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Alternating Sexualities: Sociology and Queer Critiques in India

Paul Boyce and Rohit K Dasgupta

Introduction: Alternations

Questions of alternation might be read as intrinsic to sociological approaches to sexual difference and diversity. By this we mean ways in which the sexual as social scientific subject/object has oft been conceived of against the background of fluctuating conceptual and contextual registers. Terms for the empirical description, recognition and analysis of sexual life-worlds have most often been contested and queried. This might be especially so with regard to ‘sexually dissident’ subjects - those for whom terms of depiction in research and polity might be especially vexed and complex because running counter to claims to ‘normative’ modes of representation. Such processes, in turn, might be seen to respond to the alternating experiential and political framings of contemporary and historical sexual life-worlds. This has been evident in India in recent times, for instance, as non-cis-gendered and non-heteronormative subjects have found themselves on the cusp of legislative and social changes.

In April 2014 in the case of National Legal Services Authority versus the Union of India the Supreme Court of India passed legislation recognising the rights to gendered self-determination for people of transgender experience – as male, female, or ‘third gender’. Seemingly running counter to such as erstwhile progressive measure the Supreme Court’s 2013 overturning the Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC 377) has been widely interpreted as a regressive re-criminalisation of homosexuality. In each of these legislative scenarios judicial subtleties and effects are especially multifaceted; linear interpretations of the relation between sex and gender in respect of law, governmentality and subjectivity are particularly unsustainable in these terms. Rather the present situation in India might be read as characterized by on-going alternations in respect of the potentialities for queer (mis)recognitions (khanna 2016). The practical enactment of frameworks for the official recognition of transgender subjects in varied regional contexts in India, of example, (after the 2014 Supreme

Court judgement) have been criticised by trans* activists for passing the verification of ‘authentic’ trans-identities over to external authorities, writing over varied trans-experiential possibilities that might not be readily rendered via such external registers. In West Bengal, for instance, transgender activists and community engagement officers have found that within boards entrusted with the formal registration of transgender subjects power and decision making are largely centred on government and state actors for determining ‘who counts’ as authentically transgender in biologically determinist terms – processes that are external actual trans* social actors self-understandings. As Aniruddha Dutta’s (2014) has pointed out this exemplifies ways in which that the interpretation of the judgement has been varied across and within regions, restricting and excluding certain gender variant people over others. The nature of such contradictory tendencies, which Dutta calls ‘oscillating,’ resonates with our ‘alternating’ framework as proposed in this paper.

Problems with registration and alternation reverberate with attendant issues involved in bringing sexed and gendered subjects into view within social analysis. Critical concerns arise out of the potential misrepresentation of ambiguity and indeterminacy. In citing sexual and gendered life-worlds as sites of social scientific enquiry (as with their being named objects of governance) intrinsic traces of alternative possible terms of depiction remain. This may especially pertain to sexual or gendered subjects who fall outside of prevailing frames of representation at any given socio-political moment, or in any given locale. But such is also germane to the alternating possibilities *within* a sense of the subjective. Sexed and gendered subjects are not whole or singular but internally differentiated, such that any singular term of identification inevitably resides in relation to a sense of self as incomplete or partial (Moore 2007, khanna 2016). Consequently the naming of sexuality as an object attribute of experience, must also strip the sexual of its more indeterminate affective attributes within social worlds (Moore 2012, Boyce 2012, 2013).

The effects of naming may be especially pronounced in contexts wherein sexual connections and experiences might be particularly characterised by secrecy or obfuscation – this being an attribute often attributed to both queer life worlds and sexualities more generally in India (Rubin 2002, John and Nair 1998). In such circumstances the relation between sexual and gendered life-projects and their

designation in respect of terms of identify might be felt by social actors to be especially fissured. Spaces between representation, secrecy and senses of selfhood might transect in a particularly countervailing manner accordingly. Such observations, in turn, engender questions about whether sexual secrecy can be imagined as a specific cultural or contextual attribute (for example pertaining to sexualities in India especially) or a ubiquitous condition, running alongside ways in which sexualities might be otherwise openly proclaimed – either as normative or anti-normative possibilities.

With these perspectives in mind, in this paper, we want build on a new conceptual framework of ‘alternating sexualities’ to offer some reflections on ways in which non-heteronormative sexualities have been conceived of in the sociology of India, an assemblage that for us encompasses work that might also be labelled anthropology, cultural or media studies. We are especially interested in how non-heteronormative sexual and gendered experience has been imagined in social sciences, activism and everyday practices. In pursuing this interest we seek to query ways in which sexualities – and especially gender and sexual differences – have been located as analytical and ethical objects within social scientific and political paradigms, often in respect of contested tropes pertaining to expression and concealment, transgression and transformation. We seek to bring some regional standpoints on such issues into dialogue with wider sociological analyses – drawing on research carried-out over-time in India and elsewhere. In doing so we propose synergies across sites and temporalities that, taken together, might provide insights into the current state of play vis-a-vis the sociology of sexuality in contemporary India.

Transgressions: Sexualities in the Moment

In seeking a starting point for our reflections we have found it helpful to return to foundational viewpoints on the sexual contemporary. In a recent review of sociological work conducted over several decades, Ken Plummer has reminded us that sexualities and intimacies might be imagined as endlessly multiple, across time and space and in respect of different religions, states and economies; a “vast labyrinth of desire, gender and reproduction” (2015: 1). Given the evocation of such complexity, questions arise pertaining to how, and in what terms, sexualities might be

conceived and portrayed. This pertains, for example, to how the sexual might be imagined in relation to on-going social transformations –for example, with respect to socio-economic flows associated with what is often called modernity, globalization and/or neo-liberalism (Giddens 1992, Altman 2001). Changes in attitudes toward sexuality have become one of the markers around which alterations to prevailing or ‘traditional’ values have been witnessed as the sexual has been imagined as political object on a global scale. Progressive attitudes towards gender and sexual non-normative subjects have been seen to perform as a marker of how a given state might signify (aspiring) inclusion within global, neo-liberal political-economic systems, or conversely might be marked as regressive in these terms (for not bearing such values). This has been a concern in the present political moment in India, where the reinstating of IPC 377 by the Indian Supreme Court has compelled a range of responses associated with the seeming ‘re-criminalisation of homosexuality’ and the significance of this as transgressing an image of India as an otherwise modern and progressive state (Boyce and Dutta 2013, Dasgupta 2014, Rao 2014). Questions of queer citizenship – the positive inclusion of sexual and gender ‘non-normative subjects’ within state legislative actions – have accordingly emerged as a central theme around which the politics of sexual difference are being enacted in India in the present.

Transgression, and its relationship to forms of inclusion and exclusion, has a rich genealogy within sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. Chris Jenks has defined transgression as “to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe...[a] reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (2003:2). Following Jenks transgressive standpoint, current queer citizenship activism in India might be interpreted as a mobilisation for the reintegration of the potential for militant and protest politics. One of the rallying cries of activists post the reinstatement of IPC 377 has been ‘No going back’. This evocation of past, pre- and post-colonial alternatives (referencing the colonial origins of IPC 377) also brings up the issue of sexual subjects being constructed through externality, where their very existence invokes transgression of the implicit and explicit rule of the heteronormative patriarchal construction of the (post-colonial) nation state (also see Anderson, 1991). In a society where transgression threatens the social order, advocating for the recognition of ‘alternative sexualities’ and alternate

sexual futures is a way of reimagining and conceiving of a new sociality. Foucault (1977:33) argues that '[transgression is] regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and re-crosses a line'. In other words transgressive identities open up the possibility of the shifting and the slippery subject, one that is completely impossible to control or even comprehend.

Terms of transgression, and their relation to politics of sexual alternatives, can be especially complex. This can be mapped across the politics of remembrance; what we remember and what we deny in any given political movement - and what kind of alternative realities we may construct in the process, in relation to who is included in a movement and in what frame of reference. Queer politics in India has been criticised by several people for its lack of intersectionality in such terms – for example in respect of issues pertaining to caste, class and gender based exclusions (Banerjea and Dasgupta 2013, Dasgupta 2014, Dutta 2012a). Activists in India have argued that cosmopolitan queer politics end up denying sexual and gender dissident subjects whose appearance and social status might mark them as unsuitably modern. This has been seen as so in respect of those of lower caste or class, those from rural contexts, and/or those whose performance of gender might evoke overly effeminate forms of otherwise 'male' embodiment, that may not readily reconcile with a 'gay' cosmopolitan subjectivity (Dutta 2012 a and b; Boyce 2014). As queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2011) has argued, the ethics of complicity and the ways in which a 'politically pure history' (171) may be written might cast away the classed, racist (and cast-ed in the case of India) nature of some queer formations. Claims made for the necessary recognition of queer citizen subjects might thus be taken as a signifier for a progressive Indian polity yet the integration of such politics with the politics of caste, class and gender-based exclusion remains unresolved in many instances.

To take an instructive comparative example, Gloria Wekker's work on homonostalgia (cited in Haritaworn, 2016) explores ways in which The Netherlands is imagined as progressive in the context of proactive legislation for queer rights and 'gay marriage'. Against this background racial and racist anxieties in The Netherlands, are often conceived around the figure of the Muslim (migrant), who is typically constructed as a figure whose social integration might drag these rights back. A similar sentiment is also being expressed by some in queer movements in India where Muslims and

migrants are being constructed as the new ‘degenerative other,’ threatening ‘our’ mode of being (Dasgupta 2016, Haritaworn, 2016). A sociology of sexualities, then, requires paying attention to these fissures, taking sexuality as point of intersectionality and bridging our tent with other minorities across on-going diversities and contestations

Failure – and After

Taking the theme of connections and alternatives further, Halberstam (2011) has described ‘the alternative’ as a political project, and a way by which radical utopians continue to search for new ways of being in the world (also see Boyce and Dasgupta, 2017). Halberstam particularly frames this idea through the concept of ‘in-between spaces’ as a way of projecting a different being outside the expected realms of hegemony and respectability. Queer spaces in India, as Dasgupta (2014) has described, are transitory contexts that are vulnerable and under constant threat of erasure. The disappearance of cruising grounds in the contexts of new forms of surveillance and lack of places to socialise outside straight normative or ‘NGO-ised’ spaces beyond all but a few urban contexts might be seen to have thrown queer existence and being in India into a chaotic realm. By chaotic we mean the multiple interactions of sexual identities with nationality, class, caste and ethnicity which form critical levels of solidarity as well as mistrust and fracture. The idea of a homogenous queer community remains flawed (Dasgupta 2015, Halberstam 2011, Haritaworn 2016).

Gordon Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (1997: 449) have defined a queer community as a ‘full collection or select subset of queer networks for a particular territory, with relatively stable relationships that enhance interdependence, mutual support and protection’. This interdependence and support is predicated upon the interaction, solidarity and affirmation of queer subjects who position themselves and their on-going presence within an allied commonality. Queer spaces in this case can be read as locales of alternative politics which are invested within the discourse of inclusion and exclusion and a recognition that queer contexts are alternative and temporal modes of being, proffering heterogeneity.

Against the background, Halberstam has described contemporary queer modes of being as constructed through neoliberal discourses of success and freedom. Whilst success in a heteronormative capitalist society might be thought of as reproductive ability, wealth accumulation and freedom of movement, queer people might, in some cases, be seen to have taken on and subverted these very static models of achievement. Halberstam criticises the pressures of success and rather offers failure, ‘unaming’ and unbecoming as more creative and surprising ways of imagining (queer) being-in-the-world. Failure stands as an alternative to the grimness of neoliberal discourses of conformity. Halberstam (2012) expands on this in more detail in the book *Gaga Feminism* (2012: 133) arguing that ‘in an economy that engineers success for an elite few at the expense of the failure of the many, failure becomes a location for resisting, blocking, slowing, jamming the economy and the social stability that depends upon it.’

These thoughts particularly resonate with the contemporary moment in queer politics of India, where the perceived failure of the campaign against IPC 377 has extended important figurative questions about the locus of sexually dissident politics, and why they might be so oriented toward achieving recognition from orthodox state formations – such as legal systems - or in respect of normative aspirations for recognition, for example through social respectable monogamy (Narain 2007, Narain and Gupta 2011, Boyce and khanna 2011). Might queer citizenship work in other directions, against state and other orthodox formations and their linkages to forms of normative socio-economic status? Such a re-thinking involves taking seriously a perspective on sexual lives as not readily definable within categorical frames of identity or as imagined entities with linear narratives. Rather it is important to open up the domain term, sexuality, and especially sexual dissidence, as a terrain of contextual and conceptual movement – a field of alternating possibilities.

Such reflections, in turn, engender the question of locating non-normative gender and sexualities in India, as elsewhere, within fields of extending and multiple points of reference. One regional response in these terms has been to imagine India as offering specific potentialities for conceiving sexuality as multiple. Yet how do we reconcile a sense of regional or cultural specific sexual and gender diversity with a sociological standpoint from which, in any case, sexualities might be imagined as ubiquitously experientially multiple? (khanna 2013, 2016). And how does such a question relate to

the ambiguous and indirect ways in which sexuality has been conceived in South Asian sociology, against the background of more direct forms of social action?

Silence, Object, Subject

India has been particularly significant as a geo-political domain within which the conceptualisation of sexuality as a multiply intersecting analytical and political object has been contested – for instance, in respect of caste, class and gender as noted. Yet intriguingly, one of the ways in which this has occurred, historically, has been with respect to the seeming disavowal of the sexual also. Sexuality has emerged as a site of study in Indian sociology against the background of the complex deferral of sexuality as social scientific object in the region. This has been so, for example, where sexuality has been conceived of as somehow silenced or absent within Indian public culture. In these terms sexuality has oft been approached as an indirect object - present but conceived of as socially askance (John and Nair 1998, Lambert 2001). At the same time (male) homosociality has been conceived of as an (implicit) counter-point to the heteronormative orientations of the contemporary Indian (Osella 2012).

This silencing and indirection can be connected to preoccupations with celibacy, this being an example of a way in which the sexual, as regional object, has been both claimed but disavowed in social studies. Joseph Alter's ethnographic work on wrestlers in North India, for example, has recounted forms of seeming erotic exercise and activity between men in North Indian akhara, focusing on how this produces forms of 'sexual' arousal that are sublimated through semen retention (Alter 1992). Akhil Katyal (2013) explores similar work on homosocial bonding where he describes *laundebaazi* (or a habitual orientation for boys to 'play' with other boys) as a social framing characterised through a show of excess. He argues that same-sex desire in the colonial archive is framed as an object of one's habits or interests, similar to other vices like alcohol, prostitution, or playing cards. Through an exploration of advertisements, pamphlets and indigenous literary texts from 20th century India, Katyal has worked to establish *laundebaazi* as a political metaphor to describe alternative registers of male-male eroticism in South Asia. This echoes a trope that has been an especially significant preoccupation within regional studies of (male) sexual embodiment linked to post-colonial preoccupations. This may be has been especially

so whereby celibacy and/or asexuality was produced with forms of colonial resistance – as a discourse that challenged otherwise colonial fantasies of the (excessively) erotic colonised subject (Srivastava 2004). It might also be followed as a metaphor for the sublimation of the sexual subject within Indian sociological and anthropological traditions.

Such discourses have contributed to a chaste self-image within India's public culture – one that has endured in multifaceted ways. It may be claimed, for example, that sexualities in the sub-continent have not been so much conceived of with respect to hetero- and homosexual bifurcations, but instead with regard to an asexuality versus celibacy contrast (Srivastava 2004). To take a practical example, early days of HIV prevention in India were accompanied by claims that the epidemic would not take hold, due to the sexually virtuous nature of society and culture (Lambert 2001). Yet it was this same problematic claim that helped to galvanise new social scientific responses to sexuality in India and South Asia more widely. In the early to mid 1990s it became apparent that HIV would not pass India by. New forms of knowledge emerged as an urgent requirement, as these might enable effective, contextually relevant health promotion responses. This circumstance was not unique to India as the development of international responses to HIV and AIDS helped to propel social scientific study into new directions, often in critical dialogue with biomedical and epidemiological studies. Resources directed into HIV prevention research offered new opportunities for social studies of the sexual, as it became apparent that, on a global scale, there was insufficient knowledge available to construct culturally sensitive and effective forms of intervention – these being typically oriented around safer sex promotion with often so-called marginal sexual populations imagined to be most at risk of HIV infection.

India became an important context within which such forms of knowledge were developed and taken forward – as national and international investments helped to propel new studies of same-sex practices, risks and contexts. These supplied new information bases, but also went on to stimulate queer and other critiques. Knowledge of same-sex practices and subjects produced in HIV prevention typically galvanised around seemingly empirically verifiable (and often quantifiable) subjects – in contexts of funding for HIV prevention community work (Boyce 2007, khanna 2011).

However the production of certain kinds of sexual subjects and subjectivities within the registers of HIV prevention work has also been located as another instance of silencing as alternative sexually dissident lives and life-worlds most often fell off the epidemiological map. This might be read as a ‘pre-echo’ of queer critiques of sexual rights movements in India, which have arguably tended to focus on the most legible, often cosmopolitan and ‘suitably modern’ sexual and gender subjects (as noted above). Against this background, the re-claiming of queer subjects has performed as an especially important political and sociological strategy in India, often involving an examination of histories of both repression and sexual expression in order to better comprehend the present.

Past and Present: Public and Private

Anjali Arondekar (2009) has examined the colonial archive in India (legal documents and narrative outputs) as having suppressed homoerotic texts, recovering these from a state of loss and obfuscation. In describing *Queen Empress v Khairati* (1884), one of the earliest sodomy cases in the sub-continent, Arondekar treats homosexuality in the colonial archive as both ‘obvious and elusive’. In this case, Khairati was framed as a ‘habitual sodomite’ whose unnatural sexual practices needed to be checked. He was initially arrested for dressing up in women’s clothing and subjected to physical examination by the civil surgeon. On examination, it was found that he had ‘the characteristic mark of a habitual catamite’ (Arondekar 2009: 68). Despite no records of the crimes, testimony or victims of the crime ever being located, Judge Denniston rendered a guilty verdict. When the case came up again at the Allahabad High Court, Judge Straight overturned the previous judgement due to lack of evidence. However he noted that the plaintiff was ‘clearly a habitual sodomite’ and he appreciated the desire of the authorities to ‘check such disgusting practices’ (69). Surprisingly this instance set a precedent for further cases where Section 377 was enforced, and has been cited numerous in legal commentaries on unnatural offences as a cautionary tale. Despite being a ‘failed’ case it thus nonetheless became a precedent that the colonial authorities used to control ‘sexual irregularities,’ providing a display of the anxiety of administrators towards non-normative, non-reproductive sexualities. 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. (cited in Bhaskaran, 2002:20)

The anxiety over non-normative sexualities espoused through colonial puritanism had a major influence on the development of Indian national identity (Aldrich, 2002; Ballhatchet, 1980; Dasgupta, 2017; Vanita and Kidwai, 2000). As Bose and Bhattacharya (2007: x) critically note, ‘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’. 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 Indian society. Chatterjee (2004) emphasises that the heightened division between private and public life in Indian society, which despite being a normative proposition of modernity, was greatly exacerbated by the colonial presence. The private realm within which sexuality is firmly placed is most assiduously maintained as a domain of traditional and indigenous 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 modern India.

However against this background we are also aware of the various ways through which new and alternative forms of queer kinships have emerged in postcolonial India. Debolina’s ethnographic film *Ebang Bewarish* (And the Unclaimed) recently showed how married trans*¹ men are forging bonds with their wives and Dasgupta’s (2013) work on *launda* dancers (trans* and *kothi* dancers performing in rural belts of India) in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh presented the close friendship that exists between the dancers and their lover’s wives. These alternative forms of family and kinship

¹ When the asterisk is put on the end of trans*, it expands the boundaries of the category to be radically inclusive. It can be understood as the most inclusive umbrella term to describe various communities and individuals with nonconforming gender identities and/or expressions. Also see Tompkins, 2014.

networks demonstrate a revision and reworking of the social organisation of friendship and community to form non-state centred (alternative) forms of support and alliance.

Dave (2012) in her recent work on the ethics of queer activism focuses on the formation of lesbian communities in India from the 1980s to the early 2000s, questioning whether it was ethical or crucial to practice a western lesbian identity politics or provide a more 'authentic' framework for same-sex desire. This is also an instance of where the politics of funding comes in and Dave (2012: 29) argues that the authenticity produced by certain identity terminologies were directly produced by foreign donor agencies who 'encouraged a diversity of fundable niches across the world' (Also see Cohen, 2005 who also discusses the production of terminologies through NGO discourses). Dave describes the founding of PRISM (an organisation providing a space for sexual and gender diversity in Delhi) and its members' 'insistences on a freedom from subjection to identity...enable[ing] new ethical possibilities' (96).

Dave is critical of the fraught yet crucial relationship between the lesbian movement and the larger mainstream women's movement in India. The dependence that lesbian activists might have on the larger women's movement both financially and symbolically make it a critical factor in the politics of queer activism. Dave makes a strong case for an investigation of the relationship between the ethics of activism and the social norms and conditions from which queer activism emerges. This provides for a new potential for social arrangements and also questions the ways in which goals are being achieved.

To Conclude

In this chapter we have attempted to introduce and explore the domain term 'alternating sexualities.' In doing so we have also presented various contemporary critiques of queer studies within sociology, anthropology and related disciplines in India and elsewhere. Since de Lauretis' first use of the term queer theory in 1991, queer studies has embarked on a journey that now includes postcolonial and queer-of-colour critiques. This encompasses an intersectional lens directed at studying queer

experiences in the Global South, particularly paying attention to inflections of caste, class and religion. In a place like India especially these various categories of identity can be difficult to reconcile yet they also converge in complex ways. There have been longstanding tensions between different sexual identities and/or ways of being within the queer spectrum in India, some of which are also related to the fight for resources and sexual health funding. Yet there has also been a renewed sense of radicalising queer politics that resists categorical imperatives (e.g. Dave 2012, Dutta 2014, khanna 2016). Such perspective offer a critical counterpoint to shifts in queer political movements globally towards what has been described as assimilationist politics. Lisa Duggan (2003) has defined such trends as homonormativity – “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them”. In some contexts, among some constituencies, this has signalled a retreat from the radicalism espoused by early queer movements. Petrus Liu suggests that many ‘gay men and women’ now believe that the best strategy for mainstream inclusion and rights is to ‘show society they are ‘morally upstanding citizens who are no different from anyone else’ (Liu, 2015: 2).

Against this background, experiences of sexual and gender difference have appeared to us as fields of on-going alternation as opposed to sites of singular normative or non-normative inclusion, exclusion or resistance. In such terms queer identifications in India – for instance before the law or in activism – can be seen to both engender new possibilities for recognition and misrecognition *together*. This has been so wherein queer movements might be effecting promises for new kinds of futurity for sexually dissident peoples but might also complicit in the erasure of queer subjects. These might perhaps most often be those subjects not readily received as signifying cosmopolitan progressive modernities or those not included with bio-essentialist measures of gender and sexual difference and diversity (Dutta 2014).

As an instance of an obligation to alternating queer discursive possibilities this chapter has sought to develop a commitment to the continued perusal of the sexual as sociological object - as a subject always out of reach, never total nor consolidated. In these terms we have found looking back, for example to questions of silence, transgression and subjectivity in both queer and South Asian studies of sexuality to be especially instructive, for conceiving of the sexual subject in terms of traces and

affects, over time, as much explicit forms of knowledge or contextualization. Such reflections, we proffer, can help to prefigure new questions and analytical directions for queer regional engagements within the politics of indeterminate sexual futures in India and beyond.

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