

South Asia and sexuality: still | here

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What are you looking for? I grew up in a directionally challenged world. Bombay, the city of my birth, and Mumbai, the city of my return(s), requires an attention, indeed an attachment, to mis/direction. A casual stranger's request for walking directions will inevitably summon places lost and found. To arrive at a destination, you must first lose your way, navigate the folds of spaces and histories that rarely recede out of view. That building you seek, one is often told, lives next to another building that was long demolished, even as its loss endures as the only map of the present. As my Bahujan poet Baba used to say, GPS in India is *aaplya manachi akanksha* / an aspirational techné, an imaginary shorthand that promises Grand Places Soon.

Such dis/orientations to geography and time are of course commonplace across the built landscapes of urban postcolonial worlds across South Asia. As colonial street and city names changed in the aftermath of a nationalist postcolonialism, their renaming refurbished than erased the itinerant genealogies of arrivals and departures. For example, Carter Road (in Bombay)—an affluent sea-facing neighbourhood—officially became Sangeet Samrat Naushat Ali Marg (in Mumbai), a titular shift that was unheralded, beyond the strategic state calculus of secular cityscapes. Carter Perry, that pesky suburban collector (after whom the area was named) remains doggedly present, less colonial nostalgia, more reminder of unsettled pasts and futures. Carter Road Promenade, to this day, opens out to a breezy, cruisy, public outpost for all genders and persuasions, a space stuck at a hinge in history, where attempts at geographic self-reinvention are overwrought by the slipperiness of stories told and untold (Baliga, 2008). After all, geo-histories of the urban are not just mappings of the emergence of social networks and lineages, but also sedimentations of spatial inequality. Dalit and Bahujan kin remain excluded from such urban vistas of celebrated itinerancy, segregated by access, language and embodiment (Thatra, 2022). Such exclusions were exacerbated (and not inaugurated) by the recent pandemic whose viral vernaculars of contagion, vulnerability and danger impacted caste-oppressed communities more than others.¹

There are of course pre-histories to such habits of mis/direction and exclusion. One story of geopolitics, a tale spun by harbingers of area studies, is that after colonial geographies shredded their historical value, South Asia as object had to be resuscitated and enlivened, placed within robust networks of the Indian Ocean, slavery, indenture and so much more. Yet, as my comrade Geeta Patel and I argued in our special issue on sexuality and geopolitics, such shifts in historical value (how do we 'know' South Asia, and how do

¹ For more, see Arondekar *et al.* (2021), including 'Supply chain: all dreams are sincere' (Arondekar, 2021).

we know it is sufficiently 'queer'?) have been less attentive to the hermeneutics of sexuality and region. Sexuality has remained a literal object of capture, understood within economies of representational value (the search and rescue form) and the literalism of mimesis. For histories of sexuality to be understood as histories of region, we wanted to move past the crudely literal, to cull instead an arsenal of theoretical indirection, from genre to periodisation, straying away from the parsimonious realism of a queer/area studies that demanded the stability of recognition. Our answer to the erasures or exclusions of spaces and sexualities was not to return to restorative maps of queer presence; rather, we invited non-recuperative, non-trademarked forms less amenable to historical capture (Sridhar, 2019).

Such a move away from the representational repositories of geopolitics equally finds the critical interventions of the wonderful contributions gathered here. Queer elsewhere(s) proffers a series of speculations that 'highlight the imaginative and aesthetic formations of queerness across the global south that is both alienated from and yet familiar to the western academy' (Roy *et al.*, 2023, this issue). We move from the stances that performance and poetry take, to the messiness of postcolonial history, to the thorny legacies of theorisations and politics that seed the models of trans/queerness we usher in. Across the fifteen articles, essays and multi-modal works that constitute the 'area' of the issue, we encounter worlds of words, performances, sounds and critical reflections that ease in and out of regional inflections and disciplinary homes. More dialogue than demonstration, South Asia bypasses its own exemplarity. *En bref*, the subcontinent, as the editors archly note, 'ceases to declare itself' (*ibid.*)

come away with me: *baithak*

An afterword, by convention, is an occasion for a meditation on the pieces that prefigure its invitation, a riposte to the analytical promises made and undone and a final gesture towards future trajectories and afterlives of the project. I leave those conventions aside; the heft of the issue after all lies in its insistent eschewal of such rituals of academic dispersal and content. The organisation of the issue summons instead a subaltern pedagogy of queer engagement, a collective arrangement of thought and praxis that invites us in, to play, to perform, to pull away from the satiations of restoration and reform. It invites us into a form of *baithak*. *Baithak* is a Hindustani concept/term that literally means 'seat' or 'place to seat' within South Asia, cross-cutting borders of aesthetics, affect and region. As S.R. Ahmad reminds us, *baithak* in popular Urdu refers to a collective sitting or seating arrangement on the floor that creates more decolonial spatial formations. We make room, as it were (Ahmad, 2022). When evoked as *Bethak*, it involves a literal squat, a muscular fold that invites bodily surrender. Other iterations of the term can be found in its efflorescence as *baithak gana* / *baithak* songs, sung across the Indo-Surinamese diaspora as gatherings in conflict and collaboration (Elahi, 2020), or in its invocation as a form of political gathering, mostly in non-urban locations in South Asia (Channa, 1997).

What brings me to the *baithak* here is its intimate connections to a genre of performance: the *lavani*. *Lavani* is a dance form, prevalent widely across the state of Maharashtra in Western India, known for its celebration of sexuality, aesthetics and public engagement, especially amongst working-class and lower-caste communities, and often falsely characterised as 'just sex and no art' (Tambe, 2022). As Savitri Medhatul and Bhushan Korgaonkar remind us, *lavani* performers hail from nomadic collectivities such as Bhatu Kolhati, Dombari and Kalwaat, and routinely dance in Sangeet Bari (*lavani* theatres)

across the state. Of note here is Medhatul and Korgaonkar's insistence on the lavani dancer as a complex historical figure often miscast as either a sexual predator who uses her sensuality to seduce gullible clients, or a victim of gender, caste and class marginalisation, and thus in need of reform and rescue. Such facile historical binaries elide the density of networks and collaborations that sustain lavani dancers, and the autonomy and communities they build through their performance. For Medhatul and Korgaonkar, the lavani form destabilises settled divisions between public and private, folk and modern, performer and audience, creating (to use this special issue's vernacular) elsewhere(s) of raucous and intrusive possibility.² Medhatul and Korgaonkar have galvanised public interest in this dance form, forging spaces where lavani artists and audiences meet, learn and surrender. A central feature of lavani is the space of the private *baithak*, an intimate encounter between dancer and client that transacts desire, revenue and pleasure. As lavani performance enters public auditoriums, Medhatul and Korgaonkar have worked (collectively and separately) to suture the intimacy of a private *baithak* with the broader histories of Sangeet Bari.³

For the brief interlude of this afterword, I want to stay with one such lavani performance, and its transformation of the private *baithak* into a collective space of queer elsewhere(s).⁴ On 11 December 2022, I attended 'Lavanike Rang', a small showcase of lavani fragments, written and directed by Bhushan Korgaonkar, and performed at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai.⁵ Helmed by the magical and intoxicating charms of Shakuntalabai Nagarkar, an award-winning and self-proclaimed 'elder' lavani dancer, the show was encased in the seductions of a private *baithak*. As the other artists Pushpa Satarkar, Gauri Jadhav, Latabai Waikar and Akshay Malvankar schooled the audience on various incarnations of lavani across genre, accent and region, Shakuntalabai coaxed her audience into submission. In one fragment entitled *Sakhya Chala Bagamadi Rung Khelu Chala* (Girlfriends, let us go to the garden and play), Shakubai invites the audience into her play, each gesture of rehearsed seduction cajoling us into surrender, as if to say, it IS a private *baithak* (wink, wink), don't be fooled by this public performance. Throughout the show, the largely middle-class (and I would wager upper-caste) audience laughs (sometimes over-enthusiastically) at the lavani artist's overt sexualisations, unsure if they are to heed the call or politely move on. What we see in the elsewhere lavani space of 'just sex and not art' are compositions that do not accede to installed proprieties for performance or pleasure. They are more speculative realms tuned into profit and pleasure, politics and hope, called upon to speak anew. Come away with me. We are still. Here.

² Björkman (2017). For a detailed and more historical genealogy of lavani, see Sastry's (2021) excellent dissertation.

³ There is much more to say about the divergent genealogies of lavani performances and their linkages with broader histories of caste, region and class. See Sastry and Medhatul (2022) and Korgaonkar (2014). For a detailed history of the private *baithak*, see Naregal (2010).

⁴ For a more predictable queer reading of lavani performance, see Phukan (2019). I have chosen not to focus on the literality of queer performance within lavani here as it distracts from the broader hermeneutical demands it places on our understandings of gender and sexuality.

⁵ Prithvi Theatre showcases contemporary and experimental performance and theatre in Mumbai. Even as it has been heralded as a sanctuary for artistic renewal and support, it remains a largely middle-class venue, out of reach for most Mumbai residents. The lavani artists invoked the incongruity of their presence within such a privileged and classed space throughout their performance.

author biography

Anjali Arondekar is Professor of Feminist Studies, and Founding Co-Director, Center for South Asian Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research engages the poetics and politics of sexuality, caste and historiography, with a focus on Indian Ocean Studies and South Asia. She is the author of *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009; Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010), winner of the Alan Bray Memorial Book Award for best book in lesbian, gay or queer studies in literature and cultural studies, Modern Language Association (MLA), 2010. She is co-editor (with Geeta Patel) of 'Area Impossible: The Geopolitics of Queer Studies', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2016). Her second book, *Abundance: Sexuality's History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), grows out of her interest in the archival figurations of sexuality, caste and collectivity in British and Portuguese colonial India.

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artist statements

Zulfikar Bhutto

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Abdullah Qureshi

Abdullah Qureshi (b. 1987, Lahore) is a multidisciplinary artist, curator and educator. Rooted in traditions of abstraction, he incorporates gestural, poetic and hybrid methodologies to address autobiography, trauma and sexuality through painting, filmmaking and immersive events. Drawing from childhood memories, everyday surroundings and intimate encounters, interior objects, abstract landscapes and faceless portraits are recurring themes in his two-dimensional work. In moving image and durational projects, Qureshi situates artistic concerns from the personal into more expansive conversations on critical histories, visual culture and social justice. His films take a camp performance-based approach to portray scenes, symbols and non-linear narratives that extend his visual language, questions on identity and queer genealogies outside the Western canon. Working with long-term collaborators, Qureshi's curating, cultural programming, pedagogy and writings further articulate his inquiries in feminist, LGBTQ2S+, decolonial, anti-racist and migratory discourses. Centring Black and People of Colour perspectives, he engages collective modes of creative thinking, organisation and production. Through his ongoing doctoral project, 'Mythological migrations: imagining queer muslim utopias', he examines formations of queer identity and resistance in Muslim migratory contexts.

Farazeh Syed

The female body is conventionally perceived as mysterious, an 'object' of pleasure, a marker of the 'weaker' gender. In the history of the image too, women have historically been 'imagined', objectified and stereotyped as the Other: woman is present but always as a symbolic metaphor for sensuality, eroticism and passivity, and the narrative is always that of the dominant male. Such imagery serves to represent and, in fact, reinforce gender-based power ideologies. To me, the female body signifies lived experience and an active, living entity that experiences, expresses and responds. I, therefore, employ women as self-conscious subjects embodying their physicality and sexuality and making assertive, proactive statements of protest and transformation about self-definition, identity and self-determination. The thematic concern is to de-objectify and deconstruct myths about the female body and sexuality, hence, conveying its dynamism, autonomy, emotionality, imperfection and fallibility.