Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive

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Abstract

This article is a brief historical overview of the Queer archive in India. The precolonial and colonial archive provides several possibilities for 'authenticating' the queer identity and claiming some of the history that modern nationalist homophobia seeks to wipe out. Identities are complex to begin with and become more complicated when relating them to the nation and sexuality. Contemporary Indian sexual identities are constructed out of the multiplicitious effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonisation and globalisation that are more often than not in conflict with each other. This article is a literature review of several contemporary queer writing in India and creates a starting point for discussions on India's queer sexuality.

[**Keywords**: Queer, India, sexuality, history, archive, homophobia, nationalism]

Introduction

A critical moment of rupture in Indian queer sexuality occurred with the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* in 1996. In the film Sita, remarks to her lover Radha, 'There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other.' Whilst Mehta does not provide a clue as to which language she is referring, her intentions are explicit- to disown English as an Indian language and to show that queer sexuality is not visible within the culture of India, so much so it does not even have a name! Mehta is not alone in her views, here. Foucault claimed that sexuality-based identity categories were invented in nineteenth century Europe and that prior to this invention, these did not exist (Foucault, 1990).

Recent historians have challenged these views and the Indian archive has several visible examples of discourses around queer sexuality. An opportune moment to start talking about Indian sexuality would be Vatsayana's celebrated text *Kamasutra*. However Indian historians and queer scholars, Vanita and Kidwai (2000) trace these discourses further back to ancient India. The history of India is quite problematic and complex. It has been the melting pot of several different cultures that have invaded the country and impinged their own cultural specificities on this land. From the earliest Vedic culture up to the colonial era, India has seen a multitude of laws and changing attitudes.

Vanita and Kidwai (2000) examine the unchartered territory of the Indian archive on homoerotic love. Queer scholar, Ruth Vanita's work on Indian

sexualities is both prolific and covers a wide range of queer representations, from historical to the literary and popular culture. Because of her dominance within the field I rely on her extensive breadth of work to situate the foundations of my study. But as my discussions will follow I do not rely solely on her but rather also borrow from the works by other queer scholars and historians who have written widely around imperial and colonial histories (O'Flaherty, 1973; Ballhatchet, 1980; Aldrich 2003; Arondekar, 2009) and those writing about contemporary Indian society (Nandy, 1983; Varshney, 1993; Chatterjee, 1993, 2004; Bose and Bhattacharya, 2007; Ghosh, 2007, 2010).

The texts dealing with homoerotic love in ancient India are few but extant. Whilst these do not reveal so much so about how 'women loved women or men loved men but rather how such love was represented or expressed in writing' (2000: xiii).

Before moving on further, I would like to explicate on my use of the term 'India'. The term India as we know today was coined very recently in 1947 with the creation of Pakistan and India as separate nations. The geographical boundaries of any country are marked randomly during different historical periods. The region which we now call South Asia despite its linguistic, cultural and religious differences has enough commonality through its shared literary and cultural traditions to merit being studied under the aegis of a single nation. I have argued elsewhere 'that we are unable to differentiate between communities residing on either side of the Line of Control, despite the fact that political and global powers define barriers of geography. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have had a shared culture for an extended period of history' (Dasgupta, 2011: 278). The term South Asia is fraught with many problems and covers a larger area which includes Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives in addition to the three I already mentioned. Because of the fluid and shifting nature of the borders in this area and the texts I shall be primarily dealing with, I shall use the term India even though some of the ancient and medieval texts discuss regions which are now a part of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Ancient and Medieval India

One of the dominant tropes of same sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships. In the ancient Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, Krishna and Arjuna, frequently referred to as 'the two Krishnas' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000:3) reflect bonds of friendship which go beyond marriage and procreation. In fact 'Krishna clearly states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen- there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live' (Ibid:5). The *Mahabharata*, one of the most important epics in Hinduism has numerous other examples of same sex 'attachment' many of which have been discussed by Vanita and Kidwai (2000).

However the Krishna and Arjuna friendship remains one of the most important aspects of the epic. A famous conversation in the epic is between Krishna and Arjuna, where Krishna reiterates their inseparability and reveals his divine form to his friend. This collected conversation between the two is the *Bhagvad Gita*, the most widely read Hindu text. When Arjuna's son is still born, Krishna revives him miraculously, 'by invoking his own acts of truth and righteousness, foremost amongst which is the perfect love between him and Arjuna' (Ibid:8). Thus same sex friendship gives life to a new born in this case instead of heterosexual conjugality.

Another trope which is used to justify same sex love in ancient India is through rebirth. Vanita and Kidwai argue that 'The concept of previous births serves to legitimise actions perceived as improper in the present life' (Ibid:28). Rebirth makes several social constructs and divides less important and love between two people of conflicting gender, class or caste seem involuntary as a result of their past life. In Somadatta's *Kathasaritsagara*, Somaprabha falls in love with the beautiful princess Kalingasena and attributes this love to her previous birth. 'I am sure she and I were female friends in previous birth. My mind which is overwhelmed by affection for her, tells me so' (Ibid:86). In this case the two women belong to different class hierarchies and are of the same gender but by attributing their attraction to their previous birth, their same sex desire is legitimised. Same sex desire amongst women is also found in the Bengali text *Kritivasa Ramayana* (Ramayana written by Krittivasa). In the text, the sage Bhagiratha's birth is ascribed to the sexual union between two females. Bhagiratha's father died before he was conceived and his birth was only possible through divine sanction of the god Sankara, 'You two have intercourse with one another. By my blessings one of you will have a lovely child' (Ibid: 101).

This episode is significant in understanding the cultural setting of ancient India. Whilst normative heterosexuality and marriage still remains the cultural norm, the possibility of transgressive sexual and gender possibilities is also highlighted. However this was legitimised only through divinity.

A third trope is sex change which is again brought through divine intervention. The Hindu deities were multidimensional and fluid in their form and one of their remarkable features was 'their multiplicity and variability' (Ibid:58). Thus a deity might appear in any form- male, female, neuter or even in a non-human form. Vishnu, one of the three primary Vedic gods in the Hindu pantheon was also known to take the form of a beautiful woman- Mohini. Shiva, another of the three principle gods, on hearing about his beautiful female form approaches him and asks to see it. Thus he is aware of the ambiguous nature of Mohini's gender and becomes attracted to her and 'followed her as a lordly elephant would a she elephant' (Ibid:71). The ambiguity in gender here acts as the agency through which same sex desire between the two gods could be realised. Shiva here is not deceived or unaware of Mohini's true gender but knowingly desires and pursues her. Cultural historian, Wendy O'Flaherty remarks that 'the devotees in Shiva see

the realisation of all possibilities' (1973:253). This same sex 'encounter' leads to the birth of Ayyappa, who is born of two men. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) says that this legend of the birth was a late medieval addition to the existing story about Shiva and Mohini and it refers to the child as 'ayoni' which refers to non vaginal sex.

Amongst the vast literary output of Ancient India, another work which has attained an universal recognition is Vatsyana's *Kamasutra*. In reference to non-normative sexual practices, the text responds, 'in all things connected with love, everybody should act according to the custom of the country, and his own inclination' (Burton, 1994:127). Classic texts such as the *Kamasutra* not only described but even prescribed 'queer' sexual practices such as 'auparishtaka' or mouth congress (Ibid: 70). What is important to consider about this text is that sexual practices discussed do not necessarily head towards procreation but rather pleasure. Thus non-procreative sexual practice, a form of non-normative or queer deviation from prescribed sexual practice is represented within ancient India.

One of the liminalities of sexuality studies of this period is the absence of precolonial laws around queer sexuality. The Hindu religion is complex because of the several types of religious life that existed in ancient India. The *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), one of the earliest treatise on Hindu law prohibits men from practicing 'ayoni' (non vaginal) sex. However there has been no evidence found so far of anyone being executed or punished in ancient India for same sex relations (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000).

Bhakti Movement

During the medieval period, The Bhakti movement was gaining momentum in India. Similar to the Sufi movement in the Perso- Arabic tradition, this movement reframed the perception of god and divinity. The gods were no longer just worshipped as a superior being but were rather seen as friends, lovers, spouse and even child. This opened up fluid intimacies and 'fluidity of gendered structure' (Rishi, 2009:203) between the deity and the devotee.

The Bhakti movement opened up new possibilities of reframing and discarding orthodox rigidity. Through a process of domestication, by making the deity a lover, new forms of intimacy beyond the confines of marriage and family were discovered. On another level, I would point out how this legitimised same sex love and desire with devotion and godly love. Thus poets like Surdas (15th c), Tulsidas (1532-1623) could sing praises to a male lover who was a divine being whilst female poets like Mirabai (1498-1547) and Vithabai (15th c) could circumvent the strictures imposed on women and marriage. However by incorporating god as a part of the family the devotee conflicted with the traditional reproductive family. It is significant to note that there is an ongoing tension between the devotional family and the biological one.

Surdas writes

These eyes thirst for a vision of Hari (The god Krishna)
Wanting to see the lotus eyed one
Grieving for him day and night[1]

If these above lines are taken out of the context of Bhakti, they could easily be read as a poem to a male lover who appears distant and unavailable. Vanita states that male mystic poets envisioned themselves as 'brides of God' (Vanita, 2005:91)

Intense emotional relationships also developed between the disciples and devotees who desired union with god. Jagannath Das, a fifteenth century Oriya poet and mystic was known for his devotion to Shri Chaitanya (who was seen as the reincarnation of Krishna). In this type of a Vaishnava tradition, Vanita and Kidwai notes 'all devotees tend to identify with the female who desires union with the male deity' (2000: 65). Jagannath Das and Chaitanya's love was well documented. Dibakar Das writes about their encounter in *Jagannath Charitamrita*, 'Overwhelmed with love

Fig. 1: Shri Gopi Vastra Haran, Smithsonian Archive

he held Das in a tight embrace. They stayed in this posture for two days and a half' (Ibid: 104). In fact Chaitanya addressed Jagannath as his 'sakhi' (female friend) (Ibid).

I would like to explain the importance of the term 'sakhi' in both medieval devotional poetry and its cultural significance in India. Sakhi quite literally refers to a female friend, 'sakha' being the male equivalent. This intimate friend occupies the space of the unavailable lover, she is accessible and shares the same intellect and interests as that of her friend. Thus there is an aspect of sameness which brings the two friends closer. Unlike western narratives where the friend occupies
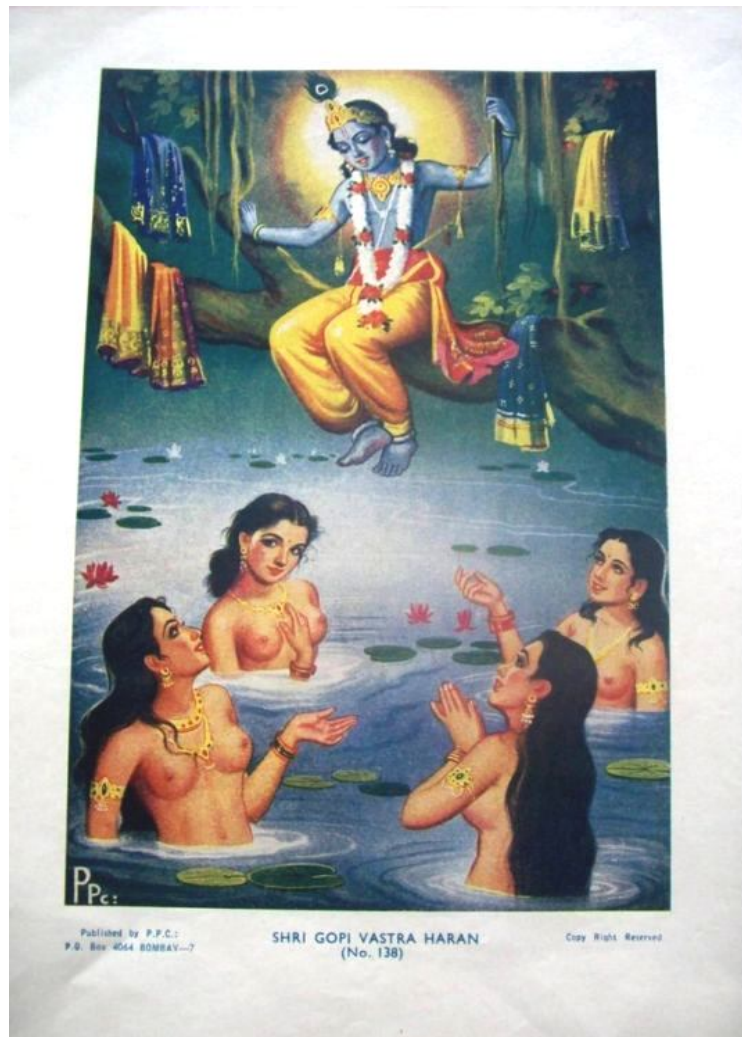
almost a secondary role or is simply an onlooker, the sakhi plays a far more important role in Indian narratives. In the Krishna-Radha tradition, Radha laments her love for Krishna to her friends and the songs are addressed to her 'sakhis' instead of directly to her male lover. Vanita notes that 'In miniature paintings, the heroine's female friends are often eroticised. Sometimes they participate in the love play of the hero and heroine, but often they occupy a space of their own in the painting' (Vanita, 2005: 92).

Hinduism is content to allow opposites to confront each other without resolution which provides a space for non-normative sexualities and same sex desires to exist. As Wendy O Flaherty remarks '[this] celebrate[s] the idea that the universe is boundlessly various and… that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other' (O'Flaherty, 1973: 318).

Perso-Arabic tradition

Whilst ancient and early medieval Indian materials contain scant or few references to same sex love, the late medieval period with the advent of Islamicate culture in India, a huge body of literature on same sex love especially those concerning between men become available.

In the latter half of the tenth century, invasions lead by Muslims rulers such as Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030 AD) culminated in the establishment of an Islamic culture in India. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna is well celebrated in South Asian history for his military prowess in Central and South Asia, his political alliances with the Hindu Kings and for initiating Islamic rule in the Punjab area. However Scott Kugle (2000) discusses another aspect of the ruler's life which is often glossed over, that is his relationship with his slave Ayaz. He goes so far as to make a comparison of their love with some of the timeless (heterosexual) lovers in South Asian history- Heer and Ranjha, Laila and Majnun. The new migrants who came into India with Sultan Mahmud brought Perso-Arabic traditions to India which was disseminated both through their military conquests and through the activities of the Sufi saints, which I shall discuss later. Homoerotic love affairs were very visible during this time and were not mentioned derogatorily. Saleem Kidwai reasons this visibility to the 'cosmopolitanism of urban Islamic culture' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000: 108). Urbanisation allowed people of varied castes and backgrounds to freely intermingle and most of the queer literature around this time depicted passionate and erotic interaction amongst men of different classes. Whilst Islamic scholars are equivocal about the *Koran*'s strong condemnation of homosexuality, there are enough instances within the Perso-Arabic tradition to contradict this viewpoint (Wafer, 1997a)[2]. In fact I would concur that this period was not only liberal but also progressive. Another example of this liberalism was the acceptance of a female ruler, Razia Sultana in 1236, even though orthodox Islam sees women as inferior to men.

Going back to Mahmud and Ayaz, we come across a whole body of literature celebrating Mahmud not as the conqueror but as the lover.

> Mahmud set a cup beside him and a decanter before him
> Full of burgundy wine, as if distilled from his own heart
> He filled the cup with wine like his love's ruby lips
> Entangled in the curls of Ayaz, Mahmud began to lose control (Kugle, 2002:33)

The above lines translated from Zulali Khwansari's *Mathnawi-yi Zulali* by Kugle depict Mahmud passionately in love with Ayaz. Ayaz was a slave bought by Mahmud, who played an important role within the court. In the 'ghazals'(poems) he is a symbol of perfect love which people quest for. Queering this moment further we find not just love between two men, but love that transcends the boundaries of class hierarchy. The Mahmud and Ayaz ghazals break a further myth perpetuated through colonialism, that all same sex love between men was pederastic. In fact as Kugle puts it, 'Mahmud and Ayaz are the archetype of perfect male lovers, but both are adult men' (Ibid: 35).

Shibli Nomani on the other hand, provides an interesting aside on same sex male love in the Arabic tradition. He says that 'Arab soldiers were uninitiated in pederasty... fell in love with them because they were away from women and 'amradparasti'' (Rahman, 1990:1). Tariq Rahman translates 'amrad' as beardless boy and 'parasti' as worship, thus the love of beardless boys. In most ghazals the gender of the beloved is ambiguous but in contrast, the Mahmud and Ayaz poems 'consistently identifies the beloved as male, through the trope of Mahmud's passionate longing for Ayaz' (Kugle: 36). The Mahmud-Ayaz romance 'was also the only one with a happy ending' (Vanita and Kidwai: 118). However historians such as Indrani Chatterjee are more cautious about such a simplistic reading and explains the presence of slave boys to free men 'not as expressive of individual sexual choices but, like slave girls, as socially acknowledged and living symbols of the nobleman's rank' (Chatterjee, 2002:63). However whilst such power relations are true, the Mahmud- Ayaz romance cannot be reduced to just a one way power and agency.

Sufism

In devotional Perso-Arabic mystic poetry like the Bhakti movement I described earlier uses symbols of romantic love to represent the love of god. Islamic mysticism 'allows for a more complex set of possibilities' (Wafer: 1997b, 107). It is similar to the Bhakti poems, however in which 'the love of god is represented using the imagery of romantic relationships between males' (Ibid).

Love is at the centre of Sufi poetry and spiritualism. In Sufi literature this love is expressed in homoerotic metaphors, however as Kidwai asserts, 'many Sufis

insisted that only same gender love could transcend sex and therefore not distract the seeker' (Vanita and Kidwai: 115).

Sufism was attractive to non-Muslims as well because it 'foregrounded personal devotion as opposed to the regimen of a dogma' (Ibid: 114). Wafer also points out that it was ambiguity that was used as a device to constantly switch between the erotic and the mystical. The imagery used drew on legendary love stories like Laila- and Majnun and Mahmud and Ayaz (Wafer: 1997b). Kidwai analyses some of the works by Amir Khusro, a Sufi mystic who lived around the thirteenth century and was venerated as a saint. His poems frequently refer to Nizamuddin Chisti, a fellow mystic and saint.

> The Muslims have become sun-worshippers
> Because of these simply sprightly Hindu boys
> I am desolate and intoxicated...
> Khusro is like a dog with a collar. (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000:127-128)

The poem has all the features of the Bhakti tradition. He draws images from his domestic life and addresses his beloved as male. The Sufis use of indigenous languages made them more emotive and Kidwai points out that 'Indian Sufi poetry was... influenced by ancient Indian poetics and traditions such as the Radha-Krishna tradition of mystical love poetry' (Ibid:117). The convention of using a signature to identify the poet is common in the Arabic tradition. In one of the Mahmud- Ayaz poems, Kugle points out to one such couplet:

> Ayaz has vexed the heart of Mahmud and left him in troubled agitation
> Mahmud gazed upon him- if only he'd pondered this poem instead. (Kugle: 35)

The poet makes clever use of the convention where he addresses himself in the last sentence. The method of devotion adopted by the Sufi poets wasn't through a prescribed prayer but through the constant mention of god's name which is called 'zikr'. The homoerotic love poems of the Sufi tradition do just that- the constant mention of the beloved. Wafer recognises the theme of male-male love in Persian poetry and broadly places them in three categories- poets who practiced 'shahid-bazi' (Love of boys), poets who used the symbolism of male-male love but avoided gaining a reputation and thirdly poets who denounced 'shahid-bazi' (Wafer, 1997b:117). Abru (1733c) and Mir Taqi Mir (1810c) were also prominent in representing homoeroticism in their poems. 'They openly discussed their attraction to males, dwelt on what they found attractive in young males... and heartbreaks' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000:119). Whilst poets like Khusro, Abru and Mir openly referred to the male beloved, others like Hafiz and Attar used the symbolism where the meaning is ambiguous. Attar saw the beauty of god mirrored through the human form. His poems '[oscillate] between the love of a boy and the desire for god' (Ibid: 124). Attar too uses the Mahmud and Ayaz romance in his works. However there were also poets such as Jalal-Ud-Din-Rumi who was critical of 'shahid-bazi'. He says for example,

> The Sufi is he who seeks purity, not he who wears a garment of wool, patches it, and commits sodomy. (Ibid: 126)

Rahman says that these poems 'neither celebrate nor denigrate homosexual love... they accept it as a natural outlet for erotic feelings, and are quick to use pseudo mystical arguments against any religious minded detractor. In short they do not feel stigmatised at all' (Rahman, 1990: 18).

Another form of ghazal that figures consistently within South Asia is the 'rekhti'. The rekhti poetry which historian Carla Petievich (2002) calls Urdu poetry's 'lesbian' voice was introduced by the poet Sa'adat Yar Khan Rangin (1756-1834) to the literary elites of Lucknow. This form of poetry was composed in the 'begumati zaban' (Ladies' Language) and was addressed to the 'feminine aashiq (lover/narrator) and her beloved' (Petievich, 2002:51). The poetry in themselves were not erotic but indicated an intimacy between the women narrator and her beloved which extended to eroticism. Petievich in her translation of Insha Allah Khan's (1817c) poem, 'Noble Lady' clearly points out to the suggestiveness of the erotic relationship yet stopping short of explicitness:

> When did my *Zanakhi* last come to my house?
> Poor me, when's the last time I had a bath?
> That girl's been angry for a long time:
> When have we ever cleared up matters between us? (Ibid: 53)

The crucial problem with the rekhti genre as with the other queer Urdu ghazals is the woman addressing the feminine beloved who like the Mahmud-Ayaz ghazals is explicitly depicted to be of the same sex. The ambiguous identity of the beloved in the Urdu poetry is challenged further by this strain of poetry. Additionally the language of the poetry (begumati zaban) which was a language used by courtesans and women of ill repute and the nature of the poets like Jan Sahib who dressed up as a woman to recite his verses made this form of queer ghazals further problematic leading to its widespread suppression and ultimate eradication. The symbolism of love between males and women in the Islamic tradition challenges the modern Islamist heterosexism and patriarchal biases and would be useful in reshaping some of these discourses. Clearly homosexual practices have always been a part of these cultures.

Colonial incursion

The Portuguese were amongst the first Europeans to establish sea contact with India and were also the first to acquire territorial possessions in maritime Asia (Correia-Afonso, 1981). The total number of people under the Portuguese rule in India by the early seventeenth century were between 'one quarter and one half of a million' (Ibid:151). This was a small but not an insignificant number. However the attractions of the Indian trade was far greater for the Dutch who established the Dutch East India Company in 1602 and established their first trading post off

the Coromandel coast in 1606 (Prakash, 1984). However there is scant information about their social laws and policies. Most of the scholarly work in this area has focused on the economic and religious implications of their influence in India and almost no work has been found so far on the figurations of sexuality in Dutch and Portuguese India (Prakash, 1984; Afonso-Correia, 1986; Perez, 2001; Gracis, 2001; Singh, 2010) As Newitt (1986) says, the 'policy of the Portuguese government was to maintain the status quo and to interfere as little as possible in their (Indians) affairs' (94). It was however the British Empire established with the famous Battle of Plassey in 1757 that dictated the social, cultural and judicial architecture of the country (Robins, 2012).

The expansion of the British Empire in the eighteenth century also dictated the policies of sexual regulation in the colonies driven by a Victorian 'fanatical purity campaign' (Bhaskaran, 2002:16).The British Anti sodomy law was introduced in Britain in 1860, which reduced the punishment of sodomy from execution to imprisonment, however when enacted in the colonial states like India as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code it was seen as a retrogressive move.

The law states:

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 be liable to fine.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section. (Narrain and Eldridge,2009: 9; Arondekar, 2009: 76; Bhaskaran, 2002: 15;)

Prior to the enactment of this law queer sexuality was accommodated if not approved. As Vanita and Kidwai point out'at most times and places in pre-nineteenthcentury India, love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted. As far as we know, no one has ever been executed for homosexuality in India' (Vanita and Kidwai:xviii). However with the passing of this law, homosexuality was officially condemned by the state and framed as a criminal activity. This is not to say that colonialism entirely drove queer sexuality underground but rather I shall argue that colonialism acted as a device to obscure the queer identity, an unwillingness to 'come out' to the public. It signified ambivalence about revelation of queer identities. In colonial India the minoritisation of queer sexualities was a political agenda of purporting queer sexuality as a 'special oriental vice' (Ballhatchet, 1980; Bhaskaran,2002; Choudhuri, 2009). Kenneth Ballhatchet (1980) suggests that sexual energy was another reason for imperial expansion, he mentions British men with 'tastes which could not be satisfied in England... agreeably satiated overseas' (1). However there was a lot of anxiety by the British administrators about the sexual freedom, India posed for its people and homosexuality was blamed on Indian customs. Lord Curzon once remarked: 'I attribute it largely to early marriage. A boy gets tired of his wife, or of

women at an early age and wants the stimulus of some more novel or exciting sensation' (120).

However who is responsible for this 'vice'- the Orientals or the West? Bhaskaran provides an example from an advice column in the Bengali magazine, *Sanjibani* dated October 1893, where schoolboys engaging in 'unnatural and immoral habits' were asked to be cured by visits to prostitutes (2002:17). Ballhatchet on the other hand flags up Surgeon-Major Hamilton's comment on the situation in England:

> 'I have had a good deal of experience of schools, seminaries and colleges for boys, and, as I daresay you know, few of these institutions escape being infected with some immorality or other; but, once it creeps in, it is most difficult to eradicate' (1980:120)

So we can say it was not such an 'oriental' vice after all. The Victorian puritan campaign started by the colonisers was somewhat hypocritical. Ballhatchet describes the various debates which took place in the Parliament at the possibility of sexual relations taking place between the white elite and the native subordinate groups. There was a need for sexual regulation and one major point of concern was the presence of prostitutes in the army cantonments, however, 'the prospect of homosexuality was revealed in guarded terms by the authorities whenever there was a talk of excluding prostitutes from the cantonments' (162). This might seem contradictory to the Victorian morals of that time but as I see, the fundamental concern was for the preservation of power by the authorities to regulate the lives of those under their command. Attitudes to sexual conduct are likewise correlated to the safeguarding of vested interests and constitution of power.

Robert Aldrich says that, 'colonialism... encouraged sexual irregularity, heterosexual and homosexual' (2003:4). The colonial aspects of homosexuality suggest sexual ambivalence which produced both physical and emotional desire and also illustrates a variety of homosexual relationships. Aldrich also notes that 'the colonies provided many possibilities of homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality' (3). Thus there was a multiplicity of possibilities and perspectives in which queer bonding and queer desire could take place in the colony.

Homosexuality was also seen as a threat to masculinity. Ashis Nandy situates the homosexual criminalisation of Oscar Wilde in a colonial context- for the valorisation of masculinity (1983). Mrinalini Sinha points out the colonial imagination's contradictory tendency to assign hyper virile masculinity and thus degenerate sexuality to some colonised males (often associated with the non intellectual class) and hyper effeminacy (often paradoxically associated with the colonised elite who were the intellectual non-labouring class) to others (1995:19).

The British ascendancy in India also incited a series of attacks on homoerotic texts which they deemed 'filthy' and the need for expurgating them. Ballhatchet points out that even books like *The Arabian Nights* aroused concern which was 'full of the adventures of gallantry and intrigue, as well as of the

marvellous… but the Hindu and especially the Muhammadan youth… gloats quite much on the former, to his own moral harm' (5). The homoerotic vulgarity displayed by the Perso-Arabic texts was further checked through a series of education and legal reforms. The British not only policed the corridors of literary imagery but also framed homoerotic love as a 'criminal activity'. Thomas Babington Macaulay, who designed the colonial education system that would teach South Asians 'civilisation' on British Victorian models, also helped frame the legislation that labelled sodomy and other acts of love between men 'unnatural' and made them criminal offences (Kugle, 2002: 37). Cultural readjustments and revisionism was conducted to purge the 'literature of most erotic themes especially of homoerotic themes' (Ibid:38). Through the poets Altaf Hussayn Hali (1837- 1914) and Muhammad Husayn Azad (1834-1910) a radical 'ethical cleansing' took place of the Perso-Arabic texts (Ibid: 40). The British moral rhetoric was upheld and the new poetry that was produced under British guidance replaced the old style poetry. It was also during this time as Kugle points out, 'the figure of Sultan Mahmud was emptied of homoerotic imagery' (41).

However, it was also during the colonial period that texts such as the *Kamasutra* were 'recovered' as sites of Oriental scholarship by Orientalists such as Richard Burton. As Michael Sweet states,'to the brilliant adventurer and erotomaniac Sir Richard Burton, the KS was a heaven-sent opportunity to spit in the eye of late-Victorian sexual hypocrisy' (77). However these views on Indian sexual practice also propagated anxiety and an anti-sex bias by Victorian puritanists. Another form of distortion took place impinged by the Victorian sexual mores which minimised the existence of queer sexuality and approving India from a heteronormative perspective. AL Basham expresses that 'the erotic life of ancient India was generally heterosexual. Homosexuality of both sexes was not wholly unknown, it is condemned briefly in the law books and the Kama Sutra treats it but cursorily and with little unknown enthusiasm. In this respect, ancient India was far 'healthier' than most ancient cultures' (1959:172). This is obviously a wishful conjecture which can be totally rejected when one looks at the wide gamut of queer narratives available in the pre-colonial and colonial archives of India. Historians such as Anjali Arondekar take a different approach to the colonial archive on sexuality. She places sexuality at the very centre of the colonial archive instead of the periphery. By challenging the archive as permanent she seeks out to recover the 'lost or silent' (Arondekar, 2009:3).

Arondekar looks back at the colonial archive that suppressed homoerotic texts for recovering the same from its state of loss and obfuscation. In *On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* she mentions *Queen Empress v Khairati*, one of the earliest sodomy cases. She treats homosexuality in the colonial archive as both 'obvious and elusive' (14). In the above mentioned case, Khairati is framed as a 'habitual sodomite' whose unnatural sexual practices needed to be checked. The lack of any evidence leads to an earlier decision of conviction being overturned. However this case set a precedent for further cases where Section 377 was

enforced,'despite no precise record of the crimes enactment nor any testimony of the victim(s) of the alleged crime were ever located' (69) and this is what fascinates Arondekar, despite being a 'failed' case its power to the Empire provides a fascinating display of the anxiety sexual irregularities had on the administrators.The elusiveness and ubiquity of queerness being played out rearticulates Macaulay's claim when he passed the law:

> I believe that no country ever stood so much in need of a code of law as India and I believe also that there never was a country in which the want might be so easily supplied. (Bhaskaran:20)

Anti-Colonialism and Homophobia

You come as the rippling waves of light
In which I drowned
If you came like the rustle of the leaves
This body would start singing again[3] (Anonymous: 2005)

The anti-sex views and anxiety over non-normative sexualities espoused through colonial Puritanism had a major influence in the development of the Indian national identity. As Bose and Bhattacharya point out, 'questions of identity are complex to begin with, and they become even more so when one has to relate questions of sexual identities or preferences with questions of national specificity' (2007:x). The major factors that are commonly seen to contribute to the particularity of the Indian experience are the legacy of long-term colonialism, uneven economic development and the complex socio-ethnic diversity of the Indian society. Narratives of sexuality underwent a great change during colonialism which placed it from the public to the private sphere. Partha Chatterjee emphasises the heightened division between private and public life in Indian society which despite being a normative proposition of modernity, was greatly exacerbated in India by the colonial presence (1993, 2004). The private realm within which sexuality is firmly placed is most assiduously maintained as a realm of traditional, indigenous and feudal social practices. The persistence in postcolonial India of the tradition and modernity binary, with a significantly gendered dimension, remains a very distinctive feature of social life.

It is therefore no surprise that the homophobia that was introduced through colonialism was also internalised by the modern Indian. A curious phenomena was however was also brought through colonialism. In its attempt to regularise unchecked sexuality, domestic spaces were jealously guarded and same sex spaces such as the army, schools and colleges opened up. Cross sex friendships, seen as a marker of western influence and same sex friendship were more acceptable. 'This [space] allow[ed] homoerotically inclined individuals to develop ties of varying closeness with one another' (Vanita and Kidwai: 198).

The Indian identity remains problematic because of its tradition versus modernity predicament coupled with religious tension. The British attacked the Muslims in particular for being prone to the 'abominable vice' of sodomy (Ibid: 200). Through poets like Hali and Azad, campaigns to purify Urdu poetry from homoeroticism were carried out during the nineteenth century. However counter movements were launched when in 1936, Urdu poet Firaaq Gorakhpuri wrote an essay defending the ghazal and arguing that 'homosexual love is natural and universal' (Vanita, 2005: 143). Anti-colonial nationalism replicates the attempt made by the colonisers in redeeming the Nation through its purge of 'unnatural' and transgressive vices such as homosexuality. According to Chatterjee, the public sphere in India is an ongoing contest between the officially sanctioned and the fragmented reality of the political society. The tradition and modernity binary that I mentioned before creates a volatile relationship not between the state and the individual but more between self-interest and power. From a historical perspective, middle class critics of post independence India maintained the ambition of reforming the Indian public in their own image. Through internalising colonialism, the new elites of post independence India attacked non- normative sexuality as nationalist critique. The polyvalence of sexuality prevalent till pre-colonialism was disciplined through social sanctions. However, as I have pointed out throughout this piece, expressions of queer sexuality far from being 'western concepts' as alleged by Modern Indian critics, have much older histories. Anxieties about homoeroticism circulated in a variety of spheres. An illustrative example of this is the short story collection *Chocolate* by Pandey Bechain Sharma 'Ugra' in 1924. The collection purported to denounce male homosexuality and cast a shadow on the stability of heterosexual manhood. In the words of Ugra, 'Chocolate is the name for those innocent tender and beautiful boys of the country whom society's demons push into the mouth of ruin to quench their own lusts' (Vanita and Kidwai: 247). One of the other things the collection did, was to locate the vice of homosexuality to hybrid Indian-Western elements. The characters in the stories not only legitimise their 'offence' by evoking Shakespeare, Socrates and Oscar Wilde but also quoting ghazals from Urdu poets such as Mir Taqi Mir. One of the other things that the collection did, was not to represent the protagonists as isolated but rather as a part of a larger social circle of friends who both denounce and sympathise with his situation (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000; Vanita, 2002a, Vanita 2009). Vanita calls the publication of Ugra's stories as 'the first public debate on homosexuality in modern India' (2009:xv). Vanita views, that while the collection claimed to denounce homosexuality, many readers received positive representations of same sex male love. She points out: 'while wonderfully encapsulating how ineradicably Westerness is a part of modern Indian identity, it [Ugra's stories] also works to 'normalise' male-male desire' (2002b: 132). In contrast, she mentions Rajkamal Chaudhuri's Hindi novel *Machli Mari Hui* (Dead Fish), which was far more sinister in configuring homosexuality to the West and then punishing it through violent physical sanctions. An overarching theme that

keeps coming up is 'the interrelationship between colonial/European homophobia and the nationalist disavowal of homoeroticism in India' (Menon, 2007: 13).

The post- Independence Indian nationalism can be divided in to two major phases. The secular nationalism espoused by Jawaharlal Nehru can be traced up till the 1970's, owing mainly to India's key integrative policies under the Congress government. However since the 1970's with the unpopularity of Mrs Gandhi, the prime Minister and the Congress government gave rise to a fundamentalist Hindu nationalism under the BJP (Nandy, 1998; Varshney, 1993). Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' is a useful framework for understanding the nationalist rhetoric of modern India. The term 'imagined community' suggests a source of identity that is bigger than oneself. It rests on the assumption of 'imagining' and creating'. The national integration of India was possible by imagining this concept of a common history and thus creating a common citizenship. However, sexuality as we have seen, fractures this idea of sameness. The hetero-patriarchal ideology of nationalism created the absence of visible queer spaces and in turn erasing queer sexuality out from the grand narrative of Indian nationalism. Jyoti Puri, who studies the interrelationship between nationalism and sexuality, contends that nations and states uphold certain sexualities as "respectable" and others as abnormal or unacceptable; she also argues that individuals are inclined to construct their sexuality, often with unsatisfactory results, according to the mandates of the state and the nation. She says, 'Queer narratives have arisen in organised contexts where truth claims are structured in competition with hegemonic discourses of the nation state. In these queer narratives... not only the politics of nationalisms but also transnational cultural discourses are evident' (1999: 174).

Vanita and Kidwai points out an interesting letter from Gandhi, the architect of modern India, also famous for his non violent struggle. In a letter written in 1929 for *Young India*, he refers to homosexuality as an 'unnatural vice' but complicates it by suggesting that there is no difference between homosexual and heterosexual lust. He also points out that, 'unnatural though the vice is, it has come down to us from time immemorial' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000: 255).

The problem here is, who claims the history and where can homosexuality be placed within this revisionist paradigm? Kugle points out that Mahmud and Ayaz became cultural icons as Muslims began resisting British colonialism, however, the moralism expressed through Hali and Azad emptied Mahmud and Ayaz of their homoeroticism instead replaced it by 'brotherly equality' (2002:42). However, he was reviled by Hindu nationalists for being the first Muslim invader. Either way Indian homosexual icons such as Mahmud and Ayaz who 'Victorian morality ruthlessly shoved' aside continue to be rejected, through modern nationalist homophobia.

Hindu nationalists were also anxious about their 'queer past'. The western epithet of India being the 'land of the *Kamasutra*' was met with unease and shame. These anxieties, as I have explained were a response to the colonial educationist's attacks on the constructs of Indian masculinity and sexuality. Temple sculptures from Konarak and Khajuraho to the *Kamasutra* and other ancient literary materials contain enough references to evidence that ancient India accommodated a whole range of sexual behaviours. This contradicts the Hindu nationalist belief that monogamous heterosexual marriage is the only form of permissible sex and all other forms of sex were introduced through the Westerners. Nehru, the first Prime minister of independent India went so far as to claim 'that homosexual behaviour

Fig. 2: Khajuraho. Photograph taken by Bony Mitra, 2005. Personal Collection

was an aberration introduced into India in the British colonial period' (Vanita, 2005:269). Vanita argues that 'this desire to re-write India's past as one of normative purity, is in part, the result of defensiveness against Western attempts to exoticise that past as one of unbridled sensuality' (Ibid). This was aimed specifically at the decadence of Indian princes who were described as 'ignorant and rather undisciplined' (Ballhatchet, 1980:119). This anxiety was mirrored by

Madhavacharya, who translated the *Kamasutra* in 1911 and saw the description of the various forms of sex in the text as 'wrong forms of sex' and the text itself as a 'warning.' His aim was in constructing the normative masculine man and discard the non-normative practices. He goes so far as to refer to and approve Section 377 within the text (Vanita, 2005). However modern critics such as Nandy, use queer effeminacy and the anti-masculine image of Gandhi to critique colonialism. He writes, 'It was colonial India... still preserving something of its androgynous cosmology and style, which ultimately produced a transcultural protest against the hyper masculine world view of colonialism in the form of Gandhi' (1983:45).

Conclusion

Twentieth century India still frames same sex desires as an import from the West. Structured by this myth, 'most twentieth century texts that represent same sex desire, strive to reinforce an imagined pure Indian-ness of manhood or womanhood' (Vanita, 2002b:127). It is important to insist here that modernity in India has not been unambiguously liberating. It has erased spaces and produced new subjectivities. Expressions of queer sexuality as various scholars have shown had much older histories than colonialism. Earlier forms of sexuality and identities were reconstituted to fit the new norms of the colonial establishment and then in turn became a part of the modernising nationalist rhetoric. Menon says that 'the normalisation of heterosexual identity [is] a part of the processes of colonial modernity' (2005:38). Anxieties around homoeroticism have circulated in various spheres. Kathryn Hansen's works on the Indian theatre shows how cross-dressing created various forms of uneasiness at the desire being evoked between the male spectator and the cross-dressing male actors (Hansen, 1999, 2002). Also illustrative of this anxiety can be seen through the demonstrations against films with queer storylines such as *Fire* and *Girlfriend* by the Hindu right wing (Ghosh, 2007, 2010). All the modern forms of homophobia are inherently connected to questions of nationhood and rejecting all claims of histories of homosexuality in the Indian tradition. Menon points out that in the Indian context, 'the heterosexual patriarchal family [is] the cornerstone of the nation' and 'any radical transformative politics today must therefore be post-national' (Menon, 2007:38-39). The cosmopolitanism of the Indian culture in Medieval India as described by Kidwai (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000) is missing and Thomas Babington Macaulay's Section 377 to the Indian Penal Code still looms large over this country.

Notes

[1] Translated from the original Hindi by the author

[2] Jim Wafer discusses the treatment of homosexuality in the religion of Islam and its written guide, the Quran in Wafer, J (1997), 'Muhammad and Male Homosexuality,' Stephen O Murray and Will Roscoe (ed), *Islamic Homosexualities*, New York: New York University Press

[3] Anonymous, from *Chi Tumi Naki: Ekti Sappho Sankalan* (Kolkata: Sappho Publication 2005. p. 32) Translated from the original Bengali by the author

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