

Queering Critiques of Neoliberalism in India: Urbanism and Inequality in the Era of Transnational “LGBTQ” Rights

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Abstract: Understanding contemporary sexuality and gender politics in India compels an examination of the imbrications between cities, the idea of modernity, the production of non-normative identity-based social categories, and critiques of neoliberalism. Recent developments in Indian sexuality and gender politics with respect to non-normative subjects must be understood through the critical lens that scholarship on neoliberalism offers. At the same time, an uncritical use of the theoretical apparatus of neoliberalism in the Indian context risks overdetermining the discursive space of normative urban gay elites. The conflation of gay identity with elitism, and transgender identity (when it is conflated with hijra-ness) with poverty, has characterized much of Indian public discourse on non-normative sexualities and genders. Emphasizing the vagaries of the daily lives of non-normative subjects, read through their geographical valences, is one way to disrupt this binary, while demonstrating the unique role of the urban imaginary in the discursive production of sexuality and gender-based activism in India. This is important in the current moment, as “LGBTQ” rights are taken up as a foreign policy issue by governments around the world, and the newly elected Indian government promises to build 100 “world class cities” during its tenure.

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Over the past decade, there has been a sea change in the production and perception of sexuality and gender politics in India, with respect to non-normative¹ subjectivities, behaviors identities and orientations. Some of these politics have been articulated through the moniker of LGBTQIKHP,² representing those consolidated identity-based categories used in activist discourses, and particularly in campaigns for decriminalization and expanded legal recognition. This sea change, which we may provisionally describe through the metaphor of heightened visibility, is evinced in policy and media discourses in particular, and is manifested through a greater number of social, commercial and movement spaces where ideas housed within the notion of “sexuality and gender politics” are being rendered. These changes are part of a set of trends that are observable in many parts of the world.

This heightened visibility in India is the result of a number of mutually constitutive phenomena. A very partial list includes the campaign to decriminalize consensual “gay sex”, a greater number of people declaiming their queer- and trans-ness in a range of cultural, social, economic, artistic and political spaces (including leftist political parties, trade unions and new social movements), the transnationalization of

“LGBTQ” identities through policy and media discourses, more media visibility within India, a greater number of cities hosting gay pride events and protests, more spaces in which to socialize, and a greater number of virtual networks. To be sure, this increased visibility has attracted criticism regarding differential access to these social and political spaces, as well as criticism regarding what kinds of caste, class and linguistic hierarchies this visibility may re/produce.

The phenomenon of greater visibility, and the tensions of class- and caste-based inequality that it has highlighted, has fostered a new wave of scholarship on non-normative, marginal and alternative sexualities and genders in India. This scholarship (including Bhattacharyya and Bose 2006; Dave 2012; Dutta 2012; Narrain and Bhan 2005; Reddy 2005) builds on and extends earlier work (eg Manalansan 1995; Sukhtankar 1999) from the 1990s, and shows the myriad ways in which self-defined “LGBT” organizations were active in India from the 1980s onward, as well as showing that gender transgressive and sexually non-normative subjectivities and behavior have been highly varied, historically produced, and in many ways integral to daily life in South Asia. One of the effects of this scholarship has been to provide a foundation from which to interrogate the idea that LGBTQIKHP movements in India are essentially twenty-first century formations that occur, or are perhaps even enabled, in the era of neoliberalism. Showing that these movements were active from the 1980s onward, with antecedents in the women’s movement, for example, disrupts the notion that contemporary changes in sexuality and gender politics are an effect or invention of economic liberalization. In this paper, I build on these critiques to map the imbrications between cities, non-normative sexualities and genders, and the politics of economic class and caste in India in order to problematize the ways in which “LGBTQ” subjectivities, in particular, may be folded into an analytic narrative that reifies gay urban elites within the auspices of neoliberalism. Concomitantly, I argue that the city is a fundamental organizing rubric for LGBTQIKHP discourses, particularly in the context of the campaign to decriminalize “sodomy” and, by proxy, homosexuality. This is not to say that cities determine the formation of any of these subjectivities, nor is it to ignore the insight of “how much we take for granted that lesbian and gay lives are lived in the urban environment” (Binnie and Valentine 1999:178). Rather, it is to emphasize the ways in which cities and, conversely, villages have occupied a special place in Indian imaginaries of sexual and gender subjectivity, and the ways in which cities in particular have been extremely diverse with respect to the distribution of social, political and economic capital.

It may be said that India’s national imaginary is now largely produced in relation to the problems, representations and vagaries of Indian urbanism (Nair 2005; Oza 2001), while rural areas are perceived as drivers of economic growth through land grabs that contribute to mining and other extractive industries (Basole and Basu 2011). The discussion within the literature on sexual geography about the elisions between the urban frame and LGBTQ subjectivities has often been to suggest that these elisions can be remedied by focusing on LGBTQ people in rural contexts as well. While I have no argument with this position, I aim to suggest something slightly different here regarding this problem. First, I suggest that examining the heightened visibility of non-normative sexualities and genders in relation to the politics of Indian urbanism potentially

complicates extant critiques of the economic fissures that are being exacerbated within cities, by locating non-normative subjects within the broad range of spaces that constitute those cities, while making the relationality between cities and the production of “LGBTQIKP” subjectivities explicit. This kind of examination serves to disrupt a binary notion of wealthy cities, where LGBTQ people ostensibly thrive, and impoverished villages, where it is presumed that only normative sexuality and gender is manifest, by interpolating critiques of the ways in which cities have become sites of economic contestation in the era of neoliberalism with contemporary discourses on sexuality and gender and LGBTQIKP subjects. Second, this kind of examination contributes to a growing body of work that aims to problematize the critique of homonormativity as it transnationalizes, by broadly deriving its concerns from the ways in which economic class is increasingly “unmarked” in discourses on LGBTQ daily life all over the world, including in India (Cohen 2005; Gupta 2005; Sharma 2006).

Neoliberalism and Homonormativity

The general critique of neoliberalism found an important specification in queer studies through the concept of homonormativity (Duggan 2003). Within the context of US queer and trans studies, this concept has been used to examine and criticize the mainstream LGBT movement’s focus on extending marriage rights to same sex couples, illustrating the ways in which any discussion of economic class has become elided within campaigns for state recognition and citizenship rights. US-based scholars have also pointed to “queer liberalism” as obscuring race (Eng 2010) and emphasizing bourgeois notions of privacy (Brown and Halley 2002). Both the concepts of neoliberalism and of homonormativity have drawn critiques calling for their revision or rethinking within the last few years. For example, as anthropologist Sealing Cheng (2013:np) writes, “[n]eoliberalism is useful as a term only to the extent of understanding macro-historical shifts and setting a framework for investigation. But its history, manifestation, and effects can be so diverse in each location that it cannot be a useful analytical category without empirical analysis.” Concomitantly, in a call for proposals for a session on “The Sexual Politics of Austerity” for the 2013 European Geographies of Sexuality Conference, the authors write that while the concept of homonormativity has been invaluable over the decade or so since its inception, it was framed during an “economic boom”. They ask how the sexual politics of neoliberalism may be understood during a period of austerity (Di Feliciano et al 2013) and, I would add, during a period in which the idea of the “Global South” has taken on new meaning through the perceived economic potential of countries like India, China and Brazil. For the purposes of my argument here, I am thinking of neoliberalism as a way to mark an era, as a heuristic device for thinking about geopolitical and economic power, and as the intersection between the widening extremes of wealth and poverty and the hegemonization of certain normative social forms, including identitarian categories of sexuality and gender.

Within queer and sexuality studies, homonormativity has served as a core analytic frame for reading the effects of neoliberal economic policies in everyday life. If this has resulted in framing or reading a particular figure, it is that of the elite, privileged, urban queer subject (cisgender, usually male, and a member of a racially or ethnically dominant social group). It is tempting to wonder who or what this subject

would be in the Indian context, how caste would be treated within this formulation, and whether a theory of this kind of subject formation requires the foil of, for example, an abjected, disenfranchised, heteronormative rural subject.

Critiques of the transnationalization of the frame of homonormativity and “liberalized” sexuality politics are powered in part by the critique of homonationalism (Puar 2007). Some of these critiques have been framed as critiques of LGBT rights as a foreign policy peg of Western governments (Long 2014), and of the ways in which LGBT rights are packaged within efforts to expand the terrain of advanced capitalist economic models. Other critiques have focused on Western countries whose governments have taken up the mantle of spreading LGBT rights around the world, while erasing their own domestic social and political conflicts in the process. As Jin Haritaworn and colleagues (2008:72) write, “[r]acism is, further, the vehicle that transports white gays and feminists into the political mainstream. The amnesia at the basis of the sudden assertion of a European “tradition” of anti-homophobic and anti-sexist “core values” is less a reflection of progressive gender relations than of regressive race relations.”

A number of scholars have located critiques of neoliberalism within the discursive spaces of non-normative genders and sexualities in the Global South. These critiques have included work on the NGO-ization of sexuality politics and knowledge production (Pigg 2001), as well as arguments against the idea of homonormativity as ‘transmission’ from West to non-West (Oswin 2007; Rofel 2007). These critiques follow on earlier debates on homosexuality in the non-West, in which detractors argued that same-sex desire was a Western import, about which I will say more shortly.

Two recent articles show some of the ways in which critiques of neoliberalism with respect to non-normative sexualities and genders are being brought to bear within scholarship on India. In their introduction to a 2012 special issue of the *Jindal Global Law Review*, Oishik Sircar and Debolina Dutta critique the focus of Indian activists over the past decade on decriminalizing gay sex in India: “The new mantra of citizenship under neoliberalism is one where every individual is told that they can be citizens with rights as long as they perform certain prescribed codes of respectable citizenship which are for their own good” (2012:12). They support this claim with a quote from Jasbir Puar’s (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages*, where Puar discusses the transition to a politics of recognition among queer subjects within the US. They then write, “[t]he experience in India will not be very different” (Sircar and Dutta 2012:12).

At the same time, in their introduction to another special issue on new work on sexuality in India, for the postcolonial studies journal *Interventions*, Stephen Legg and Srila Roy write:

while neoliberalism might be associated with the rise of new forms of sexual commerce, it may not be the most apposite lens to apply to a postcolonial setting like India. For one, the neoliberal framework might end up overestimating the newness of forms of sexual identity and labour. More generally speaking, it might overestimate the withdrawal of the state from welfare service provision in countries like India; the Indian state continues to be developmentalist *and* neoliberalising (Legg and Roy 2013:468).

I believe both of these positions apply in India, if we understand the era of neoliberalism to be, among other things, an era in which economic policies produce an exaggerated bifurcation of wealth disparities. Rather than choosing between them,

or suggesting that they are somehow opposed, I would suggest that, together, these arguments describe a key set of problematics with respect to sexuality and gender-based critiques of neoliberalism in India. These include the complexities of critiquing the primacy of citizenship rights in LGBTIQP activism, the need for these rights notwithstanding, while acknowledging that the economic and historical contexts of the region do not always conform to the classical narratives of structural adjustment and privatization that contextualize critiques of neoliberalism deployed elsewhere. In the context of non-normative or minoritized sexuality and gender based categories in India, accounting for both of these perspectives does mean looking at how the neoliberal era has created an NGO sector and the possibility of queer neoliberal subjectivity. It also means looking at the ways in which the HIV/AIDS sector, for example, captures, manages, nominates, and enumerates economically impoverished MSMs (men who have sex with men), kothis and panthis, as well as looking at the ways in which governmental bodies have also served to forge and target these populations, sometimes partnering with NGOs on the same projects, and sharing or distributing shared funding streams.

Sexuality and the City

The prevailing view of the juridical campaign to read down Section 377, India's anti-sodomy law, is that any future prospects for expanded spaces, freedom from violence, and economic self-determination for "sexuality and gender minorities" cannot be won without changing a law that is currently used to harass and intimidate sexually and gender non-conforming people. The campaign has attracted a number of criticisms, including its characterization as a homonormative reification of citizenship rights. Some have argued that expending movement resources on this particular campaign reflects an elitist, upper caste agenda, which elides questions of economic class and caste, including issues of livelihood, housing and land use (Pathak 2013; Tellis 2013). In this section, I review the career of the anti-377 campaign with an emphasis on understanding the ways in which Indian cities are being transformed in the era of neoliberalism. This review is produced by way of asking what a critique of the anti-377 campaign would entail were it to be located within a critique of neoliberalism that accounts for the city as the discursive space in which it is produced? In other words, we know what it means to critique neoliberal queer subjectivity as an instantiation of bourgeois metropolitanism. What does it mean to critique the city, or metropolitanism writ large, when we consider the production of the (multi-classed and casted) queer subject within its auspices? Furthermore, what do the changing valences of non-normative sexualities and genders mean for transformations in the rhetoric of Indian urbanism?

Section 377—Global Day of Rage

Efforts to repeal or read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code have been afoot since the early 1990s. The law is used to criminalize "homosexuality" by rendering illegal "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal" (Indian Penal Code 1860). The law is used to effectively criminalize and harass gay, lesbian and gender non-conforming people primarily, though not exclusively, in

public spaces (Sharma 2008a, 2008b). A great deal has been written on 377 (eg Gupta 2006; Puri 2013), much of which has discussed the vagaries of “sodomy”, “unnatural sex” and “carnal intercourse”, which the law criminalizes through its vaguely Biblical wording, liberal individualist emphases on questions of consent and privacy in the argument against 377, and the ways in which 377 is used as a form of social control in everyday life by the police and by biological families. The law is used as a rationale for a wide range of police actions, in a variety of ways, including arresting and extorting gender non-conforming men on the street and in cruising areas, stopping condom distribution (because condoms are used as evidence of the intent to promote or conduct the crime of sodomy), and restricting the movements of young women in relationships with each other, sometimes through arrest and temporary incarceration. It has become clear that, while there are relatively few prosecutions under 377, a great deal of police harassment is conducted with 377 as its license.

The first official challenge to 377 was mounted by the AIDS Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) in 1992, when ABVA submitted a petition to Parliament asking for the repeal of 377. (ABVA 1991) ABVA never received a response to its petition (Bakshi 1996; Joseph 2005). A second, more sustained challenge began in the early 2000s. This challenge, mounted with a stronger LGBT legal and activist infrastructure than what had existed in the early 1990s, resulted in a positive New Delhi High Court decision in 2009. The 2009 decision struck down the aspects of the law that criminalized consensual sex between adults. It referenced one of the progenitors of India’s anti-caste movement, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, in arguing that, like non-upper caste groups, LGBT people were a legitimate minority group that should be afforded the rights and protections of any other minority (Delhi High Court 2009).

While the central government did have the option of appealing the Delhi High Court decision, it chose not to do so. Had there been no further appeal, the Delhi High Court decision would have stood, and would have effectively decriminalized consensual same-sex sex between adults throughout the country. Unfortunately, a group of religious fundamentalist activists of Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths appealed the Delhi High Court decision to the Supreme Court, which heard the case in 2011, and finally gave its decision in December 2013. The Supreme Court overturned the Delhi High Court decision, without addressing any of the legal arguments for decriminalization, in a decision that is rife with technical errors (Press Trust of India 2013). Among its rationales for upholding the law, the Supreme Court claimed that “LGBT people constitute a miniscule minority”, and therefore reading down 377 is unnecessary (Supreme Court of India 2013).

The response to the decision was swift and vociferous. Lawyers who had assembled the case against 377 repeatedly pointed to its numerous errors. Foremost, they noted that India is a constitutional democracy, and not a majoritarian one, and therefore the numbers of a given minority are irrelevant to that minority’s right to be free from discrimination. The minority status of LGBT³ people had been argued on the basis of the idea that sexuality and gender identity are immutable human characteristics. How this tallies with the commensuration of sexuality-based minoritization and caste-based minoritization in India remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the protests mounted in the immediate wake of the judgment were used to demonstrate that, among other things, LGBT people in India are not a miniscule

minority, comprising instead a sizeable group with broad based support. For the purposes of my argument here, two aspects of this story are especially significant, given that the idea of the city has provided much of the context for the campaign against 377, especially in terms of locating many of the examples of rights violations enacted under the rubric of this law. The first aspect concerns the protests against the judgment. There were a number of spontaneous demonstrations the day it was rendered, 11 December 2013. Four days later, an international protest was mounted, called the Global Day of Rage. Organized largely via social media, this action was constituted by simultaneous protests in India, Europe, North America and South Africa. These were held in cities, large and small. In India, at least 17 cities participated, a far cry from the big three metros of Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. The Day of Rage garnered a great deal of media coverage and publicity, in part because the action used the space of the city to claim basic citizenship rights for LGBT people.

The second significant aspect of this story conveys tensions between the various constituencies located within the “LGBT” rubric. Alongside the Supreme Court case on Section 377, another case, which concerned the legal recognition of transgender people, was also pending before the Supreme Court. This case, *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India & Ors.*, had implications for “inclusion of a third category in recording one’s sex/gender in identity documents like the election card, passport, driving license and ration card; and for admission in educational institutions, hospitals, access to toilets, amongst others”. (Lawyers Collective 2013) This case was decided favorably on 15 April 2014, almost exactly 4 months after the Supreme Court rendered its apparently contradictory decision in favor of 377 (*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India and others* 2013). In a strange twist, transgender people in India, and especially hijras, now have the right to official recognition as members of a third gender, but do not have the right to have “unnatural sex”.

Some of the same legal advocates in the Section 377 case also appeared on behalf of the National Legal Services Authority, a governmental body deputed to provide free legal services to those who may not otherwise have access to legal representation. In New Delhi, both the initial protest against the Supreme Court judgment on 377 and the Global Day of Rage protest took place at Jantar Mantar, a designated area for political protests (whereas all other spaces in the city are now restricted in their use for public demonstrations). A number of other protests were also taking place at Jantar Mantar at the same time as the Day of Rage protest. These included protests and demonstrations by labor unions and by a Dalit⁴ rights organization. One of the other demonstrations was in support of a favorable decision in the NALSA case, and was mainly populated by hijra activists. When a few participants from the 377 demonstration tried to individually enter the space of the NALSA protest, they were each told to “go back to the middle class protest” (Personal Communication 2013).

If the Global Day of Rage protests point to the uses of the city in mobilizing a critique of state sponsored violence, then the tensions between the 377 and NALSA protests in Delhi show the obstacles in aiming to use the city to consolidate an “LGBT” constituency. These obstacles were evident in the composition of attendees in each of these spaces, with the 377 protest largely comprising English-speaking

people who could conceivably identify with the terms “gay”, “lesbian” or “queer,” while attendees of the NALSA protest were largely hijra and kothi, and non-English speaking. The composition of the NALSA protest itself points to other sets of issues that have animated the response to the NALSA decision, including, for example, the conflation of “hijra” and “transgender” in that judgment, and the subsequent erasure of other trans people, especially trans men. In both cases, the city serves as a force in shaping the debates and tactics at hand, in part by being used to demonstrate the existence of “LGBT” people as a set of sizeable constituencies.

Cities and Prosperity

As cities evince rapid economic changes that require ever deepening economic segregation, made tangible in transformations of the built environment, we may ask how these transformations are becoming linked with idea of LGBTQIKHP existence and liberation. One effect of this kind of analysis would be to show the ways in which cities have served the purpose of proving that LGBT people in India exist, collectively, in numbers, for movement-driven campaigns for legal reform, while deriving its primary concern from the ways in which economic class is increasingly “unmarked” in discourses on LGBTQI subjectivities and politics all over the world, including in India. This concern has been articulated by a number of authors, including Alok Gupta, Maya Sharma and Lawrence Cohen (Cohen 2005; Gupta 2005; Sharma 2006).

We have to acknowledge the silence between the urban and rural contexts, between activists with class privilege and those from the working class, between our own varying levels of Westernization and use of English, and the grassroots reality we were trying to understand. The fact remains that the lives of ... [many queer people] ... are equally distant and alienated from upper-class, urban Indian as well as all Western representations of homosexuality, and their personal struggles, which cannot be separated from their socioeconomic struggles and traditional contexts, are largely unmirrored and therefore remain largely unknown (Gupta 2005:132).

Maya Sharma’s analysis, that LGBT lives outside of India’s major metros remain “unmirrored and largely unknown”, points to the caste and class differences, often encoded through linguistic differences and differences of urban or rural location, that animate contemporary Indian LGBT activism. In the community consultations that took place in late December 2013 and early January 2014 on how to respond to the Supreme Court’s verdict on Section 377, the question of language in particular was raised repeatedly with respect to questions of access and translation. Despite the best efforts of many, the perception remained of a limited dispersal of information from those discussions to non-English-speaking LGBT communities, and limited opportunities for non-English speaking people to participate in them. These perceptions and criticisms referenced the vast structural differences that exist among different groups of people within Indian cities themselves, differences of class, caste, language, education and region that are instantiated geographically. It is interesting that the largest and increasingly most class-segregated cities of Mumbai, New Delhi and Bangalore are also the places that have spawned some of the oldest and most foundational organizations of Indian LGBT movements.

There is a question here to consider about the synecdochal and metonymic relationships between LGBT visibility, cities and the idea of the nation, particularly in a time that is, in many ways, marked as post-national.

What are known as “LGBTQIKHP” movements in India today began to take shape in the mid-1980s through disparate attempts to coalesce lesbian and gay social spaces, through meetings and parties advertised by word of mouth, and through newspaper ads placed by individuals seeking to create these spaces. To be sure, these efforts were contextualized by active and growing informal networks of individuals around the country, especially comprised by people who lived in Delhi, Bombay, or Bangalore, or people who had heard of organizations based there through media outlets and by word of mouth. We should note that, if the communities now represented under the agglomerated “term” LGBTQIKHP were dispersed far and wide, the infrastructure of these movements developed in urban spaces, where cities served as physical or virtual nodes for dispersed networks of people who in some way identified as non-conforming with respect to their sexuality or gender. Points of connection between geographically dispersed individuals were established in decidedly Andersonian ways, through gay magazines, newspaper ads, and national reportage of female same-sex couples deciding to marry and/or committing suicide (Vanita 2007). While these couples were not necessarily identified as “lesbian”, and it is far from clear that those individuals would have used this term or any other to describe something they would call their own “sexual orientation”, some of these stories were apprehended within an “LGBT” identitarian rubric. The range of people and places represented in these early organizing efforts is stunning in its breadth, as was also demonstrated in a few key moments over the course of the 1990s and 2000s that galvanized organizational ties, through, for example, participation in national level meetings, such as the “National Conference on Human Rights, Social Movements, Globalisation and the Law” in Panchgani, Maharashtra in 2000 (HRLN 2009).

One of the difficulties that inhere in framing such a broadly collective term as “LGBTQIKHP” is in its inability to adequately reference the various historical streams of each category, not to mention its erasure of non-normative subjects who exist outside of any of these frames. The history of hijra communities, for example, is unique, and cannot easily be assimilated into a historical narrative in which all non-normative sexualities and genders are conjoined within a singular movement context. In her 2002 *Antipode* article, “Rescaling transnational ‘queerdom’: lesbian and ‘lesbian’ identitary-positionality in Delhi in the 1980s”, Paola Bacchetta discussed the problems of homogeneity and erasure in relation to positioning some queers as “national subjects” within a transnational organizing frame. She wrote:

in ... transnational organizing, national-normativity remains the dominant frame. That is, queer activists themselves outside the (unmarked because dominant) US are understood as national subjects—as parliamentary representatives, in Spivak’s (1993) sense. They are often made to speak for or are interpreted as speaking for the entire queer population of their nation (Bacchetta 2002:951).

While I would suggest that the implication that queer activists inside the US are not understood as national subjects should be reassessed in light of the transnationalization

of campaigns like marriage equality, for the purposes of this article I ask how Bacchetta's insight might apply within a contemporary Indian national frame, where non-normative subjectivities and political agendas are being forged in places that are changing rapidly, and where the built environment is subject to violent erasure, rearranging geographies of class and caste in its wake? How might we rethink the question of queer and trans subjects as national subjects in this context?

The BJP and Gandhi's City

The city has been an active player in discourses of sexuality and gender in India since at least the early twentieth century, when Mahatma Gandhi, the "father of the nation" and an urban educated colonial subject himself, called on urban educated elites to "return" to the Indian village in order to promote development and economic sustainability. "Real India" was the village for Gandhi, and therefore any national consciousness or movement for self-rule could only be fostered there. In *Hind Swaraj*, his 1909 treatise on self-governance, Gandhi lays out a well known historiographical argument for claiming that India's true national identity is in its villages.

It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fiber. They therefore, after due deliberation, decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. They saw that our real happiness and health consisted in a proper use of our hands and feet. They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages (Gandhi 2008 [1909]:38).

The reference to industrialization here recalls the much documented and discussed differences between Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Nehru argued that India's future lay in industrialization, famously calling hydroelectric dams "temples of modern India" (Roy 1999). The reference to prostitution and "vice" in this passage is also instructive, indicating a national imaginary in which villages are authentically Indian because of their adherence to normative sexuality. Disagreements over Nehruvian development models, as well as the problematization of the idea that villages are uniformly heteronormative, have played out in the social movement that converged around stopping the damming of the Narmada River.

The Narmada traverses the north central and western states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra, and has been the site of a controversial, large-scale hydroelectric and irrigation project that involves building a series of dams, reservoirs and canals. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a self-styled Gandhian organization which grew out of the new left "people's movements" of the late 1970s, kept the project at bay successfully for more than a decade. The NBA argued that any benefits of the project, which were being exaggerated, would accrue to a small group of private entities who stood to make massive profits from water-intensive cash crops like sugar cane. The NBA also argued that the surveys underestimated how many tens of thousands of people would eventually be displaced by the reservoirs that the dams

produced. Displacement related to new dams being built, or due to increasing the height of older dams, continues, with the promised benefits of hydroelectric power and irrigation still in question. At its height, the NBA won several landmark victories, including the withdrawal of support for the project from the World Bank, in light of its human costs and uncertain benefits (BBC News 2000).

The NBA's strengths have been numerous, in that it both galvanized the people living in both heavily forested and agricultural belts who stood to lose the most from the project, while also consolidating international support for its position from like-minded activist organizations. In 2000, I attended a kind of international "activist camp" in the Narmada Valley, hosted by the NBA in order to build support, as well as showcasing the NBA's gains to foreign and domestic activists. My visit took place as part of an organized event in a village that was eventually submerged by increasing the height of one of the first dams on the river. Upon arrival at the event, I realized that, partially because the movement was self-styled as "Gandhian", my own gender non-conformity was not only noticed, but it was marked and remarked upon in a way that I had not yet experienced in India. Of particular interest was that the criticisms of my appearance, both verbal and unspoken, came from activists who were from Mumbai and New Delhi, who were English speaking and well educated, and had taken up the call for urban educated elites to "return" to the village in order to contribute to the welfare and sustainability of people there. These activists had adopted forms of dress that have been marked as nationalist and as contributing to local economies since Gandhi's time, the women wearing khadi (homespun cotton) saris, the men in khadi kurtas and pajamas. They were, in a sense, the most expressive about my black boots, collared shirts and trousers, which garnered twin critiques of being non-local and non-normative. People who were from the villages that were about to be submerged, however, seemed to categorize all of the non-khadi wearing activist visitors as outsiders, perhaps making small distinctions between us, but generally understanding us, as a group, to be "foreign". Friends who were part of the autonomous women's movement and supporters of the NBA at that time explained that the anti-dam movement in particular found it necessary to promote a certain sense of social propriety, contextualized by its Gandhian-ness, as both tactic and ethos. Here, sexual and gender normativity were seen as natural, to be sure, but they also seemed to operate as a kind of aesthetic lingua franca (Shah 2009) among the vastly diverse activists that the NBA had assembled.

This feature of the spaces created within and around the anti-dam movement has changed considerably over the past 15-odd years. In the 1990s, the NBA was part of an effort to create an umbrella organization, called the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), which provides a forum for a range of progressive social movements that are autonomous from political parties, all of which seek to confront "corporate globalisation, communalism and religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, casteism, untouchability and discrimination of all kinds" (NAPM 2014). In 2010, the NAPM became one of the first national "new left" organizations to issue a statement in support of the Delhi High Court judgment on Section 377 (NAPM 2010). In 2013, it again issued a statement on 377, criticizing the Supreme Court Judgment in no uncertain terms (NAPM 2013). The statement is entitled "NAPM

demands legal recognition of the natural right to life and love of lakhs of gender diverse individuals”. The first paragraph of the statement reads:

As lakhs of individuals and groups across the country, celebrated the 4th anniversary of the historical judgement [sic] by Justice (Retd). A.P. Shah and Justice (Retd). [sic] Muralidharan of the Delhi High Court, recognizing the natural right to life and life of gender diverse persons on the International Human Rights Day, the verdict of the Supreme Court, just a day after, on 11th December, comes as a serious blow to and blot on the Constitution of India which guarantees social, political, economic and cultural equality to all citizens and upholds the dignity of every individual as sacrosanct.

By numerous accounts, the space for people of alternate or non-normative sexualities and genders within the organizations that constitute the NAPM, including the NBA, has expanded. The catalyst for and duration over which this expansion has taken place is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one factor has been the presence of individuals inside the NAPM who have pressed for an engagement with questions of sexuality and gender transgression. The organization’s engagement with LGBTQIKHP groups in India, and especially with individuals who have helped to frame the legal case against 377, is evident in the NAPM statement’s emphasis on “lakhs” of “gender diverse” people living in India. One “lakh” is one “hundred thousand”, and is clearly deployed in response to the Supreme Court judgment’s statement that “LGBT” people in India are a “miniscule minority”.

If the idea of the rural as a space of normative gender and sexuality is eroding within movement spaces that focus on organizing campaigns in rural India, it continues to be deployed by some members of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in their argument against decriminalizing gay sex. Prior to the BJP’s sweeping electoral win in the 2014 elections, one newspaper story reported the following regarding the party’s response to the Supreme Court’s decision:

... the BJP had factored in the prospect of facing “brickbats” from the “secular-liberals”. “It is a flawed assumption that ratifying homosexuality is equal to being progressive and broad-minded. The present discourse has been largely generated by a niche of the elite, which reflects the Bharat-India divide,” a source said, ignoring questions on the harassment homosexuals go through in many towns and villages (Ramaseshan 2013).

Here “Bharat”, the Sanskrit name for India, refers to the BJP’s notion of the authentic space of the national, as opposed to “India”, which is the province of elites. (The country is known by both names, officially.) It stands to reason that the reference to “elites” here does not imagine elites living in rural areas, while non-elite “Bharat” is thought to exist in both urban and non-urban settings. It is notable that, given the Hindu Right’s historic anti-Gandhian stance, this BJP representative would nevertheless deploy an idea of authentic Indian-ness that resonates with Gandhi’s own notion of the same. It is also notable that the stance that LGBT rights is essentially an elite person’s issue is significantly different from the Hindu Right’s stance on homosexuality in the late 1990s, during its protest of the release of the film *Fire* (Mehta 1996) in India.

Fire was a 1996 film about two sisters-in-law living in a middle class joint family in New Delhi who fall in love. The film was cleared for release by the Indian Censor

Board, but was met with violent protests by right-wing Hindu organizations over its content. It was eventually released, following a period of delay of some 5 weeks. During the delay, when protests and media coverage of the controversy grew to a fever pitch, the Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist party based in Mumbai, was particularly vocal about its objection to the idea of lesbianism in India. Among the numerous proclamations that lesbianism is “not part of Indian culture”, the leader of the Shiv Sena at the time, the late Bal Thackeray, also said that lesbianism had the potential to spread like wildfire, destroying families. Another Shiv Sena activist worried that if the film were to be screened, then girls would take the hint and lesbianism would be practiced rampantly in student hostels. Beyond the nativist idea that lesbianism did not belong in or to India, the Shiv Sena carried the idea of a foreign contagion to its logical extreme, saying that the film had to be banned in order to prevent an “epidemic” of lesbian behavior (Gopinath 2005; Vanita 2002).

The rhetorical distance between predicting an epidemic of licentiousness and arguing that homosexuality is essentially an elite concern is great. While comparing two sets of statements uttered some 13 years apart hardly provides enough evidence to proclaim a paradigm shift, the difference is still worth noting. Whereas the Shiv Sena’s objection to *Fire* and the objection to the contemporary anti-377 campaign seem to be instantiations of the same rhetoric, the objection to *Fire* also included the idea that, somehow, lesbianism would be appealing enough to cause the demise of society writ large, because lesbianism was something altogether foreign. The BJP, more than a decade later, frames its criticism of gay rights in relation to class, and the urban frame, identifying itself and “real” Indian culture with “Bharat” and, in a strange twist, claiming that English speaking, urban queers now belong to “India”.

Conclusion

“Cities can be crucibles where new politics can be constructed and emerge. The biggest difficulty right now is that cities are being divided into microstates. So that even now I’m told that “the city” is not a valid concept either. My answer to that is we have to regain some notion of the city ... as some kind of body politic through which we can reconstruct, not only cities, but can reconstruct human relations and ourselves. We have to think about it in those terms, and we have to understand that this is a political project, a class project.” (Harvey 2007:13)

In this essay, I have argued that complicating the idea of queer and trans existence and social movements in India requires locating contemporary sexuality and transgender politics in relation to the politics of urbanism. This analytic methodology, which, in this case, mobilizes the heuristic potential of changing discourses of Indian urbanism in relation to questions of sexuality and gender, enables posing a range of questions that either require reassessment or are being framed for the first time. How, for example, would studies of non-normative sexualities and genders in everyday life problematize space in order to avoid reliance on the idea of a unitary national queer subject? What is at stake in leaving the relation between urban space and neoliberal modernity unmarked with respect to gender and sexuality, in a time when the flow of people between rural and urban areas is more heightened than ever before,

while the way we see/produce/think about urban and rural space is becoming ever more polarized? If cities are figured as sites of consumption, and rural spaces (especially extremely rural spaces) as sites of extraction—of natural resources and, also, of migrant labor—how may we rethink problematics of authenticity and elitism within the contexts of people who are classified as sexual and gender minorities?

Extending concerns that have animated sexual geography for some time, the stakes of considering dialogic relationalities between urbanization and queer and trans subjectivities are particularly high, as critiques of LGBT rights in relation to neoliberalism characterize much critical scholarship on sexuality and gender politics in the non-West. In India, critiques of neoliberalism have had great bearing upon understanding how the increasing economic segregation of major Indian cities has served to structure the challenges, discourses, and daily lives of people in rural and urban areas throughout the country. This is especially salient to the new political context of India's right-wing government. Its new finance minister, Arun Jaitley, has made no secret of his interest in modifying existing laws and financial policies in ways that are favorable to private capital (Gupta 2014) while being "willing to make India a low-cost manufacturing centre" (Gopalakrishnan 2014). If we apply David Harvey's (2009:66) observation here, that "[a]s the role of the state shifts, from caring for the well-being of its citizens (under a paternalistic social democracy) to providing for a good business climate, so heightened interterritorial and interstate competition deepens neoliberal commitments", then we may expect an even greater expansion of wealth disparities under this administration for at least a time, while sexuality and gender take on new meanings and importance in discourses on Indian development and modernity.

The new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised to build 100 "smart cities" during his tenure. At the same time, a spokesman for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu fundamentalist organization where Modi was trained and which is currently serving as the BJP's ideological mentor, has said that "while he did not glorify certain kinds of behaviour covered by Section 377, it was debatable whether they should be considered a crime" (Mukherji 2014). While this could be perceived as a softening stance on homosexuality from the Hindu right, it seems more likely that the decriminalization of consensual sodomy is a component of a broader discursive strategy whose aims are deregulatory in nature. How may we assess changes in sexuality and gender politics in this context? What more may we do than to relegate materialist critiques of non-normative or alternate sexualities and genders in India to the age of neoliberalism, and to claim that these ultimately entail critiquing the production of normative urban gay elites? I have suggested that an analysis of sexualities and genders in India that avoids these pitfalls does so by engaging and complicating notions of Indian urbanism itself, where, among many other things, the urban serves as the site of production for a new notion of economic subjectivity.

Endnotes

¹ I have chosen the term "non-normative" to describe the set of politics and groups of people that are at the heart of this critique, although the terms "marginal" and "alternate" are used in this manner as well, as in "alternate sexualities". All of these aim, from various directions, to escape ascribing terms like "lesbian", "gay", "queer", and "trans" to individuals who

identify with another term, or who do not use identitarian terms at all. I use the term “non-normative” in order to highlight critiques of normativity, and to acknowledge the politically fraught linguistic terrain that questions of sexualities and genders in India comprise.

- ² Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, kothi (assigned male sex at birth, “receptive” partner, having a feminine gender expression), hijra (assigned male sex at birth, having a feminine gender expression and able to avail of a “third gender” legal status), panthi (male “non-receptive” partner, often identified in relation to kothis).
- ³ Here I am using the term “LGBT” as it was used in the case to read down the law, and as it appears in the Supreme Court judgment.
- ⁴ Dalit is sometimes translated as “oppressed”, and is a movement-based term used to identify members of lower caste and so-called “untouchable” communities.

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