

# Culture & Power

Culture and society in the age of globalisation  
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## **Musti and Yaraana: The concealed worlds of queer India**

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Queerness is an expression or response that goes beyond the limits established within the dichotomies of gender (man-woman) and sex (homo-hetero). Alexander Doty defines queerness as «a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight» (Doty 1993: xv). Queerness is an umbrella term used to represent a space that suggests diversity as well as an alternative specific form of sexuality. Nowadays, when gayness, lesbianism, bisexuality and transsexuals do not hold the gender-unifying essence that they once might have had, queerness becomes, in my opinion, a valuable concept to refer to various models, bonds and subjectivities in cultures such as India. The hegemonic straight culture in India, which prioritizes marriage and the extended family, conceals many queer aspects (Muraleedharan, 2002). My examination of some of these queer traditions and bonds contributes to a better understanding and representation of some sex subjectivities in India.

Indian history and literary texts provide generous evidence of homoerotic relationships which are, on many occasions, honoured and appraised: the ancient Sanskrit epics, the medieval Puranic narratives, Urdu poetry and the modern Rekhti poems offer rich expressions of same-sex desire (Vanita & Kidwai 2000; García Arroyo 2000). Cultural repression of nonheterosexual behaviour appears at the onset of the colonial regime with the introduction of Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code

(1861), which condemns “sex against the order of nature”. As a result, Indian culture treats homosexuality with secrecy, as something unspoken and unaccepted. The Indian writer Hoshang Merchant argues that homosexuality in India cannot be treated in the same way as it is conceived in the West. In India, owing to social pressures and the relevance of the family structure, most same-sex inclined people get married and lead a double life. Thus, Merchant recognizes that he has trouble with the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’; the former is a Western construct, which does not appear in the Indian languages, whereas the latter, the term ‘gay’, is a political category, which embodies the ideal of two men going off together to make a life for themselves. This idea became the cornerstone of politics of gay liberation in the West, especially in the U.S.A.. Yet, it does not exist in India.

Being gay in India, Merchant argues, “is not an ethic, not a religion, not a sub-culture, not a profession, not a sub-caste. Yet it is all-present. All pervasive, ever practised and ever secret. It comes upon you in unexpected places, in unexpected faces. It is shame, guilt, subversion [...] honour and pride” (Merchant 1999: 204). Ashok Row Kavi, a writer and editor of *Bombay Dost*, the first queer magazine that appears in India in 1990, shares Merchant’s views on gayness and curiously compares it to the phenomenon of wearing jeans. Upholding his opinion on a market research survey about the image of jeans in India, Row Kavi asserts that ‘gay’ is very much like ‘wearing jeans’. Many Indians still affirm that gayness is a Western construct, or some kind of insane behaviour coming in from the West. Nevertheless, everybody knows the term and uses it to define same-sex relations. Likewise, in over 200 cities in India, with populations of over a million inhabitants, wearing jeans has now become the usual attire for men and a cultural phenomenon (Brass, 1999). With this parallelism, what Row Kavi wants to suggest is that same-sex relations in India are easy to manifest. He asserts “we are not a different species of human beings. The same historical determinism will make for a ‘gay’ India. But cultural differences will shape a qualitatively different ‘gay’ India” (Brass, 1999). The traditional authoritarian family structure, which still has not crumbled—though it will as far as Row Kavi is concerned—segregates men and women and confines them to different social spheres. This segregation favours same-sex love relations and attachments, and enables their emergence in ordinary situations and places such as weddings, buses or parks. Row Kavi also comments that homosexuality is integrated into Indian life, whether rural or urban, to the extent, that the Indian term ‘musti’, meaning ‘mischief’, is used to allude to gay sex. ‘Musti’ is a Hindi word, which refers to the strong smell of male hormones. ‘Musti’ is, then, enjoyable, not serious; ‘musti’ or the ‘mischief’ is sex between men; hence, the belief that it is not entirely sex, not 100% sex, since it is not mentioned or discussed. ‘Musti’ is regarded as something that takes place along with marriage but that can never substitute it. Men who have sex with men do not

talk about it, classify it or rationalize it. These men do not identify as gay or bisexual since they are alien concepts and therefore not applicable to their relations. Jeremy Seabrook points out that this kind of taboo relations leave the men and their sexual performances in “an acceptable penumbra” (Seabrook 1999: 62), as their nameless acts, bonds and relations, which are always played at twilight in backstage, are integrated into their lives. The discovery and awareness of their attraction to men in their adolescence or early adulthood occurs, on many occasions, at weddings or family festivities. Seabrook’s research reveals that many relatives, often distant cousins or strangers, come to the celebration and share a bed with young men due to lack of space. Both the eroticism of the event and the exciting atmosphere seem to provide the opportunity for sexual contact. Seabrook argues that the men’s recurrent metaphor to justify the sexual encounter is that “it is sex happening in sleep or in dreams” (Seabrook 1999: 6). This response seems to place sex between men within an imaginary world which eventually becomes a hidden part of their daily life. After initiation these men continue their search for homosexual partners in buses, parks, cruising grounds or other marginal places of the cities.

In the last decade, owing to the phenomenon of globalization, which has brought in its trail market liberalization, consumerism, modernization and the explosion of cable and satellite TV, India has experimented a considerable transformation. This metamorphic process is palpable in big cities like Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore or Madras, and has given rise to an openly gay minority group. It is not surprising that these men who identify themselves as gay are English speakers, educated to university level; they belong to middle class professional families and are, in various ways, influenced by Western discourses. On the one hand, these men manifest their enjoyment and identification with other men, but on the other, being gay does not entirely constitute the basis of their identity. What does constitute an undeniable fact for both the openly gay minority and the men who have sex with men, or practise musti, mischief, is that the city has become a Mecca that holds great freedoms. The city attracts many men longing to be anonymous individuals.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, urban India surreptitiously acknowledges a gay subculture that is gradually maturing. R. Raj Rao, a gay writer in Bombay, depicts the clandestine life of the city in the poem “Bomgay”:

Family members  
from England, America and Canada  
visit you at Bombay  
which they call Bomgay.  
Some of them are sex tourists,  
You their post-colonial pimp  
Hungry for pounds and dollars  
Religiously, you take them

on a conducted tour  
that includes Gokul, Voodoo and ARK

headquarters. (Rao 1999: 100)

'Gokul' and 'Voodoo' are the names of gay bars in Bombay; ARK stands for the initials of the first Indian gay activist, Ashok Row Kavi. Thus, the poem alludes to the origins of a gay subculture, which arises in the early 1990s. Poetically, Rao depicts the other face of the city where the marginal borders of temptation, corruption, disorientation and confusion mingle with great expectations, freedom and the search for survival. Row Kavi, in "The Contract of Silence", also makes use of this metaphor of the city representing two contrasting worlds: "Bombay can be a dead place after nine at night. For us gays, life began after sunset. From Chowpatty, the famous beach in the centre [...] all the way to Borivili where even guards at the national Park were gay" (Row Kavi 1999: 16); further on he continues: "Most of us [...] took the last train home [...] The last train at 1 a. m. was also called the Queen's Special in gay slang" (1999: 16). It seems to me, then, that there is a relationship between class and the queer subculture. The modern and relatively liberated open gays of the city do not cruise in parks, streets, men's lavatories or the underground, as the other lower-class men do. The 'sons of privilege' as Scabrook names them, nonetheless with a slightly ironic hint, lead discreet heterosexual lives. They often meet their partners in their own houses, and their families may know about their sexual preferences but they all maintain a convenient concealment (Scabrook 1999). However, the inescapable institution of marriage in India does not distinguish categories of class and caste and forces all men to marry women. The powerful structure of the traditional authoritarian family compels the individual to perform his/her duties, one of which is guaranteeing descendants, that is to say, securing cultural continuity. Thus, 'a good Indian marriage' does not necessarily entail 'a good match' but rather a responsible performance of the husband and wife's responsibilities, and the expected realization of a code of conduct. Some men who are sexually drawn to men believe that after marriage they will begin to love their wives and to develop tender feelings towards them. Though some of them do, it is also true that many men continue with their clandestine extramarital relations. Adopting public disclosure, as an alternative, entails family shame and loss of status. Moreover, as Row Kavi argues, you just cannot abandon your family and settle down in a new home of your own with your lover; "economically you may be able to afford to live separately in India but single men or women have no 'social existence' due to the single status. Living single becomes meaningful only if it is a religious vow of celibacy" (Brass 1999). I can assume then, that as far as social and sexual relations are concerned, the kind of individuality and independence we enjoy in the West does not exist in India yet, as the person is always bound to family ties. Living out a life of heterosexual

orthodoxy encompasses, for many of these men and their wives, many deceptions and secret sufferings. Mahesh Dattani, the first Indian playwright who has openly criticized sexuality and gender issues, artistically denounces that the weight of Indian tradition, the cultural constructions of gender and the repression of desire lead to ongoing hypocritical performances. From Dattani's critical perspective, "society creates patterns of behaviour and [it is] easy for individuals to fall victims to the expectations society creates" (Dattani 2000: 45). The first victims of queer relations are the same men who have sexual encounters with men. Scabrook's analysis points out that these men long for the opportunity of having deeper relationships. They miss the possibility of a love-rapports with men in comfort, with no rush and fear, with no secrecy or isolation. Many of these men search for a relationship in which friendship and love intertwine. They yearn for their 'yaar', their special bond or soul mate. 'Yaar', a broadly used term now, holds homoerotic connotations which allude to "an individual with whom one feels a deep, almost intangible connection [...] sometimes denoting a lover, at other times a friend" (Ayyar 1993: 167). Thus, 'yaar' is ambivalent enough to be used by both gay men and heterosexual ones, who want to grasp its romantic sense. As a result, yarana revolves around the image of romance and friendship between years where sex may or may not be expressed. It embodies loyalty and commitment. Yarana evokes the enriching history and literature of ancient, medieval and modern India where numerous homoerotic stories depict the love and friendship of yaars as sacred and divine. However, for a vast number of contemporary Indians, these homoerotic narrations seem to have faded into oblivion. The older generation is still submerged into old hierarchies and habits, and they find it difficult to accept that there is a cultural revolution knocking at India's door. The defenders of tradition and 'Indianness', who are mainly supporters of right-wing parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party or B.J.P., strongly believe that 'Indian values', whatever they mean by them, constitute a powerful weapon against decadent Western practices, such as homosexuality. This posture only leads to maintaining the secrecy and silence of love and sex in the queer subculture. In addition, this kind of defensive attitude empowers hypocrisy, puritanism and prudery while many men and their families are condemned to suffer.

To conclude, I can argue that, nowadays in India, traditional power structures and their unchanging sexual patterns confront the modern values of a global market. On the one hand, there are the ones who want to maintain traditional identities but are, somewhat, drawn by the lure of individual freedom. On the other hand, there are those who willingly welcome the Western model of personal fulfilment. Evidence shows that transformation has already occurred and is now expressing itself through both approval and resistance. Following the example of cultural Western movements, and moved by the powerful compulsions of global politics,

the openly gay Indian minority seems to be determined to initiate the same parallel process of liberation and emancipation that took place in America in the 70s. Nevertheless, this process is already meeting alterations and contradictions as the Indian gay subculture also wants to express their own idiosyncrasy by rediscovering and revalidating the richness of a homoerotic past that is underground. In the same way, we can also establish a hypothesis about how this cultural shift will affect men who have sex with men or practise *musli, mischid*, while longing for their *yaar*, their soul mate. In the case that high social pressures are maintained, these men are likely to opt for the comfort of a paradoxical heterosexuality, as they carry out performative secretive homosexual acts in the penumbra. We also have to regard some crucial and decisive factors in the evolution of queer subjectivities; among the major ones I can mention, there is the prominent and powerful relevance of women in the public sphere, the gradual disempowerment of the institutionalized Indian family and the liberalization of sexuality, which undertakes the annihilation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, sexual taboos and restraints. In this evolving process, however, the construction of sexualities in India should never be contemplated as an isolated cultural phenomenon that stems from some particular exotic traits in a determined place. Let us not forget that, as Row Kavi argues, human beings are the same everywhere and we are driven by the same instincts and pulled by the same emotional responses. What differentiates us is the construction of the culture that revolves around with its peculiar boundaries and nuances. Societies change due to economic, political and cultural pressure, and as far as India is concerned, it is still early to venture and predict the future effects of globalization in relation with sexuality and queer subjectivities. At the moment, numerous unresolved questions appear to indicate that a cultural metamorphosis is already in motion; courageously, the queer subculture in India is exhibiting its visible slant.

## Notes

1. A glance at history reveals that the city is always associated with the re-emergence of a distinct gay subculture. John Boswell's analysis of the 12th century European urban areas and the flourishing of minority cultures is a good example (Boswell, 1980). The numerous accounts of homoerotic stories composed by clerics during this period develop a broad and flexible vision of love, which embodies spirituality and human and sexual affection. Similarly, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai argue that there are medieval materials in the Perso-Urdu tradition, such as *ghazals* (love poems), that deal with homoerotic relations in urban market places (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

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