments on a mutual friend's post. By this time, Raja was pursuing doctoral research in Germany. In the November of that year we met through another mutual friend and colleague over tea and phuckha[88] at a *Haldiram's* in central Kolkata at the start of my long fieldwork period. We quickly adopted one another as queer family.[89] It was inconceivable to me that I should write about dance without talking to Raja, and we had a long phone conversation about the subject.

In contrast to Sayak's claim that dance does not change the body and its personhood, Bharatnatyam dancer Raja told me that dance "fixes" the way you use your body. Coming from an Indian Classical perspective, where the form is valorised in line with Nationalist discourses, his complaint was rather with the gendered constraints by which male dancers are expected to perform

[88] Perhaps Kolkata's most iconic street food. Crispy miniature puris, filled with spiced potato and served with tamarind water. Almost always given one by one at a temporary roadside stall. Similar to, but emphatically different from, pani puris and golgappas.

[89] I shall elaborate more on queer family relationships later, but for now suffice to say that our sense of shared Bengali community from the UK provided a ready background of common 'chosen family', an emotional bond that was soon cemented by a queered *Bhai Phota* (siblings' blessing) ritual that I discuss in Chapter 5

*Tandav*, in a 'masculine' style, whilst female dancers are expected to perform in a *Lasya* or 'feminine' style. Thus, the gender of the dancer, the history and context of the dance form, and contemporary discourses about gender and sexuality all influence negotiations of embodied personhood when considering the potential of dance to constitute an ethical practice. Raja explained to me that he was very uncomfortable dancing both *Tandav* and *Lasya* in the stylistic forms that they currently take. Whilst he mused that *Tandav* does not fit with his personality, he expressed exasperation about the '*nyakami*'[90] of women who dance Indian Classical in the melodramatically languorous movements of *Lasya*.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| বড্ড বেশি ন্যাকামি করে... আমার ন্যাকামিটা আমার; আমি যেটা করছি, সেটা অন্য রকমের ন্যাকামি | "Boddo beshi nyakami kore… amar nyakami ta amar; ami jeta korchi, seta onyo rokom nyakami" | "I can't deal with their prissiness. My prissiness is a different kind of camp!" |

Raja expresses disdain for the ways that female dancers simper while performing *lasya*, using the infamously untranslatable Bengali disposition of

[90] ন্যাকামি/nyakami, which is the act of 'doing' ন্যাকা/nyaka, refers to a particular culturally aesthetic performance that is notoriously challenging to translate. ন্যাকামি/nyakami is a behavioural performance of fussiness, prissiness, campness, pathos, helplessness, affectedness, or some combination of the above. It can be performed by people of any gender but is associated predominantly with femininity, and is often deployed comedically or with irony to lighten a social situation. ন্যাকামি can also be serious, particularly within acting or abhinaya, or for example when girls are flirting with prospective partners.

ন্যাকামি / 'nyakami' to describe both the fussy, frilliness of normative hyper femininity and the sass of his flirtatious, melodramatic, queer persona.

Since the social discourses around male and female dancing bodies are different, it is perhaps unsurprising that male and female bodied dancers feel differently about the relationship between their dance practice and the experience of their gendered body in motion. Sayak and Raja, in their own ways, both resist the idea that dance somehow makes a person more feminine than they already are. However, both acknowledge that for men with a tendency towards more 'feminine' gender expressions in their bodily comportment and manner of dress (or trans women who may be exploring the possibility of coming out), certain forms of dance can offer an opportunity to experiment with the feminisation of the body in a culturally accepted form. Raja goes further still. At the same time as he holds at bay the idea that dance affects one's desires and preferences, he also claims that dance "fixes" the body. I interpret this notion of 'fixing' to describe a structuring effect of dance practice on the dispositions, comportment and style of the dancer's bodily movements in life as in performance. Whilst Raja distances himself from both *Tandav* and *Lasya*, the two distinctive modes of stylistic movement in Indian Classical Dance forms, he does so alongside a critique of the imposition of a gendered binary of movement upon bodies assigned male and female in society.

" If you notice, those who do dance, those who learn dance from an early

age, watch it and you will notice that those men - I can't talk on behalf of women - men today who learned from childhood, we are very much less masculine[91] [in their performance than they are]. And we are those who couldn't learn in that way. We are too মেয়েলি (*meyeli*). The word 'মেয়েলি' (*meyeli*) , I'm taking it as an attitude, those who are feminine, … not nature, attitude, I'm talking about the outside [presentation]. If you have any friends who have learned dance, apart from me or Sayak, they are not like us, they learn from a very masculine angle,[92] because those who have taught them to dance, they are have had a greater fit with *tandava*. When someone teaches dance, no man could ever teach me *lasya* well. They would say, 'you're a man, what is there that's so good in *lasya?'*, and people told me to learn *tandav* - how many people have told me, 'you should show this in a *tandav* style'![93] I feel uncomfortable.[94] Notice, when I performed Shiva in Manchester I was extremely uncomfortable.[95]"

Raja illustrates this discomfort with reference to a performance in Greater Manchester that he had choreographed and taken the lead role in. This performance was given in a school hall with a formal stage alongside dancers

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[91] তারা বড় কম মেয়েলি , আর যারা আমরা সেইভাবে শিখতে পারিনি। আমরা বেশি মেয়েলি।
tara boro kom meyeli, aar jara amra seibhabe sikhte parini. Amra beshi meyeli.
Meyeli feminine, lit. Girlish,

[92] Masculine জায়গা থেকে
*Masculine jayga theke*
Lit. From a masculine place

[93] তুমি তাণ্ডবভাবে দেখাও / tumi *tandava* bhabe dekhao
Literally, show it in a *tandava* style/masculine way.

[94] আমার অসুজ্জ লেগেছে / amar oshojjo legeche
Lit. I feel awkward

[95] অসুস্থি /Oshusthi
lit. Unwell, ill at ease

from the local South Asian Community. It was in the style of a নৃত্য-নাট্য /*nrityonato* (dance drama), depicting the various incarnations of Shiva's consort Parvati represented by different female dancers. Raja danced the role of Shiva throughout.

> "I have an intrinsic discomfort [about dancing *tandava*]. Regarding Shiva, you can say that [he] is an extreme symbol of masculinity. I can't really properly identify with this area ever… To [represent] the ultimate masculine [figure], to be 100% masculine, I had to go through a huge mental struggle[96]. There are others who won't be uncomfortable however. They will perhaps not be able to act, but where [*tandava*] dance figures are needed, they would do it 100 times better than me. Because they have learned it, so they are programmed. I am not. My dance is very much built on that which I like. Since I've very much approached it that way, I didn't even want to do it like they do… I don't want to become seen as a dancer in that kind of binary."

Raja's explanation seems to suggest that certain movements and dispositions may resonate and connect with the existing bodily practices of some people better than others, and thus come more 'naturally' or intuitively to certain dancers. In other words, certain dancers may find it less work to align with stylistic and aesthetic codes, whilst for others, bringing oneself into line with the aesthetic codes of established dance styles may be uncomfortable or even

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[96] জ্যোতিষ্ঠ মানুষিক struggle করতে হলো / jyotistho manashik struggle korte holo

impossible. I reflected in my chat with Raja that that acting a role or character often comes more naturally if one has some personal or emotional experience that resonates with the thing being acted out. Raja agreed, but pushed this further still.

> "Certainly this plays a role, but people appreciated what I did. Is it really that acting is something fake? I tried to pretend to be a very manly type of bloke[97]. And… I can claim that I did this professionally. That is to say, I believe in doing things properly in my <u>professional</u> area. But, if we talk about what was going on inside me[98], how can I do a dance like this? But you can't always <u>compare</u> these things [to] yourself. If someone said to me 'dance Durga' I would say "oh gosh no! I absolutely will not do that either!" I can't <u>identify</u> or match myself up to Durga. I will do it my way, that which I am.[99]

Sayak and Raja illustrate a number of contradictions in their experience and perceptions of how dancing relates to the embodiment of gendered movements and dispositions. On the one hand, Sayak begins by insisting that participating in a particular dance form cannot alter a person's gendered identification or sexual preferences. This firm statement may be understood as rhetorically significant in a context where men, and particularly young men,

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97 খুব পুরুষ type -এর একজন লোক কে আমি নকল করা চেষ্টা করেছি /khub purush-type er ekjon lok ke ami nokol kora chesta korechi

98 বির্থর থেকে যদি একটু বলি / bithor theke Jodi ektu boli

99 আমি করবো আমার মত সেটা আমি হবো সেটা /Ami korbo amar moto, seta ami hobo, seta

are discouraged from engaging in activities that are perceived to be 'feminine'. Sayak continues by suggesting that certain forms of dance might reinforce or reaffirm gender identifications, according to the gendered cultural norms of the given context.[100] On the other hand, Raja argues that dance *does* in fact structure the use of the body, especially with reference to gendered bodily movement. Indeed, throughout Raja's discussion of dance a contradiction emerges between the current gendered identifications and bodily hexis of the dancer, and the structuring, aesthetic forms of the dance form itself. In the case of Bharatnatyam, a dance form with defined and distinct gender binary ingrained into the very grammar of movement, it is clear how the culturally gendered nature of this form can be constraining rather than liberating, even when engaged with as an intellectual exercise. Raja's challenge, as to whether acting can ever entirely be 'fake', addresses a further contradiction between performance conceived of as something that entails a kind of pretence, and performance as something that is phenomenologically always *real* in the sense that the performer experiences it in order to bring it into being. In other words, if performing *Tandava* entails a simulation of hyper-masculinity by producing the effects and aesthetics of hyper-masculinity in the moving body, Raja finds it intensely uncomfortable to simulate this aesthetically because in some way this performance produces for him the *experience* of that masculinity as if real (see Baudrillard 1981). Alternatively, he finds it

[100] It is interesting to note that Sayak gives salsa predominance as a 'masculine' style of dance. In the English context, salsa can be seen as a 'feminine' dance form because of the cultural categorisation of fluid hip movements and extraverted expressions with the face and hands as feminine. On the other hand, in the Indian context, Hispanic and Latine culture is associated with hyper-masculinity through associations with sports (particularly football, in the Bengals) and because of the visual and structural role of the male dance partner as 'leading' the following (usually female) partner.

completely unthinkable that he could even attempt to simulate or emulate Maa Durga, because he cannot 'identify' himself with her at all. Taking Raja's comments into account, we might then surmise that despite (or perhaps because of) the potential effectiveness of dance in reshaping the body that moves, there is a limit to a dancer's ability to simulate affects or aesthetic codes beyond their lived experience and sense of self.

Raja and Sayak's testimonies, as same-sex desiring men whose gendered presentations do not conform to the standard requirements of contemporary North Indian masculinity, show points of both convergence and divergence with the testimonies of both cis and trans gendered female-identifying dancers. On the one hand, all dancers I spoke to acknowledge various ways in which dance can be used as a means of disciplining the body, especially where the aesthetic form of that dance resonates with and reinforces existing cultural gendered norms of embodiment and comportment. On the other hand, all the dancers also demonstrate various ways in which dance can offer an opportunity for experimentation with the use of the body, including in ways that challenge and disregard normative expectations of the gendered body. However Raja's misgivings about dancing the roles of Shiva and Durga, due to their status as archetypes of masculinity and femininity in the Bengals, also highlights the limits of engaging with certain aesthetic codes within dance forms. When Raja expresses discomfort in dancing the role of Shiva in the throes of a dance of destruction (*Tandav*), and also disdain for the hyper-femininity of certain female dancers, how do we understand this discomfort

and disgust? That too, when it is experienced in relation to an art form that Raja loves, values, and considers to be an intrinsic part of his lifestyle and personal expression?

# Conclusion

All of the dance practitioners with whom I spoke discussed their relationship to dance in terms that can be more or less explicitly framed as *ethical*. Where the aesthetics and embodied dispositions of dance reinforce gendered performances or relations between gendered bodies that conflict with the dancer's sense of self - or, with the self they are seeking to cultivate - there can be a kind of performative *failure*. This is both a *failure* of the dancer to fully inhabit the form, and a failure of the dance form to transmit the culturally normative bodily hexis; that is, a failure to discipline the unruly non-conforming body. I suggest that within this 'failure', which moreover may even be intentional on the dancer's part, is a great deal of potential. Potential arises in the 'failed' replication of normatively gendered performance to effect a shift in the possibilities of what a particular gendered mode of embodiment might become. In this way, the 'failure' of the dancer to align themselves with form, and the failure of the form to bring the dancer into line, may be considered to cause a shift in the reach of that line. Indeed, such a shifting may even render the normative expression of the form more visible by this act of displacement, of dis-alignment and a push away from the usual aesthetic standard into the margins. Drawing on the store of cultural knowledge available to them, dancers may rhetorically challenge the aesthetics of the form and the gendered expressions and relations it seeks to restructure, by choosing to perform in a manner that is perceptibly 'out of line'.

In other conditions, it may be the very act of aligning a visibly queer body with a particular set of gendered bodily movements that challenges the norms of gendered expression and gendered social relations. When a queer body aligns itself with a normatively gendered grammar of movement, as Taniya and Hrithika have done, the relation of the physical and aesthetic movements to the socio-historical formations of gendered identity and gendered relations is rhetorically shifted. When dancers use the gendered structures of a dance form to discipline or train their body, either into or out of particular aesthetic dispositions and modes of comportment, they submit to a process of restructuring and extend their desire through the physicality of their moving bodies. When people who have been socially dispossessed and cast as 'illegible' within the normative cultural order excel in an art form that is culturally prized, they re-inscribe themselves within the social narrative; they refuse the state of social abjection by performing their value in the terms of the cultural order. In all of these diverse cases, dancers submit themselves to the transformative potential of aesthetic and phenomenal forms through bodily practices. At the same time, the dancers I speak of here conceive of themselves as agents in this process of transformation. Perhaps they are even effecting a transformation upon the structuring forces of the cultural mechanism with which they engage.

In this sense, like Cowan, I suggest that dance is a risky activity because it opens up the possibility of transformation of the gendered, moving body. This transformation is located at the interaction of mind, body, history, social

context, and social discourses about gender and sexuality. When framing dance as risky, Cowan focuses on the potential risk to the individual, whose actions may be in her terms 'misunderstood' by spectators. However, I consider that dance may be a risky activity not only because of the potential of transformation to the dancer, but also the power of dance as a cultural institution over certain bodies, and the risk to the social order that may be effected if the structuring potential of dance is itself shifted or lands out of line. This understanding of risk that I propose concerns how participation in structuring cultural forms, such as dance practices, may also re/structure those structuring forces. This would suggest a dialectic process of revision in sociological theories of structure and agency whereby agency is not only structured by structuring structures (as suggested by Bourdieu 1990). Rather those structuring structures, such as the dance practices and aesthetic codes I have referred to, may be restructured agentically by agents who refuse to be brought perfectly into line. Indeed, engaging with the very forms that might otherwise constrain them, creative aesthetic practices of freedom may reshape both the bodies that move within space and the spaces that bodies move through. In the next chapter, I follow queer bodies back into the realm of the everyday. I and draw together the theoretical claims about self-other and spatial relations from Chapters 1 and 2 to understand how cultural rhetoric is put to work in day-to-day life.

## 2.IV Interval: A Peer Review

This interlude presents a departure from the times and spaces of 'doing fieldwork' to acknowledge the complex responses that some of the material I have presented in this chapter elicited from queer friends and colleagues in India. This process of exchange, which came some time before the thesis was fully formed, substantially shaped my attitude towards the content of my writing and the mode in which I presented my ideas. Material from this chapter was the first part of my thesis that I shared with friends from the queer community in Kolkata. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I became a member of an online queer writing group based out of Amra Odbhuth, a queer café in Kolkata (for further discussion see Chapter 4.III). The writing group as a queer space does not appear in these pages because I choose not to include it in my research, keeping it rather as an area of life where I can enter and participate as a queer woman, leaving aside as far as possible the trappings of being 'a researcher'. However, since the feedback I received on this occasion substantially changed the way I viewed what I had written and shaped my later writing, I include that small part of it here. If I hold back from the usual detailed furnishing of context it is to limit the intrusion of my life as a researcher into certain treasured corners of my personal life.

I read excerpts of this text to my friends in the writing group in the second week of our meeting. I particularly solicited feedback around whether the text

was enjoyable, accessible, resonated or jarred with the readers, and what else they would like to read on the topic. About half of the group responded to the text with excitement, contrasting the rich, story-like narrative of ethnography to drier styles of academic writing they have been familiar with. The whole group expressed gladness that movement was being explored through the text. My friend Asad said that some of the themes resonated with their own experiences of practising yoga, which they had hitherto struggled to speak of in queer contexts because of the ways in which the masculine, Brahmanical origins of the practice jarred with their own philosophies and values as a queer, non-binary Muslim.

Beyond the positive feedback, I encouraged the group several times to feel free to share constructive or critical feedback with me. A recent dispute between a diasporic academic and a Kolkata-based collective had heightened my sensitivity to the ambivalent or unsatisfactory experiences many members of queer Indian communities have had with academics and academia. After some time one of the members of the group spoke up to say that, whilst she was in general quite 'suspicious' of academic writing, that the text I had shared with the group had made her feel quite 'uncomfortable'. Two other colleagues then spoke up in agreement. Those who had said that they enjoyed the writing seemed surprised, and asked the original speaker, Sandi, for clarification. Sandi said that she didn't like the idea of someone doing research about her, because it made her feel like an object, that she was weird, something to be studied. Another friend, Mihir, again spoke up here, saying

that in particular the tone of the language in which the stories had been told was uncomfortable for them. Although Mihir later contacted me to assure me that they knew my relationship with the community meant that I was deeply engaged with the people I wrote about, in places they said that the style and register felt to them “like writing about, rather than writing with.” To mitigate this, Sandi said that she wanted to know more about my relationships to the people I had named in the excerpt I read out. Mihir surprised me by saying “I wanted to know more about your own dance practice and how you relate to this issue of movement and the body.” Mihir later wrote to me that they felt academic language sometimes made it impossible to truly write with people, despite one's best intentions. This reflection resonates with criticisms from the writing culture movement (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and Warner’s (1999) observations about the entanglements between linguistic tone and the context in which a conversation is had. Three things capture my attention here: the objectification of the informant to make them a research ‘subject’; the writer’s relationship to those who appear in their text; and the author’s personal experience of that about which they write.

As anthropologists we concern ourselves with ‘reflexivity’, critically considering our positionality in the field, our relationships with our informants, and how our lived experiences shape these. I consider that the motivations for doing this are generally for the purposes of improving the academic research, fleshing out the context in which it is undertaken, exposing any biases it may be subject to before reviewers do, and to offer

insights and discussion of the work's limitations. However in the writing group, my friends and peers requested this information to furnish them with trust in me as an author, and as evidence that the research conducted and presented had been undertaken with good motivations and sincere intentions. In subsequent revisions of the work, it has repeatedly emerged that the queer friends and peers have desired and requested a greater amount of first-person, reflexive and self-oriented material than academic colleagues have thought appropriate. This further raises the stakes when seeking to answer the questions: for whom am I writing, and for what purpose?

I return often also to Sandi's comment that the idea of being 'studied' made her feel like a weird thing or an object. In various disciplines researchers have noted that one of the ways in which participants may experience harm is by having attention drawn to aspects of themselves that might be of interest to researchers, leading them to feel self-conscious or generally uncomfortable (Hudson and Brookman 2004, Stewart 2018). Indeed, Sandi is not wrong that studying people depends upon a process in which the researcher constitutes the participant as a particular kind of subject, or even an object, that is other from themselves. Therefore from this perspective, reflexivity may not bring the researcher closer to their informants or 'humanise' either one of them. Instead, it may be one of the tricks by which the researcher turns themselves into an alienable subject and the participant into a knowable object. In the moments where my authorial voice was most separate from those about whom I wrote, my queer peers consistently called me back and rejected the

distanciation of my self from amongst them. Where it appeared that I had sought to diminish my presence and make myself less visible they criticised me, and insisted that I reinstate my visibility in order to offer something that they felt was more trustworthy. The abjection of self, the pretence of externality or of distance at any level, was repeatedly undone by their refusal. They required an insertion of my experiences, feelings and emotional orientations towards others in the text in order to feel safe, to feel stood with, and not 'stared at'.

In his discussions of power, Foucault describes how making knowledge about humans is a means of constituting them as human subjects, of 'subjectivating' them (1977, 1998). Academics frequently rely upon Foucault's insights to explain the processes by which various governmental apparatuses exercise power in society. Yet, since academics are themselves in the business of making knowledge about humans, does it not follow that academics (including anthropologists) also exercise power when they constitute those they observe as research subjects? In addition to the well acknowledged power relations that are entailed by the anthropologist's presence, or in response to the prestige of their academic credentials and affiliations, power is also exercised when people are spoken or written about as knowable subjects, as objects about which something can be understood. The subjectivation of our informants in ethnographic writing is not so dissimilar from the process by which people are made legible in Foucauldian terms, and indeed, by which they can also be dispossessed or abjected from certain kinds of social and

cultural personhood (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). In anthropology's fraught colonial history it was, of course, exactly for these reasons that colleagues were deployed to the 'unruly' and 'remote' corners of Western European imperial projects. If we have not entirely moved on from this epistemology and this way of presenting our knowledge, can we sincerely claim to be writing towards decolonisation, or to take an anti-colonial ethical position?

I consider that the challenges laid down by my peers present a broader epistemological challenge to the ethnographic project, and to anthropology as a discipline. Their call to foreground personal relationships and subjective experiences troubles the epistemology and focus of the ethnographic genre, and troubles my sense of what it means to write ethically about the queer community with whom I have such a complicated, multifaceted relationship. I recognise the potential incommensurability of some of my friends' requests with the existing format of an anthropological thesis, and have done my best to honour the more urgent of their requests within my writing, particularly where I write about everyday phenomenal experience. However, I am yet to resolve the paradox of the position their requests put me in. In seeking to argue towards the unthinkable, I am continuing to grapple with calls to come into line from different quarters, and find myself negotiating the disorientation of experiencing how different a person I am to different people.

# Chapter 3 The Queer Body Loiters

In Chapters 1 and 2 I have described encounters of the queer body in very particular kinds of space and time that are themselves distinct from 'ordinary' time. Indeed, Kolkata Pride is a carnivalesque spatio-temporal formation, and dance events are themselves particular forms of cultural performance that create particular space/time relations between dancing bodies and spectating bodies. However, as Shreosi reminds us through her turn towards dance in the "everyday", queer bodies do not cease to be queer bodies when they step out of the flow of a Pride parade or other explicitly queer, activist settings. In this Chapter I will follow queer bodies back into ordinary time and unremarkable everyday places, to explore how queer people negotiate relations towards Others as they orientate themselves in the normative Order of Things.

In this chapter I follow queer bodies back into the realm of the everyday. Here I consider how mundane spatio-temporal experiences might reveal the 'given' conditions of public space, and reorientate our attention to make space for that which has been typically relegated to the background (or elsewhere). I follow Phadke (2007) and Das (2020) in positing the everyday as a crucial site for meaningful, creative, ethical action towards different possible worlds. In doing so I draw together the theoretical claims about self-other and spatial relations from Chapters 1 and 2 to understand how cultural rhetoric is put to work in day-to-day life.

I begin by a detailed depiction of everyday bodily experiences, and casual conversations about everyday experiences in space. I then consider how these extend and trouble Heidegger's notions of *Dasein* (being-oneself) and *Mitsein* (being-with-others), and the implications of interpersonal relationships for 'authentic' expressions and experiences of self. I further examine the ethical significance of being, and particularly being queer, in public space by framing the presence of queer bodies in everyday space as a response to Shilpa Phadke's (2007) call-to-arms, "Why Loiter". I conclude the chapter with a cautionary recognition of the risks people take when choosing to move through spaces in ways that deviate from the lines given, and transgress the Order of Things. Since invasive or violent interactions are intensely personal, intimate experiences, I rely increasingly on interactions I experienced with a companion, or through my own body. I thus variously reframe everyday encounters as potentially activist encounters, and opportunities to practice ethics and freedom through the ways we dwell in the world with others.

# 3.I The Pleasures and Perils of Being-Oneself

## Mohini and Anita: The Flyover

*February 2019*

Every Thursday, the regular members of Diana gather with the employed staff and founders at the NGO's office *Deepon* to discuss current events, plan projects and demonstrations, and to generally connect with one another on LGBT, Queer and Feminist issues. I join them whenever I can, which is most of the time while I'm in the country. It is a priority for many of us. After the meetings everyone trickles out onto the quiet residential street on which the office is situated. Akanksha, Malobika, and most of the office staff go home. After a quick check of where everybody's off to next, the majority walk slowly together towards the main road, through the dark labyrinth of houses in this rather quiet part of Kasba in central Kolkata. We go in dribs and drabs, a loose cluster, here two people rapt in conversation, there three or four in a row sharing a light, smoking cigarettes. At this time of night it's not always simple to catch an auto, let alone two. We flag them down and split up into pairs at most to travel up to Gariahat Crossing, whence we will eventually spread out in all four directions. Before we do so, however, we reconvene at the tea stall under the roaring flyover.

In the central reservation between two roads, shouting to speak over the noise of the engines, with the smell of the fumes in our noses, we chat. We unpack

what happened in the meetings, and talk about our social plans for the week beyond *Diana* and *Deepon*. We share sorrows, hopes, ribald jokes, and complain about people who have irritated us recently. We catch up on each others' gossip. *Adda mari,*[101] beneath the flyover, standing with a small shot of hot tea in a paper cup. Apart from me, everyone smokes. Most of the other people at this tea stall are labourers or are passing through quickly. A few are hanging around, and they are men, entirely. We are loitering. We do this every week.

It is at one of these *cha-adda*-loitering sessions that Mohini expresses a keen wish to speak to me about my research. Mohini is an artist who also maintains a job as a middle-school teacher. She is a queer [lesbian] feminist, and although she has built a degree of financial security for herself in a generally 'respected' career, she is from a scheduled caste. A week earlier I had sent a note round to arrange a focus group, where I could interview multiple members of *Diana* altogether, in conversation. Mohini said that she would rather speak to me directly, "অনেক কথা বলার আছে , তোর সাথে /anek katha bolar ache, tor sathe (I have a lot things to talk about with you)", about "activism". That day, Mohini is wearing a white cotton sari with a black border and a line of crows along the hemline and *anchol*[102] that she had block-

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[101] আড্ডা মারা (adda mara) is to have a conversation about politics, music, art and culture, usually over tea or coffee, in a public space. Although informal conversation is an important part of many cultures, this particular genre emerged partly in response to British imperialism and is closely tied to Bengali identity, particularly as a marker of urban middle-class Bengaliness. It is not simply talk over tea, but a specific cultural and aesthetic practice with ethical connotations, and has been broadly understood as a local identity marker that relates Bengali cultural positionality in global context (see Sen 2011).

[102] আঞ্চল / anchol , literally meaning 'border' or 'brim', refers to the decorated end of the sari that is usually worn draped over the left shoulder in West Bengal. It is also called the pallu, pallav, paita, or

printed herself. She tells me that she wants to speak separately, not in a group, because she has a lot to say about activism and wants to be able to take the time, and doesn't want to be influenced in how she speaks by other people in the group being there. Moreover, we both knew, it would be an opportunity to hang out, something we'd been trying to arrange for a long time.

> "You don't say much in the meetings, Anita, but when you do I really think it is usually something very important or insightful. I wanted to speak to you more about that, I thought it would be interesting." I grimace, uncomfortably reminded of the tussle between anthropology and *activism*, the academic call to be as 'objective' as possible and not meddle with the thing upon which you are reporting.

> "Oh… well, actually it's intentional. I try not to say very much at all. Since I'm here on fieldwork, I think it's better if I don't say anything in case I 'interfere' with the data, so to speak, with what I'm seeing"

Mohini looks at me with mild disbelief, as if I have said something very stupid, and shakes her head.

> "You shouldn't think like that. You should contribute. You are a part of *Diana* also, and our good friend, not just a researcher."

seragu and in other languages of South Asia and may be displayed differently in other regional styles of drape.

I break out into a smile.

> "Well, maybe after this trip I will be able to 'contribute' a bit more freely." I wink, and she smiles. "You know," I continue, "I hadn't thought of myself as an activist at all until a few years ago. I always thought of it as separate from my research, until in a seminar during my Masters one of my colleagues asked me, *'How do you separate your own activism from your research?'*, and I was shocked. I hadn't perceived myself as an activist at all, and the fact that somebody else saw me so clearly as an activist, without my ever having said that I was one, really shocked me. I denied it in fact, I said I was not an activist and that I didn't see myself in that way. I didn't even see it for some time afterwards. Now I realise, very clearly, that I am [an activist]."

Mohini's smile becomes knowing. "Yes," she says. "Activism is from when I get up in the morning and brush my teeth; the way I wear a sari; the way I teach - I teach in a kind of tomboyish way," she rocks her body from side to side with her shoulders stretched out, "so that you can understand something different about my gender [performance], and this is all a kind of activism. It's a huge thing, there isn't an end to it, and all of that I have learned through activism."

I smile and recall aloud how, the day before, I had been enjoying the back seat of an auto-rickshaw on my own as I travelled from one part of the city to

another. At a particular juncture, a man and an older woman got in, taking the number of passengers in the back to the maximum three. Automatically, I had begun to make my body smaller, rounding my shoulders, shuffling along and pressing myself up to the far side of the vehicle. Then, something in my head had sprung into place. I saw, as if I had been analysing a case study, how willing I was to take up less than a third of the space there, despite being taller and broader in the shoulders than either of the other two travellers. “No,” I had thought, and suddenly sat up straight with my elbows out so that they marked the limits of my space. The man next to me had jumped a little, as if startled, but had quickly adjusted himself to take up less space with what I felt was an apologetic demeanour, as if it was simply that he had forgotten himself for a moment when he had been pushing along. “Ah,” I thought. “It’s in my head, too.” He and the other woman had in fact, in this case, been willing to move. My impulse to take up less space was both a learned behaviour and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I tell Mohini about this new decision of mine to take up as much room as I needed on public transport, to refuse the expectation for my young female body to give over space to the bodies of perfectly able men, boys, and older women. I talk about not changing my body when I walk down the street in Kolkata, refusing to duck my head or curve my shoulders, or to shorten my long-legged stride. She nods and grins in recognition. I laugh with her a lot about being recently drawn into co-organising a large protest against a Transgender Bill that was being proposed by the government and critiqued by

the trans and queer community. Mohini points to my musical contribution and participation in the play *Diana* performed about polyamorous relationships at the Queer Carnival the previous month. Along with the rest of the things we had mentioned, “that is all your activism,” she says, encouragingly. However, not all my choices about the use of my body in space were so easy to make, or so quickly resulted in the yielding of space that I felt entitled to.

## Rooh: ছেলে না মেয়ে?/*Chele na Meye* **(A boy or a girl?)**?

*January 2019*

I meet with Rooh for our informal ‘interview’ in the gardens of Jadavpur University. Jadavpur is a university in South Kolkata that serves as a kind of hangout spot for a variety of groups, because the gates to its gardens are always open. Settled on the grass, I asked Rooh whether they considered themselves an activist.

> ROOH: Yeah, I do consider myself an activist because I am open, and I’m verbal about my state. If you just be with it, and if you do not try to change anything, you are not an activist, you are a passivist. There is no term, but I want to make it a term, because you are a passivist if you are only bothered about your life, yourself, about your relationship[s], and

stuff. If along with yourself you talk in any platform or in any way about others also, others in the community or the people who are as unfortunate as you are, if you do anything at all, a bit of anything, you have become an activist.

… what do I see here [in Kolkata]? Activism means you have to have a brand against your name, like "I work with *Diana*", only then I am an activist - no! If you can hold a placard and stand on the Shyambazar Mor,[104] you are an activist, because you are actively doing something for a cause, and not only for yourself. Right?"

Rooh lifts their chin and traces around the large tattoo on the side of their neck, which reaches from their jawline to their collarbone.

People ask me, what is this? I tell them this is the genderqueer-slash-transgender symbol. '*What is that* [they ask me]?' [I respond saying that] I am a transgender, and this is such-and-such. This starts conversations. I am making people active in the discourse.

ANITA: so you consider having those conversations as an activism?

ROOH: yeah. Having the conversations. Starting the conversation is the

[104] Also known as five-point crossing in Shyambazar, an extremely busy intersection in North Kolkata. Rooh's choice of this location to make their point, as opposed to any in the South and Central Kolkata districts where the majority of activism by English-speaking elite NGOs and other activist groups occurs, is pertinent and forms part of the rhetorical emphasis of their argument.

basic thing.

Rooh flips their hand, gesturing towards the university buildings behind us.

ROOH: Because people in here [Jadavpur], around us, the activism of these people is restricted within the [LGBT*] community only. [At events like Pride] people look at us from the bus and ongoing cars… and say 'oh ok they are wearing funny clothes and doing stuff, I don't know, I don't bother, ok [it's] their sexual thing, ok I don't wanna see it…' that's the way it works, right? So if you talk about yourself within your community there's no point.

We need more allies. We don't need more LGBT people, because we know there are already far more LGBT people than we can imagine. We need more and more allies. We need more parents who support their LGBT kids. We need more counsellors who can give unbiased opinions to the people - like, many of the people still believe homosexuality is a disease, in 2019, and if they go to the doctor they will talk the same: '*This is a disease, you can cure it.'* This is happening in India right now. Right? So until or unless you make more and more allies with you, til then you cannot do anything, and to make the allies more active, you have to make them understand what's going on actually. Right?

Because I believe … a verbally abusive transphobe or homophobe is far

> better than a silent transphobe or homophobe, because if you're verbal and vocal about your transphobia I can at least try to change your mind, at least a bit, if you talk to me… If people verbally start abusing me, they started taking a part in the conversation, right? … I spot a transphobe, and that's where my work starts. 'Ok dude like why are you against me? Can we talk about it?' If you just silently watch me go away, I couldn't do anything about it. So getting abused is the first step, to me. … If I ask people 'why are you abusing me, because just you don't like it?' They can have a time where they can think about themselves… if I manage to turn one person out of five transphobic people into an ally, that's my win. That's our win. And that's his win also. "

Rooh concludes by emphasising the instrinsic link they see between exposure to abuse, and activism.

> "… Not getting abused doesn't get you anywhere. Martin Luther King got abused. Every great leader got more abused than they got supported right? So getting abused is the first part and we are so snowflakey *'no no I will do the activism but nobody can tell [me]—'* then why are you being visible then? Go hide in the closet! Nobody wanted you to come out. You came out by yourself, and you are expecting people not to abuse you? You are a special kind of an idiot. It is still India."

I laugh.

After our conversation in the park, we stick together. Curious about each other, the invitation to hang out that we mutually make is tentative and hopeful. We cross the road and order *dosa* at the stall on the other side. Sitting on the white plastic chairs that perch like mountain goats on the wonky brick paving, as I sup at the sambar and chutney in the thin metal thali, I notice that Rooh is not eating. She is steadily smiling across at a middle-aged lady who is sitting with a man and a child at the table laid out near the kerb. I watch Rooh holding the lady's gaze. The lady's expression, cool and searching, suddenly breaks into a smile. Then, she actually laughs. Rooh laughs too.

"Do you see what happens?" She says, as she breaks the eye contact and turns herself towards me, her hands towards her plate. "They don't know what to do when I smile back at them."

*December 2019*

Rooh and I are walking away from the endpoint of Kolkata Pride, headed towards her flat where I'm staying on this visit. It has been an extremely long route this year - people have been saying, rather too long - and dark has fallen. Rooh has been active on the float all afternoon, screaming slogans, dancing with abandon, joyously rousing the rabble of thousands. She looks fierce. Her long hair hangs loose about her shoulders, her eyes are lined thick

with kajal and a *kalo teep* [black bindi] sits between her eyebrows. She wears denim hot pants and a black T-shirt length kurta written through with white Bangla script. Her Pride flag has passed the day held triumphantly aloft over her head or, as it is now, tied around her shoulders like a superhero cape. Anubhuti, Sayak and I have been feeling so proud of them.

There had been some unpleasantness towards the end of the walk; a flash of the risk of danger in the form of physical violence. Rooh has been instrumental in heading it off and cooling the situation down. It unfolded like this:

As the Parade made its way down a somewhat narrow street in North Kolkata's Shyambazar, it had passed a small truck with the youths of a paramilitary style band upon it, waiting for their bandmaster who was over doing something at a stall on the other side of the road. The first I knew of it was noticing a clumping of the tail of our procession around a lorry, shouting words I couldn't hear, but in a tenor and intonation unmistakably that of aggressive challenge. I had turned to see Rooh standing at the front of the cluster, between the truck with the youths and a handful of angrily shouting queer folk. I had felt the tremble of panic in my guts, and had run towards Rooh with Anubhuti not far behind me. I had been afraid.

Up close I saw that Rooh was seeking a de-escalation. Several angry queer people towards the front were shouting at a band member who looked both

sheepish and quietly enraged, although they were now not responding. I was later told that this person had been shouting homophobic and transphobic comments as the Pride crowd had passed by, provoking a response from nearby participants. At some point, the most vocal and enraged person at the front of the cluster had snatched the drumsticks out of the hands of the person they were shouting at, and struck them on the cheek with them. The band member looked even more forlorn, but did not retaliate.

" বেশ । *Besh* (*That will do!*) "Rooh had snatched the drumsticks back and handed them to the band member with a quiet word of apology. "খুশি ? Enough , এবার চলো । / *Khushi? Enough, ebar chalo (*Happy? Enough, now come on). " By now the band leader, a middle-aged man, had returned to the truck and with joined hands was apologising repeatedly to Anurag, who I saw there at the front too:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| " দিদি মাফ করুন , আমি এদেরকে বলে দিচ্ছি , please দিদি I am very sorry , এদেরকে মাফ করুন।" | *"Didi maph korun, ami ederke bole dicchi,* please *didi* I am very sorry, *Ederke maph korun"* | *Didi [sister] please forgive them, I will talk to them, please sister I am very sorry, forgive them."* |

After a few intense minutes, with the particular help of a few such as Rooh in

encouraging calm and non-violence, the cluster had dissembled and turned back towards the end of the walk which was still trickling past.

## Being-Queer-in-the-World

The various vignettes above describe mundane, everyday interactions around the appearance and use of queer bodies, and queer peoples' reports about them. These include ways of sitting, walking, and interacting with strangers in public space. Queer bodies do not cease to be queer bodies when they step out of the flow of a Pride parade or other explicitly queer activist settings. Whilst anthropology often finds its entry to insights about the social at points of obvious rupture, the organisation and participation in formal activist demonstrations emerges from deep involvement with concerns about gender, sexuality, and living life in the day to day. Indeed, Rooh critiques the formal, large-scale activism of Pride and similar formulations for failing to engage with Other people, beyond 'the community'. Such a criticism emerged again and again, that accusation (or reflection) from those who engage in queer activism themselves, that "we are speaking to those who already know", and "sensitising those who are already sensitised".[105] Instead, Rooh emphasises

[105] These statements are paraphrases of statements that have been made to me and others many times, by various people in multiple context, over the years I have been involved in queer activism in Kolkata.
Perhaps my earliest experience of this idea, and the problem of it when organising formal public activism, was when I attended a women's rights demonstration with Deepa at Nandan. After the speeches, following a familiar pattern, the women assembled began to shout slogans. However, they

one-to-one conversation with people, and other mundane acts, as the touch-point for social change.

As we have seen in our exploration of how dancing bodies come to have meaning for and through spectators, one of the fundamental problems with the liberal conception of the autonomously defined *individual* is that it ignores interaction (physical, intellectual and existential) with social 'others'. Indeed, the conceptualisation of the *individual* as an exercise quite often seeks to achieve the distinctness of the subject through clearly demarcating them from others. As an alternative to this model, I take as a starting point Heidegger's (1996) understanding of everyday existential experience (*Dasein*) as necessarily a being-with (*Mitsein*), and the mode of being-in-the-world therefore also necessarily including a consideration of what it is to be in the world as being-with-one-another. Thus, for Heidegger the question of "who" one is in everyday life (everyday *Dasein*) is necessarily co-determined by Others who are encountered in the 'environmental context', that is, in relation to any spaces or objects that other people are involved with. Moreover for Heidegger, Others (*'they'*) in public space are often experienced by ourselves as nobody in particular ("nothing definite" (164)), because *they* act and function according to shared expectations. We might say, for our purposes, people in public are usually indistinct, because in public everyone remains

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were standing in a circle as they did so, facing in towards one another. The circle became closer and closer, so that they were very soon shouting at or to each other, while the cars and general pubic that pass that location by were neither address, nor would necessarily even notice that a demonstration was going on.
When I returned to the Diana offices, Malobika di asked me how it was. I explained this scene to her and said that I had found it a little strange. Malobika di's face flashed with indignant anger. "This is how they are," she told me. "I'm sick of it. Really, I am sick of it."

inconspicuous by operating according to social and cultural norms. The inconspicuousness of this condition reveals, according to Heidegger, "the real dictatorship of the *'they'*… [which] prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness." (164).

To be queer in public space, whether as a colourful dancing figure, a butch dyke smoking a biri at a tea-stall, or as a tattooed genderqueer person having lunch with a friend, is to be anything but inconspicuous. Queer bodies and queer behaviours disrupt the indistinct, indefinite nature of the everyday and, to improvise with Heidegger's own motifs, trouble the *thrownness* of the conditions of everyday public life. Such bodies do not behave as one expects and therefore attract attention; they are not 'ready-to-hand'.

Given Heidegger's own notorious fascist entanglements, it is perhaps unsurprising that he did not enquire excessively into examples where the "dictatorship of the…*they*" might fail to hold sway. He did however recognise that behaviour and categories of experience (taking pleasure, being shocked) when with others typically involved the dissolving of *dasein* (being oneself) towards the average, an "evening out" of the ways in which one differs from them.[106] This can lead to what he describes as '*inauthenticity*': behaving

[106] "The *ontologically* relevant result of our analysis of Being-with is the insight that the 'subject character' of one's own Dasein and that of Others is to be defined existentially - that is, in terms of certain ways in which one may be. In that with which we concern ourselves environmentally the Others are encountered as what they are; they *are* what they do.
In one's concern with what one has taken hold of, whether with, for or against, the Others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them, whether that difference is merely on that is to be evened out, whether one's on Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed… If we may express this existentially, such Being-with-one-another has the character of *distantiality [Abständigkeit*]. The more inconspicuous this kind of Being is to everyday

according to ways of being that are not one's own. However, one must take some trouble not to allow Heidegger's discussion of Self, Other and authenticity to collapse back into the mould of the neatly bounded, autonomous Individual against whom he formulates this alternative model.[107] Rather he claims that:

> "*Authentic Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the 'they'; *it is rather an existentiell*[108] *modification of the 'they'* "
>
> (1996:168).

I suggest that this is one way of describing what it is that queer bodies *do* when they move through public, everyday spaces, or indeed whenever they refuse to even themselves out towards the average when Being-with-Others. Furthermore I mark interactions where such a refusal results in [an 'existential'] modification of the behaviours, affective dispositions or ideas of Other people encountered in the everyday, as activist encounters. Such interactions, we understand, shift the 'average'; they operate on the public though engagement with (perhaps even Being-with-) Others. Thus for Heidegger, 'authenticity' is essentially about finding a way of relating to other people without losing oneself to the average or in other peoples' ways of

Dasein itself, all the more stubbornly and primordially does it work itself out." (162-163).

[107] This is especially challenging in translation, given the thorough encoding of the ontological premises of liberal individualist thought into contemporary academic English language.

[108] Heidegger distinguishes between *existential*, ontological being, as such, and *existentiell,* which may be framed rather as the condition of being in the context of the world, including interactions with things, objects, entities within it. An ontic rather than ontological term, *existentiell* thus refers to the objects whose nature of being is under scrutiny through an *existential*/ontological mode of enquiry (see Bhaskar 2013).

being. He acknowledges that this can only be accomplished by "choosing to make this choice— deciding a potentiality-for-Being, and making this decision from one's own Self" (313). Therefore, I propose that activist encounters in everyday life are, at core, practices of ethics combining practices of freedom, crafting of the self, and the adoption of a social, affective, and improvisatory relation of possibility towards Other people.

## 3.II Activist Loitering

I have suggested that we can understand the disruptive quality of queer bodies in public space in relation to the ways in which by *being-themselves*[109] they fail - or rather, refuse - to level towards the average, and to be indistinct from a broader societal *they*. Heidegger theorises in some detail the condition of being-oneself in relation to a conception of *authenticity*. I however wish to focus rather on what this being-oneself means for ethical practice when we conceptualise the Self always in dialectic relation to other people, as a social and cultural conception of the self. Through the examples given by both Mohini and Rooh, I am led to focus on two means by which the presence of queer bodies in everyday space with others offers radically transformative potential: firstly the unapologetic being-in-the-world of people in bodies that read as queer, and secondly the mode of engaging others through casual conversations or in response to abuse.

As we have already seen, there are many ways to be in public space. One may be simply passing through, or one may be occupying the space in a larger-than-life manner in the form of a public demonstration or Pride parade. Standing around at a roadside tea-stall, sipping from a paper cup, smoking and gossiping, is neither of these, however. After Thursday meetings, in 'hanging out', we loiter under the flyover, and if we're hungry then sometimes in the area around it too. We, a motley crew of middle-class(-ish)

[109] My improvised referent in the style of Heidegger. All others are borrowed directly from Heidegger's writings.

women ranging from the feminine to the butch, stand around in the street for the sheer pleasure that it gives us.

I do not think it is an accident that the bodies I have identified as distinct in the public, everyday spaces of the city are female or feminine bodies. The male body, or the person whose body's surface is perceived as male, has a more or less unquestioned right to access public space, even as that access may be mediated by other considerations of social hierarchisation along the lines of class, caste, religion or cultural *community*.[110] It is implicitly understood that *the Indian woman* - by which is usually signified a middle-class, able-bodied, Hindu, upper-caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable woman[111] - does not loiter in public space, even in the city of Mumbai which is generally held to be the safest city in the country for women (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). Rather, women in urban public space in India adopt a range of strategies while in public to perform their gender, ranging from clothing choices that cover their skin to closed body postures, to emphasising large bags or other paraphernalia that show they have been working in an office and are heading home. Blending in is a safety strategy. The goal-oriented, just-passing-through script is too part of this performance of 'proper' feminine gender. By contrast, men may loiter as they please, and occupy public space

[110] 'Community' is often used in India to distinguish between people from the many different cultural-linguistic groups that live across the Indian subcontinent (e.g. Bengali, Marwari, Sindhi). The allusion to these also includes reference to different religious communities (e.g. Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Sikh, Christian etc.). In this kind of a context, 'communities' functions as an intelligible gloss for such kinds of diverse identification in Indian English, which probably contributes in some part to the use of the term in the context of a 'queer' or LGBT community. However, since 'community' as used in that sense is a term under investigation throughout the thesis, I adapt the familiar Indian English use of the word with the affichement of 'cultural'

[111] See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the significance of the Indian woman for conceptions of national culture, and as a signifier of particular kinds of modernity.

for the sake of it.[112] Indeed, the presence of men in the streets is one of the ways in which conceptions of honour and the division of the public and private spheres is used to deny women access to public space: through the invocation of risk, particularly the risk of sexual violence[113].

In Phadke, Khan and Ranade's (2011) manifesto 'Why Loiter', the authors put forward the case for women to loiter in public space as a means of claiming access not only to the space itself, but to full and proper citizenship. How then might this be so? Phadke et al. note that access to the city often reflects a person's location in the social hierarchies of the city. Whilst upper-class citizens have access to air-conditioned malls[114] and may choose not to engage with public space, their right to it is unquestioned, whilst lower-class migrant labourers may have little other choice than to be in public space, even as vagrancy laws continually threaten their right to be there along with all the other rights that are transgressed when such people are forcibly removed from public spaces. The separation of people into different spaces, and a hierarchisation of people according to their ascribed or perceived *identity*, is a key means by which societal norms of morality are upheld and perpetuated.

Phadke et al. show how loitering refuses these mandates, which I frame as

[112] Of course there are qualifications - the men who tend to spend most of their day on the street are lower class, possibly lower-caste, possibly Muslim or migrant men, and their vagrancy is often framed as the reason why streets are not safe.
[113] Phadke et al. (2011) note that implicit and usually unarticulated is also the risk that women may meet and enter into consensual sexual relationships with 'unsuitable' men from different communities, classes, religions etc.
[114] Frequently, people who are perceived to be lower class are not permitted to enter malls in Indian cities, where security guards and metal detectors form a kind of check-point at entry. The irony is, of course, those who work as security guards in such places are frequently from lower class backgrounds themselves.

matters of conventional morality, on a number of levels. Perhaps most immediately, when loitering in public space, people take pleasure in doing nothing there. This dissolves the hard binaries between public and private, inside and outside, recreational and commercial, where the proper place of the respectable Indian woman is the private domain of the interior[115] (*ibid.*). Instead, both those bodies that are exhorted to stay on the inside (in private), and the places that are public (outside) are used recreationally, as sites of pleasure.

The post-Thursday-meeting hangout is a favourite part of the week for many of the members of *Diana.* It's a time for catching up with friends, debriefing on matters important to each person, and of being together. It is a pleasurable gathering, the only reason for which is to enjoy one another's company. Similarly, when Rooh smiles back at a person in the street who stares at them, they gently affirm their right to be in public space. Without a defensive reaction, they turn back the challenge onto the person who stares.

Mohini also speaks of the way she inhabits her body more generally as a form of activism, joyfully swinging her arms and bouncing as she shares this idea with me. This resonates too with a point often made by Baishali di, who prefers to sit with her thighs at right angles, feet pointing outwards, and

[115] See Chapter 4.I for another useful conceptualisation of these distinctions and their relation to conventional morality in the Indian context, through Chakrabarty's analysis of the *ghore/baire* distinctions in the Bengali conceptual ordering of space. Ghore-baire is best translated as at 'home - outside', but is sometimes poetically rendered as 'the home and the world', particularly when referring to Tagore's (1916) novel of the same name.

sometimes folding herself over to lean nonchalantly with her forearms on her legs. “I sit like this because I’m comfortable like this,” she says. Compare this with the ideal version of Indian femininity valorised in a Kathak class attended by US-born students in Kolkata who, Dalidowicz reports, were exhorted to observe and emulate the rounded shoulders and demure body posture of a dancer’s Indian mother who sat cross-legged on the floor with her hands placed softly in her lap (Dalidowicz 2012). Recall also Shreosis’s comment about the normative moral expectation that female bodies should not move excessively or be displayed conspicuously. The “grammar of movement” that Shreosi identifies, and takes such joy in defying through belly dance, is just as strongly repudiated by standing or sitting in such ways as Mohini, Baishali and Rooh occupy mundane spaces in their day to day lives. Sitting however one likes, moving around the classroom or office in a way that feels comfortable, is pleasurable. Such behaviours may be ideologically justified in the language of resisting oppression and subverting norms, but the mode and the motivation is rather that of the pleasure of being and moving one’s own body. To borrow Heidegger’s schema, enjoying the body in this way also affords the pleasure of being-oneself without levelling to the average or the expectations of the *they*. It is certainly true that when I marked with my body the space that I needed to travel in comfort, or strode along in a breeze where I might have been expected to take a cab, I enjoyed those journeys much more.

These actions reveal their transformative potential when the face of the

woman staring at Rooh softens into a smile, when the bandmaster apologises in respectful language to the offended trans woman, or when the *bhadrolok* I stuck with my elbow in the auto shifts politely aside and makes an effort to ensure that I do not have to cramp my tall, broad female body in order to sit in the space I've paid to access. Even if only fleetingly, being-oneself in this way may indeed affect an *existentiell* modification of Others who we encounter in the spaces we share with them.

I have mentioned that the tea stall under the flyover is mostly frequented by working-class male labourers. Indeed, it is also a place where homeless people sleep and nurse their children - where they loiter too. It is in the middle of a major crossing and bus stop in the city, and although other kinds of people do not hang out under the flyover exactly, loiterers can be found at each of the street corners that frames it. They are shoppers waiting to cross, students and working people waiting for buses, and others waiting for friends in a space where one might have a number of 'socially acceptable' reasons to wait. Thus under the flyover, articulate sari-wearing women and smoking, kurta-wearing butches loiter talking politics and pleasure alongside migrant men, in a zone framed by loiterers of all classes, castes, genders, cultural communities and creeds. While it is true that the queerness of these loitering female bodies challenges and sits outside of certain norms, readings of our social class background and manner of dress would allow us access not only to this space, but also any of the expensive cafés which have proliferated throughout Kolkata, and abound in Gariahat. We never shift our meeting there, though of

course, most of the folks beneath the flyover would not even have the option of entering those (see Dasgupta and Boyce 2020). The loitering together of these diverse bodies, which are normatively marked by *identities* that separate them from mutual association by prohibitive boundaries (what Winnubst has termed 'the logic of the limit'), may be read to offer an alternative vision of public life in India. In Phadke's terms, loitering in diverse groups renders such divisions redundant and ridiculous (2011, Why Loiter?). The meaning behind Mohini's claim that 'everything' is her activism, therefore, becomes more apparent still.

## 3.III The Punishment for Pleasure-Taking

I would not like to suggest that loitering in public spaces, and choosing to comport one's body howsoever one pleases, is without risk or negative consequence. Since such behaviour goes against the normative "grammar of movement" in daily life, maintaining it can be exhausting. The very fact of being actively noticed, of being examined by the moralising gaze of Other people, is a burden and can be difficult to sustain.

Having maintained their cool spectacularly during the conflict between offended and angry community members and the offending band members towards the end of Pride 2019, Rooh was a little deflated when not long after, before reaching the park at the very end of the route, she joined me and

suggested we go home. We said our goodbyes and turned towards her flat. A few hundred yards on, as we went to cross the main road there in Shyambazar Rooh suddenly exploded, shouting loudly with uncharacteristic bitterness in their voice :

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| R: "ইটা কি বালের কথা , 'ইটা কি ছেলে না মেয়ে ' !? ছিঃ ! ছেলে না মেয়ে - তুমি কি ছেলে না মেয়ে !? | R: *eta ki baaler katha, 'eta ki chele na meye' !? Cchi! Chele na meye - tumi ki chele na meye!?"* | *R:* What the fuck are you saying, 'is this a boy or a girl' !? Shame! A boy or a girl - are you a boy or a girl!? |
| A: কি হলো?" | *A: Ki holo?"* | *A:* What happened? |

I asked, as we walked over the crossing.

"Some stupid woman asked that question when we went past," Rooh half-spat, half-sighed. "It's none of their business whether I am a boy or a girl. আর ভালো লাগছেনা / *aar bhalo lagchena* (I can't take it any more)."

It is important not to idealise encounters where the individual's person, their

existence as being-oneself, is challenged repeatedly. Responding with a smile, ignoring them, or replying with a kindly refutation frequently demands a great deal of cumulative effort, and such experiences are often hurtful to say the least. Indeed, the necessity for certain people to retain a vigilance about their person for the time they are in public can be psychologically and physically exhausting; there are limits to how much one can tolerate with magnanimity.

The exhaustion of being singled out in public space is well known to me, since my own body in motion is frequently met with challenge[116] when I am moving around Kolkata. My experiences in this regard are very well known to my queer friends, whose advice and counsel, and when needed whose words of consolation, have helped me to understand my own experiences better. I include these examples here for a number of reasons, not least because such experiences (and my queer friends' familiarity with the form they take) are what led me to identify the importance of queer bodies in everyday context in the first place. As we shall see, this example also exemplifies my understanding of queerness as being out-of-line (Ahmed 2006), rather than as determined by the configuration of one's gender and one's choice of sexual partners. This approach exemplifies the use of *queer* as an adjective but never a noun, as that which speaks of and acts in a space of contested meanings (Winnubst 2006). Indeed, the repeated interrogation of my body by those who

[116] I had initially written 'causes disruption', but over time came to notice how this returns the responsibility for these encounters to me and my person, rather than reflecting the location of the impetus in the thought structures of the person/people initiating these exchanges.

find it to be unintelligible reveals also the anxiety that is created when the 'Order of Things' is contested (Foucault 1970). I suggest that the same structural principle is at work when a stranger calls an androgynous person's gender into question, and when a person read as an outsider because of the colour of their skin, their accent or other identifying markers is asked "*where are you from?*". Thus, in drawing parallels between the queerness of gendered, classed and radicalised bodies, I wish to pull focus towards the entanglement of patriarchal, heterosexist, and Hindu nationalist systems of thought, which also introduces some degree of context for later discussions of queer activist solidarity across differing expressions of social discrimination and injustice (see in particular Chapter 5).

## Anita - আমি জানি আমি কে (I know who I am)

*December 2013*

Samira is a Diana member who happened to live quite literally around the corner from my family home in central Kolkata. Samira was back in Kolkata for the summer spending time with her family, but lived in the UK where she was at that time pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies, and had been living for around eight years. One Sunday we are hanging around in a mall, and stroll over to the food court to meet a friend of hers for lunch. The friend's name is Aliya and I am meeting her for the first time.

We sit down with our trays and begin chatting about various things. At some point of time, Samira mentions her bafflement at people insisting on identifying me as a 'foreigner'. Aliya responds that she had been able to 'tell' that I wasn't from Kolkata itself.

"How!? To me, she just looks like any other Bengali kid!" Samira says disbelievingly.

"I knew from looking at her," says Aliya.

"What, before she opened her mouth?" quips Samira.[118]

"Yeah. Indian girls who dress like that don't stand like that." Aliya gestures to my salwaar kameez, which is rather modest and traditional in style. I hadn't spent a great deal of time in India outside the company of my family by then, and as is well documented elsewhere, diasporic fashions tend to be 'out of date' compared to the contemporary styles of the Indian middle classes and social elites. This 'out of date'-ness typically manifests as excess 'bling' in occasion wear, and a kind of nostalgic conservatism in everyday attire.[119] Aliya

[118] My Bengali wasn't so fluent at that point of time, and my first long fieldwork trip was teaching me that, like many second and third generation diasporic people raised primarily in English, my linguistic competency in my 'other' mother tongue was mostly restricted to what was useable in domestic, familial contexts.
[119] In 2022 the conventional cultural wisdom of this was revisited and discussed explicitly in response to comments shared by instagram influencer @dietsabya, in which 'NRI' (non-resident Indian) fashion was described as "tacky", "basic" and around 10 years behind Indian fashions. Many people agreed with the statements, although comments in response to the post and in the online media also highlighted the broader socioeconomic and political factors at play in such a discussion, including issues around immigration, Indian nationalism and 'proper' cultural identifications (cf Sur and

continues, "I saw her down there in the shop, eyeballing everyone. Indian girls [who wear such clothes] don't do that."

*October 2018*

Over the last six years I have spent close to a third of my time in India, on each successive visit spending more time socialising outside the family home with friends my own age. Now I am living on my own, having rented my own flat. I have developed my own sense of style and built up a wardrobe influenced by the queer and artistic circles in which I move. My Bengali has long been fluent, if occasionally idiosyncratic. In many situations I am not treated as an outsider, or any differently to my Kolkata-born friends. However since living independently from my family and leading a busy life researching and socialising in the city, encounters in which I am interrogated about my cultural *identity* are more frequent. Moreover, they tend to follow a very distinctive script, which becomes more maddening with each successive repetition. A typical example occurred during festivities for Durga Puja, one of the main autumn festivals in Bengal, that were being held in the downstairs of the housing complex where I was living.

While I am chatting with some neighbours another resident overhears, and approaches me, asking how I speak so much Bengali. Although when I first

Noman 2022, Singh 2022).

started to be asked this question by strangers I used to respond with a brief explanation about my diasporic intercultural family background, I quickly abandoned this cumbersome and unnecessarily personal explanation to simply assert that I am Bengali. In this case I respond with what has become my go-to line in these situations:

| “আমি বাঙালি তো , কেন বাংলা বলবোনা ?” | *“Ami Bangali toh, keno Bangla bolbona?”* | “I’m Bengali, why shouldn’t I speak Bangla ?” |
|---|---|---|

“You don’t look Bengali,” he says in English, gazing and gawping at me in the most unsettling manner.

“There are hundreds of thousands of Bengalis,” I say

| “সবই কি একই মতন দেখতে” | *“Shobi ki eki moton dekhte?”* | “Do they all look the same?” |
|---|---|---|

“No,” he continues, completely oblivious to my point. “Actually I meant you look like a foreigner.”

Unfortunately for my interlocutor, I am in no mood to accept such comments.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| “Oh? Foreigners মানে কেমন দেখতে” | *“Oh, foreigners mane kemon dekhte?”* | “Oh, so how do foreigners look then?” |

Sensing, finally, that I am annoyed with him, he attempts to pacify me by saying,

“No, no! Actually I meant it as a compliment.” I am now enraged and disappointed.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| “তুমি কি বলছো ? Foreigner এর মতন দেখতে যদি compliment হয়, তাহলে বাঙালির মতন দেখতে মানে কি অপমান ?” | *“Tumi ki bolchho? Foreigner er moton dekhte jodi compliment hoy, tahole Bangalir moton dekhte mane ki opoman?”* | “What are you saying? If looking like a foreigner is a compliment, is looking like a Bengali an insult?” |

In the first two months of my long fieldwork trip, which was also my first experience living independently in Kolkata, such encounters as these could happen as often as ten times a day. I found them emotionally exhausting and invasive. I was aware of how, when these conversations began, my whole body, my movements, my gesture, my language, all came under intense

scrutiny. By the second month of my trip, where these kinds of encounters were at a peak, when somebody would start to ask the questions I would feel like I wanted to cry, and at one stage I began to feel that I did not want to leave the house. I shared this with my friend Ananya, a queer woman and dancer with whom I have been friends since my first fieldwork trip in 2013. After thinking quietly for a little while she said that the reason I'm feeling tired is because what I was experiencing is a kind of violence. "Not all violence has to be physical, or even intentional," she said. "It's almost like a kind of domestic abuse, where it happens every day, and on each occasion you have to decide whether or not you will stand up or let it pass." On hearing my experiences described in this way initially I felt a great wave of emotion and relief, which I attribute to having a framework in which to understand the emotions that apparently innocuous questions were raising in me. After that discussion I also felt more able to challenge it when it did occur – Ananya's empathy gave me the conviction I needed to believe that it was others' approach to me that was the cause of the problem, and not my own behaviour. Moreover around this time, although I cannot be sure why, the inquiries suddenly became much less frequent. Without being precisely aware of what it was, I must have changed something. Whatever I changed, it was not my external physical appearance or my mode of dress.

*January 2022*

Passing through security at Kolkata airport I step into the curtained cubicle, place my British and OCI Indian passports down on the table, and stretch out my arms to be scanned. I must have said something in Bangla, because after passing the metal detector through the air around my body the security guard asks - or rather, exclaims - the usual question:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| “Mam, বাংলা বলেন !?" | “Mam, Bangla bolen!?” | “Mam, you speak Bengali!?” |
| “হ্যাঁ, আমি বাঙালি। কেন বাংলা বলবোনা ?” | “Hyan, ami Bangali. Keno Bangla bolbona?” | “Yes, I am Bengali. Why wouldn’t I speak Bangla?” |

She takes a step back and looks at me incredulously.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| “না, আমার মনে হচ্ছে না। “ | “Na, amar mone hochhe na.” | “No, I don’t think so.” |
| “মনে করার কি আছে? আমি জানি, আমি কে.” | “Mone korar ki achhe? Ami jani, ami ke.” | “What is there to think about? I know who I am.” |

She considers this for a second, then shrugs and smiles.

| “সেটা তো ঠিক।” | “Sheta toh thik.” | “That is true.”[120] |
|---|---|---|

Over the years I have come to understand the constant challenges about my person, my *identity*, as being provoked by the *unintelligibility* of my body in relation to normative categories of identification. This unintelligibility, it seems, derives less from any particular characteristic but rather from the unexpected, disjunct combination of various aspects of my person, including my manner of speaking, dressing, walking, gender presentation and the spaces I occupy. When Aliya says that “Indian girls who dress like that don’t stand like that,” she alludes implicitly to how the context in which meaningful symbols, words or characteristics are given affects the ability of people to interpret them. Thus, borrowing from the philosophy of language, whilst symbols or characteristics may have a meaning particular to themselves, when delivered in an unsuitable context (both socially and vis-à-vis one another), they become unintelligible, or even a kind of *nonsense* (Wittgenstein 2009, McGinn 1989, Conant 1998). In this way, social expectations relating to how certain gendered, classed, racialised or otherwise *identified* bodies should present, speak and move in public space exemplify the pervasiveness of the logic of the Order of Things, without which or outside of which most people struggle to think.

[120] True is here an idiomatic translation. In this context, ঠিক /thik expresses that what I have said is ‘correct’ as well as true or right.

The fact that such interactions were less frequent when with my Kolkata-based biological family demonstrates further the social significance of staying within one's group. It seems probable that, when with my aunts/uncles and siblings, I am legible as part of a middle class Bengali family, or even as the cousin who lives abroad. Living on my own, or wandering around the city in the evening, I am less so. The Order of Things has a structuralist ontology in this sense, putting one to mind of Mary Douglas's aphoristic conclusion that dirt is matter out of place (Douglas 1966). Some friends have suggested it reflects a rise in racism in general in Bengal that goes along with the trend of Hindu Nationalism. For example, my cisgender, heterosexual Sindhi friend from Delhi reports that she is also frequently told she looks or sounds 'foreign'. A handful of other friends (including Bengalis) who have characteristics that are not considered 'typically Bengali' have also reported similar experiences.

I have mentioned that my queer friends were often the most empathetic towards these experiences of challenge, wherein I and others experienced my diasporic comportment as out of place, or illegible in the contexts where I appeared. Several of them suggested to me that, although the implications of each condition is quite different, there were similarities between the ways in which they were themselves challenged about their queer bodies and the entitled challenges I was encountering from these strangers. Although my

diasporic, female body[121] and their gender queer bodies disorientated people in different ways and with different consequences, I suggest that the kinds of logics by which our bodies were considered to be illegible derive ultimately from the same structures for categorising *individual* bodies. In both cases, the body in question destabilises the norms of the social order by throwing light upon it and bringing it into view, escaping capture within taken-for-granted categories such as Bangali/Obangali,[122] Indian/Foreigner, Male/Female, Public/Private. The challenge to people living within such bodies, the demand to *identify oneself*, might be understood in Heidegger's terms to be an attempt to affect an *existentiell* modification of that body, to render it Other not in the sense of in distinction from the self, but to render it indistinct again by bringing it into line with the dominant ontological ordering of things in the world. In Sarah Ahmed's (2006) terms, the people pursuing these lines of questioning are desperately *reading for a line*, attempting to straighten the unruly, unintelligible bodies and thereby make their queerness disappear. The evolution of my ability to refuse these *straightening* lines of questioning is derived directly from the strategies and ideas developed by my queer, feminist friends and colleagues. Whereas in 2013 I was often unable to assert my conception of myself or to hold successfully onto a particular way of occupying space, by 2019 I had acquired the skills to choose when to appear conspicuous or not, and to reject the thrust of others' questions that would seek to reinscribe me within the *proper* Order of Things. What these skills

[121] See David Eng's (2005) writing on diasporic "identity" as queer, and the connections between displacement and queerness in the context of Asian Americans.
[122] Bengali or 'not Bengali'

consist of I cannot verbally articulate; my body however knows precisely what to do.

Any contestation of the Order of Things[123] creates anxiety for those who are invested in its maintenance, because it reveals the historicised nature of order - or the ontology of order - itself. The spaces in which these discourses of realignment are shaped are thus, in Foucault's terms, spaces of conflict, violence, disruption and discontinuity, because these are the spaces where the arbitrariness of the cultural codes into which thinking is habituated are contested. This contestation necessarily brings about a further confrontation, with the "excessive possibilities" that have been reduced into the order of the rational in a given historical present (1979:138). Following Foucault then, we may claim that queer bodies, by which we mean any bodies that 'fail' to be indistinct or to tend towards the average in public space, are anxiety-inducing because at the very root of things they expose the arbitrary, historicised nature of the ontological basis of thought itself. Queer bodies in public space, and especially in everyday public space, are ethically significant bodies, because they signal the dizzying, excessive and tantalising possibilities of other ways of thinking entirely. Queer bodies split apart the seams of the Order of Things, and gesture towards other ways of Being-Oneself, of dwelling in the world, and therefore other worlds entirely.

[123] For example through bodies that publicly defy what Shreosi has called the "grammar of movement"

# Conclusion

As we have seen in the various contexts of Kolkata Pride, public and private dance events, and scenes from everyday life, being with others has profound consequences for being oneself. The inverse, therefore, is also necessarily true. Queer bodies in space, whether these are feminine bodies that loiter or genderqueer bodies that extend into public space, alter the *'they'* of society in public space by refusing to level towards the average. Sticking out while being oneself, whether in a demonstration, a dance performance, or while drinking tea at a roadside stall, can thus be understood as a profound ethical choice, and a deeply transformative kind of activism.

Phadke et al. (2011) refer to the connections between mundane occupation of public spaces and citizenship, whereby citizenship can be understood as full belonging to the modern nation. The modern nation and citizenship, of course, interact with contemporary Human Rights discourses. Thus, in the language of global activist and rights discourses, a line of thought connects queer acts of loitering to claims of one's rights, and of one's proper and complete personhood. This notion resonates with Pawan da's reflection that participating in the 1999 Friendship Walk, as with Gandhi's Dandi Marches, was an expression of one's "right to life".

I am cautious however of idealising or domesticating the kinds of choices and

convictions I have described in this chapter in a way that would reincorporate them into modern, liberal discourses of the individual rights-bearing citizen. Such a manoeuvre comes easily, as the magnetic power of the norm helps us to bring these queer, risk-taking expressions of *dasein* (being oneself) back into line. To be brought into line is to disappear (Ahmed 2006), to blend in, and therefore to be brought into line with the existing Order of Things risks neutralising the ethical momentum of the activist movements themselves. For similar reasons, I am also cautious of the seductive appeal of the rights discourses that seem to offer to protect, include, and enfold the queer person within the body of citizenship. We have seen how the organisation of peoples in various kinds of public, private, or liminal spaces have a distinctly *moral* basis. Furthermore, we have seen how certain cultural signifiers may be perceived as in or out of place in relation to one another, on the same body. Aesthetic choices of dress and toilette, bodily disposition, and manner of speaking may come together in expected or legible configurations, or else appear as a nonsense of confused, decontextualised signs. Challenging the arbitrariness and historical specificity of cultural codes through a commitment to being-oneself can bring both great pleasure, but also great risk. In contesting the Order of Things, queer bodies that are visible in public space signify the joy of excess, and turn towards the limitless possibilities of being human. Appearing as oneself in public, refusing to modify towards the norm, sustaining smiles and conversations with others; all these are ethical actions, and thus practises of freedom. The loitering of queer bodies in public space and their presence in the everyday allows a conception of societal relations

less as an Order to seek enclosure within, than as a form to be improvised upon, elaborated and adorned, with pleasure, joy and an ethics of abundant excess.

# Chapter 4
# Ghore Baire
# (Home and the World)

Having taken the body as the starting point of analysis in Chapters 1-3, in Chapter 4 and 5 I consider how the spatial and temporal contexts we inhabit shape our bodies by return, afford certain ways of dwelling and being, and extend or limit our creative responses to the relations that exist prior to our arrival within these matrices. In this chapter, I use the Bengali distinctions of ঘরে - বাইরে / *Ghore - Baire* (the home and the world) to make sense of the ways in which spaces come to be marked as public or private, the search for 'safe space'[124] and who may dwell within them. Through a description of the shifting locations of an NGO office over a decade, I reflect on the role of walls, gates, and architectural geometry in the enclosure of spaces and bringing of bodies into line. I show how the planning and organisation of space shapes the possible ways of being oneself in particular places, and the ways of being with others that can unfold therein. Building upon earlier discussions of dual subjectivity, I examine the effects of surveillance and disciplinary gazes within putatively 'private' spaces. Throughout I work towards an understanding of space as emergent, arrived at through relations between people, objects, and ideas, and consider how the ways that some people extend into space reshape the possibilities for others to do so.

I begin by describing events from the summer of 2013, when as an undergraduate student working in India for the first time I spent my days at the office of *Diana*, an NGO that works for the rights of lesbian and bisexual

women, and trans men. I had made contact with the organisation and visited them once in 2012. My interests even at that stage were piqued around the differences between Western cultural gender schema, built on an implicit binary system within which trans people are spoken of as moving from one side of the binary to another, and Indian cultural schema where the existence of a third gender is historically and culturally well established. I wondered how notions of trans women and trans men who did not consider themselves *hijra*s would be located in relation to such global schemas, and what kinds of effects flows of knowledge and ideas between the different systems might produce. Having written to every organisation that worked with trans people in Kolkata and received no response, I discovered *Diana*, and whilst I had not earlier thought of working with queer women and trans men, their efficient response and warm, if cautious, welcome was enough to secure me in this direction. I returned in 2013 and stayed for a period of three months, during which I attended their office, *Deepon*[126], every day that it was open (Tuesday-Saturday all day, Sunday mornings). This included helping with and witnessing their move from the office I first knew to a new location, which as we shall see did not unfold entirely as planned.

My relationship with *Diana*, and with the members thereof, has endured and continues to be one of the most important associations of my personal life beyond its relevance for my academic work. I have had the privilege of maintaining regular contact with its members as friends, and formally by

[126] দীপন, 'revelation' or 'illumination'

interacting and participating with the organisation's work during each of my annual returns to the city I consider home. I am therefore able to trace in detail the development of the office space from 2013 to the present day, a period of some ten years. I have no doubt that *Deepon*, and within it *Diana*, will continue to flourish and change, and so my account here should be considered a partial story, a prologue to things to come. My descriptions and commentaries, celebratory and constructive, are made with love and a sense of partial ownership, since I too hold this place as in some way আমার জায়গা / *amar jayga*[127] (my place).

I shall consider possible 'safe spaces' primarily through a long view of the development of *Deepon,* which occupies most of this chapter. It is important to be clear that for the purposes of this chapter, and in keeping with the scope of this thesis, I will be primarily engaging with the creation of *Deepon* as a particular kind of space for particular kinds of people and ways of dwelling. Whilst *Deepon* is formally an office space in which a range of organisational, archiving, counselling and other activist work is undertaken with sincerity and diligence, since I am not and have never been an employee of the organisation it is beyond my experience proper to discuss this in detail, nor is it essential to the exploration I wish to here make on the production of private, public, queer, or 'safe' spaces. To this end, I also consider smaller descriptions of newer and emergent queer spaces across the city. My familiarity with these

[127] Lit. 'My place'. The connotations of this will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter

spaces is less developed, but for others they are the primary 'safe space' within which they live out their community lives. The smaller amount of space dedicated to the description of such places in this chapter is a reflection of my personal situation within the queer community of Kolkata, and is not intended to impute hierarchical relations, permanence or relative significance within Kolkata's queer landscape. These descriptions may too be considered partial stories or prologues, since I look forward to coming to better know these spaces in the future, and the work of those who will grow well within them.

## 4.1 Deepon: Office as Home

## Deepon: Summer 2013

During my first fieldwork trip to Kolkata in the summer of 2013, I was based primarily at the oldest continuously established space for queer people in the city, *Diana*'s resource centre *Deepon.* At the time of my visit the organisation rented the downstairs of a small house in a central area of the city, and were in the process of moving out into a larger space nearby. There were three paid employees, Oli, Sulagna and Deepa, who bore the title 'resource person' and attended the office during its opening hours. The first office I knew was their second indoor base, but their first permanent one. There was a great deal of excitement around the move to the new site, which was attached to various narratives of progress. The organisation had become so large that they needed more space in which to conduct their operations. Whilst there has never been an official register of *Diana* members, those associated were thought to be in the hundreds, and regular attendees numbered between forty and fifty. During weekly meetings the main room was full to overflowing with members hunched up, peering through the doorway, or sitting in one another' laps to fit in. The room at the back, used as a library, was full of book cabinets, and there was enough demand that a separate room for counselling and other private meetings was now required. The third tiny room of the set-up was used as an office, but in reality the three regular employees barely fit in there at the same time. Thus any aspirations to expansion in personnel or operations had become impossible without a change of scene.

The new location was shiny and light. It was located on the second floor of a tower block of flats, behind a gate manned by a security guard. The new office was on the left of a block of four that are loosely arranged in a grid. The rest of the flats were all being used as residential properties, lived in by families and married couples. Inside the flat there was a wide L-shaped main room, a large kitchen, and two reasonably sized subsidiary rooms used as a library and an office/counselling room respectively. There was a balcony facing out over the private courtyard, and unlike the painted concrete underfoot at the former office the floor was polished stone.

The process of moving in entailed a parallel process of reflection and identification. Over the course of a few weeks, the decorations, papers, props and books from the old office were packed and transported to the new location. Moving into the new space was not simply a matter of arranging furniture, but a process of inhabiting, of transferring the spirit of the former place into the boundary walls of the new office. During the first few days of working from there, pictures depicting women together were hung on the walls, a rainbow wind-chime was suspended from the window at the front of the building. The books were arranged in their cabinets, and well-worn straw mats were rolled out across the floors. One of the employees of Diana arranged a framed photograph of a homoerotic temple sculpture next to the door in the library.[128] On seeing it, Akanksha suggested it be swapped for a more ambiguous image, in which the silhouettes of four African women were

[128] See Thadani 1991

walking together, holding hands, accented with brightly coloured scarves and head wraps. Akanksha explained that, although she found it very beautiful, the photograph of the temple sculpture was too direct in its depiction of same-sex desire to be placed on this wall, which faced another apartment through two open windows. She wanted to avoid the possibility that the image might reveal the sexuality of *Diana*'s members or generate opposition to their presence there. Discretion was thus the driving intent by which the erotic image was relegated to the background, or to the interior, while instead a more subtle posture of female homosociality was oriented outwards, towards the unknown and unknowable imagined onlooker.

A few weeks after everyone had settled into the new space Akanskha took some time to sit with me and answer the naive questions I had put together for my undergraduate dissertation research. Perched on a small bamboo stool, she looked around the large and airy office space, and told me that after years of meeting in parks and other public spaces, the first 'space' the members of *Diana* could have described as their own had been a small, rented room with a tiny, dirty lavatory filled with cockroaches. Their first purchase had been a portable library case, in which they had kept and shared a precious few books on gender, sexuality and LGBT issues. It is perhaps this case of books, more than anything else, that has become the enduring marker of place for *Deepon*. Indeed, some of those first books were now among the collection of over 400 publications stored in the resource centre library.

This story of the queer women's relation to place, from fleeting rendezvous in liminal public spaces to consistent occupation of a large and beautiful office in a prime central location, can be understood as a rhetorical narrative of progress articulated through topographical metaphors. This rhetorical narrative was all the more moving because the many adolescent queer women who frequented the space at that time referred to *Deepon* not by its name, nor even as 'the office', but as আমাদের বাড়ি / *amader baṛi* (our house/home) and sometimes even in English 'our space'. This struck me as particularly significant because at the time most of those young people were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, either living with their family or in paying-guest arrangements and hostels. The vast majority of them were not 'out' in their domestic dwellings or to their families. Even for those who suspected that their parents were aware of their sexuality it was a thing unspoken, and most of the members of Diana at that time stated that they did not feel that they could fully be themselves in their family home. In Bengali, whilst there is no commonly used word for 'home' as distinct from a 'house', personal ownership is indicated by use of the possessive pronoun. Places are usually just referred to by the bare noun, *e.g.* as 'the office', or 'the shop',[129] and so affixing a personal possessive pronoun is pertinent as it signifies emotional attachment.

*Deepon* at that time was an unusual kind of space that transgressed the boundaries of standard binary private/public space classifications. On the one

[129] অফিস (office) , দোকান (dokan)

hand, it was a public office and a resource centre open to all. On the other hand, its main function was as a meeting place for queer women and trans men, where self-expression and exploration of sexuality and feminist politics was possible and indeed encouraged. In this regard, *Deepon* was in many ways a 'home' for the young queer people who found it to be a 'safe space' for themselves, often in contrast to the situation at their family home. Over a period of almost three months, in which I spent every of *Deepon*'s opening hours either at the office or attending protests with employees of Diana, rarely a day passed without at least one member of the broader network dropping in for a chat, a cup of tea, or to simply hang out in the space. One of the three employees always had time to make a visitor welcome, and the domestic help Shanta who cleaned in the morning generally hung about to serve lunch and make tea at various points throughout the day. There was always a jar of *mooṛi*[130] ready to be dipped into, and failing that *singharas*[131] could be fetched at a moment's notice from a nearby stall. Indeed, they frequently were. My memories of those days are of reading through the archive with a cup of tea and a biscuit, of sitting across from Deepa di sharing songs as she snipped out relevant articles from the daily newspapers, sneaking out together to the *phuchka* stall around the corner during the lull at the days' end, and of laughter, chatter and continuous expressions of physical affection, from holding hands to braiding hair and sitting in one another's laps.

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[130] মুড়ি .Puffed rice, usually served mixed with chana chur (similar to English 'Bombay mix'), chopped onion and chilli.
[131] Singharas are deep-fried pouches of spiced potato, vegetables and sometimes meat. It is a regional form of what is more widely known in English as a 'samosa'.

In the new office, these activities and modes of dwelling carried on alongside the serious work of the organisation in much the same way. We enjoyed the new space, and the members of *Diana* treated it in much the same manner as they had the previous office. Unfortunately, this was not to last. A couple of weeks after settling into the new office, the landlord told *Diana* that they should leave immediately. The reason he gave was that the other residents did not want an office in the block, because anyone such as a robber or a travelling salesman could gain access to the buildings by telling the security guards they were visiting the office. He also began to demand the rent in cash, which is in any case not customary, but would be impossible for Diana since they were funded centrally by various charitable organisations. Although it remained unspoken, it was apparent to everyone that they were being forced out because of the nature of their work. The search for a new place began immediately, and a shadow was cast over our time at the new office.

Every day without fail, a party went out from the new office to look for yet another possible location. Every day they glumly returned. The rooms they had seen were too small, it was dirty, the area didn't seem safe. The problem was exacerbated by the particular requirements the organisation had for the internal geometric layout of the office. They needed a room large enough for everyone to sit in together for weekly meetings, and at least two other separate spaces that could serve as a library and counselling room. They also needed a space to put a desk for the regular office workers, in addition to the bathroom and kitchen. They needed such a space to be located centrally in the

city, so that it could be equally accessed by those members and visitors living in north and south Kolkata. However renting in this central part of the city was expensive, and most places matching the required internal layout were far beyond the organisation's means.

Added to this was the disorientating anxiety of being once again displaced, after so many years of a peculiar security. "We have nowhere to go," someone said to me one day: "আমাদের কোনো জায়গা নেই / *amader kono jayga nei* (lit. We have no place). The pain and despair echoing in those words seemed to reverberate around the walls of the hostile flat, whose false promises had rudely crushed the sense of *Diana*'s growth and progress. The gates around the complex, offering the security of enclosure to those who dwell inside, are also to keep unwanted people out, including the members of *Diana*. By contrast at the previous office it was generally understood that, whilst local residents had been aware of the nature of the organisation's work, and the lady who leased the lower half of her house to them while living upstairs certainly did, the locals left them alone and treated them civilly as they moved about the area. Ignoring their presence or turning away from the issue of sexuality had been interpreted by the members of *Diana* as a kind of acceptance. Local rickshaw drivers could take a newcomer to the 'দিদিদের বাড়ি / *didider baṛi*[132]' if they weren't sure of the location on their first visit to the organisation. Now they were pushed out, without even the dignity of being

[132] Literally, the sisters' house, or the womens' dwelling.

directly told the true reason, or knowing who it was that had wanted them gone. What was to prevent this from happening again in the next place, if they ever could find it? I suggest that being cast out of the new office in this way was thus disorientating not only because of its necessitating another search and another process of moving, but because it disrupted the rhetorical narrative of progress that had been repeated amongst members, who had seen the move to a new and larger office as evidence of the increasing stability of the ways in which they extended into Kolkata's urban landscape.

The unfortunate circumstances around the new office rental led to a change in policy in the way *Diana*'s employees approached the landlords of potential office spaces. Before arriving in this office, *Diana*'s representatives had described the organisation to prospective landlords as an NGO working on 'women's issues', a loose term used in India to refer to feminist activity of various kinds. 'Women's issues' might be interpreted as anything from the provision of livelihood and training for women, to work against domestic abuse or similar. Given *Diana*'s critical assertion that matters of sexuality inflect all of these scenarios, and the precedented inclusion of women's sexuality rights within women's rights discourses more generally, it is not a dishonest description. The hope must have been that, as at the old office, the organisation would be ignored and left alone, thus benefiting from a kind of passive acceptance. Since this had not proven the case, it was decided that the orientation of the organisation's work would be fully disclosed to prospective landlords before securing a contract to ensure such a situation did not arise

again.

One day Oli returned from a viewing extremely excited. They had visited a possible location that seemed simply perfect for *Diana*. It was a kind of outhouse or garage attached to a private residence that the owners were seeking to rent out. It had the large meeting room required, kitchen and bathroom facilities, and a separate area for counselling and the library. The middle-aged married couple who owned the place were educated to university level, and seemed very supportive of the idea of a feminist organisation using the space. Indeed, the woman was a sociologist by profession. This was considered a very good sign indeed.

A few days later, Oli and Deepa went for a second viewing. They prepared themselves to make the best impression possible. Deepa wore a sari, an aesthetic performance that had been used at several of the other viewings to make them seem more 'respectable' to the conventional middle-class landlords who they were meeting.[133] I stayed at the office, working my way through the archive, and awaited their return with interest. They sloped in after lunch, and went straight to their respective work stations. Shanta brought round tea and biscuits. I shuffled up to Oli and asked her what had happened. She looked at me with disappointment, and said that they wouldn't be taking up the space.

[133] Although perfectly comfortable in a sari, Deepa usually wore trousers and a t-shirt like most of Diana's members

"It's a funny story in some ways," she said. "The man asked about what work we did in the organisation. I started by saying 'women's issues, particularly around gender and sexuality'. He stopped me at that point and said, 'maybe you'd be more comfortable talking about this to my wife.' We spoke to the woman and explained what we do. She nodded and thought for a while, and then she told us, 'you are doing a good work, but the neighbours would mind.' You see, even though she says she is supportive of what we do, they're worried about what the neighbours would think."

This glum shadow hung over the organisation for the remainder of my stay with them. As the days passed without new leads the members of *Diana* became more and more anxious and distressed. Although Malobika di was holding their ground with the landlord and would not allow them to be cast out before they had found a suitable alternative, the pressure was mounting for them to leave and occupying the space became uncomfortable to sustain. Members who used or visited the new office became hypersensitive to any kind of negative interaction with their neighbours. The fact that the occupants of the first floor flat, which all members had to pass to reach the office, had never spoken a word to any one of them was considered evidence of hostility. It was mentioned to me once or twice that they were believed to have been the ringleaders in demanding that the organisation leave. On another occasion, I was sitting beside Oli at the desk, both of us attending to the computer screen. We were sitting close by one another, but were not at that time expressing physical affection in any of the other ways that close female friends quite

normally might in private spaces, such as holding hands or putting an arm around the other. The desk was against the wall, which looked out of a window that faced another in the next block along, which stood a few metres away. Oli saw somebody moving in the flat, and told me to close the blind. "They might see us and think [something]," she said nervously. I must have looked confused, for she added, "they may think this is not normal office behaviour." Under the possibility of surveillance, inhabitants of the new office 'straightened' their mode of relating to one another within the office and broader compound, seeking to align themselves with normative expectations of spatial practices. This disorienting situation persisted for the remainder of my visit that year.

## Spatial Relations and the Regulatory Gaze

The experiences at the new office location led me to consider more closely the ways in which spaces are organised and inhabited. Who may access a particular space, and for what purpose? What kind of a space is an office, a block of flats, and what are the effects upon either when the office in question is occupied by queer women?

In his chapter on rubbish in *Habitations of Modernity*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) argues that the basic structuring principle of space is the notion of the inside versus the outside. In the language of modernity, this takes the form of the public and the private, whereby the private is the location for personal

activities and public is a regulated, ordered space in which civic-minded citizens comport themselves with dignity and in consideration of others. In Bengali language and culture however, the distinction of ঘরে/বাইরে (*ghore/baire*[134]) has quite different implications. To illustrate this point Chakrabarty quotes from Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who states that the mistresses of Indian homes take great care to keep everything in its place inside the home, whilst throwing all their refuse and rubbish out of the window onto the street immediately below without a care.[135] Chakrabarty also considers the historic *mohalla*, a Great Wall around a fort or a palace, signifying authority and ownership but quite literally articulating the boundary of the 'inside' whilst keeping the 'rubbish' outside. With the increasing prevalence of gated communities in India as across the world, the logic of the *mohalla* is far from a relic of India's feudal past (*cf.* Falzon 2004, Chacko and Varghese 2009, Bagaeen and Uduku 2015, Brown 2010, Bose 2014,). Chakrabarty's account is focussed on the logic of the outside as epitomised by the *bazaar*, and the frustrations of modernist thinkers regarding many Indians' everyday use of outside space. However, the troubles of my friends in the new office causes me to question much more specifically how the boundaries are constructed in contemporary India and by what logics people and things are categorised as insiders or outsiders, as ornaments or rubbish.

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[134] ঘর *ghor* literally means room, but is used colloquially to refer to the home. Thus, *ghore* is that which is at home or of the home, whilst *baire* is that which is outside or of the outside. ঘরে বাইরে is also the title of a classic Bengali novel by Rabindranath Tagore (1916), which essentially illustrates a struggle between the influence of ideas from Western Culture such as rationalism and science, and resistance against the influence of Western culture in Indian society and nationalism. The title is usually translated as 'The Home and the World'.

[135] Chakrabarty notes, quite rightly, the classist and sexist biases inherent in this statement

Firstly, it is worth more clearly assessing the ways in which *Deepon* as an office space already causes trouble for the theoretical structured binaries of private and public, of home and the world. Despite its formal function as a place of work and a public resource centre, in 2012-2013 *Deepon* was very much a space where young queer people could, as part of a community, explore the possibilities of their own personhood. The practice at that time of referring to *Deepon* as আমাদের বাড়ি/*amader baṛi* (our house) or আমাদের জায়গা /*amader jayga* (our place) demonstrates personal attachment and a sense of ownership amongst the members who most often frequented it. As I have described, the use of the space was in some ways unlike the use of most formal offices. The three regular employees (and myself) shared a familial, even sisterly relationship and behaved informally with one another. This included frequent expressions of physical affection, and the tender calling of one another by *ḍaak nam*s.[136] The relationship between most members generally takes a similar form to this, with particular friendship groups within the membership constituting nodes of intense feeling and personal intimacy. In this sense *Deepon* is in practice as much a private place, a ঘর /*ghor* (*lit.* room, *fig.* house), as it is a public place or office.

At the time I describe, most of the members of *Diana* were between the ages of

[136] ডাক নাম, pet names (*lit.* Call names). The pet name is given to a child by their family, in contrast to their ভালো নাম (*good name*), their official name. The ডাক নাম/*daak naam* is usually reserved for use by the immediate family only, or the most intimate and long-standing friends. Its use in an office environment in this affectionate way is unusual.

twenty and thirty, with the majority in their very early twenties. Most of them lived in their parental homes or in some cases in joint families, where they were not able to be open with family members about their sexual orientation and desires. In some cases my friends told me that they believed their parents knew or ‘understood’,[137] but the matter was never explicitly mentioned or verbally addressed. Some of the older members, such as Bharati and Kajal who were in their late thirties, had informed their parents of their sexuality but lived in their own space together, separately from their families. Similarly Akanksha and Malobika lived in a flat together and had done for many years. I know, for instance, that Akanksha’s late mother had been aware and supportive of her sexual orientation, and of her relationship with Malobika di. Explicit negotiation around sexual preferences and same-sex love was then mostly the privilege and preserve of those who had the means and opportunity of living in their own domestic space. For those who were not able to explore and express their same-sex desires in the home, the office became a kind of playground or alternative ঘর/*ghor* wherein they could read books, laugh loudly, tease one another about crushes and quirks, sit close by their lovers and show physical affection to their obviously queer friends. In this sense, to these young members *Deepon* was an important ‘safe space’ for the formation and exploration of their own gender and sexual desires. If, as Bachelard would have it, one’s house is one’s own corner of the world, a space for imagination and the protection of intimacy, then *Deepon* was indeed a kind

[137] ‘বুঝতে পারছে’ / *bhujhte parche* (*lit.* they/she/he can understand, idiomatically ‘they know’, ‘they get it’.)

of house or *home* to many of the members of *Diana* at that time.[138]

The former office afforded this sheltering from the outside world, as the lady who lived in the upstairs of the building payed the organisation no mind and did not interact with them, whilst rickshaw pullers and other locals chose to ignore the details about the organisation’s work. The new office however was a space complicated by a kind of double enclosure. Although the boundaries of the flat-cum-office itself offered enclosure for the employees and members of Diana, the walls and gates of enclosure around the four residential tower blocks can be thought of as a *mohalla*, keeping out ‘rubbish’ from the entire complex conceived as a particular kind of ‘private’ space. As Wendy Brown (2010) reminds us, walls do not only keep something in by enclosure, but they also keep certain things, real and imagined, out. The nesting of interior/exterior relations in the new office’s tower block complex moreover highlights the limitations of a simplistic binary conception of the intimate nature of spaces.

The regulation of who or what was permitted within the interior of the compound was affected by the exercise of power through the gaze of the

[138] As I drafted my undergraduate dissertation in the autumn of 2013 I began by describing *Deepon* as a ‘home’ for the members of Diana, some weeks later realising that there is, strictly speaking, no literal word for home commonly used in the Bengali language. Rather, places are described by their form, inflected occasionally by use of the possessive formulation which is achieved by the dative case and so strictly indicates a relation of objects rather than actual possession as ownership. For example, আমার বাড়ি (*amar baṛi*), idiomatically ‘my house’ is literally ‘to me a house’, or ‘that which is a house to me’. Thus
তোমার দাদা (*tomar dada*), idiomatically your older brother’, is literally ‘an older brother to you’. This in itself is very instructive for analysing the ways in which people relate to particular spaces, and identify both themselves in relation to the space and the space in relation to others.

middle-class respectable citizens, the other inhabitants of the bounded interior that the walls created. Chacko and Varghese (2009) have described the proliferation of gated communities in India, often incorporating a near complete array of formerly 'public' facilities within their boundary walls such as clubs, pools, ATMs and gymnasiums, and their association with the urban middle classes (see also Falzon 2004). In this genteel arrangement, financially affluent families (for they are almost always in the form of the heteronormative model family) create a boundary between themselves and the outside world of public space in India. That which they shelter from is the "heat and dust" (Naipaul in Chakrabarty 2002), a disordered বাইরে/*baire* (outside) in which people of all different castes and creeds[139] mix together including the unruly, the বাজারের মেয়েরা/*bajarer meyera*[140] (women of the bazaar) and other louts hanging about on street corners. The wall creates and articulates this distinction, bringing it into being, making a reality that does not exist prior to its expression (Baudrillard 1981, Brown 2010). The presence of security guards, stationed in the yard and the car park, enforce and realise the wall's power to divide by enclosure.

Foucault (1991) has elucidated the ways in which the gaze may be an effective means of exercising power to create docile bodies and control people's activities. Within the tower block compound, the new office is set amongst

[139] In the case of India, this expression is indeed used quite literally.
[140] Lit. The girls of the bazaar, a euphemism for prostitutes, and for Chakrabarty (2002) an emblem of the modernist middle-class attitude towards the hotchpotch of that which is বাইরে *(baire)* [outside].

flats used as private residences, and the juxtaposition of the blocks means that there are lines of sight between these private spaces. This creates a kind of panopticon effect whereby the people using the office consider and self-regulate their comportment as they enter and leave the office. Akanksha's suggestion to avoid placing more explicitly queer art in sites that could be overlooked by neighbours demonstrates how it is not the actual act of observation itself, but the possibility of it that induces the disciplinary response. Moreover, the self-regulatory impulses of those who continued to use the new office space heightened after the punishment of being asked to leave was issued. This impulse was shown in multiple ways including through Oli's hyper vigilance, asking me to close the shutters on noticing movement in a facing flat.

Since, unlike Bentham's prison, the tower block complex is not overtly designed for hierarchical surveillance we can reflect also on how the geometry of certain architectural entities facilitates or disrupts certain disciplinary technologies, such as the hierarchical gaze. This aspect of the properties' geometry, regarding its relation to other inhabited spaces, was not directly considered within the specific requirements *Diana* had of prospective offices whilst they were making viewings. However in hindsight, it is notable that the former office had only one window facing outside to a *goli*[141] which was covered with a blind so that passers-by could not see in. Furthermore, the

[141] গলি. A *goli* is a side-street, not a main thoroughfare, in which the buildings are usually residential in nature. *Goli* may also refer to

ultimate and permanent destination of *Deepon* (that I shall describe in the next section) is tucked away in a corner of the *goli*, the windows not facing outwards at all but into the property's own courtyard. None of the rooms can be overlooked from the road or from other properties. By contrast, not only was the office in the tower blocks overlooked on every side, but it was also enclosed within a group of private residences within which existing residents were able to exercise power with legitimate authority and could influence the landlord by making complaints.

The spaces within the tower block are hierarchical both in the sense of the direction of the gaze (who can look upon whom), and the relative ability of particular kinds of people to influence how others behave within that space depending on the ways in which that space extends their bodies (Ahmed 2006). We have already encountered the regulatory force of the '*bhadrolok*'s gaze' in Shreosi's reflections on the ways in which forms and expressions of dance are valorised in this regional context. It is once again the *bhadrolok*'s gaze that here shapes the possibilities of dwelling in what had been adopted as a 'private' space. Specifically, the gaze of the *bhadrolok* (and *bhadromohila*[142]) is a conservative, heterosexual gaze that enforces normative, heterosexual relations between people and objects in the space of the compound. The tower block *extends* heterosexual bodies and relations in its spatial organisation. For all the ethical propensities of *Diana* as an organisation, such a gaze made it impossible to inhabit the office queerly or to shelter from the world. The new

[142] 'gentle/respectable woman'

office was not a place where queer intimacies, even of a professional or non-romantic nature, could be protected; it did not extend these bodies' shape. Rather, as the hostile relation between 'outside' and 'inside' came to the fore, the power of the gaze of those endowed with social authority served to abject the collective of queer women back beyond the boundary wall.

Some months after I returned to the UK, I learned through my friends that *Diana* had secured a new location, a ground floor flat a few doors down from the former office. It was big, and it was pleasant, I was told. Sure enough my subsequent visits confirmed it was indeed so. It had a large square main room, larger than either of the previous two, a long narrow room in which all the office workers could sit at desks and computers, and a third reasonably large room that easily housed the complete library and could serve for smaller meetings and counselling. Outside was a small veranda for keeping shoes, and in addition a little porch room that could be used for more casual meetings and hangouts. There were two bathrooms, a second entrance, and a slightly larger kitchen. I learned that the location had been purchased privately by Akanksha and Malobika, using their own savings, as a suitable and secure place to rent had not been found within the organisations budget for rent. On Facebook, I saw that my friends had planted a tree to inaugurate the new site for *Deepon*. A tree putting down roots, a mark of permanence, to grow as they continued to grow.

## The New Office

Grow they did. Over the following years the organisation expanded in scope and scale, taking on an increasing number of increasingly ambitious projects, quadrupling the roster of employees within five years. Between my initial residency with the organisation in 2013 and my long fieldwork period from 2018-2019, I visited Kolkata every year. During these visits I spent time with friends I had met at *Diana*, and usually attended whatever Thursday meetings occurred while I was in town.  When I received confirmation of my PhD Candidacy in the summer of 2017, it was Malobika di that I told of my plans to undertake longer-term research with the movement, hoping - or perhaps, presuming - that as before, *Deepon* would be my base.

By the time I arrived in 2018, so many things had changed. Apart from Sulagna, who remained employed by Diana throughout, all of the employees were different and had more specific, distinct roles. The approach to the organisation's work was more systematised and formal in nature. The many young members who earlier had been in the habit of dropping in for tea and to hang out now had full-time jobs, and for the most part, their own homes to go back to after hours. Thursday meetings were regularly attended by a smaller range of people, despite the larger number of employees. Of the 8-15 members who did attend semi-regularly, around two thirds of those had been involved with the organisation since those earlier times ,when I had first come to know them.

Various factors had motivated this change of atmosphere and increasingly professional mode of inhabiting the office's space. These encompass the scope of the work undertaken within it, the availability and conditions of funding that sustained the space, the changing approaches to safeguarding of members and employees when offering access to researchers and other people from outside the organisation, and the personal commitments in the wider lives of core members, to name but a few. A closer examination of the form and interconnections of these factors would be instructive for a deeper understanding of NGO culture, governance feminism, and the paradoxes of particular kinds of development and social activist work. I do not have the scope to discuss these features in detail here, however I will touch upon these matters as I reflect on how the changing ways of inhabiting the space of *Deepon* as an office also impacted its quality of placeness, and the possibilities of dwelling within it in other ways. I shall further examine how these changing orientations to work, other organisations, wider society, and shifts in personnel reorientated the relationships that members of *Diana* had with one another, and with the organisation itself.

# 4.II Professionalisation

## Factors of Professionalisation

The first and most obvious factor leading to the professionalisation at *Deepon* was quite simply in relation to the volume and scale of the work that was being undertaken under the auspices of *Diana*. I have alluded to the extraordinary growth of employees, which was quite necessary to manage the increased workload. Much of the work being undertaken, such as lobbying, research directives and provision of workshops to colleges and professional bodies, represented an expansion of the work the organisation had done earlier and also the development of initiatives that had previously been aspirational for the organisation. All of the work undertaken was related in various ways to improving knowledge and understanding about gender and sexuality in public and professional contexts through an educational approach. It seemed to me that employee attendance and official representation of the NGO at rallies had dramatically decreased or ceased altogether, and I was not aware of any instances of this happening at all over the six months long fieldwork period between 2018-2019.

In order to expand operations and activities at *Diana*, an expansion in Human Resources had also been necessary. Earlier, the employees of the organisation had been drawn from amongst the membership. Sulagna had been the very first employee, Oli had been a young member before taking up her role, and Deepa was known to the organisation through Debalina with whom she worked in the local film industry. There had been some semi-formal

advertisement and interview procedure in place, but all women had prior relationships with the organisation before working for it. Now the employees were found through job advertisements and appointed by a formal selection process. They were all graduates of humanities courses such as sociology or women's studies courses. They involved themselves in the social life of the members to varying degrees beyond the responsibilities of their work, and two were romantically involved with non-employee members. The lines between their involvement as employees and their involvement as members of *Diana* and the broader queer community however were much less blurred than they had been with Oli and Deepa. This was evident in the stricter keeping of hours, negotiations over responsibilities and the responsibilities of care the organisation had towards them such as holiday entitlement, sick leave, and compassionate pay. Whilst Oli, Sulagna and Deepa had been members first and employees later, if the new team could be said to be members this came after their involvement as employees. Indeed, one evening on being asked by a long-standing member and friend whether I had seen any 'change' in the place [i.e. *Deepon*], when I suggested that I felt that the current resource people had come to work rather than because of their personal commitment to the organisation, my friend corrected me: না রে , এরা কাজ করতে আসেনি - এরা চাকরি করতে এসেছে [*Na re, era kaj korte aseni - era chakri korte eseche.* | No honey, they haven't come to do work - they've come to do a job].

In observing this difference, I am not offering criticism or judgement of the individuals involved. I also wish to clarify that I believe the interlocutor, who

further emphasised the importance of the চাকরি [chakri | job ] status of the employees role, also made this statement while recognising the situation as a necessity both for the organisation and for the employees as individuals. For the valuable work of *Diana* to have developed the reach and influence it had in this period, such a workforce established through formal recruitment was essential. However, by scrutinising this subtle but important shift in the motivations and loyalties of the organisation's personnel, I invite reflection on the relationships between community, collective, and NGO at *Diana*, whose situation is far from unique. Indeed, the dynamics between such elements is a recurring conundrum both for those who set up such organisations and for those who study them (*c.f.* Dave 2011, Riles 2007, Englund 2011). Dave (2011) has noted how in Delhi in the 1990s and early 2000s, certain queer groups specifically decided not to seek formal organisational status to enable themselves to operate outside of the rubrics and scrutiny of the regulation this entailed. Recall also how *KPC* remained a collective on political principle (Chapter 1). On the one hand this maintained the bannerless and theoretically non-hierarchical form of the Pride walk and organisation, but on the other meant that funding had to be done from and through the community. Certain members volunteered to store the money in their bank accounts, and occasionally this led to uncomfortable disputes or challenges about how much money had been collected and where it had ended up.

For their part, *Diana* had been an informal collective from its formation until 2003, when they had applied for and been granted NGO status. At the time of

my first visit in 2013, the organisation distinguished two parts of itself, namely *Diana* and *Diana for Justice*. The explanation given to me was that *Diana for Justice* was the formal, public-facing NGO of which anyone was welcome to become a member. *Diana* on the other hand was the name for those 'spaces' where only queer women and trans men would be allowed to enter. Although it was apparent that workshops, lobbying, research and other externally-facing activities were firmly under the bracket of *Diana for Justice,* as far as I was aware there was no formal specification of which activities fell within the *Diana* category. It was explained to me that such 'spaces' might include closed workshops, social gatherings, or discussions of particularly sensitive subjects that affected the lives of the individuals participating in the gathering itself. In truth the distinction seemed to be in many ways purely hypothetical, since the personnel within both the inward and outward-facing activities were at that time the same people, and the 'space' referred to was always, inevitably, the office space at *Deepon*. I was nevertheless slightly surprised when I was informed in 2018 that the distinction had been dropped, and the organisation was now simply *Diana for Justice*, and thought of as one entity. This, despite the sharper distinction than ever between the professional work of the NGO and the personal lives of the people who, in various capacities, frequented the office.

## Interviewing, and Being Interviewed

Mohini and I have been friends through *Diana* since I first began visiting the organisation aged 19, in the summer of 2013. Towards the end of my long fieldwork period in 2019 we picked an evening for her to come over after work for dinner, and to have an opportunity to respond to the interview questions I had been asking various people. Mohini arrived just as I finished cooking, and we were halfway down the first bottle of wine by the time she settled in my rocking chair, feet tucked away under her sari, wine in hand and me knelt on the daybed alongside.

We went through the peculiar routine of obtaining and giving informed consent, in the formal framework required of an ethnographer about to interview a research participant. In this case, as in other instances where I interviewed friends and chosen family, there was a strange block of time where each of us seemed to awkwardly inhabit roles in relation to one another that were not at all a natural reflection of our relationship with one another. I stated the terms of the research, gave the spiel about consent and recording and right to withdraw, and Mohini solemnly nodded and agreed. After a moment's hesitation, Mohini asked me how it would work if she had a question that she wanted to ask me personally while we talked, and whether that would also end up in the research. I explained that even if she said it while the recorder was on, she could tell me not to use it in my research, and she was content with that answer. There was another brief pause, then we

both exhaled and picked up our wine classes again. I started rummaging for paper and repositioned the recording device. We laughed a little at the strange play we had just performed to and for one another. As I finished setting up, I alluded to the tension that the formalities of research can introduce to personal relationships. I reflected that in the last year or so at *Deepon* people would often say things in meetings and then half-jokingly say to me, “Hey kid, don’t write this down!”; and from time to time Akanksha would look at me queryingly as I jotted notes and muse, “I wonder, I would really like to know, what is it you are writing?”. We smiled at one another, recognising the scene.

M Do you think we say this more now than [we did] earlier? You could easily say—

A What?

M You have been [coming to] meetings for many years, you have been coming to *Diana* since 2013; so in 2013, we didn’t keep saying “don’t write this, redact that,”. Do you think that this [conversation] comes up a lot more?

A [pause] nobody used to ever say it before. But this is good, <u>I guess a sensitivity</u> has developed. I will say that *Diana* has <u>definitely</u> become <u>professionalised.</u> And with that, some <u>sensitivities</u> also

come.

M Actually, we have come to this place after really trying and trying and trying—

A There are pros and cons. I think we all understand that those pros and cons are there. But also meetings have become totally changed. Like before, we were hanging out of the windows [because there were so many of us], … I mean, we used to sit on each other's laps, we used to drink from one cup—

M Do you know, this makes me really sad, but it may be development. At that time there was no space, now there is a lot of space [elsewhere for these kinds of things].

A But there are fewer people [at *Diana*].

M the number of people has reduced because people don't want to come, Anita. That time, those people who used to come, they used to come because of that ideology,[143] now people don't come from that point of view of ideology; now *Diana* has become solely a political space, it has become a queer political space; apart from that there really is no place for chatting [adda marrar], sharing

[143] Bhabna – thought, idea . sei bhabna theke asto.

enjoyment, perhaps nowhere, I mean we who—

A [Interrupting, passionately] Why has this happened though, in your opinion?

M [pause] With time, we have really tried to build up and set ourselves up as a big movement, and we think too much academically about things. It's not that there's no emotional space, that there's no personal space, but that has also become very politically charged because we can understand that— [trails off].

In a change of direction, Mohini began to speak about a breakup she was going through, from a partner who had not been involved at all with *Diana* and who had found Mohini's high degree of involvement with the organisation somewhat baffling. This lack of understanding, or not seeing eye to eye on the kinds of 'political' issues to which Mohini was alluding, had been a small part of the disintegration of the relationship as Mohini explained.

M My political space has been seriously built up, which my partner doesn't have, so that there's been constant trouble brewing, I mean seriously… her political space is really different, I mean, her life is very black and white, as for that then polyamory, all

this, relationship dynamics, she doesn't want to understand this. She doesn't want to. [pause]

I hummed sympathetically.

M and somehow I think, that she thinks, *Diana* is perhaps not her space.

A Do you mean because it's too political?

M We speak too much about academical things

A I am hearing that a lot… I also have heard this from former members, that it is going to too much of an academic place. When I came in 2013 I became very interested, about how are activists using academic knowledge, [I thought that] my whole PhD would be on that.

M yes, I remember, I answered this question before, … tell me.

I remember you said at a Thursday meeting, that such difficult words were being used that half of all people wouldn't be able to understand, that is to say, why are we using these words? Why? But I have a response. I get lots of phone calls, like, someone from

the community[144] will phone me up. They phone, and if they talk about this space [i.e. *Deepon*] they will ask, 'can I joke around there?[145] can I have fun? can I chat to people?' ; Then I will say, 'Definitely! But the kind of fun you keep an expectation of having in another place, perhaps it won't be like that in this space; you might not find that humour or amusement because [if you compare] those places where people only muck around,[146] and those places where alongside good humour[147] there are also discussions about political issues, definitely those places will be different.'

A We do have fun.

M Yes we do, but the kind of fun we have, Anita, I mean, maybe it's not inclusive in some ways.

A Yes.

M I mean we– there's a big dilemma going on about this, amongst our friends. I mean look, people say that we stay very much in a group, that when we go anywhere [ to any events or demonstrations] we chat to each other in a group. It's not that we

[144] community মানুষ / Community manush
[145] খিল্লি করতে পারি? / khilli korte pari?
[146] মৌজা করে / Mauja kore
[147] মৌজা করা / Mauja kora

form a group [intentionally], but what happens is that we hang about with each other all the time and these things evolve, and we stick within that.

A But I think that, *Diana*'s fun, a lot of the time, I mean political— I mean, our main meeting is Thursday, where political discussions happen, our fun happens, that, if a friendship arises amongst people, then we go and have fun separately [to the meeting], but for that reason, it's very difficult for a new person to get into that.

M It's very difficult

A … For example, someone recently told me they wanted to come along to a *Diana* meeting at *Deepon*. They wanted to go, but, I … I just thought, they will sit there in that meeting, where … it's like an 'in[-group] conversation'. If you don't understand what's going on beforehand, and if you don't understand the different relationships [between people] beforehand, the situation would be very confusing… the space is important, I'm not saying that [it isn't] —

M no, the place is important, but for example that person, I mean they should be given some space, because if any space wants … to include [people], one might have to give [that person] a bit of

> time to understand that space; because the space maybe won't change for that person, just as that space has evolved so it will continue in that direction, but perhaps that person's space will change. Could I make you understand what I wanted to say?

Here, the multiplicitous ways in which the 'space' is being conceptualised and discussed by Mohini and me becomes increasingly apparent. In our evaluation of the changing priorities and feel of *Diana, Deepon*, and the people who attend them, we refer to several different collections of phenomena as a kind of 'space'. On the one hand, we discuss the physical location of the office *Deepon*, but also separately the kind of 'space' the office is in terms of the kinds of social interactions it affords and extends. This latter conceptualisation of space acknowledges the potential of the spatial environment to reorientate the person, to turn them and bring them into relations with other people, objects, ideas, and ways of being (Lefebvre 1991, Ingold 2009). Mohini seems to suggest that the ways in which the space directs those who enter it, we might say the way it reorientates them, will in turn bring them to occupy another kind of 'space' in their person (Ahmed 2006).

Ahmed reminds us that spaces and gatherings are not neutral. Spaces direct the body this way or that, encouraging bodies to extend into the spaces in particular ways. Ahmed speaks of how the dinner table orientates a family towards one another, creating a space for sociality, or how the dressing of small tables with facing chairs in a romantic restaurant draws a straight line

between heterosexual couples, making their orientation to one another seem natural. For *Diana*, we have discussed the importance of the shape and capacity of the meeting space, which is reproduced in a variation here in the latest *Deepon*, with straw mats lining the edges, facing inwards. The repetition of this space's production across time and different geometric contexts has produced a particular kind of field, in this case, a particular kind of political and social field.

Unlike Ahmed's example, there is no table around which meeting attendees sit. The connection is between each other and the open geometry of the room; it is about ideas, and about personal relationships. Seen in this way, perhaps it is pertinent after all that, for as long as I can remember, Malobika di, Akanksha, and other senior members like Baishali di sit on small stools rather than on the floor, so that other attendees must look up towards them when they speak, and when they speak it is as if from on high. Bodies entering the space of *Deepon* for a Thursday meeting are directed towards political discussion, undertaken in ideological and often academic terms. The gatherings at *Deepon*, as with anywhere else, are not neutral but directive, suggesting specific lines that make some things possible and not others. For those who have repeatedly followed these lines over years, extending into this space and growing to adulthood within it, following its direction comes more easily. For other bodies seeking other ways to gather around the subject of gender and sexuality, connection along these lines may not be so ready to hand.

I continued the conversation with Mohini by asking how we had arrived at this space. How had we come to orientate ourselves almost exclusively around political and academic discussions, when in earlier times we had also frequently gathered at *Deepon* just to be with one another?

A When I came [to *Deepon*] in 2013, everyone made me to feel welcome. At that time I sat in the office all day, every day. Everyone can see [understand] that I am not doing that this time. At that time [in 2013], I used to sit and do work, I used to share stories [chat] with them; … at meal times we used to sit together, talking. Nowadays everyone sits together in silence. This makes me feel very uncomfortable. Seriously. Everyday, everyone, together, sits down, and eats. Not a word. I mean, beyond 'pass me that', not a word. It seems very strange to me.

And at that time [2013] my Bangla wasn't so good, I… I mean non-stop I used to bother them, what does this word mean? What's this about? I didn't know anything about the movement. I mean, [I'd ask questions like] who are *Maitree*? What is this *SAATHI* [group]? Where do they get their funding from? I asked questions non-stop, and while they were doing their work they would answer me, and no time did I feel that I couldn't' ask questions. But… when I came

this time … it often happens that I can go into that office and nobody will say 'hi, hello' to me. Perhaps, I would go to *Deepon*, they would invite me to go sit in that room [at the back], but nobody would be talking with me, or if I came across a difficult Bangla word that I didn't understand, from inside I feel like I can't ask anyone, because they didn't give me that feeling that I can ask questions, because they are all busy with their work. Right? So… I personally, even though I see myself as a *Diana* person, I don't feel so welcome or at home at this *Deepon*. I also think that a lot of us feel this way, but we're not talking about it. I don't think I'm alone in feeling this. Come on, can't you recognise this picture?

Mohini heaved a deep sigh, and looked down at the floor as she answered me.

M I know exactly in what way you are feeling, and I'm hurting[148] listening. I mean, I feel very helpless hearing these things because two meetings ago, at the meeting that happened before the book fair - I think you were there maybe; [one of the founder members] said that *Diana* seems very different to them now, and looking at it she wonders whether she can somehow include herself among '*Diana*', and doesn't necessarily feel that she can.

A [after a pause] She herself said so?

[148] Kosto hocche

M yes, she said so to someone. She was worried about the entire thing, meaning, what kind of collective we are actually forming, or rather is it actually a collective, that is to say … like how many people are we in the collective? Me, Meghna, Amrita, Arpana, Oli, that we are this many, then what? I mean, somewhere the collective is becoming stagnant.

We both paused to consider this.

A It wasn't stagnant. Those names were there five years ago, but, five years ago even more people used to come. Basically that group that was there, and now members are few, and they are getting fewer and fewer and fewer… No growth is happening.

M [agreeing] No growth is happening. I mean, I don't know how it is going to work out. No, I am feeling helpless because when this was said at that meeting, I got really angry and shouted, 'Hey how can you say this? I'm really trying to mix and mingle with everyone!' — but that is, not the answer.

A But there's no way to get in… so, the criticism of one person from outside [the group] was that they thought about joining *Diana* but they first asked whether any friendship meeting happens. And

they were told that no, we just have that Thursday meeting, meaning, where we have our organisational or political discussion. And that's right. So the person said to me that, so what kind of activism is that, because, they think that, activism comes out of personal relationships, or from friendship, because it has almost always happened like this, that … we who are *Diana* now, -- I'm including myself in that

M you are. [I gave a knowing look] But you are!

A Yes, sometimes I think that I feel more like a *Diana* person than lots of Kolkata people, right? So, our friendship was made many years ago, and we do activism from that, but there is almost no space[149] for new friendship; we are so involved with each other, and actually how many people can a person be friends with? We found our people? We found our tribe! What then?... When I first came, … people used to drop into the office. No? Non-stop [people] used to drop in. Like, oh, on my way home from work I will just drop in [to *Deepon*] and sit to drink tea. This happens much less now, much less.

M Yes

[149] jayga

A Nobody wants to go. Why, what mood is there in the office?

Mohini sighed heavily.

M No this, you know, I know this is the office 's… [long pause] actually I don't have any answer.

A I also don't have an answer. It's easy to criticise but—

M Actually! We are like that… I can criticise but if that answers aren't with me after that then I feel very uncomfortable.

A From my research, something might be possible, that [along with] the criticism that I develop I can make some suggestions, that what sticking points and I finding. Maybe, …if you all like, … you can discuss them. This would be one [thing]: that monthly, perhaps we could do a friendship meeting at *Diana*. One Sunday a month, Friendship meeting. Where new members can certainly come.

M Right, right.

A That might not be so uncomfortable. Everyone sitting, drinking tea and eating singharas, maybe a—like we used to do you know,

I really remember, those two months when I came, at least two or three times we all sat together and sang songs. [pause] In these six months, it hasn't happened once. Then, it happened two or three times in two months.

M Then there wasn't so much work pressure [on the members]. Now…

A [interrupting] That is an issue. I understand that. But it's an issue because, because, those people who were there, are growing older, and there's nobody new.

M Exactly, if new people also come maybe we would not have faced this problem, because we [older members] are becoming bored.

… Look, I try to understand, why are we trying to stay together? Does everyone have the same priorities? Not everyone [who comes] will stay; not everyone will give the same patience to try to understand the issue[s that we discuss]. I am expecting this [but] I'm not getting it from anyone [at all].

A and also not everyone is academic. This [way of discussing things] won't work for everyone…

M but Anita don't you think that the discussions that we do, that if we didn't do these, then today we wouldn't have attained a place of understanding about actually what the people around us are doing?

A I also believe that. I mean, I agree with you.

Mohini and I grapple with the tensions between the political urgency of the matters *Diana* works around, and the ways in which the style of speaking about them and working with them that the organisation has developed over the years, has also come to restrict the continued growth of the organisation's membership. This discussion in various ways shows how interpersonal relationships and spaces work upon one another, creating opportunities for particular kinds of sociality.

While we reminisce, I describe how in earlier times I had the "feeling" that I could extend into the space of *Deepon* with questions. These were questions about articles, routines around the office, language, and the context in which the organisation were operating. Turning towards the then employees had been easy, and they turned towards me with answers, seeing this as part of their role. At that time, encouraging researchers and making resources available to them was one of the organisation's main purposes, as the amount of work on queer issues in academic fields in India was more limited than

they would have liked. The space at *Deepon* was also produced in response to the background of the broader lives of the undergraduate and young adults who made up the larger part of the membership at that time. They needed a space where they could connect with one another on their own terms, and there were no other spaces for them to do so. Now, Mohini points out, there are plenty of spaces for people to find that kind of connection, be that in the homes and flats they rent with their partners, or the array of cafés and social spaces that have appeared around the city whose liberal-minded owners are more queer-friendly than those of ten years earlier. As those members have grown older and taken on increasingly involved jobs, their lives pull them elsewhere, away from *Deepon*. They are pulled towards the responsibilities of their work, and at the end of the day their tiredness pulls them home to rest. This however leaves both of us with the question of why there should be no new, young adult members, who do not experience such pulls from other spaces?

I bring a comment to Mohini for consideration, made to me by an acquaintance with whom I had been chatting about my work in another queer space in the city. They had said to me that they found it odd that *Diana* did not offer friendship meetings or social gatherings, because for them, activism grows out of personal relationships. Indeed, in previous times, there were an array of more informal meetings based around watching films together, or studying books and other texts, as well as the prevalence of the 'dropping in' that could be relied on most days of the week. These initiatives were now all

defunct; people had stopped coming and running them had not been thought worthwhile any longer.

In Chapters 1 and 3, as well as here, I have considered how space comes to be constituted by relations between points of geography, architecture, objects, and importantly between people (De Certeau 2002, Bachelard 1994, Heidegger 1971, Ahmed 2006). If relations between people are a constituting factor of social space, then building relationship in and of itself can be understood as a form of activism. This is in line with Rooh's emphasis on the importance of starting conversations and recruiting allies, over and above locating increasing numbers of LGBTQ* folk (Chapter 3). Indeed, Mohini and I discuss how it is that the history of our personal entanglements with other longstanding *Diana* members that, ironically, shapes the space at *Deepon* in ways that potentially limit the opportunities for new people to extend into that same space. So much so, that my historic sense of belonging marks me as a '*Diana* person' more surely than those who live in the city and have, in theory, more ready physical access to *Deepon* and the people who make up *Diana*'s membership.

The geometric space of the office is shaped and made accessible not by geography alone, but by echoes through the years of relationships forged long ago, shaped by the background of other spaces and responsibilities that have pushed people towards it and pulled them away, to work, to homes, and to the intimacy of romantic relationships that blossom in the hard-won private

corners of the world. *Deepon* is shaped by the kind of work that goes on there, by the scale of it, and by the requirements of external organisation for the form that work must take. It is shaped by the heat of the city, and by the introduction of an air-conditioning unit that leads the employees to cloister themselves in one room at the back and to always shut the door. Its place-ness, its characteristics as a demarcated point within the wider city space, is a meshwork of the ways in which people have moved through it over time, and how they move through it today (Ingold 2009).

## Imagining Space, Imagining Places

What next then, for *Deepon*? If the office has become a place of particular affordances and particular limitations, the repetitions of which draw it increasingly in the directions it already extends, what does this mean for our orientation towards it? During this conversation, Mohini and I are engaged in a process of place-making. This is both a dreamlike place-making in terms of making sense of the spaces we have occupied in the past, and the creative process of imagining the kinds of spaces we aspire to inhabit in the future. The nature of this space, of its potentialities and affordances, are connected intimately to a sense of need. Some of these needs are existential, such as friendship and community, a kind of privacy or freedom to explore the potentialities of the self. Others are ideological, such as the need to address certain political and social norms that impose themselves upon us, or may

offer opportunities if responded to in particular ways. I suggest that all are, essentially, ethical. They concern human action, and how people are orientated towards one another. They concern the possibilities for dwelling together in a spirit of warmth and joy, or of being formally dispersed. When we discuss the professionalisation of *Diana* and the modus operandi within *Deepon,* we are forced to address the various interweaving elements that had constituted Diana as it was in 2013, and how these threads may be disentangling themselves, or indeed actively disentangled, to make space for new points of entry. The professionalisation of Diana, we see, affords certain aspirations to be realised: access to funding, protection of members of the community, producing a robust response to political and organisational challenges. However, other areas are compromised: a sense of community, belonging and welcome, from which new waves of activism and new pockets of solidarity might (we imagine!) be formed and renewed.

What strikes me, rereading this conversation as a researcher rather than as the queer woman who participates within it, is the strength of trust, conviction, and belief that underpins our discussion. At the same time, the pain and desperation feeding through the language as we nostalgically hark back to earlier times is evident. This pain, this desperation, along with the conviction and trust, leads us to ask questions of one another, to seek out possibilities for ways forward. The pain and the desperation, the nostalgia and the conviction, are fed forward into an imagined future. We sketch out a space of potentiality, based on what we know to work and know to be not working, and we dream

of what it might be like and how it might answer our perception of current need. I would like to suggest that these are also the ways in which space comes into being, before and beyond the materiality of bricks and mortar. As others have indicated before me, there is a virtuality to all the spaces we inhabit (Boellstorff 2008). Spaces do not exist in the world before we dream them into existence, and are therefore as many as the dreamers who dream them (Bachelard 1994). This creates for us a kind of space for thought, regardless of the plausibility (indeed probability) that the space of which Mohini and I dream here will never come into being just as we envisage it. However, the process of dreaming about it gives both of us hope. In a world where the heterosexual family is the dominant social unit of reproduction, to dream of queer friendships forming and to imagine the conditions under which queer relationships might renew themselves is an act of self-preservation and of future-making. It is a promise to ourselves that we who are here will be here in years hence, even as we remember how we were, and how we arrived where we are today. It is also an indication of the portability of places, of the poetic distinction between *space* and *place* (vis. Bachelard 1994, Malpas 1999).

> ".. it was there... it is there when we all sit together in a house. I feel *Diana* when we all come together. When we were all here, rehearsing that play… it was really fun, we were all together. It was more like *Deepon* than *Deepon* [pause]"

In this sentiment, which makes us both smile from the inside out, Mohini and I recognise the portability of space. If space is a relation between people and things, and those things include the relations of love, trust, friendship, and even political conviction, then wherever the space affords those relations to be expressed the place may emerge from the traces of those selfsame connections. Thus, when the 'old guard' come round every evening one week to devise and rehearse a play about polyamory in my front room, and between the scenes there is joking and tea-drinking and cuddling on the sofa, the impression of *Deepon* is projected into my flat, like a hologram. When we gather under the flyover at Gariahat on Thursday evenings, and speak and touch and joke more freely than we did at the meeting, we bring *Deepon* with us, the entangled meshwork of it, and it shimmers in the central reservation for a fleeting half hour in the flow of passing time.

Mohini and I seek to take a solution-oriented position vis-a-vis the critiques we raise. Mohini says *"it is easy to criticise, but if I don't have a solution I feel very uncomfortable."* We proceed to discuss the ways in which the organisation could make space to welcome new members and build new friendships. This impulse to action is significant. In seeking to understand what makes one an activist, in what constitutes activism, we turn to action itself. Stating that she feels uncomfortable to criticise without offering a solution, Mohini shows the will to 'fix' that which she has a problem with, and to create ways forward instead of simply lamenting or complaining about things that don't sit well with her. This conversation is, we might consider, is a kind of activism in

action. Even if the idea of the 'Friendship Meeting' about which I speak so passionately is never acted upon, the acts of dreaming, yearning, thinking and hoping are foundational to the possibility for activism. Mohini encouraged me to share my suggestion with the wider group at subsequent meetings, but I did not feel that I could, telling myself that given my role as a researcher it was not my place to do so. Perhaps though the truth was that I felt too sad and ashamed to publicly admit that I felt less a part of the organisation that I did before, and too afraid to face the possibility that it might not be in future what I, speaking personally as a queer woman, would have hoped it might have been. Herein is another lesson about activism: there is always the possibility of failure, even as the stakes are stacked high on foundations of hope, desire, and sometimes desperation. That failure is not always equivalent to the outcomes of large-scale action, but can be multi-faceted, personal and subjective.

## 4. III Alternative Spaces

## *Amra Odbhuth*

Over the last ten years, a number of spaces have opened up in Kolkata that are either explicitly organised around mundane queer sociality, or are openly welcoming to queer people. The most well-known of these is *Amra Odbhuth*, a unique venture run by a queer non-binary couple out of a house in the Jadavpur area. *Amra Odbhuth* began almost as a kind of pop-up café where queer people would gather together to share stories, art works, have discussions, and so on. I was not very involved with the café in its early days, and never have been as involved in that space as in others - although not for any particular reason than that my personal circles didn't seem to take me there. *Amra Odbhuth* was founded in 2016, and I heard little about it from my friends until much later. During my long field trip I became acquainted with the space and the founders, Rekha and Mrinalini, because my friend and academic confidante Abhijeet da knew them fairly well and had been in touch with them on and off for a number of years.

My first memory of *Amra Odbhuth* is blurred back in time. I went as a queer person rather than a researcher, going along with my queer dadas to drop in and say hello. Sometime one humid evening in a balmy Kolkata winter I rolled out of an Uber with Abhijeet da and Raja da. The café is located down a back street in the area of town close to Jadavpur University, which it's fair to say is associated with the new South Kolkata *literati*, and also with activism. Jadavpur is a part of town where people hang out and do *adda mara*. The 'gate'

to the college's extensive gardens is open all day, and anyone can go in and out. Graduates, friends of current students, and indeed all types of people go there to hang out and chat. One or two of my interviews were conducted on the university's lawns, even though neither I nor those informants were affiliated to the institution. The area in front of the main university gate is known as *8B*, after the gate's label, and is a reasonably important landmark for navigating around the city. It consists of a T-junction between two unusually wide roads, the stem the T directly opposite the university gate and housing a rickshaw stand, tea and street food stalls, and assorted other local shops. Many consider Jadavpur and 8B to be the southernmost limit of Kolkata 'proper', with everything beyond being more like a suburb or extension of the urban settlement. Others (for example, my cousins who have lived their entire life in the central area of Park Circus) consider it to be already 'beyond'. Demonstrations and protests are fairly common in the broad roads in front of 8B. Due to the influence of the student population in the area, it is considered by many to be a liberal, artsy, or even a quietly queer corner of the city.

The house in which *Amra Odbhuth* unfurls is owned by Rekha's mother. Since nobody has lived there for a while, Rekha & Mrinalini had decided to do it up and stay there, and to make it into a queer space. Over the years they have invested a lot of money into repairing and decorating the place, making it homely and habitable. They have re-glazed the windows with stained glass, repainted the walls, draped fairy-lights everywhere and covered a bunch of

surfaces with plants potted in shabby-chic receptacles such as teapots and old broken cups. The house has a cosy, relaxed, dream-like feel. Upstairs there are two large bedrooms, which are offered as shelter or accommodation to queer people on a pay-as-you're-able basis. At various times, I have been aware that the rooms were being used to shelter queer and trans elders who were escaping violence, or had fallen into financial or housing-related instability. This work is important to Rekha & Mrinalini, and they feel strongly that queer organisations and collectives should serve the needs of the community practically. They are particularly critical of those organisations that they consider to be working primarily at an academic or intellectual level, whilst in day-to-day life queer people face homelessness, violence in relationships or within the family, or even simply a lack of space to relax and express themselves without feeling the need to censor themselves.

In the context of a semi-structured interview, I asked both Mrinalini & Rekha separately about the making of *Amra Odbhuth* and what constitutes (in their minds) a '*safe space*', since the term is banded around a great deal. Firstly, Rekha told me that about the very first pop-up event that they had held in the house. This had been intended as a one-off, an art-sharing session where people from different creative backgrounds could come and present their work in either a complete form, as a work-in-progress. "We realised how necessary this was," they told me. "People really needed this space." Rekha confessed that they thought in truth that the creation of a 'safe space' for everyone was not possible, since peoples' differing needs may mutually

exclude one another. However, they said, they felt a safe space was one in which one could speak up without fear of repercussions when feeling unsafe or hurt. Rekha's aim therefore was to create a space wherein the relationships between people were such that they could be candid with one another, even about hurt feelings and experiences of insecurity. This motivated the aesthetic choices they had made around the place, to make it cosy, and the way in which they and Mrinalini hosted sharing events around art, or allowed members of the community to stay in the bedrooms upstairs on the basis of contributing whatever they could afford, however little. Rekha and Mrinalini's orientation towards the space caused them to bring certain objects and relationships to the foreground, and produce certain events and opportunities as 'near at hand' for visitors. This in turn produced a space that was open to being shaped and reshaped by those visiting it, rather than one designed to shape and constrain particular predetermined kinds of action.

In terms of the name of the space, Mrinalini told me that the line actually referred to part of a Rabindrasangeet, which runs

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| আমরা নূতন যৌবনেরই দূত… | *Amra notun jouboneri doot…* | We are the messengers of the new youth… |
| …আমরা চঞ্চল , আমরা অদ্ভুত | *…amra chonchol, amra odbhuth* | …we are restless, we are strange |

The word ' অদ্ভুত ' (*Odbhuth*) can be translated as strange, peculiar or even queer. Indeed within the broader community it is thought that the café *Amra Odbhuth* is named due to an attempted translation from English of the statement 'We are Queer'. However the song that inspired Mrinalini to come up with the name has perhaps deeper significance still for the organisation's ethos, since it features in Tagore's 1933 play তাসের দেশ (*Taasher desh* / The Land of Cards ). This core item of the Bengali cultural canon, which is understood as a critique of Colonial British as well as upper-class Bengali society, depicts resistance to the suppression of individualistic self-expression under rigid social systems such as class as represented by a land of personified playing cards in which normatively and fixed rules of order reign supreme. The চঞ্চল… অদ্ভুত (*chonchol, odbhuth*) characters of the play resist and ultimately overthrow the regime of cards, in favour of living life in their own way. This was clearly intended by Tagore as a message about the experience of living under the British Raj in India, and some have also suggested that through the play Tagore simultaneously sought to criticise the rigidity of Bengali social elites.[150] This set of cultural resonances may be accessible to anyone who has experience of the web of connected political and ideological themes indicated from these two carefully chosen words. At the same time, the possible meanings are also hidden by the process of abstraction. I myself did not initially pick up on the connections until Mrinalini spoke about them

[150] The similarities between the mode of operation between Colonial British elites and the Indian political elites who wield the greatest political power in the post-colonial nation have been extensively commented on by academics (Nandy 1983) and in public culture (e.g. Rang de Basanti, Rushdie 1981, 1983).

to me, and many other culturally fluent friends and colleagues also missed these secreted manifesto points.[151] The way in which the de-colonial, revolutionary resonances are hidden in plain view in the name of *Amra Odbhuth* is similar to the mode of queer meaning that can be found in the dances of the Pride Walk, and also in other walks of life. The rhetorical invocation of Tagore's song in this new queer context similarly draws on a shared treasure of knowledge, ideas and affect to open up a world of possible meanings. Perhaps it could be argued further, that this rhetorical invocation is a form of *queering*, or more specifically, of reading for queerness.

In her discussion of Queer Phenomenology, Sarah Ahmed (2006) speaks about 'reading for a line'. Positing queerness as that which is *out of line* and therefore visible, she considers how any number of lines on sheets of tracing paper would disappear and become one line if *brought into line* with one another ('straightened'). In a discussion of a number of 'queer' case studies, including Freud's descriptions of a same-sex desiring female patient who did not wish to change or recant her Sapphic desires, Ahmed describes how heteronormative hegemonic discourses often read for a 'straight' line. In the case of Freud's patient, by positing the same-sex desire as a wish for a relationship with the father, and in asserting the masculine consanguinal 'family line', the queerness is *read for a straight line*. I would like to suggest that it is also possible to *read for queerness*. If to be queer is to be out of line, then *queering* could be thought of as disturbing the straightened orientation of the

[151] Incidentally, Mrinalini had not initially thought that people would take the abstracted lyrics as if they were a translation of "we're queer" from English.

paper, to fan out the lines beneath; or of examining the stream of white light as passed through a prism, split up into a rainbow, as opposed to focussing it through a magnifying lens. Rekha & Mrinalini split the words *Amra Odbhuth* from their source, and home in on the many possible meanings of অদ্ভুত (odbhuth), including as a Bengali translation for queerness. In doing so, Mirinalini reads for a queer line in Tagore's song lyrics, opening the way for those who notice this to read for queerness also in Tagore's play and the revolutionary messages about self-rule and Indian femininity explored therein. Depending on one's point of view, this could be pushed further even, and received as an invitation to (re-)read the politics and ideology expressed in these culturally significant texts *as* queerness, in the sense that such ideas were then and are still in many ways distinctly *out of line*. Indeed, Leela Gandhi (2005) reminds us that the associations between anti-colonialism, same-sex desiring orientations and other forms of radical politics have a long history together. In the simple act of naming is encapsulated *Amra Odbhuth*'s spatial orientation, and the hope for the kinds of possibilities that may open up within it.

## Commercial Spaces: Cafés, Clubs, and their Owners

By the time of my long stay in Kolkata between 2018-2019, a number of other cafés around Kolkata had sprung up that also claimed to be queer friendly in various ways. One such place was Café Flow, an open space in the vicinity of South Kolkata which declared itself to be a safe space for the LGBT community. The owner was known to a number of the community through various personal networks, and the location was a convenient meeting place for people from different parts of the city. On more than one occasion, groups of queer folk working on a project together, for example in association with KPW or research groups linked to NGOs, gathered there to discuss things in a more formal, relaxed setting. When doing so, people would turn up decked out in what would be locally read as overtly queer attire, including jewellery and make-up on male or androgynous bodies, and more relaxed or even masculine clothing for women and non-binary people. Whilst in the space, such groups would talk about their plans, ideas, and broader life circumstances openly - loudly even - without concealing the nature and content of their conversations. This is not something that can be taken for granted in all spaces in Kolkata, or indeed in the majority of them if one takes stock of Kolkata as a whole.

Since the café opened quite late and was relatively close to my flat and other regular haunts, I would drop in to sit and work in a different environment, and generally found it to be a conducive space for this. However, this was not

always the case when the owner himself was there. Amongst my acquaintances, it was considered that his friendliness often crossed lines into invasiveness. He had a habit of engaging in loud, polemic discussions with people in ways that could hurt their feelings or make them feel irritated, even if he himself protested that he was merely being ‘sociable’. In a few cases this led to certain people feeling quite violated, or even spoken over, and his status as owner made it difficult or impossible to challenge his behaviour on equal terms. To my knowledge, none of the queer clientele of the café ever did challenge him directly, although I was privy to discussions where the uncomfortable nature of this behaviour on the part of the owner was discussed as problematic and evaluated in terms such as ‘male privilege’. As a result, after a point of time, I stopped frequenting the café, and I noticed that queer groups met to hang out there less often. The café, which had opened only a short while before my long stay in Kolkata, closed during the pandemic in 2021.

Shortly after my long trip in mid 2019 a Bar and Diner opened in Central Kolkata which called itself *Bar*377.* This was evidently a direct reference to Section 377, which had been read down. Advertising itself overtly as a queer space, it struck several community members as odd that this should be the choice of name given its oppressive connotations, especially since ‘377’ had been used at various times as a  homophobic slur to refer to people who experience and practice same-sex desire.[152] However, the choice to explicitly

[152] *e.g.* দেখ না, ৩৭৭ ও./ ‘Oh, he’s a 377’

trade as an LGBT space was a new phenomenon for a permanent commercial venue in Kolkata. Previously there had been pop-up events that did so, but it is thought that this was the first time a public venue had opened its doors as explicitly an LGBT space.

I never attended the place, nor did any of my close friends. Although a few people I knew more vaguely went, they came back not having much to say about it. Within a couple of months of the place opening, a post appeared on a Kolkata LGBT Facebook group and began to circulate in the WhatsApp groups of Kolkata's queer collectives and NGOs that a girl had been sexually assaulted there by a member of the bar's staff following a party. It was discussed at length how the space could not be considered a safe space for queer people since basic levels of consent were violated by the staff members. The community sought redress by putting pressure on the establishment to respond to the allegations of sexual assault and clarify its procedures around consent, client safety, and sexual harassment. I understood via these social media forums that the establishment responded by stating that the member of staff in question was no longer working there following the allegations. A few short months later, before the year was out, *Bar*377* closed down permanently.

Both of these examples demonstrate the potential for failure in the attempted

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দেখ না, ৩৭৭ আছে /'Look, there goes 377!'

construction of 'safe' queer spaces. In both examples, the owners had expressed the objective to produce a space in which LGBTQ* people could move around freely, build relationships with one another, and enjoy themselves on their own terms. In both cases, the behaviours of a single individual were enough to tip the balance away from being a space into which queer people could unfurl without fear of unpleasant repercussions. While the latter case is significantly more serious than the former, both entail issues of consent and the power entailed by hierarchical relations, such as between venue owners and their customers. This highlights the added complications of spaces constituted through capitalist relations, which must necessarily be hierarchical. Whilst nobody at either *Deepon* or *Amra Odbhuth* is required to contribute financially in order to have a right to occupy the space, normative structures of ownership and financial resource constrain both who can enter such spaces, and a hierarchy within which the nature of the space can be determined more by some and less by others. This condition is not exclusive to spaces structured by capitalist relations, but the rigidity of the hierarchy within capitalist relations is all the more inflexible for the space's demarcation as a particular person's property or domain of tenancy.

## 4.IV Setting Forth

Throughout this chapter I have used the language of 'space', because this is the English word my informants used when discussing the events that I have described. However I propose, following Ingold (2009), to partially undo this work and suggest that most of the 'spaces' I have spoken about are in fact not spaces but *places*. Furthermore, I propose that places, when understood by the pathways people take through them, offer a vision of the world that could reorientate our understandings of activism, ethics, and being-in-the-world.

Ingold criticises the inherent abstraction of the notion of space, noting that this neither corresponds to how people experience the topography of the world, nor how they live within it. "Of all the terms we use to describe the world we inhabit," he says, "it is the most abstract, the most empty, the most detached from the realities of life and experience" (Ingold 2009, p.29). People do not live in space, he reminds us, but in countries, rooms, homes, environments, indoors or outdoors; people live off the land that stretches beyond the horizon, under the sky. Indeed, for this reason, philosophers have claimed that we earthbound beings can only live and know in *places*. Yet so often the language of space privileges an understanding of place as a bounded location, as an area of space that has been enclosed in order to be occupied. Having presented these observations about constructions of place, Ingold protests further: one does not *live in* one's sitting room, or house, or city, but moves *through* places throughout the course of one's daily life, tracing a pathway

from one place to another through the vistas, occlusions, and transitions of those places' geometry, environment, and other features. The world, he asserts, is disclosed to people "processionally" along the pathways they take through it, and is reshaped by the traces they leave as they wayfare along its manifold surfaces. The topographical order in which places can be conceived as bounded, locatable, and hierarchically ordered units of space is possible only through what he calls the 'logic of inversion', whereby the pathway taken is retrospectively interpreted as describing a perimeter and demarcating a limit, creating a bounded and locatable area that can be known as a place.

Ingold's notion of the logic of inversion bears significant resemblance to Winnubst's logic of the limit, which she understands as an extension of the logic of enclosure derived from Lockeian values of property ownership, utility, and a future-oriented work ethic. This logic of enclosure (Winnubst 2006, Brown 2010) aligns with and reproduces the modern, capitalist order of the world, providing the hierarchical topographic structure for conceiving of places as nested within one another that Ingold describes (e.g. the room, in the office, in the *para,* in the city, in the country, in the world). Drawing together the insights of Ingold and Winnubst, the logic of the limit comes more clearly into view as a culturally and historically specific way of knowing the world that imposes an order on lands and their inhabitants, capturing the processual, processional, unfolding pathways of wayfarers to offer a totalising conception of space and all that can be within it.[153] However, Winnubst shows

[153] The order this logic produces is the logic with which we are taught to think about the world; this Order of Things becomes that which cannot be thought beyond.

how this logic of enclosure extends through society more generally as 'the logic of the limit', which not only encloses land to produce locations, but also bounds objects to produce subjects, and people to produce individuals. To think with the logic of the limit is to think oneself back into the enclosures of the social order that logic sustains.

I have argued that it was the process of inhabiting the offices that made *Deepon* emerge, and perhaps even now are in some ways remaking it, as a particular kind of place. The decoration of the walls with artwork and colours, the books and the people sitting beneath the shelves reading, the shared cups of tea, the song-singing while newspaper cuttings were taken, the attending of meetings, the opening and shutting of doors; these are the things I have claimed made and remade *Deepon* to be '*amader jayga' (*our place), and an NGO's office. This is how it has been possible to refer to the establishment of *Deepon* at more than three different 'locations' in the city space over the years. Seen in this light *Deepon,* along with the other offices and cafés I have described, are not reducible to enclosed geometric spaces. Rather each is a dense knot of varying density, entanglements of things, ideas, surfaces, textures, and the pathways imbued with the qualities of the people who pass along them. The world, says Ingold, is made up of a meshwork of these knots, these entangled pathways that converge and disperse and follow along to become entangled otherwise, elsewhere (see also De Certeau 2002). Unlike a network, with its ordered and hierarchical topography, Ingold's *meshwork* allows for a conception of place and of dwelling *along lines*, and brings new

possibilities for perception and knowledge into view.

In speaking about *Deepon* as a space *within* which particular kinds of activities and relationships may or may not occur, Mohini and I fret about the changes in sociality at the office as perceived failures or exclusions. However if *Deepon* is seen instead as a knot in a larger meshwork, a multiplicity of lines come into view travelling between *Deepon* and other places around the city and the world. Pathways to places of work, homes, tea stalls, rickshaws, and cosy lovers' corners may be reconsidered not as routes to be travelled along by an individual who comports their entire self or *identity* with them, but rather as pathways along which the places' inhabitants move back and forth throughout their lives. In this reckoning *Deepon* is not a location from which people are pulled away to vacate forever; *Deepon* is a node with trailing threads to all of these other places, many of which did not exist before *Deepon*. If *Deepon* today is a less dense knot in some ways than it was in 2013, if the traces of certain wayfarers has faded there, it is because the pathways that led more frequently to its door are now tied up elsewhere, with other pathways, through other rooms, and under other skies. Was this possibility for entanglement, for living in the world, not always the aim of *Deepon* and *Diana* in the first place? Does not the fledgelings' departure from the nest suggest the success of that place, rather than its failure? This insight offers another challenge to the logic of the limit, namely that certain places are not only for inhabiting, but for setting forth from, on the way to make new entanglements elsewhere.

## Love Thy Neigbour

In 2023, *Diana for Justice* announced their new initiative, *Protibeshi (প্রতিবেশী)*, a canteen and community space in a South Kolkata neighbourhood. In an interview for a national daily newspaper[154] Arpana, who was one of the members spearheading the project, explained that name, (meaning 'neighbour') had come from the call to 'love thy neighbour', which she identified in this context as a statement of resistance. "We are here for you, but give us the dignity we deserve," she said. *Protibeshi* was established with three purposes in mind: livelihood creation, a space for queer people to 'upskill themselves', and also expressly to be place of connection for people within the community and would-be allies. In a voice-note telling me about the project, Mohini explained that having applied for external funding, *Diana for Justice* was offering subsidised food on a non-profit basis, and there was a cosy seating area with free WIFI, a library section, and a training centre that doubled as a game room. The newspaper article reports the walls being covered with art created by members of the local queer community, and the holding of informal roundtables on subjects such as Social Media and Online Dating. Malobika di noted that a middle aged, cis man comes for a cup of tea every day in the canteen, and sits flicking through queer literature. She speaks of the need for allyship, but also of the need for spaces where people can learn about the LGBTQ* community, that is, a space for allyship to emerge. "There

[154] The citation is not supplied to protect the anonymity of the organisation.

are lots of interesting possibilities in that space," Mohini told me excitedly. Indeed, so there are.

*Protibeshi* is a new place for new entanglements. It is a place that faces outwards, to the wider world, as well as a place that draws people in. The middle-aged cisgender man makes his way daily to *Protibeshi*, oriented towards it by the low cost of the refreshments and the steady supply of fresh reading materials. Along the road his path crosses and knots with the Muslim trans man who comes to work there as a chef, and the lesbian hostess who walks through the library space to set down his cup of tea. The table, the books, and the teacup afford sociality. They are orientation devices in that they direct peoples' paths (Ahmed 2006). They make entanglements possible, even probable. This entanglement is a 'somewhere' (Ingold 2009), but it is also a trail to somewhere else. The activist hope is that when this man sets forth and takes with him the traces of this place, his path hence will be one that is more open, more welcoming to queer folk.

# Conclusion

In the first three chapters of this thesis I have considered the various ways in which people's relations with and orientations towards other people affect their perception of the world, and others' perceptions of them. This has necessitated an engagement with the very nature of space, or indeed *place*, as the matrix within which human existence and social interaction plays out. Through focussing more directly in this chapter on the constitution of space and place, I have shown how the geometric, aesthetic, and topographic elements of the places that people dwell within are replete with ethical consequences insofar as they shape, constrain, afford, prohibit, encourage, and restrict particular ways of being oneself. More still, places also have ethical consequences in affording or inhibiting the particular modes of dwelling that a person might practice, especially in terms of how they dwell with others.

This interpersonal dimension of place, which also impacts the nature of that place and the kinds of activities that may unfold within it over time, leads me to consider the importance of particular people and their dwelling within space for the creation of particular *places.* The texture of relationships between friendship groups, chosen families, and other dyadic connections has also been analysed as one of the fabrics with which places are constituted, and as a consequence, by which particular places may become portable and migrate from one location to another across time and space. Place thus unfolds not

only through our wayfaring, but as Bachelard (1992) so eloquently proposed in response to our dreaming, limited perhaps only by the limits of our imagination. Thus, Mohini and I dream together about how different ways of relating to one another have changed and might yet change again the places we frequent, including *Deepon* and our own friend's homes and workplaces; queer folk drift away from cafés and clubs where the owners and employees behave in ways that restrict their own extension into those spaces; Rekha and Mrinalini spend their spare time and funds potting houseplants in discarded, elegant junk, and make beds up for anyone who needs them, embracing the possibility that to be safe their space must be as welcoming of gentle challenge as it is of its guests.

In pondering deeply what various human, aesthetic, and geo-spatial elements are involved in the creation of the spaces and places in which we dwell with one another, I have sought out the oft invoked but rarely located 'safe space' of queer activist imagining. I have expressed my doubts about the possibility of creating 'safe spaces' for queer folk through capitalist relations, and shown how lines of sight for surveillance may assert exclusionary power in putatively private spaces, as well as those conceived of for public occupation. Throughout, the motif of the wall or the *mohalla* has returned me to challenge the logic of the limit and the impulse to enclosure that is written through not only the social organisation of space, but the spatial organisation of the social. I have employed throughout a distinctively local framework for understanding space as home or as world, while challenging the wisdom of

normative binary conceptions of space through public/private, inside/outside organisational logics. My bittersweet conclusion is that certain places are the more successful if, rather than facilitating our retreat from the world, they better prepare us to set forth into it. It is this conclusion that leads me into my final chapter, in which I synthesise my concerns about activism, bodies, dwelling, imagination, and attention to urge for a queer ethics organised not by the logics of identity, rationality, and order, but orientated by love, solidarity, and radical empathy.

# Chapter 5
# Everyday Ethics : A Utopian Manifesto

Guided by the priorities of my informants, in this chapter I seek out the ethical in the temporality of the everyday, in the ways we relate to others through words, actions, and dwelling together. I arrive at the utopian conviction that love is an ethical orientation, a force to turn our bodies in disorienting directions, a phenomenon of excess that exceeds the logic of the limit, offering views of self-other relations that depend not on sameness or binary opposition but are sustained through radical empathy. In this chapter, I ponder the following questions that have emerged from my ethnographic entanglements:

How can we think the unthinkable, while living in a world conceived of and expressed in a limited and limiting language? What affects, emotions, **sensations,** actions and practices might allow us to escape the logic of the limit, and limiting logics? How, in short, can we respond to queer experiences as we form utopian visions of social and personal life, and as we strive towards them? How might queer experience inform our practices of freedom?

My friends and informants do not always use the terms 'ethics' or 'ethical' to describe what they are doing, or the choices they are making. At other times, particularly but not exclusively in activist meetings and discussions, what is ethical and what is right (ঠিক/thik) is commented upon more explicitly. As we have seen, the work of LGBTQ* activists in Kolkata clearly sits in dialogue with global discourses on human rights, justice, and concepts such as freedom and equity. It might therefore seem uncontroversial to analyse this activity within the theoretically adjacent, existing philosophical frameworks of

'ethics'. However in this section, following Winnubst (2006) and Das (2020) I negotiate a deep discomfort with particular academic conceptualisations of what constitutes the 'ethical' in social life. At the same time, I seek to salvage the concept of 'ethics' as a subject for enquiry in anthropology by attempting to ideologically reframe the ethical as a diffuse and nuanced filament in the textures of everyday life (*c.f.* Lambek 2010, Das 2020). In doing so, I offer up ethics and the everyday as core ideological, temporal, and social dimensions that shape and distinguish the queer movement in Kolkata as I have encountered it over the past ten years. In the process I also confess my own deep **enmeshment** in these dimensions, not only as an ethnographer, but as a social being invested in the movement itself and the associated ethical objectives highlighted in this representation of it. Thus, this section is introduced not only with a cursory theoretical framing, but I additionally set forth a sort of manifesto statement that is necessarily, if unapologetically, utopian in nature.

**Locating the proper subject matter of the 'ethical' has been a contested ground in philosophical and academic writing for not only centuries, but millennia. Furthermore, as so often is the case, there are subtle but significant differences between the various formal academic meaning(s), use(s) and associations of ethics or the ethical, and the substantive 'common sense' meaning of the words used in everyday conversation[155]. In the**

[155] I note that this style of approach to the implications of semantic differences in academic and everyday uses of particular terms has been undertaken in detail by scholars such as Polanyi with reference to economics (1944), Hegel with reference to rationality, and Weber with reference to

**'common-sense' usage, ethics may be used synonymously with words such as morals or values, whilst 'ethical' may be used interchangeably with morality, rules, religious beliefs, the good, what is proper, and so on. In urging for 'an anthropology of the good', Robbins (2012) has developed a refined analytical framework for posing logical inquiries into matters of morality, values, and ethics in which he distinguishes 'the morality of reproduction' from 'the morality of freedom'. In Robbins' account, the morality of reproduction arises from the moral force of normative codes of conduct and interaction in a given society; in other words those things that are considered moral because they are the proverbial 'done thing'. Robbins' notion of the morality of reproduction draws heavily on Durkheimian theories of religion and society. By contrast, Robbins' 'morality of freedom' is the morality of decision making and critique, particularly the appropriateness of given social routines is in question. In this sense, Robbins' formulation adopts a similar structural form as those who have distinguished between morality and ethics (Foucault 1994), or indeed further separating them from formulations such as 'moralism' (Warner 1999).**

**The formal attempts to tease out the nuances from one another show that there are often conflicts between that which is held to be socially proper and acceptable (usually called morality or moralism), and the convictions of a given person or group, which may differ from these socially prescribed**

law (1978).

**moral norms (Heywood 2015a; 2022, 2023). This latter set of principles is sometimes known as values or the 'ethics' of the individual, and have been of increasing interest to anthropologists in recent decades (Robbins 2012, Das 2020, Laidlaw 2013, Lambek 2008). In a formal anthropological sense, all of these terms have at various times been used to indicate subtly distinct concepts. Indeed, many theorists in the philosophical and anthropological traditions have sought to pin down nuances to distinguish between such phenomena. However, whether or not one invests in the distinction between ethics and morality, the question remains as to what shapes peoples' ethical (or moral) priorities? Moreover, if morality is socially learned, how can we account for activist ethics that fly in the face of established moral codes?**

**Robbins (2012) ultimately concludes that the type of morality deployed in a given situation is largely determined by cultural values, which in turn he understands as cultural conceptions of the good or desirable, particularly such conceptions that arrange and dictate the hierarchies of other cultural elements shut such as ideas, people, actions, and things. Moreover, Robbins explains apparent contradictions in morality through a hierarchy within cultural values. For example while in North America it is considered better to be independent done dependent, it is recognised that this does not apply where a hospital stays required to attain the other cultural good: being healthy, which is better than being unhealthy. Robbins thus seems to sort out the apparently messy, contradictory choices that ordinary people make**

**in the course of day-to-day life into a sort of intellectual flow chart whereby different outcomes may be reached by a differential path, determined by nested sets of value hierarchies. These notions, he notes, owe considerable intellectual debt to Max Weber and his notion of separate values spheres within modern societies.**

**While it may be possible, and indeed tempting, to tidy away the chaotic, exploratory, contradictory, and undeniably messy conversations of queer activists into a hierarchy of values, I must heed M. Manalansam's cool to attend to the generative, productive potential of mass itself. In the context of phallocentric, heteronormative societies, where the morality of reproduction depends upon reproducing forms of life that exclude, preclude, and instantiate the social death of ones desires being, and way of life, the appropriateness of all routines is always already in question. It is therefore not surprising that so many queer thinkers and writers over the course of generations employed a language of freedom and ethics, rather than morality and moralism. In doing so, queer thinkers have sought to draw attention to the messy, rhizomatic connections between the values modernist thought would normatively separate into distinct spheres such as economics, politics, aesthetics, and the intellectual (see Robbins 2012).**

**In this case I will contend that queer activists are in the process of developing a morality of freedom, indeed and ethics of freedom that seeks to restructure the moral order based on a challenge against**

**heteropatriarchal, normative models of what is considered good and desirable in society in favour of new values centred around pleasure, love, plurality, friendship, and freedom itself. These are developed and conveyed through engagements with literature, lovers, friends, and aesthetic practices that entail critiques and re/formulations of new hierarchies of values. Furthermore, I shall attend to the ways in which my informants assert the connectedness, consubstantial-ness and mutually implicated nature of different values, aspects of life, and spheres of value and action.**

This endeavour is thus in part an experiment in resisting the potentially esoteric and rarefied leanings of a formal philosophical study of ethics. The study of Ethics in academic discourse is typically conceptualised in relation to discipline of philosophy, which itself is normatively conceived in relation to a canonic lineage of Western scholarship that traces its history from Plato and Aristotle, through the European Enlightenment to the present day[156]. The claim to universal applicability is emphatically an embedded, culturally specific feature of the Western Academic discipline of Philosophy. Claiming universality thus perpetuates the Eurocentrism of a study of Ethics. Through the universalist claims of such hegemonic traditions of thought, philosophical thinkers have sought to totalise the possibilities of humanity through culturally and historically situated ideas and models. I assert that such ethical

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[156] Courses in Philosophy may increasingly include reference to scholars and thinkers from traditions beyond Western Europe and America, but since these must be conceptually *included*, whilst figures such as Aristotle, Kant and Sartre are taken to be foundational, such acts of inclusion may simply distract from the historical conditions of the emergence of Philosophy and a study of Ethics per se.

and moral principles, particularly as they emerge from the Western canonic traditions of philosophy, can never be neutral, especially in post-colonial contexts. **I must therefore "ab-use" them, in Chakravorty Spivak's (1990) sense: engage them in order to motion away from them.**

Whilst it is certainly possible to trace the influence of Aristotle or Kant through to the daily lives and principles of people in Western contexts, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Marx in Bengal) the same is not necessary true for other cultures and corners of the globe. Veena Das (2014) illustrates (response to Laidlaw) how principles from the Mahabharata are a more appropriate, congruent and ['indigenous'] tool than the ancient Greek philosophers for analysing the ethical decision-making of her informants in a Delhi basti[157]. I suggest that the rich South Asian and Persian philosophical heritage is often not considered as such by Western scholars because of the forms they take (myths, poems, orally transmitted stories) and their close association with religion and a transcendent mode of spirituality. However, to see individual ethical choices and ideas as guided by these culturally resonant fables and exemplars is to return to seek the ethical within the messiness and chaos of everyday life. Whilst the Western discipline of 'Ethics' can remove itself to a corner of the forum, secularise itself and muse over hypotheticals, in the course of everyday life most people have no such luxury. We use the tools we have to hand. Therefore, a return to everyday ethics, ordinary ethics or philosophy as a part of the everyday in non-Western contexts would be in

[157] Often referred to in English as a 'slum'

part a decolonisation of the same**. Perhaps I might even claim that to engage *rasa* to locate the good, and evaluate ethics through the lenses of non-Western mythologies and parables, would be to seek a path around the debris of colonial ruins.**

Finally, as I progress towards the end-point of this text, I begin to explore what Arvind Narrain (2017) has described as the creative and utopian possibilities of queer lives, where queer is understood in a broad sense stretching beyond the limits of identitarian politics on a theme of gender and sexuality. There are, of course, LGBT identifying people who uphold conceptions of love, desire, relationships, class, caste, religion, etc. that reproduce systemic inequalities and reinforce existing social structures of power and hegemony. Any vision of queer ethics that seeks to reimagine social relationships and strives to think the unthinkable (see Foucault 1979, Winnubst 2006) cannot emerge as the result of ignoring this and other realities that problematise the radical claims that its proponents would make. Rather, as a thought experiment, I and others dream and then run with the potential inherent in the idea of queer-ness to signify a desire to escape limiting logics that make objects of all subjects, bind individuals to particular categories, and would perpetually return properly identified individuals to their 'proper place' according to a hegemonic socio-historical conception of 'civil' society.

Following my informants, I seek possible answers to the aforementioned questions in the textures of the ordinary, and the messy fabrics of the everyday. This section's title comes to me from the formulation offered by one of my informants to describe her activism as "everyday activism". Having exhausted - or been exhausted by - the possibilities and problematics of formal activism, I examine examples of what might be considered ethical practices in 'ordinary', day-to-day contexts. Here, I understand and identify the 'ethical' in a vein that might be likened to a kind of pragmatism: the impulse to act in ways that align with one's beliefs. For queer individuals, this frequently creates tension with normative societal expectations and implicit codes of behaviour. Just as Dave (2011a) found in Delhi in the 1990s, very often queer people in India find that their desires, interests and life choices are condemned in the language of morality. Therefore, like Dave, I find it appropriate **in this case** to take up a Foucauldian separation between the normative order of morality, received through convention, and ethics as a practice that is often articulated against or despite morality (Foucault 1994). I also wish to be clear that an ethical practice conceived and articulated *against* moral norms may look very different to an ethical practice that is conceived and practiced *despite* moral norms (see Heywood 2018). Indeed, we have seen in a few instances already how resistance to moral and cultural norms can in fact reproduce them all the more clearly, throwing them into sharper relief by providing an outside against which those prevailing norms can define themselves. Thus, resistance can result in the performative rejuvenation of the hegemonic order from which liberation is sought (Winnubst 2006). This is

especially true when that which is other or outside defines itself in the terms of the hegemonic or inside group. However, as we shall see, after problematising the logics and exigencies of society's moral norms, queer activists may dream up, invent and improvise alternative ways of being and relating to others. I consider the significance of this essentially creative approach to being and living first through a structured example of self-described 'everyday activism', then by considering the longstanding solidarities between queer and other social justice movements, and finally within personal relationships of love and friendship. Each, I claim, shows how people improvise with ethics as they strive towards better ways of living and being, and so offer us sight of what Foucault has described as practices of freedom (1998).

## 5.I Everyday Activism: Baishali's Rationale

Shortly after I returned to Kolkata for my long fieldwork trip in the Autumn of 2018, I entered the office to find one of the employees, Nila lying full out on a long roll of paper. With a face of complete concentration another employee, Chandini, was tracing around her with a marker pen. Three other Nila-shaped puddles were arranged in a haphazard pile alongside them, reminiscent of the chalk outlines at murder scenes in TV detective series. The outlines, I was told, were props in a sexuality workshop that Baishali di was giving in Sonagachi, Kolkata's red light district. When I asked if I could tag along, I was referred to Baishali di herself, so I messaged her expressing my interest in joining in with the workshops she was delivering. She replied that it would be better if we spoke in person and invited me to her flat one evening the following week.

Baishali di is one of the older members of Diana, and one of the most youthfully energetic. She has been associated with Diana for a long time, and was a co-author of some of the earliest pamphlets released by the organisation. She is a champion of producing texts and resources in Bangla, making a point of writing in a conversational register of Bangla that can be easily understood by as wide an audience as possible.[158] She opened the door of her flat with her ever-radiant smile and invited me in. We settled with cups

[158] Written Bengali can often be in a formal, literary register that is difficult to read and understand even for native speakers with a reasonable level of literacy. Academic writing in Bengali often adopts this register, although there has been a steady but increasing move away from this since the early 20th Century.

of warm, fragrant mint tea on her sofa and, as came to pass with so many of the activists I would have 'interviewed', she began by candidly interviewing me.

"How can I help you?" She asked. I explained my motivations for undertaking the ethnographic research such as I understood them at the time. Gradually our conversation meandered into reflections on my personal experiences with *Diana* over the years, and how my time as a 'researcher' in Kolkata had reshaped and recontextualised my own understanding of myself as a bisexual Bengali woman, and my personal politics around feminism, sexuality, and relationships. Baishali di listened with sincere and attentive interest. She shared reflections on her own lived experiences to support, critique, or gently challenge the ideas that arose in our discussion. We had so often shared space, at *Deepon* or at conferences or protests, but this was the first time in some five years' acquaintance that we had spent time independently, engaging directly on a personal basis. Such is the peculiarity of 'community' life, sometimes.

She explained that she had been greatly involved in many projects with *Diana* when I had first met her in 2013, but had taken a hiatus in 2016 after the death of her two elderly parents. This had been partly out of a desire to make space for "new blood", for the younger activists to pursue their own ideas and express themselves, but also because she had decided it was time for her to "really live [my] life". We agreed, activist projects are often seriously time

consuming. Recently she had taken on several more activist projects both through *Diana* and under her own auspices, but only in a very particular domain.

Before speaking further about the grassroots workshops, Baishali asked me squarely if I know what it is that she does. I confessed that all I really knew at that stage was that she is the one who runs these 'grassroots programmes', as they are called within *Diana.* Baishali di proceeded to tell me how these grassroots programmes and workshops began.

> "The grassroots workshops began in in around 2013, where somebody reached out to *Diana* and asked us to do a workshop on gender and sexuality in Farakkah – you know, Farakkah? It's that place where there are all the arguments about how much water goes to Bangladesh, and so on. There's a huge hydroelectric plant there, but that area is extremely rural...[160]
>
> "When we arrived in that place, from the very first day we were in difficulties. We had to literally hide in rooms in different people's houses, and run from place to place. It was awful. There, there were all the village women,[161] who had absolutely not the first idea about gender and sexuality in the kinds of terms in which we spoke about it and were

[160] There is a large hydroelectric plant in the township where the waters [of the ganga] meet from West Bengal and Bangladesh. It is accordingly also the site of continuing tensions and disuptes about water between the two countries.
[161] গ্রামের মহিলা / Gramer mohila

going to do the workshops. It was really, really awful, Anita. When the local police and the government people found out what we were doing, we literally had to run away from that place. We got kicked out, literally kicked out from that place. However in the workshops, these women started opening up and literally *pouring* out experiences of gender and sexuality. It was overwhelming and somewhat terrifying.

"The concept of *sexuality*[162] wasn't there. They were saying, "what are you talking about '*sexual orientation*'? My husband rapes me every night!" And most of these women - if not all - were married off at young age to somebody chosen for them. Then, what are you talking about sexual orientation or sexuality? After that I decided I wouldn't go to any place where there couldn't be some kind of continuation or follow up, and so after that I have only been doing projects and programmes with groups in other places.

"Mostly this has been through association with *Navanita* – do you know *Navanita*?[163] They are an organisation that provide training for women to develop their own livelihood. They have existing links in villages and with different groups of variously disadvantaged or underprivileged women. The founder, Diya, is a fantastic person. She goes way beyond simply teaching women to earn their own livelihood. She says, what is

[162] In English
[163] The name [Navanita], whilst also being a woman's given name, literally means 'newness', giving a sense of life, livelihood, and a fresh start or new beginning.

> the point of teaching livelihood if they don't also have other forms of empowerment and skills? What is the point, for example, of me teaching them to get 10rs in hand, but at home the husband is snatching the 10rs and maybe raping her? I need to teach her also how to keep it in the hand... Therefore, she programmes all sorts of other workshops for them alongside, including these workshops teaching them about gender and sexuality as well. That is what I have been doing."

Baishali offered then an insight into her process and aims for the workshops that she delivers. She explained that, when structuring the workshops, she takes a planned outline but that the actual programme tends to vary depending on what the groups she's engaging with bring to it themselves. The workshops are flexible in that way; the aim is that they should respond to the needs, interests, and desires of the group regarding what exactly they want to know. She told me,

> "After the first experience in Farakkah, we understood that talking about sexuality and homosexuality is a nonsense if basic knowledge of "what is sexuality" is not there. Talking about transgender is silly if we don't know that people are aware and thinking about the gender binary that is there. We have to explain first gender and second gender, why it is first and second, before bringing in third, fourth, fifth, and so on. These programmes work from a very basic premise, establishing the basics. Often these things are not spoken about [in society in general]. We need

to work from the base up.

"The key thing in the programmes is getting the women to ask questions about things – how and why are things as they are? – and encouraging them ask such questions in their daily lives. I call this my **everyday activism**; I am very interested in everyday activism."

I interrupted here, and asked Baishali to clarify for me what she meant by 'everyday activism', an idea I had not encountered before. She paused for a moment, and said:

"If I can get a woman to ask a question that she has never asked before… For example, these days there are all these take-out options. If I am out working all day, cleaning somebody's house and cooking for them, when I get home, why should I cook?"

I interjected:

"why should I cook and not my husband?"

"Exactly. Asking these questions, just asking these questions is everyday activism. Questions like, "Why is it that I am teaching my daughter to cook, and not my son?" And sometimes, do you know Anita, they raise questions that even I haven't thought of before. I really enjoy that aspect of my work.

"Even if I can make one very small change in a person's life, I will be happy. For example,

| যদি তোমার মেয়েকে বিয়ে দিতে দেবে , আর ওই মেয়েটি বলছে ' আমি বিয়ে করতে চাইনা' *please* ওকে বিয়ে করে দাও না , please ... | Jodi tomar meye ke biye dite debe, aar oi meyeti bolche 'ami biye korte chai na' *please* oke biye kore dao na, please… | If you're going to give your daughter's wedding, and that girl says "I don't want to get married" *please* don't marry her off, please… |
|---|---|---|

… It may not be that she is a lesbian, it may not even be that she is in love with another boy, it may just be that she does not want to get married. This one small thing will make a huge difference in people's lives - in that girl's life, for example. I explain to them,

| "তোমার বিয়ে এমনি হয়ে তুমি happy হয়নি , কেন তোমার মনে হয় যে ওর খুশি হবে ?" | "Tomar biye emni hoye tumi happy hoyni, keno tomar mone hoy je or khusi hobe?" | "Your marriage happened like that and you haven't been happy, why do you think that she will be happy?" |
|---|---|---|

She paused for a moment in thought.

> "My aim, to be very honest, is - if I can get through to five women out of every five hundred I speak to, I will be very happy. I will have succeeded in making a difference."

I asked her why she felt that she couldn't get through to the other four hundred and ninety-five. "Is it that it goes in one ear and out the other?"

| "না, হয়তো সেটা নোই - আসলে, ওরা শুনতেও পারে , কিন্তু আবার বাড়ি ফিরে এতো abusive situation এ আবার ঢুকছে , everyday drudgery তে যে… | "Na, hoyto seta noi – asole, ora sunte o pare, kintu abar bari phire eto abusive situation e abar dukhche, everyday drugdery te, je… | No, not necessarily that - actually, they might well listen, but then they go back again into such an abusive situation, to the everyday drudgery, that… |
|---|---|---|

> …they don't have time to think about it, or they get lost in that [everyday drudgery]. But this everyday activism is very important. These little questions could change things in some small way, slowly."

This is the conversation in which I first encountered the idea that activism could, and perhaps even should, take place in the spatio-temporal domain of

everyday life. In previous fieldwork and personal visits to Kolkata, 'activism' had been a thing planned meticulously at *Deepon* or other NGO offices, demarcated in place and time, and performed as a protest, conference, workshop, or otherwise carnivalesque event. In other words, that which I had hitherto seen as 'activism' took place in a time other than ordinary time, and in spaces particular to activist activity (as elaborated in Chapters 1-2).

Although Baishali di did not refer to academic literature on the subject, I later came to consider that her approach to her work and the form her analysis of events takes bears a strong resemblance to Michael Lambek's propositions about 'Ordinary Ethics' (2008). In his edited volume on 'Ordinary Ethics', Lambek argues that ethics is intrinsic to all human action (p.39). Further, he posits that language is central to the ethical, as the ethical is central to language (p.49). Developing an understanding of human action and social relations in the intellectual lineage of Austin, Cavell, and Wittgenstein, Lambek's proposition is based on the notion that ethics entails judgements of situations, which may be expressed in language and responded to by action, and that such judgements are necessarily made in relation to ethical criteria. These criteria are typically implicit in judgements, and vary according to place, time and context (see also Foucault 1994), but can be consciously confronted and evaluated and thereby creatively altered. Such explicit examinations of ethical criteria, he suggests, are particularly likely when an action fails. The failed action may be a physical action or a 'speech act', such as the interpellation of a concept (such as 'gender' or 'sexuality), the

acknowledgement of a word or act ("my husband rapes me every night!"), or the judgement of a word or action ("we were literally kicked out from that place").

Baishali di's insight about the felicities and failures of the activist intervention in Farrakah pertain to the relations between the people, words, and concepts present in that context. She reflects on the points of failure or disconnection between the activists, their intentions, and the life contexts of the rural women with whom they were attempting to engage. Baishali di draws particular attention to the infelicities of the language that the activists were using in the context of the rural women's lived experience. Words such as 'sexuality' or 'transgender' had no meaningful corresponding object in the rural women's forms of life. In other words, these nominal utterances were unsuccessful in interpolating meaningful, ethically intelligible subjects that could be discussed, acknowledged, and integrated into ethical criteria for action. They were not a meaningful set of criteria by which the speakers, participants, or context could be judged (Keane 2007). Recognising the truth of this in the rebuke raised by the rural women ("what do you mean 'sexuality'? My husband rapes me every night!"), Baishali di returned to the city and reflected upon the criteria implicit in her own ethical judgements about gender, sexuality, and relationships in given contexts. In particular, though referred to indirectly, the life choices available to the urban-dwelling, middle-class, English-educated activists differ so starkly from those of the semi-rural-dwelling, working-class women – who, in fact, are the ones to produce the

cutting social analysis that they rebuke the activists with. The words and concepts the well-meaning urban activists use around gender and sexuality (including terms such as 'gender' and 'sexuality' themselves) are a nonsense, lacking any 'grip' on the reality in which the working-class women of Farrakah live out their daily existence. This provides an important lesson for Baishali di and her colleagues in the practical consequences of intersectionality for activists seeking solidarity on the basis of one particular *identity* characteristic such as gender (Menon 2015, Narayanamoorthy 2022), especially within the radically unequal socio-economic landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

Baishali di's solution is to reframe her own relationship to the contexts in which she would undertake activism. She declares that she will now only participate in discussions where there is an opportunity for 'follow-up', that is, a development of the interpersonal relationships and discussion over time. She also frames her goals in relation to the criteria encountered in the given social and spatial context, reorienting the focus of the workshops away from a presentation of nominal concepts thought relevant by urban-dwelling, middle-class, English-speaking activist. Instead she develops a workshop that supports rural women towards an evaluation of the criteria by which they make judgements about the state of affairs in their lives and the lives of others around them. In analytical terms, we might say that Baishali di's workshops turn her participants towards an evaluation of the criteria and categories that inform their own subjectivity.

Baishali achieves this by encouraging the women to ask questions about their assumed or normative actions. In Lambek's (2008) terms, I suggest that this effectively encourages the rural women to undertake an examination of the ethical criteria that underpin the judgements they make in the course of daily life. Such an examination, following Winnubst (2006), may lead to a challenging of The Order of Things, the categories that structure thought, rendering some words and actions as 'rational' or 'good', while others are 'unthinkable'. Causing the rural women to examine the criteria implicit in the judgements that, for example, lead them to pressure a young adult daughter to marry, Baishali di leads the women to evaluate not only their words and acts towards the daughter in question, but to evaluate their evaluations - to judge their judgements - of that daughter's requests and state of affairs as a young unmarried woman. Such questioning could destabilise the 'givenness of ethics' (Lambek 2008, p.44) with regard to this series of actions and judgements, opening space for creativity within their forms of life.

Despite this potential, Baishali di acknowledges that the 'everyday drudgery' to which the women return prohibits many such ideas from meaningfully influencing action. I suggest that this can be understood through Austin's notion of 'conditions of felicity', which are the conditions necessary for the success of a speech act in transforming the state of affairs towards which they are directed. Austin (1962) tells us that speech acts can only succeed if conducted in the correct time and space by people who are socially invested

with the appropriate authority to execute them. For example, the declaration that a couple are now married only succeeds in transforming two single folk into a legally married couple if delivered in an authorised building by a suitably appointed minister in the flow of a service including the exchanging of vows and signing of the legal certificate. If we take Lambek (2008) at his word and understand language, ethics, and action to be intrinsic to one another, we might extend the notion that conditions of felicity are also essential for the success of other kinds of acts beyond the realm of speech alone. Indeed Baishali di herself suggests, in not so many words, that the rural women's conditions of everyday life are not *felicitious* for the creative transformation of ethical judgements and actions relating to gender and sexuality as raised by the city-dwelling, middle class, queer, feminist activists who fleetingly visited them. Even if the rural women of Farrakah can acknowledge the ethical concepts of which the activists speak, their subsequent failure to act upon them would not, for Baishali di, indicate an ethical failure on the part of either group. Instead, it is a failure brought about by the infelicity of the conditions in which the exchange takes place. Thus, if she can influence even a small number of them, she considers her work to be a success against the odds.

Baishali di's own analysis and acknowledgement of the ways in which her previously attempted grassroots activism had failed (or been *infelicitous*) led her to adjust her own criteria for ethical action. I was fortunate to be able to see first-hand how she acted upon her judgements in another, more felicitous

context.

## Sexuality Workshops: Turning Towards the Body

Four months later, I received word from Baishali di that she would be conducting another round of grassroots workshops at *Navanita*, in a Livelihood Training Centre for working-class and *basti* dwelling women, at their office in North Kolkata. As per her invitation, I joined the sexuality workshops in the second of the four day-long sessions. Baishali di had wanted the women to feel comfortable and give them the opportunity to consent fully, explaining about my work and why I wanted to join, before inviting me to come into the sessions with them.

The office of the organisation was on the first floor of a building in the middle of a northern *para* of Kolkata. The women, it was explained to me later, had been recruited to the training programme from local residential areas and all lived nearby. When I entered the room, the five participants were unrolling long sheets of paper taped together, like those that I had seen Nila preparing in the office for the sex-workers' collectives. They were taking turns to lie down on the papers, whilst a colleague traced the outline of their body on the paper with a felt pen. Two of the women asked me to help them. One seemed very nervous, holding her breath and turning her head to avoid eye contact while I drew around her. She was noticeably tense as I drew around the outside of her thigh. As I traced up the inside of her calf I felt instinctively that

she was so uncomfortable I stopped and cut across just beneath the knee, resulting in an odd final shape on the paper, more like a penguin than a person. The other young woman was less evidently uncomfortable, but I did feel that she was shy about my drawing around her body. After this task had been completed, the women wrote their names on the body maps and sat around in a loose circle to introduce themselves to me, and hear my introduction to them. One of them later explained to me that during the first session, they had begun with a discussion about why they were training within non-traditional livelihoods[164] for women rather than as tailors, teachers, secretaries and so on. They had moved from this to consider at length how we introduce ourselves[165] to other people, what details we give during an introduction and why those are considered important. In particular they had been encouraged to question whether they actually felt such details were important, and what these social introductions leave out. I suppose that while introducing themselves to me, they may have been improvising with some of those new ideas for the first time.

After this, Baishali di instructed the women to go and lie down on their body maps, and began leading them in a kind of guided meditation. She drew their focus to their breath, "এই নিঃশাস  আমাকে প্রাণ দায় / *Ei nishash amake pran dae* (this breath gives me life)," and to various parts of their body including the

[164] The organisation trains women in a profession that is almost entirely male-dominated, and in which it is extremely unusual for women to work. They refer to this as a 'non-traditional livelihood' or profession for women. I have removed reference to the exact role and skillsets in which the women are trained to protect the organisation and its beneficiaries.
[165] কিকরে নিজেকে পরিচয় দেব  / *kikore nijeke porichoy debo*

hair on their head. She then began to lead them through a visualisation, of shampooing the hair, the pleasurable feeling of rubbing the shampoo through the scalp,[166] and prompting the relaxation of their eyes, nose, teeth, tongue, and all the features of their face one by one. She continued, naming each part of the body as the visualisation extended to washing the back, the neck, the chest, the belly button, the thighs, feet and toes.

| আমার শরীরকে আমি সবচেয়ে ভালোবাসি ; আমার শরীরকে খুব আদর করছি । | Amar shorirke ami shobcheye bhalobashi ; amar shorirke khub ador korchi. | I love my body above all ; I am lovingly caring for my body. |
|---|---|---|

Concluding the visualisation in this way, after a long silence Baishali di invited the women to slowly open their eyes. For a time there was no sign of movement; very gradually the participants began to slowly bring themselves to a seated position, seeming reluctant to break the dense stillness invited by the exercise. After the participants had seated themselves cross-legged around the place where Baishali di was sitting, she asked them to reflect upon how they felt when they speak or think about different parts of their body.

| এই জায়গাগুলোর যখন কথা ভাবছো , মনের মধ্যে | Ei jaygagulor jokhon katha bhabcho, moner modhye ki abeg ei | When you think of these places, what emotions are we bringing up about |
|---|---|---|

[166] আনন্দ হয় / *ananda hoy*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| কি আবেগ এই জায়গাটাকে তৈরী করছি ? | jaygatake toiri korchi? | those parts of the body? |

She gestured to the prompts she had written on the flipchart attached to the wall, encouraging the women to use and go beyond them.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| দুঃখ | dukho | Sadness |
| রাগ | Raag | Anger |
| ভয় | Bhoy | Fear |
| ঘেন্না | Ghenna | Disgust |
| লজ্জা | Lojja | Embarrassment/Shame |
| সুখ | Sukh | Happiness |
| আনন্দ | Ananda | Pleasure |
| ভুগতে পারছি না | Bhujte parchi na | I don't know |

The silence persisted, although I felt that it was no longer as entirely relaxed as it had been a few moments before. Baishali di encouraged the participants again, acknowledging that this was both a straightforward and difficult task, difficult because she understood that they were not accustomed to speaking about their bodies in this way. She instructed them to go and write on their body maps how they felt about each part of their bodies, what emotions

thinking or speaking of them brought up. "যা খুশি তাই লিখবে / *Ja khushi tai likhbe* ( Write whatever you like ) . "

Even this invitation did not seem to make the exercise any less daunting for the participants. After five minutes they were called back together, and several of them expressed that they had not known what to write in that time. When Baishali di asked them what the problem was, they said, simply that they were confused about what to write because they had never thought about it before.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B : শরীরটা ভালো লাগছে?<br>P5 : হ্যাঁ<br>B : সেটা কি দায়ে ?<br>P5 : মাঝের আনন্দ দায় | B: shorirta bhalo lagche?<br>P5: hyan<br>B: Seta ki dae?<br>P5: Majher ananda dae | B: Do you like your body? Asked Baishali di.<br>P5: One of them spoke up. "Yes."<br>B: And what [feeling] does that give you?<br>P5: Sometimes it gives me pleasure/joy |

We observed that in the chest area of the body maps the majority of the women had written the word 'লজ্জা /*lajja* (embarrassment, shame)'. Picking up on this, Baishali di asked the participants why this should be so. One of the

five spoke up and offered an alternative emotion:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| গৌর্বিত। বাচাদেরকে দুধ খাওয়াবে ; যে আমি মেয়ে | Gourbito . Bachaderke dudh khawabe ; je ami meye. | Pride. I can feed children with my breasts ; [I feel] that I am a woman. |

Baishali di welcomed this alternative perspective. She cautioned however that not all women are mothers, and moreover that not all women who become mothers can produce breast milk. What then? Why should we feel shame about our breasts? Still another participant spoke up.

"They are private parts, ব্যক্তিগত/*byektigoto* (personal)" she said.

"Yes! মাথা চালাতে হবে/ *matha chalate hobe* (But we have to think a little bit more). টাকা/*taka* (money) in the bank is also private… so where does this mindset come from"

There was a thoughtful pause. Baishali di continued, proffering a response to herself since no other was forthcoming.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B : সমাজ আমাদের মাথায় এই ঢুকায়। সমাজ যেটা বলছে - সমাজ যে ডাকবে বলে তুমি যাবে ? | B: Samaj amader mathay ei dukay. Samaj jeta bole - samaj je dukbe bole amra jabo ? | B: Society puts this into our heads. Whatever society says to us, if it tells you to jump in, will you? |
| P2 : হ্যাঁ , এর আপাততঃ | P2: Hyan, er apatoto | P2: Well, yes, up to a point. |
| B : সমাজ এইখানে রয়েছে। আমি নিজেই সমাজের অংশ। আমি সমাজ হয়েছি , তাইনা ? ... কিন্তু জামাই যদি উড়না নামিয়ে দায় , আর আমি না বলি ? [pause] মেয়েদের কেন বুক ঢাকা উচিত ? | B : Samaj eikhane royeche. Ami nije samajer ongsho. Ami Samaj hoyechi , taina? … kintu jamai jodi urnata namiye dae, aar ami na boli ? [pause] Meyeder keno buk dhaka uchit? | B: And in this way society is formed. I am myself a part of society. I have become 'society', isn't it? But if my brother-in-law takes my urna off, and I say no, [then what]…? [pause] So why should girls cover their breasts? |
| P3 : মা, বাবা, দিদি বলে | P3: Ma, baba, didi bole | P3: Mum, dad, and big sister say so. |
| | B : Shoriye dao. Amar keno mone kori? | B: Yes but put that out |
| | P2: Mone hoy meyeder sompad. | |

B : সরিয়ে দাও। আমার কেন মনে করি ?

P2 : মনে হয় মেয়েদের সম্পদ।

B : Interesting . কেন ?

P2 : অনেক গল্প আছে।

P5 : ছেলেদের ডাকতে হবেনা। তাই আমাদেরকে না করতে বলি। কিন্তু আজকাল [ লোকজন ] বুক খুলে বেড়াই।

B : তাই। দেখে আমাদের কি মনে হয় ?

B: Interesting. Keno?

P2: Anek golpo ache.

P5: Cheleder dakte hobena. Tai amaderke na korte boli. Kintu ajkal [lokjon] buk khule berae.

B: Tai. Dekhe amader ki mone hoy?

P5: Onyora kharap bolbe.

B: Tomra?

P5: Amra o

of your mind. What do we think? Why do I think I should?

P2: I think, it is a woman's value.

B: Interesting. Why?

P2: There are lots of stories.

P5: So that boys don't [cat]call. That's why they tell us not to. But these days [people] go around with their breasts uncovered.

B: Right. What do we think when we see that?

P5: That other people will say bad things.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| P5 : অন্যরা খারাপ বলবে। | | B: And what about you? |
| B : তমোড়া ? | | P5: Us too. |
| P5 : আমরাও | | |

Everybody expressed agreement.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| P1 : লোক বলে ছেলেদের দেখানোর জন্যে। | P1: Lok bole cheleder dekhanor jonye. | P1: People say it's to show boys. |
| B : খারাপটা কি ? | B: Kharap ta ki? | B: Where's the bad in that? |

Through this exercise, Baishali di guides the conversation towards the women's experiences of their own bodies, in relation to their own lives. She invites the women to spend some time concentrating on their experience of their body, and their feelings about it. This exercise, of attending to their bodies, is unfamiliar to the women and they proclaim that they do not find it easy. By gently asking questions about their bodies, Baishali di helps the

women to guide their attention to the parts of themselves that have been relegated to the background through constant acts of turning away.

Turning towards their bodies in this way, the women are also invited to ask questions about *how* they have come to be orientated towards certain parts of their own bodies, and others, through particular affects. Why is it that particular parts of the body are experienced as pleasant and proper, whilst others are to be concealed and turned from with shame. Baishali di suggests, through the discussion, ways for the women to reorientate themselves towards those parts of their body that have been relegated to the background. In this process of reorientation, accomplished through affect and attention, the implicit logics by which their bodies have been relegated to the background are also brought to the foreground, and examined. If the breasts are covered and concealed, then they are placing them in the background not because of লজ্জা /*lajja* (shame), but motivated by a sense of privacy and preferences. Through these processes of attention and questioning, the women are turned towards their bodies anew with affects of love (ভালোবাসা, আদর/bhalobasha, ador) and pleasure (আনন্দ , *ananda*). If one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, then perhaps it is also possible to become a woman otherwise, as de Beauvoir also had hoped, through love in strength, by not escaping herself but by finding herself, affirming herself, with love as the source of this new orientation to life (de Beauvoir 1949). In the following section this ethics and love as oriented to one's body is explored In another form of everyday ethics

and affection through queering of rituals.

## 5.II Love as an Ethical Orientation

## Queering Rituals with Everyday Ethics

On the morning of the 9th November 2018 I awoke to a queer invitation:

> *Hi Friends! Since it is Bhai phota*[167] *today, I have decided to Queer it up. I am cooking delicious gourmet Bangali food & inviting my queer friends over for "Queer Phota."Basically we shall celebrate our friendships by applying the ritualized chandan, ghee, dhan & durba on each other's foreheads*[1]*. Please join me at [ADDRESS] from 5:30-7:30pm. Love to see all of you and celebrate this auspicious occasion with each other.*
>
> *xoxo Hrithika*

I was honoured by the invitation, and its intimacy. However, I was expected to visit my biological family the same evening, and I experienced a tension between the two summonses. I wanted to go to Hrithika's queer phota, but

[167] Bhai Phota is a religious ritual celebrating the relationship between brothers and sisters. It is celebrated across India (sometimes under the name Bhai Dooj or Bhai Tika), but prominently in Bengal. On the given date, which varies according to the lunisolar Hindu calendar, sisters apply chandan (sandalwood) paste to the forehead of their brothers and cousin-brothers in what is known as a phota in a prayer for their brother's prosperity, health, happiness and long life. They may also put raw rice (dhan) and durba (Bermuda grass) on their brother's forehead to symbolise their prayer for his prosperity. Depending on individual family custom, sisters may also offer light from a lamp's flame to brothers. Brothers respond by offering gifts as a sign of their affection and commitment to their sisters.
Bhai is the word for brother in Bengali and an array of other Sanskrit-derived North Indian languages. 'Phota' (or dooj, tika) refers to the ceremonial mark made on the forehead with Chanda paste. Although it is aligned to Vedic mythology, Bhai Phota is commonly practised by considered the more traditional occasion for celebrating brother/sister relationships, although the alternative festival of Raksha Bandhan (celebrated widely across India in August) is becoming increasingly popular, especially amongst younger generations. Bhai Phota is the last major event in the peak festival season for Bengali Hindus, after Kali Puja/ Lokkhi Puja (also celebrated as Deepaboli/Diwali) and Durga Puja.

also could not cancel on my biological family. I bought a new sari in the afternoon, and set off to Hrithika's house in the early evening. I hoped the others would be (uncharacteristically) on time.

I was dropped at the end of a lane in Bhowanipore, one of the oldest parts of South Kolkata, and walked the remainder of the way to the unfamiliar address. Offset from the narrow road, lit by the warm glow of Diwali lights, I approached a red house in the colonial style of architecture. Though by now flats had been built in the courtyard across from it, this house was clearly the original reason for the rusted wrought iron gates that separated the space from the street. Through the ground-floor windows, with their faded shutters thrown open, a library of dusty leather-bound volumes sat looking out at the world from mahogany bookcases. I rang the bell and was immediately admitted by an elderly household help, who sent me on my way upstairs. Halfway up the staircase I was greeted by Hrithika, wispy and glowing in a dressing gown and slippers, her hair still wet and her smile radiant.

"I'm so glad you have come, she said, embracing me warmly. "Come, আমি সারি পরে আসছি [ami sari pore aschi // I'll put on my sari, I'm coming]."

The stairway opened out onto a long drawing room, where a copper stag's head hung above an antique grand piano surrounded by darkwood furniture, set with brass vases, family photographs, and other such trinkets. When Raja arrived a little later we would remark how much the house resembled the

house in Kuheli, an obscure 1970s Bengali ghost movie that we had previously established is our mutual favourite. The classical and culturally specific décor of the house created an evocative setting for the gathering that was essential to our experience of it, a nostalgic atmosphere invoking a dreamlike ideal of Bengal.

Two friends of Hrithika had already arrived, and I was introduced to them as Shyamal and Aaryan. Shyamal, a Bengali Masters graduate doing odd jobs in publishing, wore a smart shirt and trousers, while Aaryan, an aspiring fashion student, wore an elaborately patterned turquoise silk kurta.[168] We chatted in Bengali while Hrithika changed, emerging in a green cotton sari over a black western-style crop top, draped to leave one leg exposed, showing off the skinny jeans she had put on in place of the traditional cotton petticoat underneath. It was then that Raja arrived with his friend Hilde, a Finnish research colleague from the University of Kent who also identifies within the LGBTQ* spectrum. Raja is a tall, elegant North-Kolkata born Bengali who was at that time completing his PhD in Human Geography at a University in Germany. An expert Bharatnatyam style dancer, his movements are all fluidly inflected with the poise and gestural expressiveness of dance. Now we were all here, we began to complain that Abhijeet was late, speculating that it could be because he was tangled up in the sari he had said he would wear in our morning Facebook messages. We scolded Raja harshly for not wearing the traditional dhoti[169] he had said he would put on for the occasion.

[168] Traditional tunic worn by men, usually over slim-fitting trousers called churidar.
[169] Loose trouser-like garment worn on the lower body, constructed by means of pleats and folds from

Hrithika brought across an antique brass thali[170] upon which she had placed an unlit clay pradip,[171] chandan made into a paste with ghee, durba grass and raw rice grains.

"Everyone will give everything to everyone," she said. "This is about friendship. It is a 'friendship phota'."

As Hrithika moved to prepare for the ritual, the question arose of what blessings to give one another.

"May your heart, your love, and your life glow like this lamp, and may you be happy always," said Raja to the room, in flowing poetic Bengali, before repeating it in English. "What more blessing do you need than this?" We considered the austere traditional verse, which everyone knew off by heart and chanted together in a singsong voice, with some laughter.[172] There was an

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a single piece of unstitched cloth. Like the sari, it is therefore considered to be a cleaner and purer form of garment.

[170] Plate, here specifically a plate used for ritual purposes

[171] A teardrop-shaped oil lamp made of clay, usually lit for puja or other ceremonial purposes.

[172] ভাইয়ের কপালে দিলাম ফোঁটা, যমের দুয়ারে পড়ল কাঁটা।
যমুনা দেয় যমকে ফোঁটা, আমি দিই আমার ভাইকে ফোঁটা॥
যমুনার হাতে ফোঁটা খেয়ে যম হল অমর।
আমার হাতে ফোঁটা খেয়ে আমার ভাই হোক অমর॥
Bhaiyer kopale dilam phota, Jamer duyare porle kata ।
Jamuna dey Jamke Phota, ami di amar bhaike phota ।।
Jamunar hate phota kheye Jam holo omor ।
Amar hate phota kheye amar bhai hok omor ।।
I have put a phota on my brother's forehead, a thorn has fallen at Jam's door ।
Jamuna gives Jam a phota, I give my brother a phota ।।
Receiving a phota from Jamuna's hand, Jam became immortal।
Receiving a phota from my hand, may my brother become immortal ।।

The verse is frequently only used in lines 1-4, or in some families lines 1-2 and 4-6. Jam (Yam, or Yamaraja) and Jamuna (Yamuna or Yami) are twin deities, with Jam most commonly understood in

unspoken agreement that this would not do. We were improvising our relationships, and what we were to each other did not and could not be made to fit this centuries-worn formulation with its gendered binary and patriarchal relationality.

"And what finger should we use?" someone asked. The phota, a chandan-paste mark imparted on the forehead, is usually made with the little finger of the left hand. Raja flirtatiously raised his index finger and said he would give the phota with that one. Hrithika raised her middle finger in a gesture of defiance and said she would give it with that one. We all laughed.

Hrithika was just about to start offering the ritual items to Shyamal when Abhijeet burst in, wearing a striped vest and shorts, grinning ear to ear. Hrithika slammed down the thali.

"শাড়ি কোই" [ Sari koi? // Where is your sari?] we shouted with one voice.

Abhijeet smiled his charming smile and heading straight for the bedroom insisted he would be out in a few minutes. To our surprise he was true to his timings. He emerged in a forest green sari draped perfectly over a bright multicolour floral shirt with golden glittering threads. Bald-headed, joyful, a pink fabric purse dangling from his right arm, this was as much about queering culture as bending gender. We fussed over him, and Hrithika and I

Vedic texts as the Lord of Death, and Jamuna as a life force. In the Rig Veda they are also depicted as fire (Jam) and earth (Jami). Moreover, Jamuna is consubstantial with the river Yamuna. In Hindu mythology, Jamuna marks Jam's head with a phota, and it is this act which makes him immortal.

lovingly rearranged the pleats on his shoulder. Hrithika then lit the lamp, and standing before Shyamal offered the lamplight before his face. She paused and looked to us all standing at one side. Something was not right.

"There has to be ulu," she said. For a moment everyone looked at one another. Aaryan and Shyamal started to say "I can't…"

Ulu is a high-pitched vocal ululation given at the most 'auspicious' moments in Bengali Hindu sacred rituals, including the crucial moments of major pujas, marriage ceremonies and other festival occasions such as rites-of-passage rituals. It is therefore emotionally bound with multi-layered memories in the Bengali experience, as it forms part of the somatic texture of life's most sacred and significant moments. In many cases, the sound of ulu marks time-out-of-time, and there was an automatic consensus that the Bhai Phota – or 'Queer/Friendship Phota' as we had renamed it – was incomplete without it.

The discomforted reaction arose from the fact that, despite there being no formal prohibition on giving ulu according to age or gender, it is usually given by women. Aside from Hrithika (and Hilde who was new to Bengali culture), I was the only woman present, and it is difficult to give ulu alone. There was a moment of awkward hesitation, then we shrugged and I began to give ulu, tentatively supported by Aaryan and Raja. To the sound of our increasingly confident ulu, Hrithika circled the light around Shyamal's face and heart. She placed the raw rice and durba grass on his hair and marked his

forehead with the chandan paste.

"Do you know why we use the Durba?" said Abhijeet. "Because it's a rhizome. It sprouts in all directions without limits. If you pull it up and plant it, it grows again. We use it so that your prosperity should be like that." Raja and Hilde murmured approval of this distinctly Deleuzian explanation. Shyamal now bent down to touch Hrithika's feet in an act of *pranam*[173].

"No!" Hrithika protested, but Shyamal insisted, and we encouraged Hrithika to give him a blessing. After some further protest – which is in fact not uncommon in the giving of pranam and blessings between those who are particularly close – she placed her hands gently on his head and prayed for his health and happiness.

One after one we sat for each other. Bhai Phota is usually given by girls to their brothers, and in some families the light only given to those who are younger than the sister offering the ritual. We however all sat before one another regardless of age and gender, marking each other's heads and shining the light of the sacred lamp over each other's faces and hearts. Each giver improvised a blessing or wish for their friend as they deemed suitable for the relationship. Abhijeet gave some particularly saucy blessings, adding to the usual wishes for health and happiness that Hrithika should "give all the men a good kick"; that Shyamal should "have many boyfriends and break every

[173] A traditional act of respect and deference to elders, which is reciprocated by the giving of *ashirbad* (blessing).

single one of their hearts"; and that I should have "lifetime ESRC grants, and a good long 3-year non-teaching postdoc". Whilst Aaryan and Shyamal gave Hrithika beautiful but quite normal gifts of chocolate and jewellery, Abhijeet gave her a large packet of condoms.

Towards the very end, I gave the light, phota and sweets to Raja, who would not allow me to put the durba and raw rice on his head, insisting he should put it on mine in a prayer for my prosperity. Raja and I had had a long but increasingly close relationship over social media, where we were introduced by other Bengali academics. Only on this visit to Kolkata had we finally met in person, and discovered many shared kin-like ties in our personal networks. Our diasporic experiences and many mutual friends both in Kolkata and abroad have made us feel very close, very quickly. I touched his feet with sincere affection, and this clearly moved him a great deal. We held each other in a long, firm, hug.

After eating Rainbow Cake, which we all cut holding the knife together, I had to rush off to my own family's celebrations. I was not allowed to leave without eating at least a small a plate of home-cooked Bengali food – dal, soft fried aubergine, and slow-cooked meat with rice. An hour later, when because of the age relation my cousin-sisters did not allow me to hold the light to my cousin-brothers' chests,[174] when I bit my tongue whilst my aged aunt gave ulu

[174] There are an array of variations on the prohibitions and permissions of different ways of making the Bhai Phota offering across different family groups. This variation, practised by my biological family, is not pervasive in Bengal, but Is the version I have known most intimately.

on her own, the ceremony suddenly felt sadly diminished. I felt a pang of resentment that I could not express my love for my cousin-brothers, and indeed my cousin-sisters, to the extent I had just done with my friends[175].

It may seem unusual to include a description of an annually occurring ritual in an argument for the activist potential in everyday relationships of love. Although rituals are often said to mark 'time out of time' and thus typically coded as sacred rather than mundane (Rappaport 1992, Gell 1992, Leach 1968), relationship rituals create and reconstitute everyday social relations by drawing together the personal and the sociocultural (Turner 1974, Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Moreover, Robbins (2016) notes that while rituals represent people's transcendent versions of values, they do so in a way that shapes their ethical sensibilities as expressed in their everyday lives. Indeed he shows that rituals and otherwise religious practices, as opportunities for standing back from the flow of the ordinary, inform peoples' everyday ethics even as they are grounded in them. I suggest that kinship rituals in particular are useful for supporting Robbins' assertion that ritual practices exist in mutual relationship with the everyday, precisely because of the ways in which values and ethics unfold within each. For example, family relationships are not simply given but are relationships that people must 'perform' in the Austinian sense, not only during annual events such as Christmas (Kuper 1993), but also in more frequent and mundane 'rituals' such as sharing meals

[175] In recent years, it has become increasingly popular for rakhis and phota to be given bilaterally between siblings, regardless of gender. This however is a novel development, largely limited to urban-dwelling families.

and providing everyday acts of care (Weston 1991, Pleck 2000, Fiese 2006). Along these lines, this queer celebration of Bhai Phota offers a pertinent insight into the ways that queer people conceptualise, establish and practice relationships within the framework of friendship as family. Through further analysis of Hrithika's Queer Phota, I show how ethically motivated creative improvisation with ritual can be used in an attempt to recover and reconstitute cultural traditions, personal relationships, and socio-political values.

Robbins defines values as representations of the good, or at least that which is held to be socially understood as good and desirable (2016:774). He shows that while values may often come into conflict in everyday life (e.g. honesty and politeness, obligations to kin or affines), rituals often serve to offer an exemplary value in relation to idealised roles that persist at the level of the social imaginary, regardless of whether real people 'live up to' these in their day to day lives. Indeed it is often for this reason that queer people have felt excluded from the main rituals of the societies in which they live, which often validate and uphold normative institutional structures of familial, social, and romantic relationships. Consequently, rituals such as same-sex marriage have occupied a contentious place in LGBTQ* activist discourses, with many suggesting that they do not believe celebrating queer relationships in marriage rituals can be commensurate with genuinely queer ethics (e.g. Warner 1999, Winnubst 2006). On the other hand, and for precisely the same reasons, queer people in various cultures and contexts have creatively

reappropriated and reimagined elements of sociocultural rituals to affirm their relationships and mark important life events through commitment ceremonies, weddings, baby naming ceremonies, and so on (e.g. Manodori 2008, Khan 2011, Mamali and Stevens 2020). Although rituals are either ancient in origin or widely perceived to be so (Hobshawm and Ranger 2012), rituals are themselves open to transformation, through gradual evolution or proactive alteration. As Turner (1986) has put it, rituals are 'cultural performances' in which people as 'creative actors' design their ways of living through ritual. The shared cultural significance of ritual practices, elements, and aesthetic forms contributes to the store of tools with which cultural rhetoric can be performed, as people draw upon the meaning of ritual behaviours and artefacts to shape their social worlds.

Bhai Phota, known as Bhai Dooj in other parts of India, is a ritual that celebrates existing sibling relationships, highlighting values of male protectorship, feminine familial loyalty and caregiving, and the spiritual value of a long life (particularly for the men). In one of the traditional forms of the sacred formula, the value of male physical strength is also celebrated with the prayer "ভাই যেন হয় লোহার ভাটা / bhai jeno lohar bhata (may my brother be as strong as iron)". The blessings and gifts given by the brothers to sisters are traditionally imbued with the meaning of protectorship, while the offering of the pradeep (lamp), chandan, ghee, and durba are various signs of the sister's wish for the brother's prosperity and blessing. Bhai Phota is not traditionally

celebrated beyond the immediate family.[176] In the absence of a day that celebrates parents such as the European and American traditions of Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day, it is perhaps the principal cultural celebration of immediate family in the region. Thus, Bhai Phota is a ritual within which Bengalis 'do' family by performing their sibling relationships and expressing values about the quality of those relationships that reaffirm the gendered roles of brothers and sisters. Bhai Phota in its traditional form focuses only on the cross-gender relationship between brothers and sisters, and does not therefore celebrate 'homosocial' bonds between siblings of the same gender.

Hrithika's invitation replaces the gendered 'bhai' with 'queer', and she emphasises that the phota is in celebration of 'friendship'. In the wording of her invitation she asserts the auspiciousness of the bonds that this ritual marks, emphasising the special nature of the relationships she invokes. She leads by expressing her intention that all the bonds of friendship will be celebrated regardless of gender. Hrithika's appropriation of the ritual thus necessitates the management of ethical conflicts arising from the ritual structuring of sibling relationships according to normative gender stereotypes. In this sense I suggest the cultural creativity she undertakes is similar to that of same-sex couples who decide to celebrate their relationship

[176] Nuclear family and first cousins, who in North Indian languages are referred to and related to as 'brother' and 'sister'. In the past decade, the North Indian sibling celebration of Raksha Bandhan has become more commonly celebrated in Bengal, popularised in part through Bollywood and television representations. This involves women and girls tying a colourful thread band (Rakhi) around the wrist of their brother, seeking their promise of lifelong protection. Rakhis have come to be popularly tied not only to immediate relatives but also friends, classmates, or even colleagues, and subsequently there is an emerging celebration by some of Bhai Phota amongst broader social networks. This however remains exceptional rather than normal practice.

through wedding or commitment ceremonies, whereby many if not all of the symbolic elements that make the ritual recognisable have historically been associated with values, social roles and relationship structures that exclude or morally condemn same-sex and otherwise queer relationships. In the case of both weddings and Queer Phota, this concerns both the socially shared meaning of particular rituals, and their material expression, since both of these facets intersect to produce the sacralising effect of the ritual process (Mamali and Stevens 2020).

In their study of same-sex couples' wedding rituals, Mamali and Stevens (2020) suggested that traditional wedding ritual forms were reflected upon and displayed differently depending on whether the couple accepted or rejected a particular ritual action, either in form or meaning. They thus categorised their informants' "reflexive display" of wedding customs in four ways: playful appropriation, strategic compliance, annexation, and conspicuous absence. Playful appropriation is the term they use for rituals whose material form is accepted, but whose meaning is reconstituted. In the context of same-sex marriage, this often entailed playing with gender norms, such as a couple who shared a bachelorette party that they called a "stagette", during which they engaged in a series of stereotypically masculine pastimes including attending a Milwall football match, going to old pubs, and go-kart racing. Several other couples interviewed subverted the tradition of women lining up to catch the brides' bouquet by having line-ups of all male catchers. Where meaning and form did not provoke outright rejection for Mamali and

Stevens' informants, they spoke of couples' 'strategic compliance' with ritual norms, such as wearing plain wedding bands, or walking down an aisle at the start of the ceremony despite having chosen to hold it, for example, in a pub. They assert that this display is necessarily a reflexive and strategic display, rather than one of mere compliance, since the ritual is not simply *done* but is undone and re-done through the justifications the individual couples use for its inclusion, and the fact of their doing it in its normative form as a non-conforming (i.e. same sex) couple. In certain cases, they noticed that couples did not change the material form of a ritual but altered it in order to communicate a changed meaning. This included a couple who integrated 'jumping the broom' to draw a parallel between the lack of legal provision for enslaved people to marry and the black partner's family's refusal to accept their relationship; and a couple who wear three wedding bands to signify engagement, civil partnership, and their subsequent marriage after the latter was legalised. Mamali and Stevens refer to this as annexation, creating opportunities for story-telling by the sacralisation of materially altered (but recognisable) ritual items. Finally, several couples commented on the 'conspicuous absence' of wedding traditions that they felt had such problematic meanings and histories they could not be reclaimed. This included a couple who wore bright floral dresses instead of white gowns, and another who refused to walk down the aisle. In both cases the couples expressed resistance to the patriarchal scripts of female chastity and 'belonging' of women to men. In this context, the non-performance of certain acts becomes in itself meaningful, and contributes to the constitution and

expression of the relationship being celebrated.

Faris Khan (2011) notes similar kinds of strategic appropriation and transformation of ritual forms in the same-sex weddings of diasporic South Asians in North America. For Khan's informants, calling the ceremony a 'wedding', and not a civil partnership or other name, was an explicitly "political" statement. By referring to their union as a 'wedding', these couples situated their ceremonies in a socially and politically esteemed genre, and their relationships as expressions of culturally valued lifestyles. Whilst in European traditions Wedding Ceremonies are fairly standardised, nuptial practices across India have never been uniform. This existing flexibility further eased the couples' "agentic improvisation" with the ritual form of the few 'mandatory' elements of Indian weddings, such as the presence of a sacred fire around which couples walk one after the other in *pheras* (circles). Whilst in some traditions the couple make four *pheras* and in others seven, the groom usually leads a greater number of circumambulations than the bride. All of Khan's informants interpreted the significance of the *pheras* differently, and furthermore all couples observed the ritual in a unique variation based on the meaning they inferred and the story they wished to tell by practising it. All couples chose to divide the leading of rounds equally between partners, either by grouping them in equal divisions, taking turns, or making a circumambulation side by side. One bride explained that in doing so, they felt that they were emphasising the imperfections of traditional heterosexual marriage while demonstrating the value of equality in their own relationship.

Both the weddings and Bhai Phota can be seen as a form of work, a ritual commitment, wherein the 'traditional' sociocultural elements are rhetorically employed to express distinctive personal relationships, characterised by particular values. Similarly to the same-sex weddings described, Hrithika's Queer Phota shows both instances of apparent faithfulness to traditional forms, and varying kinds of departure from them. Hrithika begins by annexing the cultural form of Bhai Phota itself, retaining its material use of the "ritualised chandan, ghee, dhan and durba" but altering its application to endow friendships, rather than heterosocial sibling relationships, with a sacralised status. The ritual actions of marking the brother's head with a chandan *phota*, offering them the light of the *pradeep,* and the placing of dhan and durba on their head is playfully appropriated by participants of all genders, with chosen brothers marking the foreheads of their chosen sisters and female friends, sisters blessing each other, and brothers feeding each other sweets. The ritual is offered with a prayer, but there is no mention of Jam (the Lord of Death) or his sister Jamuna; instead light, warmth, and joy are invoked. The blessings from the brothers are not, in line with the institutionalised social values, promises of protection, but express personal values of academic curiosity ("lifetime ESRC grants") and sex positivity ("may you have many boyfriends and break every single one of their hearts"). Sweets are shared, and these include a Rainbow layer-cake, referencing the Pride flag. The meaning of the rituals is appropriated, but the form is playfully altered to express different applications of those meanings and

introduce new values and ethical priorities.

The shift in values suggested by the playful appropriation of the Bhai Phota rituals here is not unique to queer groups, but can also be seen in other South Asian Cultural contexts. In 2017 the Canadian Indian Youtuber and Presenter Lilly Singh[177] posted a photograph on her instagram, in which she showed herself and her brother posing side by side, each with a *Rakhi* tied to their wrists. The rakhi is a decorative thread bracelet traditionally offered by sisters to their brothers on the date of *Raksha Bandhan*, which falls in August each year. The picture was accompanied by a caption in which she described the day as very special to her, saying she was "overjoyed" because her "baby bro" had tied a Rakhi on her for the first time. She spoke of how she had tied a Rakhi on her brother for years "without questioning why or even critically thinking", but had revised her view of the custom as a result of "having travelled the world and met so many people… who are negatively impacted by sexism in really severe ways." She continued,

> "I think about why a girl I've met in a village in India thinks it's okay for her brother, uncle or cousin to abuse her. I think about why girls feel they can't speak up. I also think about why parents in so many places view daughters as a burden. One of the reasons is that so many traditions we practice in many cultures around the world have sexism embedded into

[177] Lilly Singh rose to popularity first in the global South Asian diaspora and later in India itself by creating comedic videos about Punjabi culture and the vicissitudes of diasporic family life. She is now a producer, television host and comedian, and has made appearances with major Indian celebrities such as Shahrukh Khan and Madhuri Dixit.

> them and if we don't change that, they will always seem the norm. Girls shouldn't be raised to believe that brothers should protect and sisters require protection. Rather, they should be taught that they are equal and should both make a promise to each other. Sisters, daughters and mothers should be celebrated in all the same ways brothers, sons and fathers are and if a tradition suggests otherwise, then it's time to change that tradition. Just because something has happened for a long time, it doesn't make it right. To all my sisters and brothers, it's time to make it right."
>
> (Singh, 2017)

Singh makes a direct connection between her everyday experiences of sexism and her witness to the impact of sexism on other people, and the unilateral heterosocial practise of sisters tying rakhis on their brothers. She translates this conviction into an alteration of the Raksha Bandhan ritual, annexing the sign of the rakhi to tell a new story about equality in sibling relationships across gender. She also goes further, making of her conviction a call to action, urging her many million followers to change traditions in order to teach people that brothers and sisters are equal. She explicitly critiques the ethics of established tradition ("just because something has happened for a long time, it doesn't make it right"). In the comments section, many young South Asian women comment in agreement with Singh's post, and several divulge that in their families they also practice the traditional bilaterally. One follower shared

that "When we explained [to my brother, who is 12 years junior than me] what rakhi is... He decided to tie me rakhi as well as he claimed I was his protector. That feeling is the sweetest thing!". This wealth of responses exemplifies Turner's insight that rituals are themselves open to transformation, and that personal convictions and choices shape these transformations. This stands in contrast to the received anthropological wisdom that rituals express a 'transcendental social' which has a quality of permanence that is impervious to the fluidity and conflicts of everyday life (Bloch 2012). In the playful appropriation of Bhai Phota, Raksha Bandhan and Wedding rituals, I have shown how everyday ethics may re-do rituals, and work towards a shifting of the axiomatic values of a given society.

Certain elements of the *Bhai Phota* ritual are unchanged in the celebration at Hrithika's home, notably the giving of the chandan and ghee *phota,* dhan, and durba, but also the aesthetic and somatic presentation of the ritual environment. Despite none of us having given ulu before, proceeding without this sonic signifier of auspicious moments feels awkward, and we produce it together out of a kind of deeply-felt necessity. The aesthetic and somatic elements of the ritual are displayed with a degree of joyful excess that is theatrical, or even camp. The setting of the charmingly antique home, with its old books and brass vases, invokes a peculiarly Bengali aesthetic bringing to mind the golden era of Bengali cinema, the household values expressed by Nikhilesh in Tagore's '*Ghore Baire*', and the 'Kolkata rust' associated with independence in India and liberal Nehruvian socialism (see Chapter 1). The

most luxurious and traditional Bengali dress is requested, and insisted upon, by all the members. In the context of South Asian same-sex weddings, Khan (2011) notes that the wearing of the dhoti in particular was spoken of as particularly meaningful by one groom, who referenced the garment's historic status as the oldest and most auspicious form of Indian dress for men. This groom further connects the culture of the dhoti to the culture of pre-colonial India, before the introduction of British Victorian standards of gender, and associated laws policing sexuality. In this way, Khan shows how the display of cultural authenticity through observing particular ritual practises and aesthetic codes inserts the ritual participants into an Indian institution: in the groom's case, marriage; in the case of Hrithika's chosen family, the bond of the sibling relationship.

Puar describes this kind of ritual alteration as "recovery work" (Puar 1998:41), identifying the emotional and politically motivated "desire to explode the myth of homosexuality as a Western construct" as part of a reclamation of India by queer people and allies. I suggest that the display of queer relationships in familiar rituals also serves a rhetorical function of making non-normative social bonds intelligible to the wider society in which that relationship plays out. This is achieved partly through the playful appropriation and annexation of familiar, established ritual forms (Mamali and Stevens 2020), but also by presenting relationships within culturally valued frameworks and enduring social relationship structures (Khan 2011, see also Robbins 2016). These strategies of cultural rhetoric insert queer people

and their relationships into scripts of social morality, even as they selectively challenge those prevailing moral values that undermine divergent ethical convictions informed by ordinary experiences and everyday life. In the following section of this chapter on everyday ethics, I consider interpersonal affective ethics and spaces between queer people built on love and affection despite the geopolitical bifurcation of India and Pakistan into two separate, unassailable entities by the Partition of 1947. By allowing my analysis to zoom in so minutely to these everyday, intimate interactions between two people, I show how the ethical conditions of large-scale social and historical events haunt the lifeworlds of the present, and shape the possibilities for being together in diffuse but definite ways.

## Friend of Pakistan

In this penultimate section, more than anywhere else in the thesis, I rely on deeply personal, autoethnographic materials to furnish my anthropological contribution with consent from Asad (a non-binary, bisexual artist living in Pakistan) to reproduce our exchange. I have found this to be methodologically and ethically necessary in order to write meaningfully about the everyday manifestations of love, friendship, and intimacy that I argue orientate felicitous social and spatial relations amongst Kolkata's queer community. This is despite the prevailing convention to avoid excessive centring of the ethnographer and the ethnographer's experience in anthropological writings, except perhaps in the context of critical reflexive practice. As much of my

thesis has already shown, such a conception of the ethnographer's 'proper' place vis-à-vis their informants and the social worlds they describe is strongly influenced by the colonial origins of the discipline and the expectation of an anthropologist's 'outsiderness' to the context they study. It is also, of course, to encourage the best possible conditions for analytical clarity, allowing for the difficulty of negotiating events in which one's own emotional life-worlds are deeply implicated. Whilst I have certain epistemological disagreements with this position, which I consider to derive from a rationalist mistrust of emotion and feeling characteristic of Cartesian knowledge hierarchies, I do not have the scope to unravel the various contradictions and potential hypocrisies I see within this premise. Rather, even upholding a certain degree of mistrust for one's own emotional experiences, many anthropologists who have seen fit to study friendship have also concluded that the only material rich enough to provide the thick description necessary for a credible anthropological account is that in which the ethnographer themselves is a participant.

Although I have witnessed many tender intimate events between friends, lovers, and chosen family in the course of everyday life in Kolkata's queer community, I cannot presume to describe these without feeling myself a voyeur. Similarly, since my witnessing of such interactions was almost always in the informal context of friends' (or my own) home, neither do I feel that it would have been appropriate or ethical to seek out and initiate discussions or interviews about these necessarily mundane and often intensely private

intimate events. Nonetheless, I have worked towards the claim that any discussion of queer ethics, friendships, and orientations cannot be complete without a descent into the ordinary moments of intimacy in which that love, which inspires queer movements, is expressed and lived. Taking seriously Berlant's (1998) understanding of intimacy as an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, I only feel meaningfully positioned to speak about those intimacies in which I share.

I therefore offer up for analysis my friendship and familial bond with Asad.. Asad and I met in Spring 2021 in the queer writing group that Amra Odbhuth set up during the Covid-19 lockdowns. In the Zoom room, as in a physical room, from the first moments I felt a *taan* (pull) towards them, which I have no way to explain or rationalise. Asad is based in Karachi, and just as I slip in and out of Bangla, Banglish and English, so too they lilted in and out of Urdu. It had long been my desire to learn Urdu and, seeing an opportunity to fulfil this while also supporting a freelance queer artist in the subcontinent, I wrote to Asad privately on the group Discord chat to ask whether they would teach me. They agreed, and so we commenced weekly Zoom lessons, through and outside of which our initial intuitive bond rapidly grew, settling into a deep friendship articulated in the language of chosen family.

My relationship with Asad cuts a form almost negative to the other chosen family relationships I treasure in India. Anubhuti, Sayak, Rooh and I have become family through in-person meetings and a deep hanging out. Although

we continue our relationships through messaging, social media and occasional calls when we are in different countries from one another, the fabric of our familial lives together is woven from countless moments of simple coexistence: sitting on the sofa watching TV, *adda mara*, eating together, daydreaming together, and sleeping in the same bed at night.[178] By contrast, Asad and I grew our queer kinship bond exclusively through online interactions. Our togetherness is a bricolage of video calls, messages, shared images, the voice down an inconsistent telephone line. I would press this still further: distance and separation have been the conditions of possibility for our mutual love and connection.

Asad is one of my most treasured people. I lack the language to describe or delineate the nature of the relationship, which goes beyond casual friendship but does not match any alternative 'kinds' of normative relationship category. Asad gives me affirmations of love and appreciation on a weekly basis. I tell Asad that I love, appreciate and admire them more often than I tell almost anyone else. All of this despite the fact that we had never, until recently, stood in the same physical space or held one another's' gaze. During our placeless experiences together, we frequently articulate vivid fantasies of everyday togetherness, co-constructing an imaginary place and time where our feelings of proximity are spatially realised.

—

[178] Co-sleeping amongst siblings, parents and children, and close friends is the norm in South Asia.

*Asad* *Anita*

Wanna go do the most mundane things w u

Omfg yes

Grocery Shopping is a love language

I'm thinking of them all now.

I'm paradoxically hyper-actively overwhelmed with all the totally boring things I wanna do with you.

Yes just wanna grow old like that w u

Doing the dishes and leaving each other notes to reorder the stuff to put in the bird feeder

These messages imagine a togetherness that is intensely intimate in its intense

mundanity. Whilst digital technologies facilitate conversations, sharing experiences, and spending time connected to one another, we express a mutual desire for co-presence that cannot be easily facilitated except by physical co-presence. We imagine together different ways of developing and expressing our bond by identifying simple, necessary acts that arise in co-habiting arrangements. These mundane occurrences, impossible for us to realise together at the time we were messaging, become exciting and even overwhelming possibilities despite – or perhaps, because – of their ordinariness. This interaction reflects many similar comments on the preciousness of mundanity for queer couples and queer chosen families that pepper discussions within my friendship groups about the kinds of lives people would like to build for themselves. I recall for example some years ago when Anika, a queer asexual woman associated with the *Diana* collective, returned from an exchange during which she had been hosted by a lesbian couple in Argentina. Although her visit had been primarily to attend a course on queer activist leadership, she told me that the principal excitement of the trip for her had been seeing the way they live together and raise their daughter from day to day. “This is a dream for us,” she told me, with sparkling, hopeful eyes.

When I visited India in 2022 I travelled via Mumbai, staying there for almost a week on arrival and passing through again over a brief weekend before leaving. The evening I landed in Mumbai I wrote to Asad, excitedly announcing my geographical proximity.

Aaaagh I'm so much closer to you but also so much further apart because

WHY ARE THERE NO PLANES

This is the first time we're sharing the same sky

Or, the first time we are sharing whilst knowing it

How long are you here for

I'm asking as if I'm gonna book a train immediately and come see u

In my heightened emotional state of yearning, in blindly optimistic hope, I misread Asad's message. My heart grasped on what it wanted to hear, on what made the most emotional sense to me, and for a minute I managed to convince myself that I had been wrong about all of the transport lines being closed between India and Pakistan since 2019. I really thought they were coming.

Here in Mumbai til 7th

Beautiful

Stop wait there are trains

I'm passing back through

Mumbai on 25th or 26th as my

flight home is from here only on

27th

Oh ok ok

I see

Tomorrow's Saturday

Is that actually plausible?

Yessss

Bby

I have to see my family in the

morning, and then

in the evening we have tickets to

a concert – could get you one

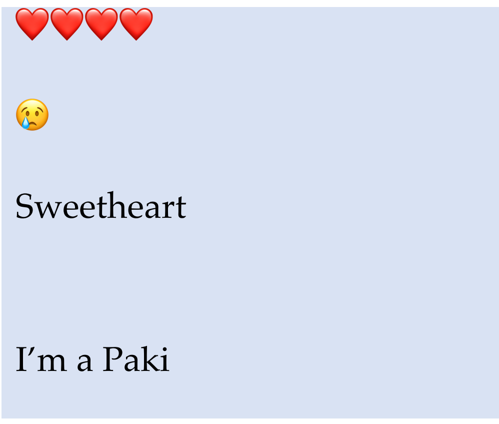
too?

Wowow

staying at my chosen family's

place. I'm sure  you can stay too

How long does the train take?




Haha I'm willing to believe anything

Remember 1947?

I know you're too far away

*[Remember 1947?]*

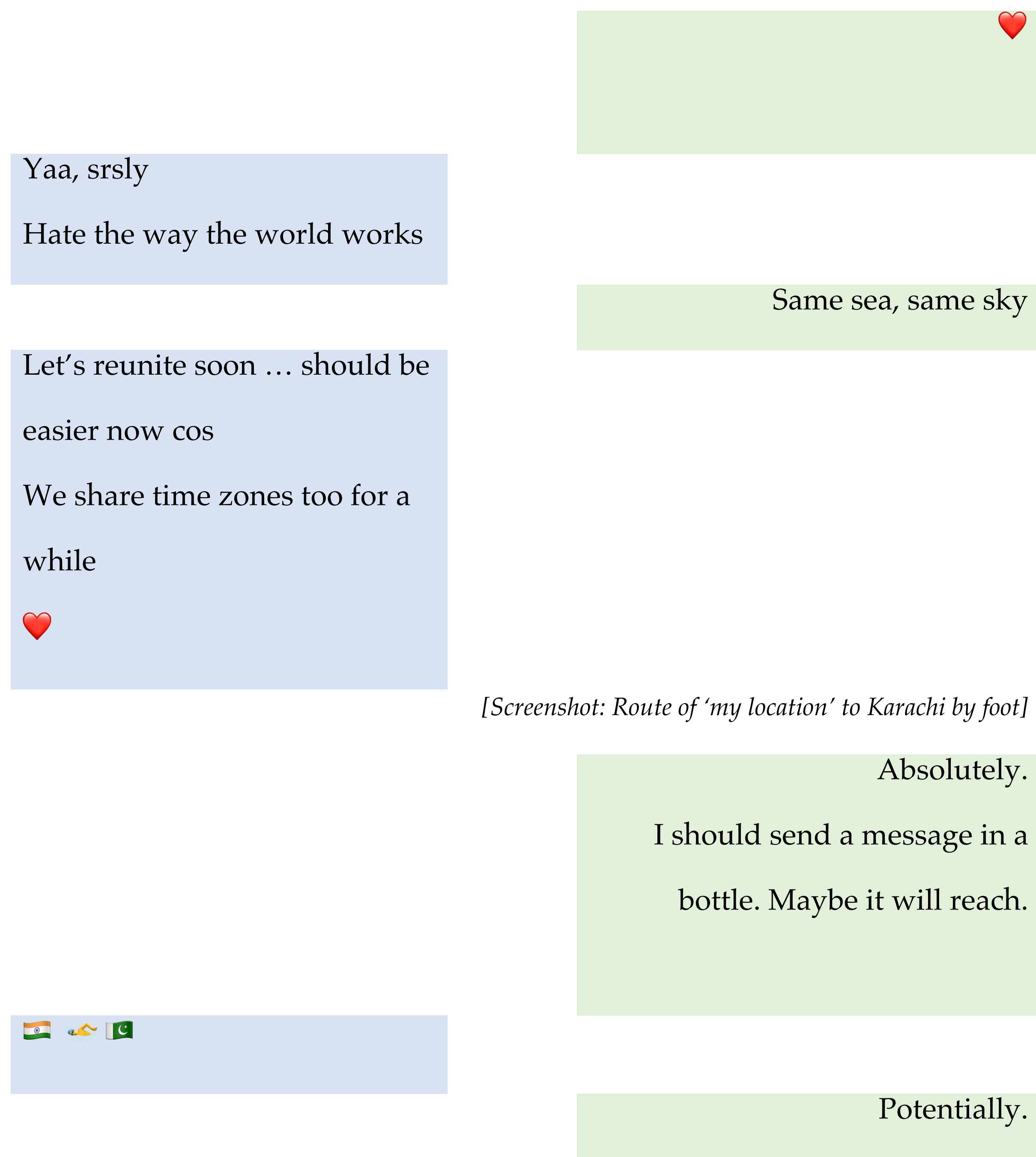
I know we queers like to forget this was a thing

*[Remember 1947?]*

No I don't  I only know we are the same family

💘 🥰 💘

Not being able to see you is no different to how I wasn't able see my family here the last three years [during Covid] – just stupid rules




Sitting on the end of Anubhuti's bed in Andheri, tears began to roll down my cheeks. I told Asad,

(Genuinely just had a tiny little cry because I can't come see you)

(Bloody partition bullshit)

*[(Genuinely just had a tiny little cry because I can't come see you)]*
Every time I look at the map.

Partition is queer phobic
honestly

Nation states is queer phobic

IDK, ur the anthropologist,
prove me right

I have full confidence that we will be physically co present some day not far off. I have no doubt. Somehow, for this reason, I don't feel as bad as I might about the whole thing for you and me.

But yeah. Maps are created by the imposition of boundaries.

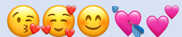
What could be more anti queer

Yaa ur right

I know just the Faiz poem to read to you,
When we meet :)

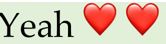
When I passed back through Mumbai en route to the UK from Kolkata, I complained to Asad again about the ridiculousness of our imposed separation.

Back in Mumbai for one night and once again
pissed that there is no longer a direct train to you

I love you


Imagining waking up the next day finding your and  the wish of many, many queers across the Indo-Pak borders has been granted, we're living in a radically different subcontinent where there's only abundant love, warmth

and security for all of us and queer loneliness epidemic is a thing we read about in history books.

Yeah 

Here's to the subcontinent of love and togetherness

Even as I'm leaving somehow already feel I miss you more

Two months later, after a casual microagression from a colleague triggered a wave of ancestral pain, I called Asad in the middle of the night, crying my heart out, seeking comfort. Describing the event and searching through the reasons why it hurt me so much, I raged angrily about the historical circumstances that have made such emotionally painful occurrences not only possible but commonplace. As I vented my anger to Asad's listening ears I found myself articulating my anger about the senseless loss of life during and after Partition, and the continuing political, emotional and human toll of the event's legacy. I expressed again my grief about the fact that we had not been

able to see each other when I was in India, since this too was related in my mind to the structures of racism and difference that had hurt me yet again.

The condition of enforced separation between people who have chosen one another as family must be perpetually overcome by dreams and fantasies of an alternative narrative where sustained togetherness is possible, even as we know that such a situation is unlikely to ever come to pass. Together, apart, Asad and I fantasise about a world re-formed which most likely could only be so as a result of radical systemic and political change. According to the normative Order of Things, the India/Pakistan boundary should draw a hard line between Asad and me. The border was drawn up in just forty days by Cyril Radcliffe, a British appointed London lawyer who had never previously visited India and by his own admission was eager to leave as soon as possible due to the climate not agreeing with his physical constitution (Chester 2002, Mishra 2013). The boundary between India and Pakistan was conceived precisely to separate our grandparents and their communities from one another on the basis of religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and ultimately national 'identity'. This was considered necessary on the assumption that harmonious relations necessary for the social cohesion of a national community would be impossible between these subjects (so conceived) with their differing and incommensurable 'identities'. The logic of the limit was, and is daily, literally imposed through colonial cartographies on the basis of identifying people as certain kinds of subject who must logically - perhaps even morally - associate to other individuals through relations of discord or

outright antagonism (Walia 2021). Perversely, the imposition of the new national boundaries through institutions of law and order resulted in one of the greatest episodes of conflict, discord and loss of human life in history, and is widely considered to remain at the root of continuing unrest in the subcontinent today (Mathur 2013). The political border continues to be reinforced not only through militarised enforcement at its geographical sites, but through a vast array of bureaucratic technologies including restrictions on visas for Pakistanis to visit India and vice versa, and customs laws that functionally prohibit ordinary citizens from exchanging goods or sending money between the countries.

Physical, geographical, and political separation create the conditions in which relationships are difficult to imagine and even harder to practice. However physical separation also, ironically, creates the conditions in which Asad and I can connect, through queer means. The 'borderless' (or at least, less easily enclosed) technology of the internet allows our initial connection, notably through the convoluted entanglements of queer social networks. This 'transcendent' plane, detached for our purposes from the mapped ground, affords the development of our affective relationship; yet in doing so this technology for overcoming limitations produces what Foucault has called a 'limit-experience' (2006) that wrenches each of us away from the subjectivities of Pakistani and Indian [Diaspora] through a boundary-dissolving joyful and passionate friendship. Over three years the limit of the transcendent and abstract affective relationship became increasingly something to be suffered,

and in response Asad and I began to invent ways to 'leap over' the physical restrictions that produced our separation in order to normalise our presence in one another's' daily lives. Asad would create digital art for me to print out in the UK, and use internet searches to identify specific frames to display it that were available in my local area, bringing his creative work into my domestic space. My brother visited Karachi as the guest at a school friend's wedding, and when he returned he brought with him one half of a pair of earrings sent to me by Asad, so that we could each wear one while apart, and feel that we were together. On more than one occasion, Asad sent money to India or received payment for artworks delivered to India digitally by routing the money through my UK accounts. In the absence of mundane contact, we invent ways to be together that escape the logic of the limit, particularly the physical, social and political boundaries between India and Pakistan. Some of these are facilitated by internet technology, but ironically some depended on my diasporic status; some of our transgressions utilise both of these advantages to extend each other's worlds further, drawing other Indians and Pakistanis into reciprocal and appreciative exchanges. This illustrates the expansive quality of intimate relationships, which extend in networks beyond the original intimate pairing to draw other people together in closeness too. For this reason, Lauren Berlant has suggested that the ultimate creation of publics occurs 'off-stage', in intimate connections that are formed and take root before they are shown to the wider world (Berlant 1998, see also Shapiro 2015).

In the autumn of 2023, Asad was selected for an international artists' residency with the British Council, who coordinated for their (initially refused) visa to be approved, and flew them over to Birmingham for ten days of intensive meetings and gallery visits. Asad postponed their flights for a few days, and appeared in my home, where over five days we did laundry and grocery shopping together, made each other cups of tea, sat silently on opposite sides of my desk typing away on our respective projects, and painted a canvas to secure the traces of our physical togetherness. The event of our meeting was remarkably uneventful; all we could say to each other and enquiring friends was that being physically together was the most normal experience of our relationship so far. We pondered the uncomfortable irony that it should be in Britain, of all places, that our partitioned condition should be resolved. "I have thought a lot about what it means for me to be here, and to be enjoying this, and I don't know how I feel about it," said Asad. "I thought I'd hate it, actually. I just wanted to come here to be with you. But instead it feels like home, because you are here."

A string of queer-thinking scholars across the last century have sought to think their way out of the Hegelian trap of sameness that threatens to reinscribe the disciplinary structures of liberal individualism and the divide-and-rule logic of 'belonging' within related conceptions of community (Gandhi 2006, Winnubst 2006, Derrida 2005, Honig 2001). To paraphrase Gandhi, "although indispensable… the very idea of community (found or elective) presupposes closure: a circular return, ad nauseam, to the tedious

logic of the Same"; how therefore can we imagine an "anticommunitarian communitarianism?" (2006:26). The grounds of friendship, on the other hand, are "shot through with difference" (Whitaker 2011:62). As my accounts in this and previous chapters amply demonstrate, while people may meet friends through associations with particular groups any recognition of sameness does not guarantee friendship, nor do perceptions of irreconcilable difference prohibit it (Gandhi 2006, pace Hegel). Friendships take varied forms, and while often compared positively to kinship relations in the anthropological literature, friendship lacks the formal structure of duties and expectations that institutes kinship. Despite (or perhaps because) of this openness and ambiguity, friendships may paradoxically offer distinctive moments of certainty amidst the change and instability of life's path (Diphoorn and van Roekel 2019). Friendship is thus a 'meandering trope' (Boulton 2019), and must embrace hope and doubt, trust and distrust, as central to its formation (Ahmed 2000, Diphoorn and van Roekel 2019). Following Gandhi (2006), Dave (2011a), Derrida (2005), Ahmed (2000), Honig (2001) and a host of others, I propose that relation of friendship offers a model for co-belonging and affective community that would allow us to sustain difference, resisting both the circular return to the Same and the allegedly neutral space of the universal human individual. Indeed, in centring friendship, we find ourselves returned to the very start of this story about queer activism in Kolkata. Recall that the first Pride walk in the city, and indeed in all of South Asia, styled itself a "Friendship Walk".

My friendship with Asad challenges a range of boundaries, limitations, and normative subject positions, and we must improvise ways to overcome the shot-through ground,[179] which previous generations' enmity and others' conflicts make difficult to traverse. Indo-Pakistani friendships, relationships, or solidarities of any kind are often decried as 'anti-national' by Hindu nationalists, and the epithet 'Friend of Pakistan' has long been used as an insult for anyone who acts in support of Pakistan or religious minorities in India. So many of the normative conditions for the development of deep friendship or a familial relationship are unavailable to us. For the first three years of our friendship we could not meet in person, nor did we know for certain if or when we might. We usually struggle to connect clearly over the phone or video chat due to weak internet connections on one or both sides. Our friendship is replete with hope and doubt, with trust of one another, with distrust of state machineries and of our respective national governments. The intimacy of our friendship necessitates an ethical reckoning (see Zigon 2014) with the normative ordering of public life on a much larger scale, including the dis-orientating effects of partition, visa politics, and nation-state boundaries. Through all this, we recognise one another as chosen family, and dream of a mundane existence in each other's company. In doing so we wilfully ignore the logic of all of the many physical, geopolitical, and sociocultural limits that, according to the prevailing order, would scorn the possibility of such a loving friendship.

[179] In this case, 'shot through ground' serves both a figurative and literal (if poetic) description of the kinds of space that would enclose Indians and Pakistanis in different social, geographical and political locations.

To create friendships that do not obey the logic of the limit and go beyond the Order of Things is to open oneself to the uncertainty, ambiguity, and possibility of a relationship for which there is no fixed social framework or code of behaviours and obligations . Scholars have often focussed predominantly on sexual and romantic relationships as the primary site of intimate events (Sehlikoglu and Zengin 2015). Indeed, same-sex romantic relationships have brought to attention the ways in which queer configurations often require a creative, even improvisatory approach to sociality, since many of the *scripts* by which intimate relationships should be organised and play out are explicitly heterosexual.[180] However, this improvisatory creativity does not necessarily end with the romantic relationship. Indeed, since the romantic and sexual relationship is traditionally the (concealed) foundation of the heterosexual family unit (Foucault 1998), a new form of romantic relationship challenges the institutional Order of Things in society more generally. In fact, rather than the sex act implied within the epithet 'homosexual', Foucault suggests that it is his lifestyle guided by love, this orientation of love itself, that disturbs people, because herein lies the possibility to conceive of another basis for the social:

> "our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for [affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship] without fearing the

[180] There is probably not an 'out' same-sex couple in the world who have not been asked "Which one of you is the man?" - the answer to which is "Both" or "Neither", which is quite obviously the whole point.

> formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another-there's the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up."
>
> (Foucault 1981)

In the light of Foucault's proposition, Asad's observation that 'Partition [and] Nation States are queer phobic' becomes clearer still. Relationships that wrench people from their individual subjectivity and tie them to one another with affective intensities short-circuit and leap over borders. The passion of friendship brings the limit of colonial cartographies, visa restrictions, banking bureaucracies and legal codes into view precisely where they are transgressed. Asad and I are just one dyad, representing one line of connection. One need only imagine the threat to the nation state if this relationship were echoed in multiple forms throughout the cities' streets.

## 5.III Solidarity: Queer Activism in the Context of Wider Political Ideologies

# যুদ্ধ চাইনা , শান্তি চাই
# Juddho Chai Na, Shanti Chai
# (We Don't Want War, We Want Peace)

On the 14th February 2019 a car loaded with explosives crashed into a 78 vehicle convoy of Indian Security Personnel travelling through the controlled and contested Kashmir region. The explosion killed 40 and injured many others, and represented the greatest loss of life through a terrorist attack in India for 30 years. The driver of the car was a 22-year-old from Kashmir, whose family claimed he had disappeared a year earlier after being radicalised, following a beating from Indian police. The terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad claimed responsibility for the attack, however the Indian government laid the blame with the Pakistani authorities. There was widespread coverage in the Indian media expressing credence in varying degrees of complicity or operational responsibility for the attack with the Pakistani Goverment, and the consequences for the relationship between the two countries was immediate. In India, people began to call angrily for war.

Cultural, intellectual and scientific delegations were immediately cancelled between the two countries. In a jail in Jaipur, a Pakistani prisoner was beaten and stabbed to death by fellow inmates. Many Kashmiris living across India were harassed, beaten, and driven from their places of work and study through threats and violence. Within the *Diana* WhatsApp group and other queer activist mailing lists, information about practical and fundraising initiatives were circulated aiming to support Kashmiri students who were

displaced or felt unsafe. It was within the *Diana* WhatsApp group that I first heard about the rally being organised by the Association for People's Democratic Rights (APDR) to protest the violence and aggression against Kashmiris, and between India and Pakistan. The rally was a Peace *michhil*, a call for peace.

In the afternoon of the 20th February, less than a week after the attack, I made my way to Moulali in central Kolkata to the starting point of the march. The previous day in the taxi back from workshops in North Kolkata, Baishali di had asked me whether I was planning to go and said she was thinking about attending. I had become aware of the march, and acquired details about attending entirely through lesbian identifying friends, and colleagues who I know through queer activism.

I arrived at Moulali on my own just after 3pm in the afternoon, and couldn't initially find the rally. It struck me that, although Moulali is a large and sprawling intersection of the city with no obvious focal point, there had been no specification about the meeting place within Moulali itself. This suggested to me an assumed knowledge amongst activists and otherwise politically engaged people in Kolkata about the likely location of the starting point. After walking around for a bit, crossing and re-crossing the broad road, I was about to give up and go home when I noticed a group of people with signs written in Bengali attached to their backs. A peace rally in Kolkata gathering to set off is, I realised, less conspicuous than a Pride parade or a queer demonstration.

This had neither the mood of outrageous celebration nor the palpable simmering anger which I have felt in the air at either. There was no float, and those who stood ready to walk were dressed no differently than anyone else around them in the cityscape, apart from the papers some of them had pinned to their clothes. I noticed that, in contrast to the queer demonstrations which employ a definite mix of written English and Bengali, every single poster, handout and the prominent main banner of the *michhil* were all in Bangla.[181] Every slogan raised during the course of the march was also in Bangla. This made me wonder whether the prominence of English in queer rallies can really be predominantly explained by its affording broader accessibility to the regional and national media, as it has been suggested to me on several occasions by various organisers of such events.

Although I had arrived alone and had no prior interaction with ADPR at all before (or since) the event, I was not entirely amongst strangers. Almost at the same time I had located the group, I recognised a young woman behind one of the main banners as the Presidency College student who had organised the discussion of the proposed Transgender Bill at the University a few weeks earlier. She was with a group of others who I recognised as current Presidency students. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, a Presidency student had been detained by police for posting on social media speaking against the calls for war against Pakistan, and there was a running collection to support his case, which I had already seen circulating on my own social media networks.

[181] Bengali script, as well as language.

A student who I did not recognise approached me, addressed me by name (অনিতা দিদি / Anita didi), saying that she had seen me on Facebook, and asked me to contribute to the fund. I spotted and greeted several people who I know as personal acquaintances or friends through queer collectives and the queer movement more generally. Kaustav Sanyal, who had taken a lead role in organising the Down with Fascism, High on Love event, was there, and so too was Anurag Maitrayee. Debalina di was there filming the event, and so too was Oli's good friend Sunetra. I had heard from friends and in the WhatsApp group that *Diana* founder member Karabi di had also been planning to go, but didn't see her while I was there. However, many people joined the walk, and it is very likely that there were others amongst the crowd who I would have recognised if I had seen them.

I asked Sunetra to tell me a bit more about ADPR, the body who had organised the event. She explained to me that APDR is a 'political organisation' who are fiercely anti-NGO, a non-parliamentary left-wing organisation who do fact-finding missions around human rights injustices and provide legal support to victims of human rights abuses or miscarriages of justice. As she described their work, slowly the crowd began to move. We walked in sight of each other, and I felt that I quite definitely walked with everyone at the same time as I walked alone. As we set out I was aware of feeling apprehensive; the mood was sombre. The seriousness of the political situation, and the understanding that a violent and hateful war could be ignited by a spark at any moment, was something I felt viscerally moving

around my body. Out of a desire to know that they were safe I kept an eye on Anurag, whose transness is apparent in her physical presentation, and I tried to keep tabs on Debalina, who was flitting about the column with her oversized camera balanced awkwardly on her slender shoulder, appearing and disappearing again like a bird at a feeder. The march went along peacefully with police at the front and back. The protest was amazingly smooth and well organised. The slogans were all effective, not a single one was let to fall by the marchers.

The smoothness of the march did not continue very long before it was disturbed. At the crossing just before New Market police station, a band of some young men waving Indian flags suddenly bore down against the head of the procession. One of the flags was a personal flag such as those designed for sports fans, but another was a enormous Indian flag on a large bamboo lathi[182] that was being waved with vigour. I do not have the words to describe the cocktail of emotions I felt as I saw them approach us. Genuine fear of what might happen, of the potential for mortal harm to come upon those around me, was just one part of it. There was a scuffle as the young men started attacking and beating the demonstrators. With many of the other young people amongst the large number of citizens who were walking, I rushed to see what was going on. The agitators were directly challenging the *michhil*, and by the time I reached the site of engagement one of them had already been loaded into a police truck and was driven away, smiling, jeering, and

[182] pole, stick

waving his Indian flag out the window at reporters and marchers. The *michhil* organisers encouraged everyone to continue, raising a cry of " মিছিলটা চলবে / michhilta cholbe (the rally will continue)". Several people, who I took to be ADPR members or otherwise organisers of the rally, shouted to other walkers that on principle we would not be broken apart or incited to aggression by the violence and attack that had come upon us.

Things however were not so easy to control. In the escalation, I saw a mob of antagonists hustling and tearing at the clothes of somebody who had been a part of the rally. The person they had chosen was a tall, burly man, who did not react in any way as they grabbed and tore his clothes, shook his body, and struck him again and again. There were around 40-50 people surrounding him, an immediate circle of about ten people who were harassing him, and then further concentric circles around those pulling them away, watching, or shouting in support of either side. Those harassing this man had him pressed up against an electric transformer box one the edge of the pavement where he stood stock still, staring into space, impassive to all that was happening to him. The police, distracted by the arrest of one flag-waving nationalist, were slow to realise what was happening in the commotion, since by now there was a great deal of shouting and the *michhil* had fallen out of its linear formation. Whereas before the protesters had spaced out in lines taking up the breadth of the street, in places it was now conglomerated into small crowds, one of which was centred around the man being beaten. A number of people around the man were also taking pictures and videos on their phones, perhaps to try

to document the violence to support the case in court later. The police did ultimately intervene, but by the time there had been a resolution most of the *michhil* had moved on and regrouped a little further along the route. Two or three times the procession had to wait and regroup in this way because of disturbances slowing down sections of the column. This was coordinated by ADPR members at the front of the column, and kept people together overall as the movement continued at different rates along the line. After this assault on the *michhil*, a new slogan was added to the rotation of chants along the lines of 'shame upon those who try to stop this rally' ("ধিক ধিক ধিক কার / dhik dhik dhik kar"). However some members of the rally discouraged these slogans and called marchers to focus on the message of the rally itself, reinstating the principal slogan "যুদ্ধ চাইনা শান্তি চাই / juddho chai na santi chai" (we do not want war, we want peace). This slogan, which had been used throughout the march, had been shouted by everyone whilst the assailants were reacting violently to the protest.

It is clear that the ADPR Peace Michhil varies in several significant ways from the format of Kolkata Pride and similar queer celebratory protests. However, it is also clear that it bears a strong resemblance to the idea of Satyagraha and Dandi March tradition that inspired the first Kolkata Pride. Both are, therefore, part of a tradition with its roots in the Indian Independence movement, and the Quit India movement in particular. In the case of the ADPR Peace Michhil, it is also notable that there is a long and particularly poignant historical precedent for the Gandhian model of peaceful, nonviolent

protest and an inclusive attitude towards Islam in India on the one hand, and Hindu nationalist ideologies associated with violent action on the other.[183]

While families and other communities were politically and ideologically divided by the events at Pulwama, what accounts for the predominance of calls and actions for peace with Pakistan across these queer activist networks? Queer groups and collectives, including WhatsApp groups and mailing lists, shared information about various ways in which Kashmiri students could be supported in the aftermath of Pulwama, and about events such as the ADPR Peace *Micchil*. Many of my queer friends and contacts posted about the events on their personal social media accounts, critiquing militaristic and partisan responses to the incident, and expressing support for Kashmiris who were suffering abuse in retaliation. Such activities were of course not exclusive to queer people, however the degree of activity that I noticed in queer channels

[183] Indian nationalism, Hindu nationalism, secular or interfaith tolerance, violence and non-violence are interrelated in complicated entanglements that have played out in many configurations over the last century of political history in the Indian Subcontinent. On the one hand, Gandhi's particular invention of *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a particularly 'Indian' mode of protest privileged the status of Hinduism within India, even as he was seen by some to be overly sympathetic to Muslim and other religious minorities. Many Hindu nationalists of subtly differing ideologies, including Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse, blamed Gandhi and his movement for the partition of India and Pakistan, with an ideology that both identifies Muslims as other but in another way essentialises their presence within the imagination of putatively Indian territories. Indeed, one could say that the creation of Pakistan is as much as a result of inability of majority Hindu groups to agree on an approach towards Islam than it is about opposition between Hinduism and Islam per se.

At the same time, many challenge the international narrative that privileges Gandhi's non-violent *Satyagraha* movement within the formation of modern, independent India, since the vast numbers of his followers who were injured or even massacred while following his orders for peaceful protest are almost entirely ignored within contemporary historical accounts. This therefore allows an idealised image of the foundation of India to prevail in the imaginations not only of Indians who admire Gandhi, but also amongst the colonising nations who may then maintain a narrative wherein Indian and Pakistani independence was granted benevolently and without oppressive, genocidal bloodshed. Therefore there are historic resonances in the association of non-violent protest, inclusive attitudes towards minorities, and the foundation of the modern Indian nation, as there are between Hindu nationalist ideologies, violence, and anti-Muslim/Pakistan sentiments. There is not a lack of overlap between the two however, and despite the preference of each side to claim prevalence, both are equally central to the emergence of India at the time of independence and its current political constitution today.

of communication was significantly more prominent and ideologically unified compared to wider public discourse and other kinds of personal social network in which I was involved. However, it is not necessarily surprising or incongruent that queer voices should be raised alongside others calling for peace with Pakistan, as seen in the support of queer individuals and organisations for the rally organised by ADPR . Rather, engagement and expressions of solidarity with non-LGBTQ* specific social justice causes may be considered a more or less conventional feature of queer activism in Kolkata.

## Solidarity Forever

In general, at Queer gatherings - either formal or personal - topics related to injustice beyond LGBT experience frequently arose. At the Diana weekly Thursday meetings, for example, responses to an array of topics not centred in LGBTQ* rights discourses were discussed, including those relating to caste-based discrimination, religious violence and so on. Moreover, Diana's longstanding relationship with other women's rights organisations, in particular through the umbrella organisation Maitree, was particularly pivotal. My friends and acquaintances from queer circles often expressed disdain for same-sex desiring individuals who professed allegiance to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who are generally associated with a Hindu Nationalist ideology and historic atrocities against Muslim and other

minoritised groups in India[184] (Anand 2005, 2011, Palshikar 2015, Holman 2023). In the various semi-structured interviews I took with people I met in Queer contexts, I often asked whether there was something particular about queerness that made such sympathies more likely. Most people responded that they believed this to be so. Many also raised the issue of intersectionality unprompted by me, either because they identified themselves as being engaged with activism pertaining to social justice issues beyond sexuality and gender, or because they in any case did not frame their 'activist' concerns through a frame of gender and sexuality issues alone.

Panchali described herself as an activist engaged with both queer and "class" issues, placing greater emphasis on her involvement with theatrical and public engagement activism on the issue of social class. When I asked them what they felt the goals of the queer movement in Kolkata were, they responded:

[184] One of the most notable examples in recent decades pertains to the role of BJP party members, including current Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, in the Gujarat Riots of 2002. Despite a purportedly independent report clearing Modi and other BJP party members of complicity in the violence, the report has been criticised for shielding the state and minimising the estimated harm caused during the period by citizens and scholars alike (e.g. Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002, Mitta 2014). Such a view is consistent with the serious international diplomatic sanctions imposed upon Modi following the riots. Indeed, many scholars and political commentators have asserted the pivotal role of Modi and the BJP in the weeks of violence, killings and property destruction (Brass 2005, Nussbaum 2008, Gupta 2011). The worst violence during the riots was strongly linked to areas in which the BJP was under the greatest electoral threat, and it was those same areas that showed increased voting for the BJP in subsequent elections (Dhattiwala and Biggs 2012).

The BJP presses a cultural and historic agenda to reimagine the nation in relation to conservative Hindu religious and cultural norms, as seen for example in the renaming of Allahabad to Prayagraj in 2018 and theproposed the renaming of Ahmedabad to Karnavati as early as 1990. Such acts of renaming attempt to remove historic Mughal names for cities for 'Hindu' names.

At a less ostentatious but arguably more pervasive level, Modi's successful style of political campaigning is written through with what Jaffrelot (2013) has called "the banalisation of Hindutva", as shown through his body language, his propensity to wear saffron coloured kurtas, and the imbuing of his public speeches with Hindu nationalist rhetoric and allusions to Hindu mythology. Similar patterns of public comportment are demonstrated by many of the BJPs representatives and candidates.

P: In Kolkata the movement is generally more politically sensitised, and a more intersectional movement. In most places in India, initially the movement was very much dominated by cisgender gay men, and cisgender people. In Kolkata that has slowly changed, and there are much more non-binary people and people of different genders and sexualities who are visible and involved.[185] … The queer movement in Kolkata doesn't just talk about gender and sexuality issues, it also talks about caste, class, religion, and so on. Because if somebody is queer person and also a muslim person, or if they are a queer person and a dalit person, then they are doubly discriminated against. We need to understand this. In other places for example, many queer people are supporters of BJP, which I find to be very strange. If you are for the rights of minorities then you cannot support a group that is very Brahmanical, very casteist, very patriarchal. I understand that because BJP has the power at the moment, people may want to be on their side because they might be controlling some of the funding, but I don't see how as a queer person or somebody standing up for the rights of minorities that you could support them. There are some BJP supporters among the queer community in Kolkata but they are much less, although they

[185] It was frequently remarked by various people in different contexts that LGBTQ* movements in the major cities of India tend to be extremely dominated by cisgender gay men from more privileged class backgrounds. Indeed, in my brief visits to Delhi I felt that at least on the surface level this seemed to be accurate. Whilst there are certainly spaces in Kolkata that are predominated by cisgender, gay, middle class men (such as the pink club night pop ups), the strong presence of female-led organisations such as Diana and an array of transfeminine and intersectional organisations has resulted in a more visibly gender diverse context for activism in Kolkata specifically.

are there. In Kolkata generally people are a bit more politically sensitised, that is how the city is. So the queer movement in Kolkata has always been more intersectional.

**A:** So this brings me to ask, from your own activism and as we see this intersectional perspective in the wider community, do you think your involvement with other underprivileged groups, such as class and caste, or Kolkata for Kashmiris[186] is linked to queerness?

**P:** I can't say for sure because there are also people who are not queer who are being very vocal against war over Kashmir, but certainly there are many people in the queer movement who are vocal about it also. The thing is, if you are a queer person and you know what it feels like to be oppressed, then when you see somebody else being oppressed you feel it.

This idea, expressed by Panchali, echoes ideas about radical empathy expressed by scholar and lawyer Arvind Narrain. I first encountered Narrain's theorisation of radical empathy and queerness in the field itself, when he delivered a keynote lecture at a queer conference organised by *Diana* in 2013. Taking the cases of Alan Turing and Chelsea Manning, Narrain asked whether it could be possible that there is a connection between these

[186] This was an ad hoc collective that centralised information and resources to support Kashmiris in Kolkata in the immediate aftermath of Pulwama. A significant proportion of those involved overlapped with queer and queer activist communities.

individuals' queerness and their actions, which led them each to undertake significant personal sacrifices in favour of the freedom of other oppressed or endangered peoples. Pulling at this thread, Narrain posits such 'radical empathy' as the basis for the politically impactful work for which each has become known. Narrain develops this idea in a 2018 article, drawing connections between the subversive nature of same-sex love, dissent from the social status quo, the cultivation of the self inherent in the trans experience, and the potential for radical empathy. Following Lee, Narrain raises a provisional definition of radical empathy as 'a politics of recognition and solidarity with community beyond one's immediate experience' (Lee, 2015, pp. 191 in Narrain 2017). He suggests that queer lives as afford 'creative possibilities' that are also 'utopian possibilities' as a result of the kinds of subversion and dissent that leading a queer life entails. Thus Narrain offers a tentative framework for understanding intersectional solidarity as fundamental feature of queer ethical practices, including activities that could be understood as queer activism.

I suggest that, in relation to this line of thought, it is also pertinent that the LGBTQ* movement is necessarily pluralistic even at its point of conception. Unlike other social movements that would appeal to a single named '*identity*' as basis for action, queer movements have for the most part relied upon identification across the lines of gender and social background as a primary condition of possibility by which an LGBTQ* community, collective, or movement could begin to be imagined. Furthermore, any impulse to solidify

the basis on which people associate themselves with an 'identity' falling under the LGBTQ* umbrella is also always troubled by now taken-for-granted understandings of gender as fluid and a person's desires as fluctuating in form and intensity over the course of a lifetime. Indeed, people who identify with LGBTQ* markers form community and connection based around their desires and practices. The experience of these desires may prompt questions about self-identification and the cultivation of the self, since desires are necessarily culturally specific and personal. In this way the individual's life circumstances strongly affect their experience of their own queerness. Therefore, any conceptualisation of the self based on sexual desire or romantic love is impossible if it does not also include a consideration of the person's gender, ethnic or cultural background, class or caste, religious experiences, and so on.  In other words, it is only possible for the 'alphabet soup' of non-heterosexual identifications to form the well-known acronym if solidarity is sustained across people who identify themselves as different from one another in person, lived experience, and desire.

A strong emergent theme in the discussions offered by Panchali and Arvind Narrain is the idea that the experience of marginalisation increases one's sensitivity when perceiving the experience of oppression in others. I have encountered expressions of empathy and solidarity with causes beyond sexuality and trans rights frequently over a decade of working with the queer movement in Kolkata. From the beginning of my engagement with *Diana* in 2013, I spent perhaps more time at demonstrations for women's rights

(encompassing working class women, mental health, women who had suffered sexual violence, and more) than at explicitly LGBTQ* events. As we have seen, queer people exchanged information and resources to support Kashmiri students suffering retaliation following Pulwama, and actively involved themselves in public calls for peace, in groups and via personal social media platforms. This circulation of information and commitment to actions of solidarity does not represent an isolated event within these networks. In 2019, senior members at *Diana* invited and hosted a forum on 'Queer Ecology', considering the implications of climate change and how they should ethically respond to that. One evening in the yard outside *Diana* Malobika di saw me handing over a parcel of cat food to Oli, and we joked about how many lesbians were adopting cats and other pets from the streets or becoming vegetarians. When I remarked on the association between lesbianism and vegetarianism in the UK in the 1970s-80s, Malobika di joked, "See, we are about 30-40 years behind the lesbians in the West. Give us another ten years and they'll all be vegans [here] too." In fact this association may be traced much further indeed; Leela Gandhi (2006) has explored at length the connections between homosexual identifications, vegetarian lifestyles, anti-vivisectionist and anti-colonial ideologies in both England and India at the turn of the 20th Century.

The intersectional outlook of the LGBTQ* movement in Kolkata was particularly evident during the weeklong film festival 'Conversations',

organised by *Diana* and Bishash Gender Trust[187]. This event, which has been running since 2007 and can claim to be the oldest queer film festival in India, now runs for a week and shows films from India and abroad, both recent and international, high and low budget. The films are selected by the employees of the organising NGOs. In the weeks running up to the publication of the schedule Nila, an employee of *Diana*, stayed up late for weeks watching the many submissions and suggested films for this year's festival, noting regretfully at one Thursday meeting that there were far more films worthy of inclusion than could be included in the final schedule. The final schedule was indeed densely packed, with films running back-to-back for four days in a historic independent cinema hall located in South Kolkata.[188] In the opening ceremony, Malobika di delivered a speech in which she publicly discussed various points of concern in a post-377 India. She was followed by Anindyo, who addressed the fact that a number of the films to be shown over the course of the week were not ostensibly to do with same-sex desire or transgender identifications.

> "Now, the closing film for example, the film by Mari Selvaraj… deals with caste as a very important element, perhaps the most important element in the entire film… We [were] often sort of confronted with a

[187] One of the oldest queer NGOs in the city, whose name means 'faith' or 'convication'.

[188] The festival has from its earliest days been supported by The Goethe Institut, the cultural wing of the German government commission abroad, and had for many years been delivered in the Institut's Max Mueller Bhavan auditorium, which has a capacity of around 150. The new venue by contrast has a capacity of 600. The cinema's large entrance hall was set up with banners and a table that served as a ticket desk, on which an array of Diana and Bishash Gender Trust publications in English and Bengali were displayed for sale. Attendees used the rest of the hall and the antechamber to the main cinema screen to hang out and meet friends between (or even during) screenings.

> discussion of… what constituted queer cinema: what is the queerness in cinema? What constitutes queer cinema? And… there are many such films where we are …slightly playfully … trying to sort of both locate our understanding of what is queer cinema and also critique it… so a lot of these things probably sort of also tweak the notion of what is, [or] what could be considered queer cinema, or what is a queer element."

Examples of films that challenged or played with the category of queerness included 'Nostalgia for the Future', an Indian documentary film that considers the architecture of late 19th century and mid 20th century India by asking what kind of citizen was intended to inhabit such spaces.[189] A short film 'Breathe', although featuring one protagonist identifying as bisexual and another practising a polyamorous lifestyle, was predominantly about mental health in early adulthood. The final film of the festival to which Anindyo had alluded was the Tamil Film 'Pariyerum Perumal' (2018), a film about the abuse suffered by a student from an scheduled caste when he strikes up a friendship with a girl from a higher caste at college. The film is not predominantly about LGBTQ* people, although a sub-plot pertains to the death of the main character's father, a folk dancer who performs in women's clothing. It also seems probable that the film was in part influenced by the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student who died following sustained institutional bullying within his university, related to his ecumenical political

[189] The film focuses particularly on the Lakshmi Vilas Palace built by the Maharajas of Baroda, and the planning of Chandigarh as a new state capital for Punjab in the style of the American *City Beautiful Movement* motivated by Nehruvian political imaginings of a modern India. The movie also focussed on the various municipal buildings designed in Chandigarh by Le Corbusier.

beliefs and activism.[190] In a short speech before the move, Akanksha offered a more direct framing of the sentiment that Anindyo had expressed a few days earlier, saying: "Some people might say that this is not a queer film, however, we feel that it is."

This returns us to the question of whether an intersectional approach to injustice and solidarity with other *identity*-based movements can be claimed as inherently queer, or at least pertinent for the conceptualisation of queer ethics. Various thinkers, and most notably queer theorists themselves, have criticised models of identity politics that mobilise around *identity* and the category of the individual. Thus in LGBT movements, where activism and the calls for rights are articulated with reference to the category of the human individual, difference is articulated in the terms and terminology of the dominant system of thought. Perhaps counterintuitively, in cultures where heterosexuality is the identified default sexual *identity*, homosexuals (lesbians, gays, bisexuals) are very much encompassed within the hegemonic Order of Things, but as a binary opposite to the figure of the heterosexual (Winnubst 2006). The concept of *queer* itself may thus offer a way to imagine breaking free from such identifications, serving as a signifier intended to dissociate the subject from confinement under particular categories or labels pertaining to a liberal model of the 'individual'. Ironically, the term *queer* itself has sometimes been used as a discrete category, with an associated logic of the limit circumscribing those

[190] In his suicide note, Rohith explicitly blamed "the system" for his death [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Hyderabad-university-doctor-counters-Smriti-Irani-says-Rohith-was-dead-when-she-reached-hostel/articleshow/51142603.cms].

who would call themselves (or be called) Queer. As a disruptive, utopian project however, I argue that the possibilities of plurality and fluidity signified as *queer* remain enticing. They are enticing precisely because of the paradoxical function of *queer* as a label that does not qualitatively identify that to which it refers, even as it points to the possibility of unthinking the orders and categories that organise thought itself.

As demonstrated in the commentaries of Anindyo and Akanksha, as shown by the unfaltering inclusion of caste, class, climate and anti-communalist concerns in the discussions and activist priorities of queer people, such a conceptualisation of queerness troubles even its own limits. To paraphrase Shannon Winnubst, 'queer' signifies the "impossibility of containment" (Winnubst 2006:8) and makes visible the limits of the schemas of thought in which clear-cut, discrete and ordered categorisations of sexuality, gender and named desires can be conceptualised. More than this, it is queer to recognise that the Order of Things beyond which we cannot think might not exist, that the possibilities of meaning are not fixed, and that other sorts of meaning and ways of being are still viable. **The mess itself might just be the worlding of the new world, and not merely the precursor to a new world 'order'.** Such a hope might be profoundly disorientating, even for those who live their lives out of line. In refusing to be limited by the would-be boundaries of identification, in refusing to identify only with one version of lived experience within the historical present, queer activists[191] reach out towards a vision of

[191] In the broadest sense of the term

society and community that rests on something other than liberal individualism, and the associated systems of power it underpins.

# Shesh Prosnogulo:

# The Final Questions

For those readers unfamiliar with Bengali literature, I will take a moment to explain the cultural rhetoric I employ in the title of this conclusion. 'Shesh Prosnogulo' literally means, 'the final questions', but directly extemporises on the title of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's final novel entitled 'Shesh Prosno'. Published in 1931, Shesh Prosno (The Final Question) traces the entanglements of a Bengali *probashi* community living in the city of Agra, shedding light on the societal norms upheld by the *bhadrolok* society and the way these are questioned and disrupted by the choices of one woman, Kamal. Kamal breaks a range of socially prescribed norms for women, cohabiting with her lover, refusing the epithet of 'Mrs' and the formal institution of marriage. Her lover admits that he is committed to a relationship with her not for her formal education, which is limited, but for her রূপ / *roop*, which appears in the English translation as 'external beauty' but literally means her body, her physical form. Chattopadhyay's *bhadrolok* create a range of prohibitions that exclude Kamal from participating in their close-knit community. Despite this Kamal wins the affection of certain members of that community through acts of care and compassion, expressed in bringing food to sick friends and giving company to lonely elders. Chattopadhyay, who rose to prominence for his pre-Independence revolutionary writings, is remembered for creating female protagonists who defy social norms. Chattopadhyay transparently posits Kamal and her self-determined way of living as an alternative to the normative codes of social institutions such as kinship and marriage, and critiques structures of nationhood founded in the intellectual supremacy of Western rationality. Shesh Prosno is broadly understood as a call for cultural

evolution made through themes of love, empathy, questioning and friendship. It was an explicit proposal for modern Indian personhood that caused outrage and disorientation amongst social and literary elites at the time of its publication, but was markedly popular with women (Prabhakar 1990).

My final reflections too are questions about the Order of Things, the morals of normative social institutions, and the ethics of a life's path orientated by **the values of** pleasure and compassion. My final questions too are a proposal for ways of being oneself and being with others, and echo the calls for cultural change that my friends and informants tirelessly raise. My contribution is to suggest that the ways forward will be brought to light not by "identity politics", but by a politics of love (Domínguez 2000, Winnubst 2006). This would suggest a turn away from the rhetoric of homosexuality, towards a rhetoric of queer love; away from the *shomokami* whose identity is defined by their sexual desires, towards the *shomopremi* who identifies themselves with others through bonds of love.

Love is a joyful, dis/orientating affect, that turns us towards people and objects. **Love is a sensation, and an affect; love escapes language even as we are bound to attempt to describe it in the poverty of words.** I have described a variety of ways in which love and joy are experienced, understood, and expressed through the body and its pleasures (see Spinoza 1994). This understanding returns us to the phenomenological axiom that people perceive the world, and dwell within it, through their bodies and **its sensations**

(Merleau-Ponty 1962, Heidegger 1971, Stoller 1994, Ingold 2000, 2009, Ahmed 2006). This is because people are, verifiably, their bodies (Eagleton 2017). I assert this not with the intention to reduce the person to mere flesh, which might be the conclusion if my statement were **bound back towards** a Cartesian thought structure that separates the thinking mind (cogito) and living being (sum). Rather, I assert that people are their bodies in order to speak of the person and the body as consubstantial, to speak of people as *somebodies*. **After all, where is the mind if not in, or rather throughout, the sentient, sensing, and sensuous body? What is intelligibility without sensibility?** The world, then, is inhabited by *somebodies* wh**o dwell within it, through the richness of their senses, with one another.**

In this dissertation I have carried out a close study of the relations between queer identifying activists in the city of Kolkata in relation to the configurations of space and everyday ethics. To do so, I have used **an untidy** array of public and personal social discourses about the experiences of queer bodies, pleasures, hopes, relationships, joys and desires, to reconsider the possibilities of being one's self and relating to others. Earlier chapters have shown how interactions with public spaces and the framed arena of the stage are central to activist strategies, at a community level and at a personal, individual level. On the one hand I have shown how movement through public space is a technique by which the queer community locates itself in Indian society, **how the pleasure of movement is an act of worlding**. On the other I have argued that the movement of the personal body through dance

and in everyday circumstances is at once a technique of self-formation, an activist expression of political convictions, and an ethical practice of freedom. **I have asserted the cultural value of dancing and comportment, exploring tensions between socially accepted moral aesthetics of movement and the pleasurable, sensuous, joyful explorations of the body in various kinds of bodily** performances. I have described how the sights, sounds, aesthetics and rhetoric perceived and felt into performance by the *rasika*, the spectator, contributes to the making of worlds, of people, of relations, and of ethical possibilities.

**Amongst the various spaces I have explored, perhaps none is more elusive or of as great concern to queer activists as the** 'safe space'[192]. Frequently alluded to and earnestly sought, in this final chapter, I have demonstrated how the ambiguity of the concept of the 'safe space' allows for processes of imagination that reflect political and ethical convictions, **but also produces conflict and contestation around these ideals. In doing so, I have considered the peculiar, rationalised relation between the private and the personal, and asked how such spaces are produced in relation to the public domain in which I have considered activist negotiations with wider society so far.** Finally through an expostion of everyday ethics, I have interrogated the space of the nation-state which creates boundaries around the love and affections of queer selves. I end with maybe an utopian but much desired manifesto of love as an ethical orientation.

[192] The English derived phrase 'safe space' is incorporated in this form in English and Bengali language utterances.

Love inspires the styling of South Asia's first Pride event as a 'Friendship Walk', and Pawan da experiences the thrill of walking within it. **Sayak pleasurably senses his physical body** and finds liberation in dance. **Bishu dances himself into a state of 'আনন্দ'** (*ananda*/joy). Bishu's experience of dance leads him to assert that all joyful people are beautiful. Beauty attracts, and turns us towards it through pleasure. Hrithika understands that people's orientation towards artforms such as dance is one of attraction, and this directive force creates an opportunity for intimate events and relationships. **Attraction, pleasure, and desire, are sensuous orientations. They are not merely bloodless directions, as a trace upon a map, but quivering, warm, lusty, tingling, delicious. These pleasureful, tender sensibilities** are capable of transcending the logic of limits, of national boundaries and geopolitical segregations, of social propriety and religious divides. These **orientations trace lines of flight** between people, creating a meshwork of entanglements. **These entanglements, this mess, resist order, knotting around one another even as one seeks to unravel the line**. Intimate events, unfurling in the realm of the everyday, reorientate people further, drawing disparate pathways into the ethics of a shared narrative. In the quietness of ordinary intimacies, **the taste of unspeakable knowledge**, new lives for the living may come into view.

I have explored how the entanglements between people and their pathways are afforded by particular places, and also continuously create places anew. I have described how the pathways queer *somebodies* walk through everyday

times and places bring them into contact with other *somebodies*, and how those **sensorious e**ncounters can reorientate each, through a smile to a woman at a Dosa stall, or the respectful apology of a cis man to an insulted trans woman. This necessitates a re-evaluation of the liberal philosophical category of the autonomous, self-determined, individual, and this figure's institutional role as the basic category of social order in post-Enlightenment sociological thought (Winnubst 2006). Through a phenomenological approach, where the person is understood as a *somebody* that perceives and is perceived by other *somebodies*, it becomes clear that relations between people are **messy, creative, existential lines** along which life is lived (Merleau-Ponty 1962, Ahmed 2006, Ingold 2006, 2009). The logic of the limit, which would enclose and bound each person into a knowable subject, is only possible through a process of inversion whereby the relationships a person has with others are retrospectively classed as effects of a person's identity (Ingold 1993). Instead, I wish to ask whether we might consider the possibility that people, or at least their identifications and '*somebody*'-ness, might be an effect of their relationships with other people and places.

Being in the world, and being in the world with others, brings places and people into being. Although the saga of *Deepon's* various locations demonstrates that the geometric spatial properties of places can facilitate acts of enclosure or abjection and seek to manifest the Order of Things, it also shows that places are not reducible to their geometry. Rather they are shaped and reshaped by the wayfaring of *somebodies* through them, and unto other

places. **They are sites of sensory stimulation, of colours and tastes and smells and textures.** If we see places as nodes of entanglements, as knots in a meshwork, we can also begin to see a world perceived through dynamic lines that extend **rhziomatically** in all directions and dimensions, towards and away from other entanglements **and nodes of life**. Just as people are in a dynamic *dual subjectivity* with one another, people and places are in a dynamic relation with one another; the subjectivity of the world is an additional existential and phenomenal dimension. These dimensions are often discussed separately, structured as they are in thought by the conceptualisations of them derived from the very same philosophical traditions that seek to impose limits and boundaries in place of pathways.

Impelled by the entanglements with Kolkata's queer community that have shaped me so profoundly, I urge for a queer phenomenology that can think and speak of the dynamic relation of places and *somebodies* in their **multisensory** mutuality. This queer phenomenology would trace the ways in which we are the effect of our trails, and uphold our wayfaring through the world as our activism, an activism that creates the world itself. The moment of our movement is the meshwork of the worlds we inhabit. And so, direction matters. Orientation matters. Entanglement matters. **Sensation matters.** Solidarity matters. **They matter because they are good, and because they are good they are also ethical, because they are the stuff of life itself.** Bodies in motion are ethical bodies because they are the filaments that **weave the textures of the** world. The force that binds them is love.

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