

DISPATCHES FROM A 'ROGUE' ETHNOGRAPHER:
EXPLORING HOMOPHOBIA AND QUEER VISIBILITY IN THE FIELD

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Introduction

In a narrative article that explores her experience as a queer ethnographer in the Indian city of Chennai, Susan Seizer (1995) suggests that the invisibility she faced as a lesbian in a city with no vocabulary for such attachments allowed her to closely consider bonds of *pācam* or 'affection' between women. My own experience as a queer ethnographer in Chennai eighteen years later was very different. Far from slipping under the radar and being labelled 'chaste' or 'virginal' for being unmarried, I instead faced the daily fear of discovery. I feared being pushed back into the closet as I engaged with institutions and people who now had a vocabulary not only to name homosexuals but also to express homophobia.

During my fieldwork with young middle-class women in Chennai between 2012 and 2013, I encountered both homophobic practices and vocabularies. My fieldwork involved five months living in an undergraduate residence hall or hostel, as it is locally called, and a further five months commuting to two women's colleges. The main research questions I was exploring had to do with the discourses of sexual danger and practices through which 'youth' as a period of sexual precarity¹ is socially constructed in Chennai. As such, I had plenty of opportunity to talk about sex, sexuality and danger with my informants.

In the last two decades, legal battles and increasingly powerful social movements have won visibility for queers in India. Yet, as scholars like Paola Bacchetta (1999) have noted, this has also given rise to virulent discourses of cultural nationalism that justify the policing of women's behaviour and movements, as well as homophobia. In this paper I explore the sense of danger I experienced as a queer ethnographer. Unlike Seizer, who is Caucasian American, I was 'returning home' for fieldwork, coming back to places I had previously experienced as a mostly closeted queer teenager, where I already had a place within existing

¹ The word 'precarity' has largely been used in the social-science literature either in the context of employment and social mobility (Standing 2011) or in the context of larger scale abandonments such as extreme poverty and the disillusionment engendered by the fractures between the promises and realities of neoliberal development agendas (Allison 2013, Jeffrey 2010). My thesis makes a case for the use of this conceptual frame in order to understand the making of 'ordinary' everyday life as a disciplinary process. Drawing on scholars such as Povinelli (2011) and Berlant (2007), I argue that the imagination of 'ordinary' everyday life is produced through disciplinary mechanisms that distribute vulnerability differentially, thus making different people more or less vulnerable along different axes of power in contingent contexts. It is in this sense that the word 'precarity' is used here.

social structures of caste, class and gender. As queer Indians have made increasing demands of the state, so has queerness emerged more coherently as an ‘other’ to be feared and harassed. Alongside a vocabulary for queer identity in mainstream political discourse and popular parlance, abusive terms such as ‘faggot’ and ‘lesbo’ have also emerged and gained popularity. This has occurred at a national level, particularly with the recent re-criminalization of homosexuality in India in 2013. Thus, whilst I was returning ‘home’, I was also returning to a place struggling to define its own national and cultural identity in the face of encroaching modernity, in which sexual identity had become the battlefield.

Situated in this context, this article seeks to unpack my experiences of danger in the field and explores the circulation of fear as a significant nodal point through which I approached my ethnographic subjects. Ethnographic research, as I will show, was as much an affective transaction as intellectual labour.

The first section of this article sets out a brief introduction to same-sex desire and the contours of an emerging discourse of homophobia in contemporary India. The section that follows describes my own experience of fear and the ways in which this structured my relationships with my informants. Finally, I examine the question of ‘passing’, which is ultimately the essence of Seizer’s article.

Same-sex desire and new homophobias in India

Same-sex desire, as a wide scholarship now shows (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, Katyal 2013, Cohen 1995), has had a complex life in India. As Cohen (1995) notes, sexual practices of any kind are intimately connected with relations of power. Same-sex practices between men, he shows, have always had a place as an aspect of horseplay in male friendship. It is, as Katyal (2013) further elaborates, also framed as a ‘habit’ or *baazi*. *Laundebaazi*, or a ‘habit for men’, circulates within the same set of expressive idioms as other ‘addictions’ or ‘excesses’. As these scholars show, within the famous story of South Asia’s uneven modernity the homosexual as a subject of identity, as a separate post-Freudian species of sorts, exists simultaneously with the *laundebaaz*, the *kothi*, and the effeminate man or ‘*meyeli chhele*’ (Khanna 2009), all of whom might desire members of the same sex, but do not identify as homosexual.

However, the fact that these ‘sexual others’ have a place within the social imagination does not render them legitimate. Rather they remain, both legally and otherwise, marginal.

As Patel (1997) notes, the *hijra* – members of the third gender² – are typically feared and avoided in middle-class households, except during marriage, childbirth and other auspicious times, particularly in North India where their blessing is valued. Figures such as the *hijra* and the *kothi* (femme men who play a sexually passive role and identify with idioms of femaleness) thus typically form the monstrous ‘other’ of ‘proper’ middle-class domesticity. According to Patel (1997), every Indian child has her ‘when I saw my first *hijra* story’, marking an early encounter with the non-normative which always holds the threat of loss of home and respectability. It is this anxiety that often presents itself as queerphobia.

In the particular case of women who desire women, there are fewer visible and socially legible idioms of practice. However, there are plenty of practices of horseplay among female cousins and of physical intimacy among friends (see Vanita and Kidwai 2000). In the room I lived in at Teresa Hostel, my main fieldwork site, the young women often touched each other in intimate places on their bodies, slept in the same bed and kissed each other on the mouth. They would address each other as ‘my golden one’, ‘my darling’ or ‘my little one’ and use other epithets typically used between lovers. The metaphor of kissing a cousin or a sister was often used to describe such relations. The idiom of incest – of kissing ‘sisters’ – is not unfamiliar in the history of same-sex desire in India. As Dave (2012) writes, much same-sex sexual experimentation occurs within this idiom – she quotes letters written to a lesbian collective in New Delhi where women seek ‘sisters’ who are sexually inclined towards women to have sex with. It is when women meet within the idiom of kinship that such intimacy is made possible. Indeed, we might make the Foucauldian observation that heteronormativity makes places for same-sex desire as much as it represses it (Foucault 1977, 1978). However, such practices were not seen as ‘lesbian’, but rather as an aspect of youth and ‘hostel friendship’, of the bond among women who were living together. The key difference between this and ‘lesbianism’ was that ‘lesbians’ were regarded as being wilfully stuck in a childhood of exclusively female company and in a refusal to ‘grow up’ into heterosexual women.

Inherent in the disgust many express towards women who refuse to ‘grow out of’ such affections is a fear of being stuck in temporalities and forms of embodied presentation that suggest a lack of maturity and capacity. As Vanita and Kidwai (2000) point out, postcolonial

² Typically known as *hijra* in other parts of the country, *aravanis* are typically male-female transgendered communities in Tamil Nadu. As Reddy (2001, 2005) notes, however, *hijra* and *aravanis* identities cannot be taken as merely gender identities or sexual identities. Rather, they are also produced at the intersection of cultural, political and health discourses, as well as in the discourse of the state.

homophobic often conflate anxieties about bodies that do not conform to gender binaries with fears about same-sex desire. The *hijra* and the homosexual man are thus often ridiculed together (see also Cohen 1995), forming part of ‘a homophobic refusal to acknowledge homosexual men as full-fledged “men” living in mainstream society’ (Vanita and Kidwai 2000). The anxieties expressed about lesbians similarly indicate fears of improperly gendered transsexual or transgendered bodies, cast additionally as ‘childish’ (Halberstam 2005), stuck in the failure of proper femininity, and having attained neither ‘manliness’ nor proper womanhood.

As such, the figure of the lesbian is typically caught up in histories of pathology – as ‘mad’, as ‘manly’ and as ‘un-domestic’ – as well as in a betrayal of a nationalised narrative of home and family (Bacchetta 2002). It is useful to note here that same-sex desiring women have largely entered the popular discourse in media reportage on suicides. This fact, I discovered, have led to the widespread social assumption that ‘lesbianism’ is an inherently unhealthy form of attachment. Indeed, even a sex educator employed by the Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society (TANSACS) told me that ‘both physical and mental illnesses are caused by the lesbian problem’.³

Besides locating homophobia in these regimes of ‘difference’, it should also be noted that in recent years new homophobias have emerged in relation to legal sanctions against same-sex erotic expression. Most notably, the widespread media coverage of the queer movement in the 2000s, leading up to the Delhi High Court’s decriminalization of same-sex acts, brought homosexuality into everyday discourse. Though this ruling was eventually quashed by a Supreme Court ruling that effectively re-criminalized same-sex relations, annual queer pride parades and an increasingly vocal queer community have created an on-going public debate on sexual minorities. It is in this context that I found an increasingly vocal homophobic response that sees such communities as a danger to the heteronormative everyday of middle-class life.

During my fieldwork, Chitra, who started college in 2010, accusingly told me one evening over dinner that it was ‘because of these lesbians’ that she almost did not go to college where she thought she might. Having been accepted into a prestigious women’s college, she had been excited until neighbours and family friends gathered to warn her parents that she might become a lesbian. She would be attending a single-sex institution and living in an all-female residence, after all. Eventually, before her parents would let her go,

³ Interviews conducted in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, on 27 and 28 February 2013.

she had to promise them that she would engage in no lesbian activity and would return home as straight as she had left. ‘It’s all because of the lesbian news in the papers that year’, she sadly complained, referring to the fact that the LGBT community – in that globalised vocabulary – had come to be constituted as a ‘minority’ within a rights language in India that year (2009) and in the years immediately preceding it. This shift had occurred in the context of the successful case in the Delhi High Court to decriminalize same sex relations (Khanna 2013).⁴

Ironically, the vicarious practices of memory that many of my informants engaged in – repeating the stories heard from older family members who had previously attended university in Chennai – cast this early pre-2009 period as a sort of simple Golden Age, ‘before all this lesbian stuff’. Chitra was convinced that, before the media started reporting on homosexuality, it did not exist. In an odd way, she was making a profound philosophical point. Before the social space for this identity was created, it could not have existed as a coherent discursive formation.

Chitra, however, was angry. She told me this new awareness of homosexuality made life hard for her. Now everyone thought she was a ‘dyke’ for desperately missing her old roommate – a ‘passionate friend’ – with whom she had exchanged long letters months after this friend moved elsewhere to continue her studies. Earlier, Chitra said, relying on stories told to her by an elder sister, ‘unhealthy practices’ such as lesbian attraction did not exist. To Chitra’s mind, friendships had been purer then. Ranjana, another informant, was similarly convinced and blamed ‘this new gay thing’ on how ‘forward’ the city had become. It was difficult, she told me, for a girl like herself, who wanted to joke around and tell everyone she was ‘gay’ – and Ranjana often did, usually also touching and fondling other girls in the room – and not be taken for ‘some lesbo’. For Ranjana, the acts she engaged in were not ‘sexual’, they were ‘just fun’. Nonetheless, homophobia was expressed through graphic graffiti scrawled on bathroom walls in the women’s residences. I saw inscriptions such as ‘Fuck off Lesbian’ and ‘Dyke’, the latter accompanied by the image of a young woman sucking on a large penis. This image, according to one young woman who lived in the residence hall where I found it, was a pictorial representation of what might ‘solve lesbians’, that is, turn them heterosexual – perhaps a little too close to corrective rape for comfort.

Same-sex attraction is thus seen as a disease of modernity, an effect of pernicious cultural globalization. As Bachchetta (1999) suggests, we might locate this in a dual narrative

⁴ This decision has since been overturned in the Supreme Court (December 2013).

of both cultural nationalist xenophobia and of queerphobia, where homosexuality is reviled for being a ‘foreign import’ into what is imagined to be a pure – that is, a sexually heteronormative – Indian context. As several scholars have noted (Bacchetta 1999, 2002), narratives of a regionally undifferentiated and ‘pure’ Indian culture have been central to increasingly popular Hindu nationalist agendas. The victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which represents this ideology, in the 2013 parliamentary elections suggests the persuasiveness of these ideas, particularly in a context of rapid and often destabilizing socio-economic transformation.

As Chitra, Ranjana and other women often told me, it was good to be modern, but ‘within limits’. They agreed, in a sense, with the theme of ‘balance’ that other scholars (Donner 2011) have highlighted in discussing the cultural politics of the Indian middle classes. In this context, as I have shown elsewhere (Krishnan 2014), it is not consent that marks the boundary between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ sexual activity, but notions of propriety that hinge on gender, caste and class. For many of my informants, engaging in a ‘lesbian lifestyle’ or ‘being a lesbo’ was located along a continuum of transgressive acts, ranging from sex with men of a lower caste or class to even being raped (which was largely seen as a result of the man’s ‘uncontrollable desire’ incited by the woman’s immodesty of clothing or comportment). What these acts shared is that they interrupted a narrative of smooth progress towards successful and respectable heterosexual femininity. Discomfort with homosexuality thus suggests the rhetoric of endangerment that increasingly frames ‘ordinary’ middle-class life in the climate of rapid socio-economic change. ‘Lesbian lifestyles’, as my room-mates called them, are pertinent here because what is seen as threatening is not merely same-sex attraction, but the possibility that queers might choose to identify as such and live queer lives.⁵ As a result they also threaten the middle classes’ project of seeking control over their own life-worlds through the predictable reproduction of ‘ordinary’ heterosexual and caste-endogamous middle-class life.

Homophobia and the queer researcher: failing at fieldwork

The educational institutions where I conducted research had some concrete measures in place to ‘eliminate lesbian behaviour’. Beds were required to be separated from each other by desks, rooms could never be locked, and doors (except bathroom doors) could never be fully

⁵ This recalls Foucault’s argument (1997) that what is disturbing to dominant social structures is not so much the fact of same-sex practice, but the idea that queer communities offer an alternative to the inevitability of marriage as the central institution upon which the organization of affective life is founded.

shut. The warden would search rooms at random, and if any suspicious material – such as magazine articles supporting LGBT rights or love letters between women – were found, the student would be expelled immediately. Expulsion could also result if a student was caught red-handed engaging in ‘lesbian’ activities or if informed upon by fellow students. These measures excited an old anxiety in me that I recognized from my days as a student at such an institution.

Even though I never faced a direct homophobic attack, either verbal or physical, these regulations put me in a precarious place, forcing me to delete texts from my (then new) girlfriend and ensure I had no provocative material in my bag (including field notes) for very long. I felt watched – and indeed I was being watched, given that the warden of Teresa Hostel was suspicious of me because I was not yet married, or even engaged. I gradually grew to fear my room-mates, even as my research progressed as I wished. In general, fieldwork made me feel as if I was walking a tightrope, and it was this experience that led me to think theoretically about precarity. As Phadke et al. (2011) write, women who loiter in Indian cities are often taken to be loose or non-normative. A female ethnographer who loitered for a living, it appeared, would always be suspect.

Ethical anthropological practice suggests that sharing information with informants is essential to doing fieldwork on sensitive topics. On the contrary, as I grew closer to my informants, I found myself feeling more and more guarded. I wondered if my evasive answers had raised doubts, if I had given myself away. I had gone to Chennai with the idea that I would answer truthfully if anyone asked if I was a lesbian or if I was attracted to women. Given the silence around queer life, rather than the vigorous anti-homosexual discourse I had experienced as a student in the city, it was a shock to me to see these regulations in place to control same-sex desire, and even expel same-sex desiring students. While I never lied to any of my informants, I feared every day that I would somehow be discovered and thrown out of the hostel without having collected any material at all.

Some informants also perceived me, in entirely accusatory terms, as a ‘feminist’, an identity I own wholeheartedly. ‘Feminists’ are often considered disreputable, phlegmatics who cling to complaint and anger, who lack personal initiative and, in the words of one young woman I met at a workshop in one of the colleges, are *aṭaṅkapitāri*, that is, undisciplined, or rather resistant to discipline. The figure of this feminist *aṭaṅkapitāri* is complicated by the ever-present question of the extent to which the feminist researcher seeks to discipline her female subjects into being ‘properly’ feminist in their exercise of agency. As Mohanty (1988: 62) pointed out in her influential essay on writing as a feminist within the

academy, ‘feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power – relations which they counter, redefine, or even implicitly support’. In one instance early into fieldwork, I was speaking with one of my room-mates at Teresa Hostel about her Gandhi-esque promise to her mother in Kerala never to touch alcohol or have sex with a man while she was away in college. When, after a frustrating conversation about her belief in chastity and sobriety, I attempted to tell her that she was only subjecting herself to long-distance surveillance by keeping her promise, she angrily retorted that I was nothing but a ‘Westernised feminist’ in my thinking. Did I not understand that this promise had been her ticket out of her small town, where her parents had to justify to their small Christian community everyday why they had chosen to take the big risk of sending a young girl to a city where they had no relatives? This promise had been her chance to live in a big city, to go to college and to further her aspirations for an urban job. She was ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti 1988): calibrating risk, choosing to be a less disciplined subject of feminism so that she could be a more disciplined middle-class subject in a context where her autonomy depended largely on demonstrating the latter.

After many days of anxiety which followed in the wake of hearing stories about women who had been mocked, persecuted by peers and thrown out of institutions for ‘being lesbians’, I was feeling deeply vulnerable. On the one hand, the empathy I felt evoked real feelings of anxiety from a not-too-distant past. On the other hand, I feared discovery, and as I became closer to my informants as their room-mate, I knew that being thrown out would mean not only the loss of an opportunity for ethnographic work, but would also cause personal hurt. During this time, I had what I think of as ‘my night of madness’: one night I physically clutched my notes to my body as I slept at Teresa Hostel.

That day had been particularly trying. I had had to ram a bucket in a hole in the door of the bathroom to prevent my room-mates coming and peeking, only to make sneering comments about my body. Following that, I had seen a bit of graffiti on the wall that I now regret I hadn’t had the nerve to take a picture of. It said, ‘blowjob you fucking cunt’. I had asked the current occupant of the bed it was near about it, and she had casually responded that the girl who had slept there had been ‘maybe a lesbian’. The day before, I had heard similarly threatening stories about two other women who had been shamed and made to leave after they were discovered in a compromising position by a room-mate. Hours before, I had come back from the bathroom to find my room-mates rifling through my phone. Apparently it had rung, and they had taken the opportunity to look through it.

Consequently, I began to fear their reading my field notes – I had written impressions in great detail, and if they read them they would know. They would most certainly know that I too was one of those ‘lesbos’ they had comfortably referred to as ‘it’ the other day – ‘neither he nor she’ – and an old fear I remembered from my own days as a student crept into me as I cuddled my notes to sleep. I was being a terrible ethnographer, I knew. I should not be so scared of my informants finding my notes or reading them. Idealistically, if naively, I had imagined reading my notes with my informants. While I did eventually do this with some, with others it was clearly impossible. I knew I was closed to the idea of their talking back to my ethnographic impressions, even scared of it, even as I knew that I was in a position of greater power overall now – I was no longer the frightened twenty-year-old lesbian I had been.

This discomfort I felt – rehearsing my own struggle to come out, to live as a queer, single, feminist-identifying woman – gradually became a site for reflection on the meanings of homophobia and its histories in the contemporary context, some of which are traced below. In the days that followed, I learned to see same-sex orientation as one among a range of embodied practices – ‘orientations’, as Sara Ahmed (2004) calls them, referring to literal leanings of the body, and of intent – that were disciplined into categories of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’.

On passing

You can't have a bald head or super short hair in Madras and not be looked at by everyone who passes by...if you want to pass, you have to tañkacci-fy (make a little sister of) yourself.

Ponni Arasu, Queer Activist, Skype Interview, 17 November 2012

During an interview early one morning, I spoke with one of my informants, Ponni, about ‘passing’ in Chennai. Originally from Chennai, Ponni had migrated to New Delhi at the age of sixteen to start college, but had since returned to work with communities in Tamil Nadu. I had got in touch with Ponni a few years previously, when I was coming to terms with my own queerness. Speaking to her during my fieldwork, I told her about Satya, a young woman I had recently met. Satya had come out to me as queer and had admitted during our first meeting that I was the ‘first real live lesbian’ she had met. Ponni was my own ‘first real live lesbian’ many years ago when I was struggling to come out, and in talking to her about Satya’s coming out we revisited our own anxieties about being queer in Chennai. It was in

this context that Ponni began telling me that ‘passing’ in Chennai was about such things as wearing long, stereotypically feminine hairstyles and acting demurely in public spaces. Anyone with short hair, she said, and I agreed, was stared at suspiciously.

Later that day, when I told Satya about my conversation with Ponni, she added fair skin and being thin – or at least being worried about one’s weight – to the attributes we needed to ‘pass’. I agreed, as I thought back to what a group of Aravanis⁶ I knew in Chennai had told me about fairness creams and chemical bleaches being central to their process of transition. It wasn’t enough to have surgery and start wearing make-up and feminine clothes, they told me. To attract men – an imperative that refers both to the desire to look like a heterosexual woman and to the realities of sex work (*dhandha*), which Aravanis often engage in – it was also important to be thin and to have soft, fair skin. One young Aravani in her twenties commented during the discussion that after all the fantasy for most men was to sleep with an upper-caste woman, and given the associations between fair skin and high caste, it made sense for her to lighten her skin. For Shankari, whose home we were in and who is a well-known figure in transgender and sex workers’ rights activism in Tamil Nadu, the desire to be fair-skinned was more intrinsically connected with wanting to be a woman. She and Sowmya, also an active political figure in the movement, recalled their early years of transitioning. As Sowmya carefully rubbed a chemical whitening cream into her face, she told me how she wanted to be a ‘true woman’ – not the dark and hairy person she remembered being in her past. We might note as well the widespread normalising of upper-caste women’s bodies as the ideal heterosexual body: one that other women must strive to attain if they are to ‘pass’.

‘Passing’ as heterosexual thus also intersected with other experiences of urban spaces. In our interview, Ponni talked about the difference she experienced when she went out in Chennai wearing a *salwar kameez* (tunic, trousers and scarf), complete with *potṭu* (dot on the forehead) and *mai* (eyeliner), and with her hair done nicely, compared with when she had short hair, or wore jeans and a T-shirt, making no effort to look feminine. In the former attire, she pointed out, the looks she receives are approving: men romanticize her appearance as a ‘good’, albeit modern, Tamil woman. In the latter, she told me, she is glared at, censored for her lack of femininity and her ‘arrogance’ (*timir*, see below). Similarly, she told me, having a man to walk about town with makes a difference: she is taken more seriously, given fewer threatening looks and groped less. She told me that she felt her presence at places like malls

⁶ *Hijra* in other parts of the country; see footnote above.

and cinemas, even simply walking down the street, often involves having to negotiate a number of unsavoury questions from passers-by and even the police. Having short hair, in her experience, almost always registers as ‘something different’, something that could be queer, or at least is not fully heterosexual.

These were some of the concerns that preoccupied me during my fieldwork. While I had long hair, typically wore modest clothing and did not have a partner for most of my fieldwork, I had once been seen smoking. Young women in Chennai see smoking as ‘masculine’, and in the discussion that followed about how ‘boyish’ and ‘bold’ I was – the latter is not a compliment at all in this cultural context – I learned that, in a trifecta of sins comprising drinking, smoking and sex, sex featured as the most ‘masculine’. It was all right for boys, these young women agreed, but by smoking I was clearly showing disregard for my future offspring, as well as for my reputation in the city. One tall young woman in the group flicked her hair back as she offered her final diagnosis: ‘No wonder you’re still unmarried’. Later, in another discussion, the subliminal implications of smoking were more openly discussed: it was ‘dykey’, one of my roommates told me; ‘biker chicks do it’. I thanked goodness that I did not ride a motorcycle. It also suggested *timir*, the arrogance that women are not expected to display.

Timir might also be translated as a kind of wilfulness: the refusal to comply and conform, the disobedient insistence on standing out in the crowd even when it is not the ‘safe’ thing to do. Queerness is interpreted as *timir* because it is seen as the wilful practice of deliberately going against the grain. Much like wilfulness in cautionary tales in the west, *timir* is typically warned against because it is regarded as leading to unhappiness. The *timir* woman must be tamed, and this is a commonly heard justification for sexual violence and harassment against women who look non-traditional in any form, whether because of their lack of femininity or their perceived ‘westernisation’. The typical rhetorical question that many women in Chennai have heard at the start of such an offensive is: *Nī ellām oru tamil peṇṇā*, ‘Are you even a Tamil woman?’ The question produces the Tamil woman as virtuous, womanly, bashful and self-conscious of her body and its sexuality. The threat it offers is corrective violence, directed at the figure on the margins of this Tamil womanhood: the defiantly dark, unwomanly woman, dressed in ‘manly’ attire.

Returning to the quotation at the beginning of this section, Ponni argued that, in order to be taken seriously as a woman – i.e. to ‘pass’ – ‘you have to *tañkacci*-fy yourself’, that is, make yourself a ‘little sister’. What Ponni was referring to was the need to be positioned within an affective economy of kinship in which young women are *tañkacci* – little sisters –

not to be molested or leered at for looking ‘queer’ or ‘slutty’. *Taṅkaccis*, as a student at NT College pointed out early in my fieldwork, ‘have *vekkam*, *mānam*, *sūṭu*, *soṛaṇai*’ – i.e. shame, honour, anger if this honour is questioned (i.e. righteous indignation) and sensitivity. Often referred to as ‘VMSS’ playfully by students I met, many still told me that they felt these were necessary qualities for womanhood, exemplified by modest clothing – ‘according to your body type’ – a demure ‘closed’ stance, clutching books or bag close about the body in public spaces, and the absence of *timir*, marked in this display of demureness.

This need to be a *taṅkacci* in order to pass without suspicion in the city recalls the imaginary of kinship in the construction of the nation as a cultural community. Das (2007) examines the gendered politics of crisis points like partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, pointing out that the traffic in women typically mediated narratives of communal nationalism. In the particular context of Tamil Nadu, as scholars like Ramaswamy (1992, 1997) have argued, the discourse of Tamil cultural nationalism has pinned the cohesive unity of Tamil cultural identity itself upon the figure of the virtuous Tamil woman as daughter and sister. The fantasy of the defilement of the sister – the *taṅkacci* – and her protection by the Tamil man are thus central to the staging of ‘ordinary’ nationalist life.

Arguably, what Susan Seizer (1995) described in her article was ‘passing’ by fulfilling the norms by which western and Caucasian women are typically judged in urban India. Her lack of relationships with men, she argues, marked her as being ‘pure’ and ‘virginal’. Without the burden of expectation that she behave like a *taṅkacci*, Seizer was marked as being merely asexual, and her relationship with her female partner was dismissed as *pācam* or affection between female friends. While I certainly did not have this privilege, the manner in which my privilege as an upper middle-class woman at a western university perhaps protected me from a more direct expression of homophobia was in my being cast as a ‘nerd’. Even as I was jokingly asked if I was ‘some lesbo’ or if I was ‘into women or something’, groups of women I spent time with would mumble ‘nerd’ in my direction. Their questions were more warning than accusation. If I continued as I was, bereft of both man and make-up, I could be seriously taken for a ‘lesbo’. And, as I learned from my loquacious room-mate, Arti, the others in the room had discussed it and ruled that had I not been ‘buried in books’, they would have thought I was ‘a lesbian type’. But perhaps, Arti shrugged, proving the point made earlier in this paper about queerness as one of many forms of transgressive oddness that the Indian middle classes distance themselves from, I was only a ‘career woman type’.

Conclusion: how do I look at girls?

About two weeks into our acquaintance, I received a text from Satya, who was attending a friend's wedding. She had seen an attractive young woman at the reception, she wrote, and had wanted to tell someone. Later, she told me she had been a bit tipsy when sending this text, hence perhaps more open to admitting what I assured her was a common conundrum. If she were a man, we mused, she might have been able to flirt a bit, make some small talk and get a phone number. 'She was hot', Satya told me, musing thoughtfully; 'a lot of them there were so hot'. She added: 'It's hard, man. How can I *sight-aṭichu*-fy girls?' To *sight-aṭichu*-fy is the popular youth idiom used in Chennai to mean 'look' or 'gaze' at.

Satya also told me about crushes she'd had on friends around her – it was bound to happen, we said to each other. After all, in a heterosexual mixed-sex peer group where such attraction is normalized, passing, or lasting, attractions inevitably occur. But Satya had concerns – did these people see her looking at them? While she was out to some of her friends, this, she was concerned, would make things a little weird. Would they be comfortable around her in the same way and continue to invite her, for instance, to sleepover parties and so on? Was she being 'creepy', she wondered, if she enjoyed the sight of one of her friends during such events, or even for a moment gazed at her with desire? It seemed as if doing so would break the implicit pact that undergirds women's homosocial spaces: they are 'safe' because they are desexualised. On the part of straight women I met, this attraction in intimate spaces was exactly what they feared about the possibility of lesbians existing among them. The idea that women who might desire other women would see them in their intimates and in nightclothes in the hostel made many young women I met feel queasy, some adding that living with a lesbian was like 'living with a man'. While Satya didn't doubt in theory that her friends would eventually 'be cool with it', the possibility of temporary awkwardness was too much to bear.

The fear here is that the ways in which queer women orient themselves towards and look at other women might give them away – or us, rather, as this was a pervasive fear for me too during fieldwork. While I did not feel a desire for any of my informants, I still felt afraid that my glancing at women on the road, my 'feeling' queer, might somehow betray me, resulting in my expulsion from the hostel, being mocked, refused any conversation. Even as I challenged the disgust many of my informants displayed for people they saw as 'weird' on the basis of their gender or sexuality, the fear that my own identification with this class of 'freaks' would be discovered sometimes paralysed me. My moment of ethnographic failure – my 'night of madness' when I cuddled my field notes to sleep – cannot be re-spun as success.

I still wonder if there might have been better ways to connect with informants I feared for the virulent homophobia I sometimes heard them speak. However, my distance from them allowed me to connect with others who felt the same way I did, and even perhaps offer some support and guidance to informants such as Satya, who were still struggling with their own sexual identities. The importance of this support was brought particularly into relief when Satya found herself unable to publicly mourn the suicide of a queer woman she had befriended online. To speak about her friend would expose her to the risk of speaking about her sexuality, revealing that she had known this friend as a fellow member of an online queer forum. Our regular contact in those weeks allowed for Satya's expression of grief and outrage over this suicide. If, as Mankekar (1999) writes, it is the relationships built in the field that constitute positionality, then it was through these relationships that I approached the complex question of sexual pleasure and danger in India's rapidly changing and fraught context.

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