

**Globalizing through the Vernacular: Gender/sexual Transnationalism
and the Making of Sexual Minorities in Eastern India**

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Dida, for sowing the seeds of my personal and intellectual journey

Abstract

The dissertation explores how the globalizing expansion of LGBT and HIV-AIDS activism into global south locations such as India relies on transregional and translocal communities of gender/sexually variant persons, and yet subordinates them and associated discourses of gender/sexual difference within the tiered hierarchies of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender; particularly GTB) organizations and transnationally-funded HIV-AIDS intervention projects. Engaging with conversations and debates across transnational sexuality studies, transnational feminism, Marxist theories of capital, and literary approaches to cross-cultural translation, I argue that the globalizing expansion of gender/sexual identity and rights based politics in India takes place through mutually transformative, yet structurally constrained, intersections and translations between institutions such as funders, non-governmental organizations and the state on one hand, and networks, communities and subcultures of socio-economically marginalized gender/sexually variant persons (such as *kothis*, *dhuranis* and *hijras*) on the other. Such transformative interactions both create new political possibilities, and reproduce hierarchies related to location, class, caste, gender/sexual marginality and social respectability. Even as translations with subcultural languages of gender/sexual variance enable the transnational expansion and hegemony of institutional categories of identity and representation, lower class/caste communities and discourses become positioned as 'local' or 'vernacular' relative to national and transnational formations of activism and discourse. On one hand, the reification of communities as 'sexual minorities' and as local variants of transnational categories like transgender or 'men who have sex with men' results in identitarian distinctions such as the homosexual/transgender divide that selectively enable certain political possibilities, but constrain many contextually flexible lived practices and fluid subject positions that become unintelligible in terms of emerging cartographies of identity. On the other hand, liberal discourses that valorize individual choice and gender/sexual fluidity may also elide mobile negotiations with privilege and power (such as locally variable distinctions between feminine insiders and masculine outsiders) in *kothi*, *dhurani* and *hijra* communities. Further, dominant forms of activism based on discourses of equal rights and the private/public divide often cast lower class/caste persons and related practices as uncivil and/or criminal. Drawing upon five years of ethnographic research in eastern India, the dissertation critiques how hegemonic forms of identity and rights based politics produces lower class/caste groups as a victimized minorities and exploitable labor pools, rather than as active and full participants in the transnational movement for LGBT rights.

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Introduction

I. Ranajay's Story: Cruising Globalization through the 'Line'

The ruling [the 2009 reading down of Section 377, the anti-sodomy provision of the Indian Penal Code] is historic in a country where homosexuals face discrimination on a daily basis... it also promises to change the discourse around sexuality in a largely conservative country, where even talking about sex is largely taboo... Gay rights activists all over the country welcomed the ruling and said it was 'India's Stonewall'.

(‘Gay sex decriminalized in India’, BBC, 2nd July 2009)

In 1988, I first went to the lakes [of south Kolkata]. One evening, I heard someone call out, ‘hey, this boy is a *dhurani*!’ (...) I could not understand what the person had said; I went back and asked, ‘what did you call me? What is *dhurani*?’ (...) Since that day, I started learning this language (*bhasha*), noting down new words, and even staying up nights and studying them by the light of the lantern, so that I would not be excluded from the *dhurani shomaj* (*dhurani* society, circle or network). One day, some *hijras* visited my neighborhood; I overheard them use the language. I told them, *mashi* (aunt), I can understand what you are saying. They said, are you *kothi*? I replied, no, but I am *liner* (of the line)!

(Interview with Ranajay; translation and parentheses mine)

Ranjay is a thirty-something year old ‘gay rights activist’ in a position of leadership within a community-based organization or CBO that works for the sexual health and rights of ‘sexual minorities’, primarily those designated through the terms MSM (men who have sex with men) and TG (male-to-female transgender) in the discourse of HIV-

AIDS prevention. Marking the close association between sexual rights activism in India and HIV-AIDS funding for persons assigned male at birth, Ranajay is also a part-time staff member of the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society, which has funded several community-based HIV-prevention projects that he has worked in.¹ He is occasionally described as a ‘gay man’ within middle class activist circles in Kolkata, the capital city of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal – a designation that he does not object to. Indeed, Ranajay was exposed to the gay identity early on via the media: as he told me, ‘gay was one of the first terms that I heard about’. But Ranajay also participates within lower middle to lower class/caste communities with distinctive subcultures that use words such as *dhurani*, *kothi* and *hijra* to speak about themselves – broadly, terms that describe a range of gender variant and same-sex desiring persons assigned male at birth, who typically experience marginalization and stigma on account of their gender/sexual difference,² which is also constitutively linked with their position in terms

¹ All names mentioned in the context of my ethnographic fieldwork are changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my interlocutors, except the names of some public figures that are given in full (e.g. Ranajay is a pseudonym, but Ashok Row Kavi is not). The ethnographic fieldwork that underlies this dissertation was conducted with IRB approval (Study no. 0906P67882) during my graduate education at the University of Minnesota, and I have followed the protocol for confidentiality and risk reduction as approved during the IRB review process. While standard Bengali does not have gendered pronouns like ‘he’ or ‘she’, I have attempted to consult my interlocutors regarding their preferred gendered pronoun in English. In cases where I was not able to verify preferences, I have compromised using male-gendered pronouns for those socially identifying or presenting as male, however ‘feminine’, and female-gendered pronouns for those identifying as *hijra* or transgender/transsexual. In cases of marked or explicit gender/sexual ambivalence, I have used s/he and hir. These identifications may be situational and changeable. All translations from the Bengali and parenthetical explanations within quotes are mine.

² I use the phrases like ‘gender/sexual difference’ or ‘gender/sexual variance’ to broadly include varied configurations of non-heteronormatively gendered and sexualized subject-positions, encompassing behavioral practices and understandings of selfhood whether publicly represented as an identity or not, without presuming a strict separation between ‘gender identity’ and ‘sexual orientation’. ‘Gender/sexual identity’ is used in a similar sense, but more specifically for

of class, caste and religion.³ Among these terms, *hijra* is the best-known public identity. In his role as an urban activist, Ranajay embodies the narrative of sexual progress outlined in the BBC report cited above, common in both media and activist accounts. A ‘conservative country’ characterized by a silence or lack of speech ‘about sex’ is gradually awakened to a new ‘discourse around sexuality’ through institutional activism and progressive legislation, emanating from metropolitan cities and attendant circles of middle or upper class activists, journalists, lawyers, judges, academics and so on, who belatedly emulate the example of western sexual liberation (‘India’s stonewall’). However, Ranajay’s story also evokes different and relatively obscured histories and spaces of non-elite community formation that, as we shall see, both crucially enable and come into friction with that narrative of progress, even as they are largely elided by it.

These formations of gender/sexual difference, indicated by Ranajay’s phrase *dhurani shomaj* (‘*dhurani* society’), will form one of the primary sites of this dissertation. I will study how such subcultural formations constituted by lower class gender/sexually variant persons both contribute to and are transformed by the new ‘discourse around sexuality’,

identitarian positions. For a critique of the epistemological distinction between ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’, see Valentine, D. 2007. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press.

³ The relation between class, caste and religion in South Asia is complex; while there are broad tendencies of alignment between economic disadvantage, lower caste status and religious marginality or minoritization, these relationships are not linear and there are Muslim upper castes and even Dalit (oppressed caste) capitalists, in addition to many middle caste people whose position may vary from very poor to upper class. I use ‘class’ as a broad signifier (rather than a strictly Marxist one) for overall socio-economic stratification and position contingent on all of these factors; a phrase like ‘lower class/caste’ thus indicates varied configurations of economic and caste status which result in an *overall* lower position in socio-economic strata (also see section on ‘method’).

and become increasingly consolidated into ‘sexual minorities’ such as ‘MSM’ or ‘transgender’. Yet, even as they transformatively intersect with discourses of MSM-TG or GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) identity and rights, terms like *dhurani*, *kothi* or *hijra* indicate modes of community formation that are not entirely intelligible within such identitarian discourses, given that they may not correspond to singular ontological ‘orientations’ or ‘identities’ along the axes of gender or sexuality, but rather incorporate a variable spectrum of overlapping subject positions and practices based on gender/sexual and socio-economic marginality. Such terms and attendant communities or practices become positioned as local, regional or provincial relative to national and transnational formations of HIV-AIDS and GLBT activism, even though they evidence expansive spatial networks and circulation preceding and enabling the institutional movement.⁴ The ‘languages’ that Ranajay imbibed with much eagerness, and related understandings of gender/sexual difference, are also subordinated and positioned as relatively local or ‘vernacular’ with respect to the globalizing Anglophone discourse of gender/sexual identity and rights – even as they partially intersect with and translate globalizing categories of gender and sexuality, and thus enable their transnational expansion and emergent hegemony. Locating this process of discursive subordination within the larger linguistic political economy of South Asia and the relation between

⁴ For previous ethnographies of *hijra* and *kothi* communities, see Nanda, S. 1990. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing; Reddy, G. 2005. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Cohen, L. 1995. ‘The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics’, in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 276-304; Hall, K. 2005. ‘Intertextual Sexuality: Parodies of Class, Identity, and Desire in Liminal Delhi’, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, pp. 125-144; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45-6.

English and ‘vernacular’ languages, I will use the phrase ‘vernacularization’ to characterize the ongoing (re)production of hierarchized relations between categories, discourses and practices of gender/sexual variance.⁵ In designating such relational hierarchies, I do not seek to stage the common dichotomy between foreign versus indigenous or global versus local sexualities or genders, which may reify cultural difference through a west/non-west binarism, as much literature on transnational sexualities has pointed out.⁶ Rather than presume such dichotomies as a given, I am interested in how discursive formations intersect in mutually transformative ways and are simultaneously tiered through spatialized relations of power that produce hierarchies of scale such as global/local, transnational/regional, metropolitan/non-metropolitan, or cosmopolitan/vernacular. Indeed, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, *kothi-dhurani-hijra* languages and discursive practices perform crucial roles in the translation and hegemonic

⁵ The ‘vernacular’ is here used as a relational rather than absolute term – it marks that which is produced as ‘local’, ‘parochial’ and/or ‘traditional’ relative to emerging imaginations of GLBT cosmopolitanism and ‘global queering’. I do not take the location of the vernacular as granted, but see scalar hierarchies such as global/local, cosmopolitan/vernacular etc. as being *actively* produced and re-negotiated within colonial, neocolonial and globalizing regimes. For an overview on recent debates regarding the term, see Pnina Werbner’s essay on the category ‘vernacular’ (Werbner, P. 2009. ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, *Theory, Culture and Society*: 23: 2-3, p. 496). I use ‘GLBT’ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) here, rather than the now more common and politically correct LGBT or LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer), to signal the continuing dominance of gay-identified men in institutional activism and to avoid the suggestion of token equality and female inclusion suggested by LGBT.

⁶ For instance, see Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 14. Available at <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed 28 March 2013); Corboz, J. 2006. ‘Globalization and Transnational Sexualities’, *Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS)*. Available at <http://www.iasscs.org/sites/default/files/Globalisation%20and%20Transnational%20Sexualities.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2013); Brown, G., Browne, K., Elmhirst, R. & Hutta, S. 2010. ‘Sexualities in/of the Global South’, *Geography Compass* 4(10): 1567-1579; Jackson, P. 2009. ‘Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, pp. 357-95, see esp. pp. 360-1.

expansion of identity and rights-based discourses. On one hand, terms like *kothi* or *hijra* are ‘vernacularized’ as regional variants of transnationally expansive categories like MSM or transgender, translating them vis-à-vis the aforementioned subcultural language(s); on the other, related discursive practices and subject positions may be elided or rendered unintelligible in as much as they do not fit within institutional discourses of identity and rights. Conversely, putatively foreign terms like ‘gay’ and ‘transgender’ may acquire vernacularized senses in non-elite and/or non-metropolitan sites that differ from dominant articulations of homosexual or transgender identity. In my argument, therefore, vernacularization marks a set of contradictory relational processes through which articulations of gender/sexual difference within lower class/caste communities serve to translate and enable the hegemonic emergence of identity categories such as ‘MSM’, ‘transgender’ or ‘homosexual’ in India, but are also simultaneously subordinated, and even rendered unintelligible in some aspects, within emergent discourses of identity- and rights-based activism, governmental policy and developmental aid. Processes of vernacularization accompany and indicate both the hegemonic participation and contribution of lower class/caste communities within trans/national GLBT activist networks, and their simultaneous exploitation and relegation to state-sanctioned violence, neglect and death. By studying such contradictory relations that underlie the emergence of ‘sexual minorities’ in eastern India, the dissertation attempts to both locate non-metropolitan and non-elite spaces in India as important sites of gender/sexual transnationalism (the ongoing transnational expansion of gender/sexual identity and rights-based mobilizations, also called ‘global queering’), and to launch a sustained

ethnographic critique of institutional GLBT activism from the purview of such lower class/caste and/or non-metropolitan locations.⁷

As Ranajay straddles dominant activist formations and ‘vernacularized’ sites and embodies some of their interactions, his story is an apposite entry to the broader arguments of the dissertation. Ranajay was born in a small town north of Kolkata where he still lives, and has been a regular visitor to the city from his adolescence in the late 1980s onward. Initially drawn to certain areas of the city that are termed ‘cruising’ (sexual networking) sites in activist discourse, he subsequently became a member and key organizer with the Counsel Club of Kolkata, one of the early organizations that grew up around male (homo)sexual difference in Indian metropolises from the late 1980s onward, typically led by middle class gay-identified activists. After several early short lived social groups of gay men such as Club de Messieurs (1989) and Fun Club (1990) in Kolkata, the Counsel Club was formed by city activists in 1993, and built alliances with

⁷ As argued more extensively later in the introduction, most previous ethnographies of *hijras* (and sometimes *kothis*) locate them as communities that are located outside the emergence of the movement even as they are affected by it, rather than as important contributors or constituents (see Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*; Cohen, ‘The Pleasures of Castration’; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*; Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’). In contrast, studies of GLBT institutionalization mostly focus on the role of relatively metropolitan institutions and activists in enabling the condition of possibility for gender/sexual identities to emerge; see Cohen, L. 2005. ‘The Kothi wars: AIDS cosmopolitanism and the morality of classification’, in Adams, V. and Piggs, S. L. (eds.), *Sex in development: Science, sexuality, and morality in global perspective*, pp. 269-303. Durham: Duke University Press. Khanna, A. 2007. Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A critical engagement with the postcoloniality of sexuality. In B. Bose & S. Bhattacharya (Eds.), *The phobic and the erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India* (pp. 159-200). Kolkata: Seagull Books; Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A political economy of development’s sexual subject’. *Development*, 52(1), 43-51; Boyce, P. and Khanna, A. 2011. ‘Rights and Representations: Querying the Male-to-Male Sexual Subject in India’, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 13 (1): 89–100.

pioneering non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in other metropolitan cities, particularly the Humsafar Trust in Mumbai.⁸ Gradually, these organizations became involved in both HIV-prevention work and rights-based activism. In 1999, the activist arm of the Counsel Club organized a ‘friendship walk’ that is typically depicted as the first of the ‘pride walks’ in India, which are inspired by similar walks for GLBT rights in Euro-American cities and claim a direct genealogy of descent from the Stonewall Riots of 1969, often credited with launching the GLBT movement in the west.

Ranajay was a direct participant in these developments. In 1995, as a young member of the ‘cruising’ circles of Kolkata and adjoining suburbs, he discovered the existence of Counsel Club from an article in the leading Bengali daily, *Anandabazar Patrika*, which reported the Club’s advocacy activities under the following headline: ‘*Prakashye bikri hochchhe samakami patrika*’, or ‘Homosexual magazine [sic] being sold openly’.⁹ The key words are ‘*samakami*’, which literally means ‘same-desiring’ and translates as ‘homosexual’ – the weight of that attribution being such that it exceeds the boundaries of personhood and seems to infuse the magazine itself – and ‘*prakashye*’, which means ‘openly’ or ‘publicly’. *Samakami* is a relative neologism in the Bengali language, and Ranajay is conscious of its newness. On a rainy summer evening spent in various lively discussions with some of his peers from the Counsel Club days, Ranajay argued that the word was coined by students and academics of Jadavpur University in the early 1990s, in

⁸ For an overview of early institutional history, see Fernandez, B. 1999. *Humjinsi: A Resource Book on Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Rights in India*. Mumbai: India Centre for Human Rights and Law.

⁹ ‘Prakashye Bikri Hochchhe Samakami Patrika’, *Anandabazar Patrika*, 1995.

translation from the English ‘homosexual’. As it happens for most narratives of origin, Ranajay’s thesis was debated and disputed by his peers, but his attribution of the coinage to a vanguard intelligentsia (Jadavpur, since the 1970s, has been known as a center of left-to-liberal activism and sexual progressivism) is significant, as is the uptake and dissemination of the word (whatever its origin) by the Bengali metropolitan media. Less than a decade before the *Anandabazar* article, Ashok Row Kavi – often depicted as the first public gay activist in India, and a founder of the aforementioned Humsafar Trust – had come out as ‘gay’ in an article in the English magazine *Savvy* in 1986. This heralded the process of an ongoing ‘coming out’ of homosexuality in media discourse, signaled by the other significant word in the Bengali article headline, ‘*prakashye*’ or ‘publicly’. This is a familiar iteration of what Foucault famously termed the ‘repressive hypothesis’: the gradual public unveiling of a supposed pre-existing essence that was hitherto repressed, hidden or undisclosed, even as the naming of that which ‘comes out’ requires an active process of linguistic construction¹⁰ (‘*samakami*’, like its Hindi counterpart ‘*samlainik*’, references the English ‘homosexual’ which in turn emerged through the late 19th and early 20th centuries within discourses of sexology, psychology and psychoanalysis).

Ranajay’s participation in the process of the increasing public articulation and visibility of the ‘homosexual’ subject was significant – in the mid-1990s, he temporarily moved into an apartment that he shared with his partner in Kolkata, an activist from Bangalore whom he met through metropolitan organizational networks, thus setting a significant precedent for ‘live-in’ gay couples in the city. Their apartment became a hub for Counsel

¹⁰ Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage Books, pp. 68-70.

Club meetings between 1995 and 1998. He was also among the organizers of the ‘pride walks’ in Kolkata, which were initiated in 1999 by a group of fifteen gay men from groups like Counsel Club and the Humsafar Trust.¹¹ These ‘pride walks’ are prominently highlighted within the standard activist narrative about the growth of organized activism for ‘sexual rights’ in India, as is illustrated by an excerpt from the Bengali pamphlet for the 2010 Kolkata Rainbow Pride Festival:

This event [the Stonewall Riots in New York, 1969¹²] initiated the organized sexual rights movement. (...) On 2nd July 1999, fifteen front-rank activists from different Indian cities came together in Kolkata to commemorate this historic event (...) Since then, the number of participants increase every year.¹³ (My translation).

The pamphlet articulates a predictable and somewhat weary narrative of progressive globalization – a few good men (and fewer women) in Indian big cities braved a repressive society to form the first collectives under western and diasporic influences, especially the US GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) movement symbolized by Stonewall. Gradually, these ‘front-rank’ activists expanded the movement to politicize lower class and non-metropolitan members – an expansion signaled through the growing number of participants in pride walks from small-town or rural areas. Even as

¹¹ For a history of the mobilization behind the first ‘pride walk’ (which was actually called a ‘friendship walk’), see, Khan, O. 2012/1999. ‘Friendship Walk 1999’, *Gaylaxy*, August 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/cover-story/friendship-walk-1999/> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

¹² In the early morning of 28th June 1969, LGBTI individuals assembled at the Stonewall Pub in New York demonstrated against a police raid, an event that has acquired iconic status in US and transnational queer histories.

¹³ ‘Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk’ (Pamphlet). 2010. Kolkata.

homosexuality is often defended or justified by LGBT activists via a recourse to high Indic tradition (the evidence for and supposed tolerance of same-sex desire in ancient India as evident in temple art, Sanskrit and Persian texts, etc.),¹⁴ the metropole-to-periphery narrative of progress that premises sexual politics upon metropolitan agency and western influence is repeated across many activist and media accounts, with only occasional exceptions.¹⁵ There are many recursive variants over the years – in 2005, the Kolkata pride march is cited as an example of westward-looking liberalization and globalization that is at last awakening a city that is supposedly sleepy and backward compared to other Indian metros;¹⁶ in 2010, an LGBT film festival in Mumbai is touted as a way of catching up with levels of tolerance and visibility in the West;¹⁷ in 2012, US-

¹⁴ Thadani, G. 1996. *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*. London: Cassell; Vanita, R. and Kidwai, S. (Eds.) 2001. *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. I do not mean to dismiss this crucial literature, which is important to explore histories and literary traditions that are often elided by dominant histories; however, in terms of activist practice, such efforts have not served to displace Euro- and metro-centric narratives, and in fact, nationalist glorifications of supposed tolerance of gender/sexual variance in ancient India might well co-exist with a celebration of western-influenced liberalization and globalization – a point that is further elaborated in the fifth chapter.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of media representations, see Dutta, A 2008. 'Narratives of Excess and Exclusion: Nationhood, Class and Queerness in the Indian English-Language Press' in Kuntsman, A. and Miyake, E. (ed.s) *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Racality*. York: Raw Nerve Books. As an example of rare exceptions, a 2003 newspaper report on the Kolkata Pride Walk in *The Asian Age* discovers that 'Rural gays dominate rally', although it scarcely elaborates the context or implications of such alleged 'domination', or who indeed these 'rural gays' may be ('Rural gays dominate rally', *The Asian Age*, July 2 2003).

¹⁶ Sengupta, V. 'Oh! Calcutta!', *The Telegraph*, August 7, 2005.

¹⁷ Hazlewood, P. 2010. 'India gets its first mainstream gay film festival', *AFP*, Apr. 7 2010 ('Organisers [are] hailing it as a sign of progress after years of prejudice and discrimination... Such events have been an established part of the cultural scene in Western countries for many years but in socially conservative India [...] it has been largely an underground activity.').

based multinational corporations like IBM and Goldman Sachs are lauded for bringing LGBT-friendly workplace policies to India,¹⁸ and so on.

This common metrocentric narrative, in its various iterations, corresponds to and undergirds a political economic structure dominated by upper/middle class activists and related institutions such as funders, corporations and the media; thus it is not just an inaccurate account that could be ‘corrected’ through non-metrocentric research on non-elite ‘sexual minority’ communities, but also an ideological and discursive-material formation whose structure and effects merit examination beyond their treatment in the current ethnographic literature on gender/sexual minorities in India, as argued in the next section. In this dissertation, I shall be especially concerned with investigating the structural collusions and conjunctures between HIV-AIDS funding, GLBT NGOs and activists, and male-assigned gender/sexually variant communities – mediated by figures like Ranajay who span metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. While India has also seen a burgeoning growth of lesbian and female-to-male transgender activism, most NGO and developmental programs that target and intersect with non-metropolitan and/or non-elite ‘sexual minorities’ are limited to persons assigned male at birth due to their reliance on transnational HIV-AIDS funding (female-assigned queer subjects are not seen as risk groups for HIV-AIDS in India).¹⁹ Thus, my analysis will be largely constrained to same-sex desiring and gender variant persons who are assigned male at birth, whether or not

¹⁸ ‘IBM, Goldman Sachs and Google to Launch an LGBT Resource Guide for India Inc.’, *Economic Times*, 17 October 2012.

¹⁹ For the exclusion of all women and female-assigned persons from HIV-AIDS ‘target groups’ except female sex workers catering to a male clientele, see, for example, National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). 2007. *Targeted interventions under NACP III: Core High Risk Groups*. New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

they identify as such. While this unfortunate constraint risks perpetuating the relative invisibilization and de-prioritization of female-assigned persons in funded GLBT activism, I hope to explore structural processes that may be relevant beyond the specific groups in question.²⁰ The conjunctural formation linking HIV-AIDS funding, NGOs and communities includes transnational and national funders ranging from the World Bank to the Indian state, which since the mid-1990s have aided metropolitan NGOs such as the aforementioned Humsafar Trust to support small-town and rural community-based organizations (CBOs) in promoting HIV-AIDS prevention and the rights of sexual minorities. As I will argue through the dissertation, this structure remains resolutely metrocentric even as its developmentalist projects may be increasingly articulated through inverted spatial tropes that serve to disguise or invisibilize metrocentric hierarchies, such as ‘community-based organizing’, ‘local ownership’, ‘decentralization’, and so on.

On another front, the narrative of the metropole-to-periphery expansion of GLBT identity and politics is also echoed in a more critical vein in several academic critiques that interrogate the purported universality of ‘homosexuality’ and GLBT identities and situate them as particular historical constructions that exclude or suppress other idioms of gender/sexual desire, but still identify the significant historical determinants of GLBT

²⁰ This is not to claim congruence with lesbian and female-assigned positions and politics, which need to be examined separately and specifically, and indeed have been in the work of anthropologists like Naisargi Dave (Dave, N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.). I mean rather that the structural dynamics facing male-assigned communities are symptomatic of broader power structures linking state, NGOs, and funders, and indeed postcolonial governmentality more broadly (see chapter one), which might also contingently impinge on other groups.

identity formation with the metropole and metropolitan institutions, whether western or non-western. Whereas in activist and media narratives metropolitan organizing enables the liberation of homosexual subjecthood, in several academic discussions of globalization and sexuality, it sets the stage for the construction of homosexual subjectivity in cultural contexts where same-sex desire may not have been previously articulated as personhood, whether for good or bad.²¹ Thus, the story of metropole-led globalization is a recursive trope that – far from being exhausted easily – evidences several more or less nuanced articulations, both celebratory and critical.

As I argue, the metrocentric narrative of sexual progress is not just an ideological construction that simply excludes or elides non-metropolitan or lower class forms of gender/sexual politics or contributions to movement-building, which could be remedied through corrective histories of non-elite gender/sexual difference and dissidence, such as those by Alok Gupta²² or Maya Sharma,²³ or by geographies of sexuality that ‘move beyond the hierarchy of metropolitan gay centres’, as advocated by the geographer Gavin Brown (which is of course necessary in itself, but perhaps not sufficient to analyze the

²¹ See Khanna, A. 2007. Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A critical engagement with the postcoloniality of sexuality. In B. Bose & S. Bhattacharya (Eds.), *The phobic and the erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India* (pp. 159-200). Kolkata: Seagull Books; Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A political economy of development's sexual subject.’ *Development*, 52(1), 43-51; Boyce, P. and Khanna, A. 2011. ‘Rights and Representations: Querying the Male-to-Male Sexual Subject in India’, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 13 (1): 89–100; Massad, J. 2007. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Altman, D. (2001). *Global gaze/global gays*. In Hawley, J.C. (Ed.) *Postcolonial and queer theories: Intersections and essays* (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: Praeger.

²² Gupta, A. 2005. ‘Englishpur ki kothi: Class dynamics in the Queer Movement in India’. In Bhan, G. and Narrain, A. (eds.), *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

²³ Sharma, M. 2007. *Women loving Women in Rural India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

implications of metrocentricity).²⁴ Rather, I will study the pervasiveness of metrocentric narratives as symptomatic of an incompletely hegemonic political economic formation linking metropolitan and non-metropolitan sites, which is potentially both ‘empowering’ and violent, both creating and restricting political possibilities. Examining this formation through a focus on processes of vernacularization enables us to see how it informs and draws upon non-metropolitan spaces and articulations of gender/sexual difference that are ‘vernacularized’ as regional or local, even as it often obscures such collusions and dependencies.

Ranajay’s story, as a small town boy who became initiated into political activism through metropolitan activist circles, hints at some of the linkages between the metrocentric history of GLBT identity formation and other histories that are relatively obscure and difficult to map. As mentioned above, the Counsel Club was not the first community articulating some form of gender/sexual difference that he belonged to. In a long interview, he described to me his childhood in the small suburban town of his birth, when he made a few friends at high school who shared his dawning sexual interest in men, and who told him of places where people ‘like them’ would meet. Some of these spaces – termed ‘cruising sites’ in subsequent activist discourse – were nearby, such as suburban railway stations near his home town, while others involved excursions to Kolkata, albeit a side of it not often seen or covered in the typical media coverage of metropolitan pride marches (as explained later, I do not use ‘metropolitan’ and ‘non-metropolitan’ as fixed referents to particular locations, but rather as a relational trope to characterize spatialized

²⁴ Brown, G. 2008. Urban (Homo)Sexualities: *Ordinary Cities and Ordinary Sexualities*. *Geography Compass* 2/4 (2008): pp. 1215–1231; p. 1215.

relations of inequality between various centers of power and their relative peripheries, variously located in urban slums, suburbs, small towns and villages). One such place that he first visited in the late 1980s was the lake area in South Kolkata, formally known as Rabindra Sarovar after Rabindranath Tagore, the venerated poet-philosopher-songwriter who is a cornerstone of both high and middlebrow Bengali culture. Belying the staid respectability of its name, the lake is sandwiched between a slum area and a posh South Kolkata neighborhood, and is a site where people of different classes have been known to cruise for sex in the evenings, including paid sex work. In 1988, before the formation of the first gay groups of the city, it is here that Ranajay came upon many people from the ‘line’ – an old Bengali resignification of the English word, of uncertain provenance, signifying the whole range of people who are potentially interested in same-sex sexual networking, whether or not that interest forms a basis for personal or communal identity. However, the ‘line’ was not homogenous in gendered terms – in particular, Ranajay encountered what he described as a ‘society’ (*shomaj*) of ‘girlish’ or feminine males (*meyeli chhele*) who formed close intentional communities, and discovered the strange ‘language’ (*bhasha*) used by them. Despite its designation as such, the *bhasha* was not a fully formed, grammatically distinct ‘language’, but rather a vocabulary or subcultural argot of words, relating particularly to gender/sexual acts and practices, which are not found in colloquial Bengali (or indeed, other Indian languages) and are inserted into standard Bengali or Hindi syntax.²⁵ The *bhasha* was private and restricted to the circle, and in this sense marks a subculture, but also indicates distinctive modes of public

²⁵ For previous ethnographic studies that note similar ‘languages’ called *Farsi* prevalent among *hijras* and *kothis* elsewhere in India, see especially Hall 2005, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’; Reddy 2005, *With Respect to Sex*.

visibility as gender variant, which we will have occasion to explore over subsequent chapters. Though Ranajay had never felt himself to be *meyeli* or feminine unlike most participants of these circles, he told me, ‘I wanted to learn the language, and not feel excluded from this *shomaj*’. So much so that he would stay up at night and study the vocabulary, making and memorizing a list of the new words by the light of the lantern. In this fashion, he came to participate in these circles whose members used terms like *dhurani* and *kothi* to describe themselves, though – as evidenced in the opening quote from his narrative – he avoided these terms as self-appellations and when asked, referred to himself simply as *liner*, or ‘of the line’.

Where did the language come from? In the lake area, it was called ‘*khaurir bhasha*’ – the language of *khauri* or trickery, fun, play – a language used to fool outsiders, just as the *khauri jok* or *khauri lilki* (false hair, false breasts) worn by some *dhuranis* might fool the intended beholder. *Khauri* thus suggests a deliberate fakeness or falsity that belies any clear origin or ontological fixity. Yet, some people did make claims to the origin and possession of the language. In one of his early visits to the lakes, Ranajay encountered a relatively senior member of the community, who identified herself as a *hijra* – a well-known community of persons who are assigned male at birth but dress in women’s clothes, who are sometimes represented as a ‘third gender’ in academic and activist literatures.²⁶ Overhearing her speaking some words that he had picked up from his friends, he exclaimed, ‘oh, you are speaking our language as well!’ In response, the *hijra*

²⁶ On *hijras* as a ‘third gender’, see Nanda 1990, *Neither Men nor Women*; Hall 2005, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’.

clapped loudly – a typical gesture associated with *hijras*, often used for assertion and aggression – and said, ‘this is *our* language, it is you people who have taken the language from us!’

Given that *hijras* are one of the best known groups or identities in the history of gender/sexual difference in South Asia – the word is much better known as a public identity than any of the other non-English terms Ranajay encountered at the lakes – this claim of *hijra* anteriority and possession is not surprising. However, whether or not the claim of original possession is tenable, the ‘language’ (or indeed, such languages) is certainly much used beyond the clans or *gharanas* into which many *hijras* are organized (though, as we shall see in the first chapter, there are *hijras* beyond *gharanas* as well, not officially recognized by the state, activists and funders). While undertaking the ethnographic fieldwork that underlies this dissertation, I heard iterations of the rich discursive world described by Ranajay hundreds of kilometers away in ‘cruising areas’ and community networks in the districts of Murshidabad, Nadia and North 24 Parganas to the north of Kolkata, indicating translocal connections and networks that predated institutionalization. These networks and their participants seem to be assimilable neither to *hijra gharanas* or clans which are an old, much-studied site of South Asian gender/sexual difference,²⁷ nor to the seemingly new, metrocentric articulations of same-sex desire – even as they overlap with both the *hijra* as signaled by the common language, and the new homosexual subject as indicated by figures like Ranajay. Along

²⁷ Nanda 1990, *Neither Man nor Woman*; Hall 2005, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’; Reddy 2005, *With Respect to Sex*.

with other activists like him, Ranajay functioned as a conduit and a native informant fostering increasingly transformative linkages between GLBT institutionalization and the attendant narrative of globalization and these networks. As a mid-rung and upwardly mobile activist, his ticket to globalizing circuits of HIV-AIDS and GLBT activism was his knowledge of the 'line', whose participants have increasingly become both target groups and exploitable low-tier workers in NGO projects for HIV-AIDS prevention and sexual rights from the 2000s onward.

As we shall see, these communities and spaces disturb the ontological stability of both the 'old' identities like the *hijra* and 'new' GLBT identities and movements, and hint at their productive and mutually transformative intersections. Thus, they may be read contrapuntally to complicate the recursive metropole-to-periphery story of globalization as told in media, activist, and some academic narratives. To what extent do these sites represent a different, alternate or even resistant history, and to what extent are they an obscured but crucial part of that structure of metropolitan dominance, expansionism and 'progress'? This is a key underlying question that we will encounter and address in many forms through the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The first four chapters will examine the ongoing formation of identities such as *hijra*, MSM, transgender and gay vis-à-vis the aforementioned translocal formations of gender/sexual variance, and will analyze how institutionally validated identities, as recognized by senior activists, funders and the state, gain hegemony through selective, institutionally constrained translations with subcultural 'languages'. Simultaneously, the hegemonic constitution of terms like

MSM and TG subordinates and vernacularizes relatively ‘local’ or ‘regional’ terms as their sub-categories or variants, and elides discourses and practices that are not entirely legible within institutional discourses of identity. The last chapter will examine nationalist and liberal discourses of GLBT rights and citizenship and argue that they further contribute to vernacularizing processes by casting certain *kothi-dhurani-hijra* practices as uncivil and/or criminal. All of the chapters attempt to articulate a critique of metrocentric trans/national formations of GLBT and HIV-AIDS activism without either presuming their totality or fetishizing local difference – this is a project that I sketch out vis-à-vis debates on ‘global queering’ in the following section.

II. Global Queering and the Question of the Determinant

Any critical engagement with metrocentric narratives and structures of GLBT and HIV-AIDS activism must navigate questions of dominance, hegemony and the negotiation of cultural and geo-political difference within ongoing spatio-temporal processes termed ‘the globalization of sexuality’ or ‘global queering’.²⁸ In this section, I will attempt to read into some of the underlying issues in academic debates on ‘global queering’ and the transnational expansion of GLBT movements, particularly juxtaposing two relevant bodies of literature – discussions of ‘global queering’ in the Asian region, and ethnographic studies of gender/sexual difference in South Asia. Subsequently, I shall

²⁸ Altman, D. ‘On Global Queering’, *Australian Humanities Review*, December 1996; Altman, D. (2001). Global gaze/global gays. In Hawley, J.C. (Ed.) *Postcolonial and queer theories: Intersections and essays* (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: Praeger; Binne, J. 2004. *The Globalization of Sexuality*. London: Sage Publications.

proceed in the subsequent section to outline some of the interventions of my project within the broader field of feminist and queer approaches to globalization, transnationalism and development.

The relation between the transnational emergence of contemporary gender/sexual identities and historical precursors of gender variance and same-sex desire has been a fraught and controversial question in many postcolonial societies. While right wing nationalists, such as the Hindu right in India, have typically attacked such identities as new western influences, LGBT activists have traced back homoeroticism and gender variance, and even gay/lesbian identities, through revisionist readings of pre-colonial history and indigenous culture.²⁹ Scholarly accounts usually repudiate the conservative denunciation of homosexuality as foreign influence, but the historicity of gender/sexual identities and their relation to postcolonial (and/or neocolonial) modernity remains a debated question across several world regions. This is especially evident in the debates on ‘global queering’, a term coined in the 1990s to signal the widespread (though uneven) emergence of politicized gender/sexual identities in the postcolonial, and more specifically post cold-war, period. The 90s were a time of burgeoning academic and popular discussions about ‘globalization’ – a loose term clubbing together many complex flows of capital and culture. The question of how ‘globalization’ occurs vis-à-vis

²⁹ For critical discussions of nationalist denunciations of homosexuality, see Amory, Deborah P. 1997. “Homosexuality” in Africa: Issues and Debates’, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 25, pp. 5-10, here p. 5; Kapur, R. 1999. ‘A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves: Hybridity, Sexuality and the Law’, *Social and Legal studies* 8, pp. 343-358; for examples of LGBT readings of pre-colonial history, see Thadani, G. 1996. *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*. London: Cassell; Vanita, R. and Kidwai. S. (eds). 2001. *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

culturally variegated spaces and histories spans spatial and temporal registers, intersecting spatial or scalar questions (the interrelation of ‘global’, ‘regional’, ‘local’) with historiographic ones (the interrelations of ‘postmodern’, ‘modern’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘non-modern’, ‘traditional’), and has thus inspired a vast multi-disciplinary literature.³⁰ Within this larger discursive terrain, I will focus on one particular genealogy of debate that has particularly raised questions about transnational relations of power within the dissemination of GLBT (particularly male gay) identities. Early commentators like Dennis Altman studied the transnational circulation of rubrics of identity such as gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender (GLBT), and the conception of sexuality as personhood itself, as a globalizing extension of the history of sexuality in the modern west.³¹ The apparent expansion of western (or metropolitan) discourses of sexuality and identity raises the contentious issue of cultural imperialism or globalizing hegemonies that might suppress others forms of difference and politics. This has been an acutely debated question in scholarship on GLBT identities and politics the Asian region. For example, Joseph Massad critiques western advocates of GLBT rights in the Arab world (which he provocatively terms the ‘Gay International’) for propagating a neocolonial discourse of

³⁰ For influential discussions on globalization, (post)modernity, and spatial scales (global/local), see Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Basil Blackwell: London; Giddens, A. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford University Press: Stanford; Jameson, F. & Miyoshi, M. (Ed.s) 1998. *The Cultures of Globalization*. Duke University Press: Durham; Miller, D. (Ed.). 1995. *Worlds apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*. Routledge: New York; Gibson-Graham, J.K. 1996. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell; Gaonkar, D. P. 1999. ‘On Alternative Modernities’. *Public Culture* 1999 11(1):1-18; Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. “Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate”. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463.

³¹ Altman, D. ‘On Global Queering’, *Australian Humanities Review*, December 1996; Altman, D. (2001). Global gaze/global gays. In Hawley, J.C. (Ed.) *Postcolonial and queer theories: Intersections and essays* (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: Praeger.

identity that ‘produces homosexuals ... where they do not exist’, seeing gay/lesbian identities as modern western constructs that repress non-identitarian histories of same-sex desire in the non-west.³² This strain of critique is echoed by scholars such as Akshay Khanna and Paul Boyce in the Indian context, who argue that incipient regimes of law and activism (here identified with non-western metropolitan centers rather than a western ‘Gay International’) construct a same-sex desiring subject that obscures the various ways in which same-sex desire is dispersed within mainstream homosocial (particularly male-male) spaces in India without necessarily being articulated as a separate form of personhood.³³ As Ara Wilson has argued, such scholarship, even when critical of western dominance, may inadvertently reproduce the common ‘import-export’ model of contemporary queer politics in Asia, where GLBT identity, culture and activism becomes characterized as a ‘western export’ that is imported and adapted into Asian countries.³⁴ In contrast, most of the subsequent literature, including Altman’s later work, argues that non-western gay/lesbian identities emerge through regionalized histories and processes of identity formation alongside globalizing flows, rather than through a homogenizing or dominant globalization.³⁵ However, there are important differences in the way such arguments may be framed.

³² Massad, J. 2002. ‘Re-orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World’, *Public Culture* 14, pp. 361-85, here p. 363.

³³ Khanna, 2007, ‘Us ‘Sexuality Types’; Boyce and Khanna, 2010, ‘Rights and Representations’.

³⁴ Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 14. Available at <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed 28 March 2013).

³⁵ For overviews of this literature, see Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’; Corboz, J. 2006. ‘Globalization and Transnational Sexualities’, *Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS)*. Available at <http://www.iasscs.org/sites/default/files/Globalisation%20and%20Transnational%20Sexualities.p>

For example, the early essays of Fran Martin and Peter Jackson focus on regional histories and traditions of gender/sexual difference in Asia (e.g. Taiwanese or Thai traditions of gender variance) that resist, interact or hybridize with globalizing influences, preventing the dominance of a hegemonic identitarian discourse.³⁶ However, as Wilson has pointed out, the ‘recuperative work’ of excavating ‘local traditions’ as regional cultural resources, as opposed to the dominating specter of globalization, may end up reifying the ‘association of (queer) modernity and the West, arguing instead that there was queer life in local traditions’.³⁷ In contrast, the strain of scholarship exemplified by Peter Jackson’s later essays, and the ethnographic oeuvre of Boellstorff, Wilson and Blackwood, focuses on regional Asian modernities: in Wilson’s words, they ‘decentre the attribution of sexual modernity to a white US and European model’, and explain the emergence of gay/lesbian identities and cultures through regional trajectories and circuits of modernization, including post-colonial nationalism (Boellstorff),³⁸ national forms of

[df](#) (accessed 8 April 2013); Brown, G., Browne, K., Elmhirst, R. & Hutta, S. 2010. ‘Sexualities in/of the Global South’, *Geography Compass* 4(10): 1567-1579; Peter Jackson, ‘Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15 (2009), pp. 357-95, see esp. pp. 360-1.

³⁶ Martin, F. ‘Response to Dennis Altman’, *Australian Humanities Review*, December 1996; Jackson, P. “An Explosion of Thai Identities: Global Queering and Reimagining Queer Theory,” *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 2 (2000): 405 – 24.

³⁷ Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’, n.p.

³⁸ Boellstorff, T. 2005. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; see esp. pp. 219. Also see Boellstorff, T. (2001). The perfect path: Gay men, marriage, Indonesia. In J.C. Hawley (Ed.), *Postcolonial and queer theories: Intersections and essays* (pp. 18-45). New York, NY: Praeger, see esp p. 23; Boellstorff, T. (2003). “Authentic, of course!”: *Gay language in Indonesia and cultures of belonging*. In T. Boellstorff, & W. Leap (Eds.). *Speaking in queer tongues: globalization and gay language* (pp. 181-201). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

capitalism (Jackson),³⁹ or transnational circuits of ‘modernisation (and) capitalist development’ within Asia (Wilson).⁴⁰ Jackson and Boellstorff, in particular, emphasize that emergent LGBT identities in Southeast Asian nations emerge through their distinctive modernizing trajectories of nationalism and/or capitalism, rather than either a west-led globalization or persistent influences from the pre-colonial period. In their argument, while non-western LGBT identities are not reducible to western influence, they need not derive their logic or justification from pre-colonial histories of gender/sexual variance.⁴¹ For Boellstorff and Jackson, the genealogical rupture caused by nationalism/capitalism need not equal western dominance or the loss of local/regional distinctiveness, even as it may foster some transnational similarities – in this sense, the nation stands in as a site of difference that is both modern and not western. While Jackson and Boellstorff focus more on the nation, Wilson’s emphasis on intra-Asian transnationalism performs the similar function of both decentering the ‘west’ and the ‘import-export’ model of putatively westernized identities, and avoiding the ‘recuperative’ and potentially nativist endeavor of excavating ‘queer life in local traditions’.⁴²

³⁹ Peter Jackson, ‘Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15 (2009), pp. 357-95, see esp. pp. 360-1.

⁴⁰ Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’, n.p.

⁴¹ Jackson, P. 2009. ‘Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15 (2009), pp. 357-95, see esp. pp. 360-1.

⁴² Wilson, A. 2006. ‘Queering Asia’, n.p.

Thus, within this literature, the valorization of regional modernities as a site of non-western difference may be performed on the scale of both the national (the variations fostered by postcolonial nationhood or national capitalisms) and the transnational (the differentiating rather than westernizing/homogenizing effects of globalization and transnationality). For example, parallel to larger trends in globalization studies over the last two decades, Boellstorff and Leap (2003) counter the view of globalization as a supra-local homogenizing force, and provide a counter-narrative of regional differentiation within and through global flows. Echoing the feminist critique of the totalizing metanarrative of 'globalization' and 'capital', they question the 'rape script' of globalization and the oppositional global/local binary, where 'global' forces inevitably threaten 'local' cultures.⁴³ They emphasize that 'western' categories like 'gay' are regionally appropriated and transformed into polyvalent, variegated forms.⁴⁴ Ara Wilson's theorization of transnationalism within the Asian region, or what she terms 'queer regionalism, queer Asianism or queer pan-Asianism', also critiques homogenizing theorizations of globalization and locates the 'transnational, border-crossing, transcultural dimensions of Asia' as a distinct regional circuit of 'modernization' and 'capitalist development'.⁴⁵ In contrast, Boellstorff's work on Indonesia (2001, 2003) emphasizes the scale of the nation, charting *gay* language and identity in Indonesia as both 'translocal' and 'national' – the translocal circulation of *gay* language (*bahasa gay*)

⁴³ Boellstorff, T. & W. Leap (Eds.). *Speaking in queer tongues: globalization and gay language* (pp. 1-10). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press; see esp. p. 6.

⁴⁴ Boellstorff, T. & W. Leap (Eds.). *Speaking in queer tongues: globalization and gay language*, pp. 1-10.

⁴⁵ Wilson, A. 2006. 'Queering Asia', n.p.

within the Indonesian archipelago forges identities that are neither locally-rooted ('ethno-local') nor globally-homogenized, but articulated through a translocal network and a postcolonial national imaginary (the 'gay archipelago').⁴⁶ The emphasis on the national (rather than 'ethno-local' or 'global') emergence of Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* identities in Boellstorff's ethnography parallels Jackson's argument that national-level variations within global capitalism pluralize queer modernities.⁴⁷

Therefore, despite the differences between Jackson, Boellstorff and Wilson, for all of them, the nation, transnationalism and/or (trans)national capital – and hence the overarching modernizing forces of 'nation' and/or 'capital' – emerge as the significant overarching logics, or determinants, informing the emergence of contemporary LGBT identities in the non-West. In case of both Boellstorff and Jackson's emphasis on the nation and Wilson's focus on Asian transnationalism, regional or (trans)national forms of modernization emerge as the overarching conceptual framework for explaining contemporary gender/sexual identities – underlining the notion of an alternate, regional or non-western modernity that may surreptitiously reaffirm the tradition-modernity paradigm and serve to totalize nation/capital, even as it stresses the plurality of modernizations. Even though Boellstorff is careful to avoid crude determinism and

⁴⁶ Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), see esp. pp. 219. Also see Boellstorff, T. (2001). The perfect path: Gay men, marriage, Indonesia. In J.C. Hawley (Ed.), *Postcolonial and queer theories: Intersections and essays* (pp. 18-45). New York, NY: Praeger, see esp p. 23; Boellstorff, T. (2003). "Authentic, of course!": *Gay* language in Indonesia and cultures of belonging. In T. Boellstorff, & W. Leap (Eds.). *Speaking in queer tongues: globalization and gay language* (pp. 181-201). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

⁴⁷ Jackson, 2009, 'Capitalism and Global Queering', pp. 358-360.

suggests that postcolonial nationalism acts as not a ‘determinant’ but a ‘dominant’ force, his de-emphasis on the ‘ethno-local’ as a site for queer modernity retains the scalar opposition of national modernity to more localized ‘traditions’.⁴⁸ The location of the determinant is more explicitly articulated in Jackson’s argument that the capitalist market, and not ‘any persistent pre-modern tradition’, underlies the emergence of trans/national GLBT identities in Asia:

While research on Asian queer cultures has critiqued “out of America” explanations of global queering, it has nonetheless confirmed Altman’s contention that capitalism has played a central role in the phenomenon... market-based processes have been sources of both new forms of difference within and emergent similarities among modern queer cultures. In contrast to earlier studies that emphasized the culturally homogenizing impact of transnational capitalism, the market, not any persistent premodern tradition, is here placed at the center of modern queer cultural differentiation... modern Thai queer identities appear to be related to the development of a national market and the rise of vernacular print capitalism, which Benedict Anderson identified as a key source of modern ideas of nationhood.⁴⁹

Jackson’s argument, articulated in an ambitious and wide-ranging summary article (2009) looking back on a decade of his and others’ research on ‘global queering’, may be placed within a long and sophisticated tradition spanning Marx, Neil Smith, David Harvey, and Negri-Hardt (among others), where ‘capital’ (here, the ‘market’) is simultaneously a unifying and differentiating logic that can both explain and contain heterogeneity – i.e. a

⁴⁸ Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), see esp. pp. 219.

⁴⁹ Jackson, ‘Capitalism and Global Queering’ (2009), pp. 360, 361, 363.

totality.⁵⁰ Much like Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (which Jackson briefly cites), heterogeneity and differentiation is here posited as *internal* to the contemporary moment of globalization, modernity, (trans)nationality and capital, which – in making its other of the 'traditional' or 'non-modern' non-existent, indeterminate or at least less analytically relevant – becomes a totalizing category setting a surreptitiously normative trajectory for sexual politics, which has to happen within some entity called 'capital', 'modernity', or 'nation' even as those categories are reclaimed as non-western (and moreover, the non-western becomes legible and politically relevant for contemporaneity *in so far as* it can be rendered in terms of modernity, capital, and nation). Thus, to tease out a broad tendency characterizing the aforementioned literature, and for the moment ignore some of their subtler nuances, we may say that while this body of scholarship counters a deterministic account of capital or globalization by stressing the pluralization of national histories and transnational circuits of capital, it has to implicitly reaffirm modernizing forces such as nationhood or (trans)national capital as the counter-determinant to the dominance of west-led globalization. The danger here is that anything 'outside' of or unintelligible within the logics of 'market', 'nation', 'capital' (etc.) may be relegated to the level of being 'persistent' pre-modern residues, as evident in Jackson's summary of Boellstorff and Altman:

⁵⁰ I am aware that I am potentially flattening a rich and complex tradition; however, for my purposes, it is important to make a distinction between critical traditions that have postulated 'capital' as an overarching category or logic and those that have not, including the form of critique I seek to undertake in this dissertation. For relatively recent examples of the former strain of thinking on 'capital', see Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. London: Basil Blackwell; Hardt, M. & Negri, A. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Smith, N. 2010. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (3rd ed.). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Market-based processes have been sources of both new forms of difference within and emergent similarities among modern queer cultures. In contrast to earlier studies that emphasized the culturally homogenizing impact of transnational capitalism, the market, not any persistent premodern tradition, is here placed at the center of modern queer cultural differentiation.⁵¹

The relegation of anything that cannot be explained on the basis of ‘capital’ (and related modernizing logics such as the ‘nation’) to the residual (‘persistent pre-modern tradition’) is an epistemological move that enables the folding of all cultural and locational differences into an overarching totality without the need for much further investigation beyond key analytic sites identified with the ‘determinant’. This is evidenced by the premium placed by a whole body of research on what Jackson terms ‘gay capitals’: western and non-western metropolitan cities (NYC, London, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila) which are seen as being originating hubs of gay (and by extension GLBT) culture, a move that also tends to place ‘gay men’ (followed by lesbian women) in a *de facto* position as the ostensible historical vanguard of ‘GLBT’ or ‘LGBT’ political and identitarian formations.⁵²

However, the focus on Asian parallel, regional or national modernities as a site of difference cannot resolve the question of dominant regimes of identification, and of those local, translocal, and regional formations that may not easily fit into such trans/national narratives of Asiatic modernity. For instance, the ethnographic literature on South Asian

⁵¹ Jackson, ‘Capitalism and Global Queering’ (2009), pp. 361.

⁵² As Jackson states, ‘It is no coincidence that research on global queering has concentrated on cities that, in popular gay parlance, are called “gay capitals” — Amsterdam, London, Paris, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, Bangkok, and Tokyo — all of which are in countries with long histories of market economies.’ (Jackson 2009, p. 370).

communities of gender/sexual difference has tended to retain an epistemological focus on, and ethical concern for, the level of the ‘ethno-local’. In this literature, the overdetermining force of *both* transnational *and* national activist networks, NGOs, donors and funders – working within globalizing capital flows – have been critiqued for propagating or imposing identitarian schemas over trans/local or regional ideas of gender/sexual difference.⁵³ Gayatri Reddy, for example, argues that categories based solely on gender/sexual difference neglect the culturally-specific intersections of gender, sexuality class, caste and religion within which marginal subjects like *hijras* are situated, and critiques how gender/sexual categories used in AIDS activism neglect the ‘local moral worlds’ of religion and kinship-based *hijra* practices (while she locates *hijras* as regionally spread across South Asia, her ethnography focuses on the localized dynamics of *hijra-kothi* communities in Hyderabad, South India).⁵⁴ Akshay Khanna and Paul Boyce argue that discourses of LGBT identity tend to obscure non-identitarian spaces of male same-sex behavior. Khanna (2009) argues that a relatively fluid regional ‘idiom of gender’ in Bengali, the *meyeli chhele* or ‘girlish boy’, is reductively ‘tamed’ into epidemiological categories like MSM through the transnational ‘HIV-AIDS industry’.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Reddy, 2005, *With Respect to Sex*; Khanna, 2009, ‘Taming the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele’; Khanna and Boyce 2010, ‘Rights and Representations’.

⁵⁴ Reddy, G. 2005. ‘Geographies of contagion: *Hijras, kothis*, and the politics of sexual marginality in Hyderabad’, *Anthropology and Medicine* 12(3): 255-270, see esp. p. 256, 263.

⁵⁵ Khanna manifests an interesting tension. In the 2007 essay (Us ‘Sexuality Types’), I read him as proposing the ‘emergence’ of hegemonic discourses through reconstitution at multiple levels (p. 185), but in the 2009 article (‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele’) the ‘semi-closed’ linguistic community of “the HIV-AIDS industry” is contrasted to its outside, where there seems to be scattered manifestations of the *meyeli chhele* or girlish boy; *individuals* from this diffuse cultural context approach support groups to be subsequently identified as MSM/*kothi* (p. 49). This elides the overlaps between local networking (with its processes of space-creation/demarcation) and NGO mapping practices, and between subcultural collectivities and epidemiological registers of knowledge. See Khanna, A. 2007. ‘Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A critical

While Lawrence Cohen's earlier work deals with local communities of gender/sexually variant persons in the North Indian city of Benaras, his later essay critiques the mediated emergence of target groups for HIV-prevention such as the *kothi* through the circuits of 'AIDS cosmopolitanism', particularly focusing on the NGO networks led by the Humsafar Trust or Naz Foundation International.⁵⁶ Such scholarship tends to sequester the history of (trans)national activism from 'local'/'regional' gender/sexual difference and launches powerful critiques of normative institutional categories, which however might inadvertently reaffirm the diffusionist, metropole-to-periphery history of 'global queering' as opposed to more localized differences, whether subsumed by or resistant to the global. As a case in point, Reddy's meticulous and exemplary ethnography of *hijra* and *kothi* communities investigates their cultural mores largely as separate from institutionally-mediated gay/GLBT formations, even as she notes that they might increasingly co-exist, intermingle or hybridize with the latter.⁵⁷ Reddy and Khanna thus critique the institutional emergence of identities from an empirical standpoint seemingly outside that institutionalized history – that is, Reddy's 'local moral worlds' or Khanna's 'idioms of gender' seem to remain largely anterior to or outside of, or at least not play a significant role within, globalizing tendencies even as they might intersect with them (often in a way that potentially neglects, reduces or 'tames' their complexity and richness). To extrapolate from my reading of their arguments, cultural heterogeneity

engagement with the postcoloniality of sexuality', In Bose, B. and Bhattacharya, S. (eds.), *The Phobic and The Erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India*, pp. 159-200. Kolkata: Seagull Books; Khanna, A. (2009). 'Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A political economy of development's sexual subject.' *Development*, 52(1), 43-51.

⁵⁶ Cohen, 1995. 'The Pleasures of Castration', p. 276-304; Cohen, 2005. 'The Kothi Wars', p. 293.

⁵⁷ Reddy, 2005. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 253.

(here, in terms of gender/sexual difference) is non-totalizable: but for the same reason, such sites of difference cannot take the place of the determinant (or determinants) in the aspirationally totalizing emergence of LGBT identities and gender/sexual identity politics, the investigation of which becomes epistemologically centered on institutions such as metropolitan NGOs or the ‘HIV-AIDS industry’. As both Cohen and Khanna argue, the particular identities used within HIV-AIDS industry, like its usage of the *kothi*, are ‘in some sense a creation of the industry itself’ – which tends to reaffirm the determining influence of globalizing institutions on LGBT identity formation, even as their subsumptions and exclusions are critiqued.⁵⁸

Here, it is not my intention to suggest that these are analytical errors – rather, in my reading, these scholarly tendencies taken in conjunction approach an epistemological paradox or double-bind regarding the issue of the determinant. This concerns the project of undertaking a political economic critique of aspirational totalities – i.e. processes or logics that ‘aspire’ or tend towards totalization – without reaffirming a deterministic metanarrative of globalization or capital, or a global/local binary which would only further elide local/translocal/regional histories and subjectivities (as has been amply critiqued by transnational feminists).⁵⁹ One mode of investigation exemplified by

⁵⁸ Cohen, 2005. ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 293; Khanna, 2009. ‘The Taming of the Shrewd *Meyeli Chhele*’, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Massey, D. 1993. ‘Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place’, in Jon Bird et al. (Eds.), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge; Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press; Nagar, R., Lawson, V., McDowell L. and Hanson, L. 2002. ‘Locating Globalization: Feminist (re)readings of the subjects and spaces of globalization’, *Economic Geography* 78:3: p. 257-284; Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. ‘Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463; Nagar, R. (2008). Languages of Collaboration. In P. Moss

Jackson, Wilson and Boellstorff emphasizes the differentiating aspects of globalization and transnational capital and/or the construction of national difference, whereas Reddy, Khanna and Boyce retain an ethical focus on the ‘ethno-local’ (to use Boellstorff’s term) or the ‘queer life in local traditions’ (to use Wilson’s phrase), and critique their elision or marginalization through trans/national regimes of identity (these descriptions of the literature are meant to indicate their broad tendencies, rather than characterize them absolutely). This brings us to the key question of where and how to locate politico-economic and historical determinants – a question which, as I suggest through this dissertation, might be both unanswerable and unavoidable. Investigating localized and non-totalizable ‘ethno-local’ sites as anterior to or outside of institutional histories risks either giving up on the question of determinants or implicitly consigning it to metrocentric narratives. On the other hand, to re-situate difference within the nation or capital (whether through theoretical argument or ethnographic narrative) might reaffirm a totalizing framework that contains heterogeneity unto itself, and may inadvertently elide local or translocal sites that are less intelligible in terms of nation or capital *even in the name of* non-western difference, as evident in the emphasis on Asian markets and trans/nationality as opposed to ‘local traditions’ in the literature on trans/national queer modernities in Asia.

With this proviso in mind, I will suggest that sites of the ‘vernacular’ and of ‘vernacularization’ indicated through the opening vignette, rather than standing for either ‘ethno-local’ traditions with a demarcable external provenance to queer modernity, or the

heterogeneous inside of modernity-capital-trans/nation, suggest to us the crucial task of describing and theorizing the *simultaneous* aspirational totalization and non-totalizability of signs like ‘modernity’, ‘capital’, ‘nationhood’, etc. (however broadly or narrowly construed). As increasing critiques of categories like ‘capital’ have pointed out, these signs are not recuperable as ontologically coherent, self-contained formations in themselves and thus cannot contain heterogeneity *even as* they are inevitably heterogeneous in their constitution.⁶⁰ Of course, the non-totalizability of capital, nation etc., and the internal contradictions of their progressive teleologies, may well be demonstrable from metropolitan locations – indeed from any empirically approachable site of analysis whether they are located as ‘western’ or ‘non-western’, centers or peripheries (if the center cannot hold, it cannot hold anywhere). However, as the aforementioned ethnographic literature on South Asia teaches us, the ethical urgency is perhaps greater for sites evidencing domination and marginalization – which is why this dissertation in its focus will attempt to prioritize vernaculars and vernacularization over metropolitan institutional histories.⁶¹ At the same time, such sites cannot be entirely consigned to signs like ‘tradition’, ‘local’, etc., even as the evocations of the concrete materiality of the ‘other’ contained in those terms can never be dismissed. In as much as

⁶⁰ See, for example, Mitchell, T. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Gidwani, V. 2008. *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶¹ Throughout the dissertation, the ‘vernacular’ is thereby used not in a fixed linguistic sense – as in much of the usage in literary studies, and also common everyday use in postcolonial contexts, e.g. ‘vernacular’ language, education, etc. I evoke the conceptual sense often used in anthropology and cultural studies, e.g. in concepts like ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’, except that I resist such an easy conflation. The ‘vernacular’ signals forms of discursive-material hierarchization that cuts across language and location – e.g. there may be vernacular registers of English, and of ‘gay language’ in the west, as well.

sites of the ‘vernacular’ are precisely so because of their subordinated participation within emerging hegemonic formations of trans/nationality and capital, such as the HIV-AIDS industry and the development sector, and in as much as the concept and material realities of nation, development, capital (etc.) are themselves dependant (even ‘parasitic’) on these vernacularized ‘others’ (wherever located), the ‘vernacularized’ is both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ aspiring totalities.⁶² Thus, in this dissertation, the vernacular(ized), given its co-implication with ‘nation’ and ‘capital’, will emerge as one possible provisional nomenclature for such an inside/outside space or site of investigation.

III. Vernacular, Translocal, Transnational: Questions of Space and Scale

As mentioned in passing above and assumed throughout, my usage of terms like ‘vernacular’ or ‘metropolitan’ mark spatial and scalar relations of power, and their situated manifestations at particular sites, rather than ontologically stable locations. In this regard, it may be expedient to position my use of the vernacular(ized) vis-à-vis its common usages in South Asia, where it is often used as a more stable referent to particular languages. The methodological uses and potentials of resignifying the ‘vernacular’ and using the framework of vernacular/vernacularization for relational and scalar analysis may be elucidated via feminist and queer approaches to globalization, transnationalism and development, which have not only analyzed spatial and scalar relations of power, but also interrogated how epistemological constructs like local or global may themselves reify scalar relations. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the

⁶² On the parasitic nature of ‘capital’ and its reliance on other cultural/economic logics, see Mitchell, 2007, *Rule of Experts*; Gidwani, 2008, *Capital Interrupted*.

analytical frameworks deployed in this project vis-à-vis salient tendencies in feminist and queer critiques of transnational formations of power.

At the level of its most direct or straightforward signification in the South Asian context, the ‘vernacular’ signals the material and conceptual divides manifested in the pre- and postcolonial legacies of linguistic hierarchization in the region, particularly the relations between ‘vernacular’ or ‘regional’ languages and various prestige languages, including precolonial ‘cosmopolitan’ languages like Sanskrit or Persian, and postcolonial trans/national national languages such as English.⁶³ Vernacularity is thus aligned with scalar subordination and spatial limitedness. However, some ‘vernacular’ or ‘regional’ languages like Bengali and the Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani continuum are among the most spoken languages in the world in their own right, and are also transnational within the South Asian region, which indicates the untenability of ‘vernacular’, ‘local’, ‘regional’, etc. as stable empirical categories. Moreover there are further hierarchies between standardized ‘regional’ languages and their dialects – such as a ‘high’ Sanskritic and/or Anglicized Bengali or Hindi vis-à-vis their further-vernacularized dialects – indicating the stratified and layered nature of ‘vernacularization’, which belies a static or

⁶³ On the relation between ‘vernacular’ and global/national/cosmopolitan languages, See, for example, Iyer, N. & Zare, B. (Eds). (2009). *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*. Amsterdam: Rodopi; Pollock, S. (2006). *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Vishwanathan, G. (1998). *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Oxford University Press; Gupta, S. 2013. ‘Big issues around a small-scale phenomenon: Vernacular pulp fiction in English translation for Indian readers’. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48(1): p. 159-175; Sadana, R. 2012. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

epistemologically fixed categorical division between ‘vernacular’/‘regional’ languages and ones deemed as national/transnational/cosmopolitan (as often assumed in the literature).⁶⁴ While not empirically stable, the ‘vernacular’ is positioned within all too material hierarchies – as Nagar and Faust have argued in the context of contemporary India, the layered linguistic stratifications of the ‘vernacular’ corresponds to socio-economic divides, such that ‘vernacular’ education translates into relative lack of socio-economic capital even as English enables upward mobility.⁶⁵ As we shall see in particularly the second chapter, the NGO and development sector around HIV-AIDS and gender/sexuality also evidences a hierarchization of labor congruent with this division – office jobs with even basic English skills usually gain significantly higher salaries than field-level work, which requires not just Bengali/Hindi proficiency but also the further familiarity with dialects and the aforementioned subcultural languages that are even more devalued and taken for granted than standard Bengali or Hindi. (In as much as academic projects such as mine function within a similar political economy of knowledge where the particular ‘field’ and ‘community’ counts only in as much as it can feed into abstraction and theorization in English academic discourse and be intelligible to debates in the US academia,⁶⁶ they too are part of the same exploitative and violent logic of vernacularization even as they might attempt to critique it.)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Nagar, R. & Faust, D. 2001. ‘English-medium Education, Social Fracturing and the Politics of Development in Postcolonial India’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2878-2883.

⁶⁶ Nagar, R. & Swarr, A. 2010 (Eds). *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Buffalo: SUNY Press.

Further, in addition to linguistic and socio-economic divides, the category ‘vernacular’ also connotes conceptual polarities such as parochial, provincial, demotic or particular, as distinct from the cosmopolitan, universal, enlightened, or transcendent.⁶⁷ While the linguistic and conceptual sense may not be conflated (academic usages of phrases like ‘vernacular literature’ usually do not presume them to be parochial, provincial etc.), it cannot be denied that the layered political economy of languages relies on such a conceptual hierarchy, which is thus ideological through and through. One way to critique such hierarchization has been to posit and describe conceptual intersections and inversions, e.g. the theoretical catchphrase ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’.⁶⁸ This serves to nuance and complicate the conventional linguistic understanding of the ‘vernacular’, such that the putatively cosmopolitan may be vernacularized or the vernacular might serve as a situated vantage-point for cosmopolitan practices and identifications (e.g. Werbner uses the example of vernacular-speaking elites in the non-West who imagine themselves as cosmopolitan to chart the intersections and inversions among these categories).⁶⁹ However, such conceptual dilution or inversion of the aforementioned binaries is not enough to counteract the structural barriers of access within the political economy of languages (not every cultural location has the prestige or ability to claim ‘cosmopolitanism’ and be taken seriously in doing so); thus the conceptual dyad ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ might too easily wish away material scalar divides. Therefore, something like a vernacular-elite distinction may remain necessary for the

⁶⁷ Werbner, P. 2009. ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, *Theory, Culture and Society*: 23: 2-3, p. 496.

⁶⁸ Werbner, P. 2009. ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, p. 496.

⁶⁹ Werbner, P. 2009. ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, p. 496.

purposes of structural or systemic analysis, and the very critique of the ‘vernacular’ as a pejorative concept and a stable empirical site would necessitate a political economic analysis of the processes of making-vernacular, or vernacularization (retaining the ‘vernacular’ as a useful analytical category for this purpose). In this critical usage, the category cannot be deployed as an ontological or neutral descriptor, but a relative one with consideration to differentiations both within and across languages – something is vernacular in relation to something else, and has to be continuously re-created and performed as ‘vernacular’ through ongoing socio-linguistic processes, rather than being ‘vernacular’ in and for itself (Coupland [2009] makes a similar argument in the context of dialects in England).⁷⁰ The production of the ‘vernacular’ is thus thoroughly implicated in the larger production of scale.

Here, I particularly draw upon and seek to extend the possibilities opened up by a certain strain of feminist theorizing on transnationalism and globalization that has questioned the scalar assumptions of anthropological theories of globalization as well as leftist theorizations of capital. Feminist geographers and anthropologists such as Massey, Ong, Mountz, Hyndman and Nagar have critiqued the conceptualization of spatial and scalar categories within globalization literatures, particularly the divide of the ‘local’ and ‘global’.⁷¹ Drawing upon the work of Massey, Ong articulated an early influential

⁷⁰ Coupland, N. 2009. ‘The mediated performance of vernaculars’. *The Journal of English Linguistics*, 37(3), 284-300.

⁷¹ Massey, D. 1993. ‘Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place’, in Jon Bird et al. (Eds.), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge; Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press; Nagar, R., Lawson, V., McDowell L. and Hanson, L. 2002. ‘Locating Globalization: Feminist

critique of anthropological discussions of globalization for equating global with ‘universalizing capitalist forces’ as opposed to ‘local cultures’, which perpetuates ‘a top-down model whereby the global is macro-political economic and the local is situated, culturally creative, and resistant’.⁷² Departing from this schema, she emphasizes the role of human agency and cultural meanings in transnational flows; shifting from the study of an all-encompassing top-down globalization to horizontal transnational relationalities encompassing specific regions, in which cultural logics such as the ‘fraternal network(s)’ of east Asian capitalists play an important role. (However, Ong still sees the market as ‘absolutely transcendental’ and universalizes ‘liberal ideologies of governance’).⁷³ Ong’s move can be located within a larger discursive shift from ‘global’ to ‘transnational’ framework in critical theory: for instance, the move from ‘global’ to ‘transnational’ feminisms to avoid the totalizing gestures of first-world epistemes of globality, while retaining a critical focus on transnational asymmetries and relations of power that cross national boundaries.⁷⁴ Following such broad shifts, the last decade has seen a further nuancing of critical vocabularies of space and scale beyond the local/global dichotomy. Drawing upon transnational feminists such as Roberts and Nagar, Mountz and Hyndman critique the masculinist gendered dynamics of the local/global divide, pointing out how in

(re)readings of the subjects and spaces of globalization’, *Economic Geography* 78:3: p. 257-284; Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. ‘Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463; Nagar, R. (2008). Languages of Collaboration. In P. Moss & K. Falconer Al-Hindi (Ed.s), *Feminisms in Geography: Rethinking Space, Place, and Knowledges*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 120-129.

⁷² Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press. See esp. p. 4.

⁷³ Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship*, pp. 4-8.

⁷⁴ Swarr, A. & Nagar, R. 2010. *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Albany: SUNY Press.

mainstream political economy, the ‘local’ is often essentialized and equated with intimacy and femininity, as opposed to disembodied masculinized global forces, which effaces many forms of relationalities. They propose that the ‘local’ and ‘intimate’ should rather be seen as inflecting the ‘global’.⁷⁵ Parallel to the global/local divide, dichotomies such as community/capital and cultural/economic have also been interrogated, and feminist political economy has emphasized that the ‘cultural’ produces as well as is produced in and through the ‘economic’. For example, Priti Ramamurthy formulates a ‘feminist commodity chain analysis’ that interrogates the masculinist primacy of ‘global’ and ‘seminal’ ‘drivers’ such as multi-national corporations in much of mainstream commodity chain analysis, and emphasizes the role of ‘cultural’ ideologies of gender in informing transnational economic formations (such as the cotton trade linking India and the US), which might have been relegated to the level of ‘local culture’ in realist commodity chain analysis.⁷⁶

I reference this crucial literature to frame my study of the material-discursive political economies of GLBT or MSM-TG movements because it enables me to approach communities and networks of gender/sexually variant persons as not merely ‘local’/‘regional’ or (sub)cultural, and to analyze how subcultural formations enable the emergence of expansive institutional discourses of gender/sexuality *as* transnational, even as they are transformed by them in asymmetric ways. As I will argue, the globalizing expansion of rubrics of identity such as MSM and transgender evidence collusive

⁷⁵ Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. ‘Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate’, p. 446.

⁷⁶ Ramamurthy, P. 2004. “Why is Buying a “Madras” Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis”. *Feminist Studies* 30(3).

interactions with ‘vernacularized’ languages of gender, sex and desire, which enable their mobility across particular regions through selective and constrained processes of translation. Vernacularization contains the destabilizing or equalizing potentials of such intersections and translations through the tiered production of regionalized vs. transnational language and discourse, corresponding to hierarchies within NGOs and the development sector – in other words, the institutional propagation of constructs like MSM and TG as globalizing identitarian formations must contain structural dependencies on ‘vernacularized’ languages through scalar subordination, globalizing themselves *through* vernacularization. This framework enables a political economic analysis of emergent gender/sexual formations that interrogates the conceptual totalization of capital/nation while recognizing dominant trans/national formations.

Here, ‘globalization’ or ‘global’ is not an empirical category but an ideal horizon, a forceful ideal and teleology (e.g. the desired global dissemination of LGBT rights) whose discursive-material effects need to be examined – which is why the title of the dissertation uses ‘globalizing’ as a gerund, an ongoing and always incomplete process, rather than a given totality as may be suggested by the noun ‘globalization’ (many theorists such as Cooper, Rofel, Ong, Mountz and Hyndman, etc., have questioned the assumption of ‘globalization’ as a given empirical category).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ See especially Cooper, F. 2001. ‘What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian’s Perspective’, *African Affairs* 100(399): pp. 189-213.

While globalization is used in the sense of a teleological horizon, ‘transnational’ refers more to level of empirical analysis of discursive/material formations, indicating how formations such as the HIV-AIDS industry⁷⁸ and the development sector cross borders of nation states but often also collude with nation-states. While recognizing their potential disjunctions, I do not conceptually oppose the nation-state and transnational, given that in the long run, the liberalizing Indian state (i.e. the state after economic liberalization in India) is often complicit with, and indeed constitutive of, the globalizing processes and transnational formations that matter for my analysis, though there have been significant frictions – e.g. while one wing of the Indian government earlier opposed decriminalization of homosexuality, the health ministry also routed international HIV-AIDS funding for MSM, constituting the state-funder-NGO nexus in the HIV-AIDS industry, as will be traced in the second chapter (and the state as a whole eventually came around to supporting the decriminalization argument, marking a convergence of nationalist and transnational liberal discourses, as charted in the fifth chapter). The transnational as a scalar level thus particularly signifies supra-national structures and circuits that also involve nation states, and attendant flows of discourse and capital that aspire or tend to globalize themselves as totalities, though globality in itself is an impossible horizon. The ‘metropolitan’, in turn, indicates the spatial centralization of power and resources at particular sites within such trans/national formations (such as big

⁷⁸ I borrow the phrase ‘HIV-AIDS industry’ from Akshay Khanna, which he uses in a 2009 essay (the essay however does not analyze the industry per se); see Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A political economy of development’s sexual subject.’ *Development*, 52(1), 43-51.

cities, but obviously not all geographical and socio-economical locations within such cities).

In contrast to the ideal horizon of the ‘global’ and the material scale of the ‘transnational’, I use ‘translocal’ in two interlinked senses. The first, and most evident sense, is of the translocal as signifying linkages across multiple local sites (i.e. multi-local, across locals). The second sense is translocal as ‘transcending the local’, adapting from Aradhana Sharma’s use of translocal in her critique of development, empowerment and NGOs in India as a ‘translocal assemblage’.⁷⁹ As Sharma explains, ‘by translocal I mean something that is both situated (but not locked in space) and formed in articulation with processes that transcend and crosscut various spatial and temporal registers’.⁸⁰ In terms of the project of this dissertation, ‘translocal’ permits a thinking of scalar potentialities beyond locality on one hand and transnationalism/globality on the other: something that cannot be entirely reduced into the spatial scale of either localized cultures (the ‘ethno-local’), or subsumed within aspirationally globalizing and trans/national formations. However, unlike Sharma, my argument also deals with the attempted containment of the translocal through the ongoing production of dominant scales or scalar hierarchies. By this, I mean that the translocal may be ‘vernacularized’ as relatively local, regional or provincial vis-à-vis trans/national formations – we shall see this in the case of particular categories like *kothi* in the subsequent chapters – but it may also escape or exceed its vernacularization as local. Indeed, the translocal may be

⁷⁹ Sharma, A. 2008. *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender and Governance in Neoliberal India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸⁰ Sharma, A. 2008. *Logics of Empowerment*, p. 2.

transnational in itself – *hijra-kothi-dhurani* networks may indeed cross national boundaries within South Asia (e.g. stretching across India and Bangladesh), though due to the limitations of fieldwork I do not explore such cross-border networking in this dissertation. But even if transnational, they are so in a more bounded and limited sense than dominant transnational formations, lacking their globalizing force (else they could not be vernacularized in the first place). While vernacularized languages of gender, sex and desire lack the transnational reach of globalizing rubrics, they serve to establish the translocal mobility of globalizing terms and concepts across diverse local sites in particular regions. While such vernacular(ized) translocality goes beyond a territorially or culturally bounded sense of the ‘local’,⁸¹ it also therefore negotiates structural hierarchies that cannot be described by concepts such as ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’.⁸² Rather, intersections between transnational and translocal discourses, to the extent that they are effective in translating and adapting each to the other, enable the aspirational ‘cosmopolitanism’ and hegemony of particular rubrics of gender/sexual identity: their widespread but uneven acceptance and intelligibility within globally expansive projects of development, human rights and sexual health. The ethnographic elaboration of translocal nature of (sub)cultural formations of gender/sexual variance and their participation in transnational globalizing flows allows us to see how non-metropolitan India may function as a crucial site of ‘global queering’. It allows us to bridge the critique of globalizing identitarian rubrics with the ethical appreciation of regional variegation

⁸¹ For interrogations of such common conceptions of the ‘local’ see Boellstorff and Leap, 2003, *Globalization and Gay Language*.

⁸² Bhabha, H. (1996) ‘Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, pp. 191–207 in Laura Garcia-Morena and Peter C. Pfeifer (eds) *Text and Nation*.

and agency, and explore how such putatively contradictory phenomena may be collusively linked. In Spivak's terms, I attempt a 'creation of infrastructure' at the epistemological level such that translocal formations that cannot be encompassed either by 'capital' or 'nation', while informing and being informed by both, may begin to be 'heard' – while of course this endeavor is constitutively limited through its complicity with metropolitan academic formations and attendant vernacularizing processes, as charted in the conclusion.⁸³

IV. Articulation and Translation: Questions of Power

The critique of scalar global/local dichotomies also implies a critique of teleological or stagist temporalities of power, such as those evidence in a strain of Marxist theorizing of capital. Both celebratory and critical accounts of modernity, colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization have often placed them within a trajectory of historical progress and/or inevitability, which subtends their global expansion.⁸⁴ Much critical theory in the latter half of the 20th century, such as the hugely influential oeuvre of Foucault and Deleuze, has sought to interrogate and go beyond teleological and eschatological assumptions about historical progression and attendant metaphysical conceptualizations of the human. However, as Lisa Rofel and others have pointed out, it may still be that these theorists

⁸³ Regarding Spivak's call to 'build infrastructure', see Spivak, G. C., 'More Thoughts on Cultural Translation', *Transversal* 4:8 (2008), Available at <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en>> (Accessed January 9, 2013).

⁸⁴ For a powerful critique of the persistence of such tendencies in contemporary critical theory, see Rofel, L. 2001. 'Discrepant Modernities and Their Discontents'. *Positions* 9(3): 637-649.

retain a strong sense of linear sequentiality and temporal progression, even if not eschatological teleology, in their theoretical propositions. For instance, much of Foucault's later work suggests a set of crucial historical breaks in or around the 18th century, encompassing the diffusion of modes of government throughout society ('governmentality'), new technologies of power focused on the administration of populations and the furthering of life ('biopolitics'), and the concomitant emergence of the conception of sexuality as a distinct arena of personhood.⁸⁵ This broad schema of interlinked transitions – European in provenance, potentially global in significance – conceptually parallels the discontinuity suggested by Jackson and Boellstorff between pre-modern gender/sexual variance and modern gay and transgender identities (which they associate with postcolonial nationalism and capitalism rather than direct western influence).⁸⁶ Both US theorists like Eve Sedgwick and ethnographers working on South Asia like Gayatri Reddy have critiqued the assumption of a governing historical 'rupture' as well as the 'unidirectional narrative of supersession' that characterizes the emergence of modern categories and identities (particularly the 'homosexual') in the Foucauldian schema, and Reddy instead emphasizes the continuing 'cohabitation' and hybridizing intersections of different models of gender/sexuality in a 'single social field', e.g. the *hijra-kothi* and the homosexual-gay.⁸⁷ However, as argued in the first and second

⁸⁵ See Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality Vol 1: An Introduction*. R. Hurley (trans). New York, NY: Vintage; Foucault, M. 2007. *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78* M. Senellart, F. Ewald, A. Fontata & A.I. Davidson (Eds.), G. Burchell (Trans.). London: Palgrave Macmillan; Foucault, M. 2010. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

⁸⁶ Jackson, 'Capitalism and Global Queering' (2009), pp. 361.

⁸⁷ Reddy, G. 2005. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 221.

chapters, (sub)cultural formations such as *hijra* or *kothi* may not be reducible to historicist schema of either rupture or continuity, and may rather collude in mutually transformative ways with postcolonial governmentality to consolidate ‘modern’ identity categories, including contemporary significations of *hijra* and *kothi* themselves.

The Assemblage

Such an analysis of transformative collusions and intersections necessitates a feminist intersectional analysis that takes different logics of power and their convergences seriously, rather than isolate governing or teleological determinants. In this context, it is significant that two feminist scholars, working separately on two fields whose convergences are relevant to my project – queer translational formations (Puar) and NGOs in India (Sharma) – have both used the Deleuzian theory or model of the ‘assemblage’ to analyze complex and mobile configurations of power that may not be reducible to a coherent, determinant or teleological formation. Sharma uses ‘assemblage’ to suggest the ‘collage-like, ad-hoc, and also purposeful quality’ of shifting formations of power. In her usage, assemblage signifies ‘a conjunctural and evolving ensemble-like formation, which results from the intersections of various ideas and institutional practices... an assemblage is made up of heterogeneous elements that are not necessarily internally coherent but are brought together for specific strategic ends’.⁸⁸ However, the question of *how* heterogeneous elements or logics are ‘brought together’ is not in itself addressed by her usage of the ‘assemblage’ model, which rather emphasizes their

⁸⁸ Sharma, A. 2008. *Logics of Empowerment*, p. 2.

variable, unpredictable and indeterminate effects. Puar goes into greater detail regarding such relationalities in her analysis of power, specifying that she seeks to chart ‘convivial relations between distinct yet entangled forms of power... what can be named ‘environmentality’, rather than ‘governmentality’, of *mutually reinforcing, rather than teleological or serial*, habitations of discipline and control, regulations and regularities’ (my emphasis).⁸⁹ While her shift from ‘governmentality’ to ‘environmentality’ and conviviality seeks to undo serial or governing logics, her reliance on Deleuze’s theorization of power, and particularly his proposition of a shift from Foucauldian disciplinarity to contemporary ‘control societies’, often tends to bring back a strong sense of linear sequentiality and supersession, which is of course not teleological in the eschatological sense. For instance, in her analysis of post 9/11 formations of power in the US, Puar describes how shifts in contemporary power have moved past disciplinary apparatuses as described by Foucault, beyond discreet sites of confinement, training or drilling to a much more diffuse extension of control – ‘networks of control that criss-cross different spheres’ such that older boundaries of discrete arenas such as public and private spheres become ‘obsolete’.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, she further elaborates how this power is different from and potentially supersedes Foucauldian governmentality and disciplinarity – ‘Unlike power that banishes and excludes, or includes and organizes and manages, this power operates through calculation and intervention, characterized by tendencies and

⁸⁹ Puar, J. 2008. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 117.

⁹⁰ Puar, J. 2008. *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 129.

degrees, adjusted through tweaking and modulation rather than norming'.⁹¹ Overall, there is the sense of a greater and increasing degree of the diffusion of power within the social body – but what may diffuse, except which that which is implicitly conceptualized as having been more centralized at some point? The diffusion from more centralized and schematic power is a prominent theme both in Foucault and Deleuze, and tends to preserve the historicist sense of a Eurocentric and metrocentric progression, such that one gets the sense of something that *had* been more centered and schematized which now disperses, diffuses and becomes more fluid. (This is especially evident in the section 'Control and Becoming' from Deleuze's *Negotiations*).⁹² While this is not a teleology, there is a strong sense of linear progression such that certain forms of power may even be rendered 'obsolete', or at least less analytically relevant for theorizations of contemporaneity. As described in the first three chapters, institutional-subcultural collusions within emerging MSM-TG formations have not tended to render (sub)cultural logics of power, such as *hijra* hierarchies based on gendered authenticity, obsolete or antiquated as much as redeploy and often intensify them in new contexts. Of course, some sense of temporality, linearity and sequential movement may well be inevitable in charting emerging formations: however, rather than the framework of diffusion and dispersion that often seem to underlie some versions of assemblage theory, I emphasize

⁹¹ Puar, J. 2008. *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 116.

⁹² To quote from the Deleuze text: 'we're definitely moving towards control societies that are no longer exactly disciplinary... Foucault was one of the first to say that we're moving away from disciplinary societies, we've already left them behind. We're moving towards control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication... One can envision education becoming less and less a closed site of differentiation from the workplace as another closed site, but both disappearing and giving way to frightful continual training, to continual monitoring'. See 'Control and Becoming' in Deleuze, G. 1990/1995. *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 175.

processes of consolidation and translation that tend towards relatively centralized power structures, contingently bringing together different modalities and temporalities of power relations with ‘origins’ – in as much as ‘origins’ can be demarcated – as much outside the space of nation/capital as inside. Thus, considerable sections of the chapters are devoted to describing and analyzing the elaborate dynamics of (sub)cultural formations that, in my argument, play an important role within emerging hegemonies even as they intersect with and are shaped by institutional pressures and structural hierarchies of the NGO sector, and are ‘vernacularized’ vis-à-vis transnational discourses and formations.

The other potential issue with Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of assemblage is that while it emphasizes the unstable ‘relations of exteriority’ between different detachable components that are contingently brought together (rather than organically linked),⁹³ there is a relative lack of attention to processes of centralization and the attendant inequality of locations within the ‘assemblage’. The ‘assemblage’ may become thus an encompassing category that, while the antithesis of an organic whole, still serves to collapse spatial separation and inequality into its diffuse, unstable body. While I am influenced by the idea of contingent linkages between discrete components, locations and logics (see section on articulation below), I am interested in how these relations produce enduring tendencies of metrocentricity, scalar hierarchy and vernacularization.

⁹³ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1987/2007. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007; see esp. pp. 71, 88-91, 323-37.

Articulation and translation

In this context, the anti-historicism (or more precisely, a-historicism) of Althusser may be more useful than the implicit or explicit sequentiality of Foucault and Deleuze (though, of course, I am indebted to and continue to rely on much of Foucault's work, and in particular his theorizations of governmentality and biopolitics, but not as an encompassing framework). In particular, I will draw upon Althusser's theorization of 'articulation' as a way of describing mutual alignments and reinforcements where relatively autonomous levels of the social whole and discrete logics of power and are contingently 'articulated' together – unlike Althusser, however, here articulation must be taken beyond the encompassing category of 'capital' to study translations and collusions between various transnational and regional/translocal cultural formations.⁹⁴ This allows us to approach what Puar variously terms as the conviviality, entanglement, environmentality and mutual reinforcement of different modes of power,⁹⁵ and which is more broadly and less precisely termed 'intersectionality' in much contemporary feminist academic and activist discourse.

The second and third chapters, in particular, explore translation as a specific mode of articulation between subcultural and institutional discourses, which potentially may both reinforce and disrupt the hegemonic acceptance of globalizing rubrics of gender/sexuality. As theorists of translation like Lefevre, Niranjana and Spivak have

⁹⁴ Althusser, L. (1970). The errors of classical economics. In Althusser, L. & Balibar, E. *Reading capital* (B. Brewster, trans.). London: New Left Books. (Original work published 1965), see esp. p. 104.

⁹⁵ Puar, J. 2008, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 117.

long argued, it is never purely linguistic and deeply implicated in relations of power, enabling ideological and institutional agendas.⁹⁶ In particular, the translation theorist André Lefevere proposes that translation is a form of refraction or adaptation within institutional constraints – for instance, in the context of my project, such constraints may take the shape of the construction of MSM or TG as target groups for governmental policy and HIV-prevention funding. As Chatterjee has particularly argued, in postcolonial India, marginalized sections without access to stable citizenship and rights have sought to (or been compelled to) make claims on state policy through the formation of enumerable population groups, reifying identitarian divides.⁹⁷ However, the potential institutional determinism of such a framing of constrained translations may be nuanced by Spivak's approach to translation, which emphasizes that translation necessarily involves contingent equivalences around irreducible gaps, and may take us in unpredictable, unexpected directions.⁹⁸ Translation may be conceptualized as a contingent mode of articulation, such that institutional hegemony may be both established through the unstable processes of translation and become subject to slippage and rupture, rather than resulting in the neat subsumption of local/regional variations into overarching globalizing rubrics of identity.⁹⁹ Through such an analytical frame, I hope to arrive at a form of intersectional

⁹⁶ Lefevere, A. 1983. That structure in the dialect of men interpreted. In E.S. Shaffer (Ed.), *Comparative Criticism* (Vol. 6). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Niranjana, T. 1992. *Siting Translation*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, P. 2011. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁹⁸ Spivak, G.C. (2000). Translation as culture. *Parallax*, 6(1), 13-24, p. 13.

⁹⁹ E.g. see Hardt M. & Negri A., *Empire*, 2000. There are of course varying degrees to which articulation and translation may be evident in the emergence of different cultural and political economic formations – e.g. for the aforementioned identities for male-born persons, pre-existing kinship structures such as *hijra gharanas* and the cruising networks play an important role;

critique that can resist the totalizing historicism of constructs like capital, nation, globalization, etc., while taking the dominating effects of trans/national forces into account.

Hegemony and subalternity

The issue of hegemonic and slippery translations brings us back to the vernacular and vernacularization – the production of scalar hierarchies that seek to contain (sub)cultural formations and discourses as regional, local, provincial. As such, the ‘vernacular’ is not exactly equivalent to either the hegemonic or the subaltern, while it may overlap with both concepts. On one hand, the transnational emergence, consolidation and hegemony of normative forms of gender-sexual difference and subjecthood may well be enabled through/across ‘vernaculars’, which may serve to provide localized translations to hold together or consolidate larger, tiered transnational structures like the funder-NGO complex around HIV-AIDS and LGBT rights. On the other, through the vernacular(ized), one might ‘speak back’ to and negotiate transnational modular forms, potentially challenging or interrupting them – it thus retains possibilities of resistance to current normative/universalizing formations and even of alternative imaginations of community and difference (while scalar hierarchies between the transnational-regional-local may well be hegemonically accepted by *kothi-dhurani-hijra* persons, especially those working within institutional GLBT activism and the HIV-AIDS industry, the vernacularized does not necessarily think itself as ‘vernacular’). Thus, the ‘vernacular’ as a concept signifies

whereas for lesbian and female-to-male transgender identities, such pre-existent formations may be less evident or at least less visible, and a wider field of cultural translation would thus need to be studied.

neither a uniform hegemonic acceptance of a given totality, nor subalternity, which Guha and Spivak define as the dominated without hegemony, the politically unintelligible, that which cannot speak or more precisely be heard, being cut off from all avenues of social mobility.¹⁰⁰ Rather, the ‘vernacular’ might be used to signal a subordinated discursive terrain that may oscillates between subalternity (the condition of unintelligibility) and hegemonic participation through translation – it is the discursive ground or terrain where the fractured hegemony of transnational formations is created, disrupted or re-negotiated.

IV. Method

All of the discussions above are, of course as much methodological as theoretical. The analytical framework of translocality and vernacularization, as explicated above, has both emerged out of and informed the specific research ‘methods’ that evolved during the activist and collaborative experiences that underlie and enable this dissertation. My initiation into what eventually became the project was deeply personal – I started working with GLBT organizations, particularly certain larger NGOs in the city of Kolkata, during my own politicization and ‘coming out’ (as various things to various people, including queer, gay, *dhurani*, *kothi* and later transgender) in the years of my undergraduate and graduate training in India, which was in literary and cultural studies. I stumbled into ethnography and ‘participant observation’ almost accidentally but inexorably as my contacts and involvement with communities that were being termed

¹⁰⁰ Spivak, G. C. 1988. ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (Ed.s) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press: Chicago.

‘sexual minorities’ increased, and as I was exposed to communities and community-based organizations (CBOs) beyond the metropolitan city, in various small towns of the state of West Bengal in eastern India, similar to the town where I had myself grown up. In the process of participating in NGOs, CBOs and associated communities, I gradually started noting down my experiences in writing. Subsequently, this ‘ethnographic research’ expanded to span the metropolitan city of Kolkata with small towns such as Berhampore, Kalyani and Ranaghat, all to the north of Kolkata, as well as their surrounding villages and working class settlements. The state has seen a growing movement for the civil rights and sexual health of ‘sexual minorities’ since the early 1990s, led by non-governmental and community-based organizations that bridge metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Therefore, the region provided me with both an appropriate and accessible site to study the interactions of lower class and/or non-metropolitan communities with NGOs, funders and the state, largely based in big cities. In this context, the metropolitan/non-metropolitan schema deserves some elucidation vis-à-vis the urban/rural divide. While there is a clear stratification of resources and standards of living from more metropolitan to rural areas, the spectrum of slums, suburbs, exurbs, small towns and villages interrupt a neat spatial demarcation between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ in West Bengal; thus, rather than relying on stable descriptors of places as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’, I am more interested in how places and people are relatively positioned within spatialized relations of power. As we shall see, some small-town community-based organizations (CBOs) and their staff members may well have greater access to the metropolis and attendant circuits of discourse/capital than other participants in *kothi-*

dhurani-hijra communities living in slums or villages, even as they are otherwise disempowered vis-à-vis metropolitan institutions – the metropolitan and non-metropolitan schema thus designates shifting spatial stratifications rather than an absolute divide that can be fixed in terms of ‘urban’ or ‘rural’.

Within this stratified spatiality, I was both a representative of metropolitan privilege (whether as NGO volunteer or academic researcher), and a ‘native’ co-inhabitant of towns like Kalyani (my birth place) and Ranaghat. In this context, the boundaries of researcher and subject were quickly destabilized as I was often interpellated into these communities as not only *kothi* or *dhurani* but also as a friend, sister or daughter – resulting in complex negotiations between ‘participation’ and ‘observation’, on which I reflect in greater detail in the conclusion, which elaborates on ethnography as the practice and politics of friendship and kinship. However, the chapters themselves are more on the side of ‘observation’ rather than explicit reflections on the ‘participation’ (as addressed in the conclusion), having arisen from detailed daily field notes of casual interactions and conversations, as well as recorded interviews and oral histories, collected over a period of more than twenty four months spread across six years from 2007 till date. Unless recorded, these notes were most often written down on the same day and were usually written in the form of conversations between the people I engaged with and myself. In keeping with the conversational style of the notes, the chapters often make use of quoted excerpts from exchanges or interviews – this is not to claim absolute verbatim accuracy, but to indicate a sense of the linguistic dynamics of the exchanges in the ‘vernacular’

(here, I must apologize in advance for any unintended distortions or inaccuracies owing to the inevitable slippages of memory; I have tried my best to ensure that the confidentiality of persons is not breached particularly in conversations that deal with potentially sensitive or controversial topics, where unintended inaccuracies could be potentially costly).

In the attempt to render the dynamics of the ‘original’ narratives and dialogic exchanges, I realize that there remains a certain strategic empiricism to the ethnographic descriptions, oral histories and interviews contained in the subsequent chapters. Even as I critique the various representational frames and categories that have been used to approach and describe these communities (MSM, TG), a claim to evidentiary verisimilitude and descriptive facticity (and its attendant responsibility) remains unavoidable if one is to not only critique dominant epistemologies (whether activist or academic) but also provide alternative approaches that might allow us, variously privileged subjects, to better ‘hear’ sites that are elided or marginalized in various ways, and to recognize and respond to the materiality of the other. While in many ways ethnography (including oral histories and interviews) is the primary mode of approaching such materiality in this dissertation, where appropriate, I also use archival and textual analysis, particularly to examine or question processes of representation by the state, NGOs, funders and the media.

Designating subjects: Caste, class, religion

Even as it interrogates dominant representations and institutionally constrained translations, this dissertation is also, in itself, an act of institutionally constrained translation and representation that in some sense brings the difference it describes into being, even as it tries to ethically respond to a material alterity that cannot be confined to act of representation.¹⁰¹ This becomes a particularly fraught issue when defining and describing the marginalized people and communities who are the subject of this dissertation. Thus far, I have broadly used gender/sexually variant lower class/caste formations – intentionally a clunky, awkward formulation – to designate the particular socio-economic position of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* persons. As Valentine reminds us, gender and sexuality may not be neatly separable as categories of experience even as they might be useful as discrete analytical frames,¹⁰² indeed, conceptions of ‘gender’ (femininity, masculinity) are ‘sexualized’ and vice versa. The dissertation both problematizes and uses this distinction contextually; indeed, I am particularly interested in how the distinction between gender and sexual identity emerges in translation, as explored in the second and third chapters. Concepts like ‘community’ or ‘subculture’, which I often use to refer to *kothi-dhurani-hijra* formations, also cannot be taken as transparent categories. The boundaries of ‘community’ are often intensely contested and renegotiated through processes of vernacularization and translation, and thus ‘community’ cannot mark a pre-political or romanticized space, as will be particularly apparent in the negotiation of the

¹⁰¹ On the dilemmas of feminist representation particularly in transnational research on ‘third world’ or ‘global south’ difference, see Desai, J., Bouchard, D. and Detournay, D. 2010. ‘Disavowed Legacies and Honorable Thievery: The Work of the “Transnational” in Feminist and LGBTQ Studies’ in Swarr, A. L. and Nagar, R. (Eds). *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Albany: SUNY Press.

¹⁰² Valentine, D. 2004. ‘The Categories Themselves’. *GLQ* 10(2): 215-220.

MSM-TG divide. ‘Subculture’ is useful to designate the distinctive linguistic practices and discursive repertoires of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* communities, which are not shared with standard Bengali or Hindi as well as ‘mainstream’ culture; however, again it does not mark a static location of difference but a dynamic formation that shifts contingently through processes of articulation and translation with trans/national formations.

While the negotiations with gender/sexual difference in these ‘communities’ and ‘subcultures’ will occupy much of the dissertation, I will not be extensively or systematically studying the complex relations between class, caste and religion in these locations due to the constraints of focus and space, while recognizing their constitutive co-implications with gender/sexuality. I do, however, attempt to note such factors when they impinge on specific individuals and instances of marginalization or privilege. My interlocutors across Kolkata, Nadia and Murshidabad have included upper, middle and lower caste individuals as well as both Hindus and Muslims. *Hijra gharanas* or clans (which have their own religious norms), non-gharana *dhurani-kothi* communities, as well as small-town CBOs typically include members across caste and religion, and recruitment (as described in the first chapter) seems to be based more on perceived gender/sexual presentation than any other factor. Particularly in Murshidabad, which is one of the few Muslim majority districts in India, a large section if not numerical majority of the people I have interacted with have been Muslim. Explicit caste and religious bias, or explicit reflections on potential differences of power due to caste and religion, are relatively rare in my experience of these communities, and hierarchies of intra-*gharana* rank, or of staff

position in CBOs and NGOs, are far more visibly evident (this may be partly due to the specific location of the ethnography in West Bengal, signaling the inculcation of at least a token secular public culture over three decades of communist rule in the state, which retains and reworks many hegemonic Hindu elements, such as the annual Durga Puja or mother goddess festival when organizers usually explicitly specify that their *pandals* or temporary shrines are open to all (*sharbojonin*) irrespective of caste and religion – this potentially Hindu-normative secularism is a topic that needs separate elaboration elsewhere). In this context, I use ‘lower middle’ and ‘lower class’ (corresponding to the Bengali terms *nimno-moddhobitto*, *moddhobitto*) as broad markers of income bracket and socio-economic position; this is not intended to dismiss caste or religion as frames of analysis, but to indicate overall positionality that may involve variable configurations of caste, religion, and economic status, which I try to contextually specify where relevant.¹⁰³

Politics

The political stances and arguments of the dissertation arise from certain specific collaborative experiences within the broader span of participant observation. Since 2009, I have been closely involved with several CBOs, particularly including Madhya Banglar Sangram and Dum Dum Swikriti Society, as a volunteer and advisor. This allowed me the privilege of being included as an ally in negotiating the tricky terrains of institutional identity politics. My privilege as an English speaker meant that I was often asked to fill out forms, check reports, and deliberate on how to represent CBO members as MSM, *kothi*, TG, etc. Such experiences constantly reminded me of the material and discursive

¹⁰³ On this issue, also see footnote 3 above.

hierarchies through which many community members must negotiate transnational terminologies of gender and sexuality. The political critique of vernacularization in this dissertation directly emerges from such collaborative experiences, and from the constant realization of the inequalities of privilege and access that marked our collaborations, on which I reflect more explicitly in the conclusion.

V. Chapter Outlines

While each chapter tells its own story, here I attempt to draw out some of their linkages and the broader continuous narrative that spans discrete chapters. The first three chapters form a closely interlinked narrative tracing the emergence of *hijra*, *kothi*, MSM and transgender categories as population groups and/or minority identities in eastern India. The consolidation of these terms as concepts and identities through collusions and translations between institutional and subcultural formations results in the vernacularization of subcultural terms as regionalized sub-categories of MSM or transgender, and the attendant elision of complex subject positions and practices that overlap or switch between emergent identitarian divides, even as translations may be slippery and permit usages that breach institutional discourses of identity.

The first and second chapters study the historicity and emergence of *hijra* and *kothi* as prominent categories of South Asian gender/sexual difference with reference to broader debates on identity, (post)colonialism and modernity in postcolonial and South Asian

historiography.¹⁰⁴ While the *hijra* has been a long-standing site of gender/sexual difference, the *kothi* is often seen as a recent emergence. These chapters suggest that the apparent contrast between the historical continuity of the *hijra* and the contemporary construction of the *kothi* masks deeper similarities in how both identities have emerged through collusions between (sub)cultural processes of community formation and governmental power.

The first chapter traces the bounded emergence of the *hijra* beyond the temporal rupture/continuity divide, taking cue from feminist and anthropological interrogations of the spatial global/local dichotomy.¹⁰⁵ The consolidation of the *hijra* and the standardization of a *hijra/non-hijra* divide sets the stage for the separation of sexual identities like *kothi* and MSM from gender identities like *hijra* and transgender, explored in the subsequent chapters. The emergence of a standardized cartographic division between *hijra* and *non-hijra* identities helps consolidate the hegemonic division of gender and sexual identities in India, in keeping with transnational tendencies.

¹⁰⁴ There has been a lack of comparably prominent vernacular categories for female-born persons in activist and academic literatures, owing to the greater visibility and focus on male-born queer subjects in activism, HIV-AIDS funding and the public sphere – a serious problem that deserves separate treatment beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁰⁵ Sivaramakrishnan, K. & Agrawal, A. 2003. ‘Regional Modernities in Stories and Practices of Development’ in Sivaramakrishnan, K. & Agrawal, A. (Ed.s) 2003. *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. “Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate”. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463.

The second chapter examines how the *kothi* is consolidated through translocal subcultural networks that collude with metropolitan institutions, and how it is simultaneously vernacularized as a regionalized sub-category of the transnational MSM rubric. Through this and the third chapter, I particularly examine the political economy of NGOs, CBOs, the state and transnational funders, and how they contribute to the establishment of umbrella terms like MSM and transgender which subsume ‘local variations’ and ‘regional’ identities, at the same time often eliding their translocally varied dynamics under standardized identitarian rubrics, which are translated through subcultural languages within institutional constraints set by the political economy of NGOs, CBOs and HIV-AIDS funding.

The third chapter concentrates specifically on the emergence of the transgender or TG category and the MSM-transgender divide, connecting the institutional propagation of identities through HIV-AIDS organizational networks with a more diffuse dissemination of biomedical discourses of transsexuality. The institutional MSM-TG schema and transsexual transition narratives are translated vis-à-vis the *hijra-kothi* and *intra-kothi* splits to enable the appearance of ‘transgender’ as a separate gender identity and a supra-regional ‘umbrella term’ that vernacularizes its ‘local variations’. The transgender-MSM divide tends to elide and exclude subject positions and practices between and beyond MSM/homosexual men and trans women such as those accommodated by *kothi-dhurani* formations, and reify the shifting boundaries between feminine and masculine subject

positions in these circles. Yet, there are also variant negotiations with ‘transgender’ identity and discourse that may be elided relative to the dominant version.

The fourth chapter shifts from the institutional topos of the previous chapters to study the emergence of urban middle class gay communities and identities in relation to relatively vernacularized categories like *kothi*. The chapter examines how middle class gay identity is often articulated in terms of a modernizing teleology, aspiring to a more masculinized version of gay identity, which tends to not only vernacularize *kothi* or *dhurani*, but to indeed render such subject positions abject. Yet, variant intersections and translations between gay and *kothi* foster temporalities of emergence that contradict the metrocentric and teleological narrative of gay identity formation. However, such variant articulations of gay (e.g. gay men who use *kothi-dhurani* languages and practices to create community, or *kothis* who adopt gay as an identification in a way that challenges its normative association with masculinization) may be rendered as private and localized with respect to the dominant narrative of a globalizing gay identity. Moreover, activists may also contain tensions and challenges by constructing a liberal, inclusive or ‘fluid’ version of gay identity that can apparently accommodate masculine, feminine subject positions and gender fluidity, but often without countering the position of unmarked masculinity as the norm and retaining male privilege within gay communities.

Together, these four chapters on identity and community formation critique the reification of identity in terms of too rigid boundaries, mapping the dynamic insider-

outsider boundaries of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* circles into fixed minority populations, but do not valorize ‘fluidity’ unconditionally. Some articulations of ‘gay’, for instance, demonstrate the dangers of subsuming gender difference into apparent liberal vision of gender/sexual equality and fluidity, eliding the power differentials entailed by social masculinity and femininity that are constantly negotiated by *kothi-hijra* circles. The problem may be endemic to overarching transnational identitarian schemas that try to encompass and vernacularize the translocally linked yet locally variable dynamics of community formation, marginality and discrimination, such that the shifting boundaries between insiders and outsiders in marginalized communities is inevitably rendered in reductive ways – either reified in terms of the MSM-TG split, or elided in ‘fluid’ versions of gay identity.

The fifth chapter charts the civic activism around the decriminalization of sexual behavior in India and critiques how it uses the figure of the *kothi* and *hijra* and their participation in public sex work for strategic ends. However the decriminalization itself largely uses the argument of private autonomy and re-criminalizes *kothi* and *hijra* publicity through the public-private split, tending to render forms of *kothi-hijra* resistance unintelligible within dominant terms of political or civic engagement. Ideals of citizenship and civility are translated vis-à-vis hierarchies of respectability within *kothi* and *hijra* communities to produce hegemony; however, as before, hegemonic translations and articulations remain slippery and variant political possibilities may emerge.

The conclusion reflects on the position of the 'fieldwork' and the resultant project itself within wider logics and processes of vernacularization. It particularly examines how participant observation pulls the ethnographer in contrary directions to the demands of the political economy of the metropolitan academy, which utilizes the ethnographer as a native informant and conduit for exploitative process of knowledge accretion and the creation of academic capital.

Chapter 1: An Epistemology of Collusion: *Hijra* and the Historical (Dis)continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India¹⁰⁶

Introduction

The historicity of gender/sexual identities in South Asia vis-à-vis their contemporary emergence within or through globalization becomes a particularly vexed question with regard to the distinction between the *hijra*, one of the best-known terms in the literature on gender/sexuality in South Asia, and related categories or identities like the *kothi*. In the ethnographic literature, the *hijra* usually denotes a socio-economically marginalized group of persons assigned male at birth who dress in women's clothes and live in intentional communities.¹⁰⁷ While the *hijra* is often studied as a historic figure of South Asian gender/sexual difference, the genealogy of *kothi* (or *koti*) as a category for lower class gender variant or 'feminine' same-sex desiring male-assigned persons has sharply divided activists and scholars. Even as the first 'gay' groups were emerging in metro cities, the *kothi* gained visibility within the emerging institutional movement for LGBT rights in the late 1990s, and was advocated by some activists as a more culturally authentic identity than the putatively westernized 'gay' used by elite English-speaking

¹⁰⁶ An earlier version of this chapter was published as Dutta, A. 2012. 'An Epistemology of Collusion: *Hijras*, *Kothis* and the Historical (Dis)continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India', *Gender & History* 24 (3): 825-49.

¹⁰⁷ Cohen, L. 1995. 'The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics', in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 276-304; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 2-16.

Indians.¹⁰⁸ Critiquing this indigenist argument, several activist and scholars locate the emergence of the *kothi* category and identity as a relatively recent phenomenon linked to the rise of Indian activism for the sexual health and rights of sexual minorities, situated within the interlinked globalizing expansion of GLBT rights activism and HIV-AIDS prevention funding.¹⁰⁹ Lawrence Cohen argues that *kothis* ‘emerged in cities like Mumbai as a new social fact’, distinct from previous more localized usages of the term, and parallel to the growth of funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associated communities.¹¹⁰ Akshay Khanna adds, ‘although many stories may be told about the term, the particular *kothi* referenced by the HIV-AIDS industry is in some sense a creation of the industry itself’.¹¹¹¹¹² The emphasis on the involvement of institutional networks in making *kothi* into a contemporary gender/sexual identity, disjunct from previous usages of the term, suggests that here HIV-AIDS activism and (more broadly) a metropole-led gender/sexual globalization takes on the role of the determinant in the sense of the overarching or governing logic, similar to the role of national capitalism in Jackson’s theorization of LGBT identity formation.

¹⁰⁸ Khan, S. 2000. ‘Males Who Have Sex With Males in South Asia: A Kothi Framework’, *Pukaar* 31.

¹⁰⁹ For example, see Cohen, K. 2005. ‘The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification’, in Vincenne Adams and Stacy L. Pigg (eds), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 269-303.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 293.

¹¹¹ Khanna, ‘Taming of the Shrewd *Meyeli Chhele*’, p. 49.

¹¹² Boyce, P. 2007. ‘Conceiving Kothis: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India and the Cultural Subject of HIV Prevention’, *Medical Anthropology*, 26 (2007), pp. 175-203, see esp. pp. 181-2; Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd *Meyeli Chhele*: A Political Economy of Development’s Sexual Subject’, *Development* 52 (2009), pp. 43-51, see esp. pp. 49-50.

In contrast to the controversial indigeneity of the *kothi*, the *hijra* has often functioned as a quintessential marker of South Asian gender/sexual difference. The *hijra* is often studied as a community and identity with a relatively continuous historical trajectory, with pre-colonial records stretching back to at least the seventeenth century.¹¹³ The colonial regime defined the *hijra* as the Indian equivalent of the broader pejorative category of ‘eunuchs’ and attempted to describe, classify and control them, echoing British attitudes to other gender/sexual practices like widow-burning and child marriage that were made to stand for the debased nature of Indian society.¹¹⁴ As colonial depictions were superseded in the twentieth century, the *hijra* was reclaimed as a prominent non-western ‘third gender’ or transgender group resisting the western schema of sexual dimorphism.¹¹⁵ Recent ethnographies by Lawrence Cohen and Gayatri Reddy critique earlier pathologizing or essentializing constructions of the *hijra*, describing the *hijra* as a complex identity of marginalized male-assigned (or rarely intersex) persons who dress as women, may identify as a third gender, and combine their kinship-based social organization with Islamic and Hindu religious practices.¹¹⁶ *Hijras* may undergo castration and penectomy, which confers higher status within intra-community hierarchies, and

¹¹³ Reddy, G. 2005. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 9.

¹¹⁴ For an overview of colonial attitudes to the Hijra, see Preston, L. 1987. ‘A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 21 (1987), pp. 371-387.

¹¹⁵ For Hijras as a ‘third sex’ or ‘third gender’, see Nanda, S. 1990. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990); Herdt, G. 1994. *Third Sex, Third Gender*. New York: Zone Books.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, L. 1995. ‘The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics’, in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 276-304; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 2-16.

claim auspiciousness to undertake ritual blessing for money and gifts during occasions such as childbirth in middle class families.¹¹⁷

Significantly, the ethnographies of Kira Hall and Gayatri Reddy situate the *kothi*, too, within this more historically continuous (sub)cultural formation as a gender variant community related to *hijras* though not organized into hierarchized clans, in marked contrast to the emphasis on institutionally mediated emergence of the category in Cohen, Boyce and Khanna.¹¹⁸ Both *hijra* and *kothi* may be thus positioned within a more continuous history relative to HIV-AIDS interventions and LGBT rights-based mobilizations. Though Reddy examines hybridizing interactions between *hijra/kothi* cartographies of gender/sexual difference and GLBT discourses and critiques the outmoded tradition-modernity binary, some of the more hidden features of that now-unfashionable dichotomy nevertheless come through in the epistemological assumptions and methodologies evidenced in the aforementioned literatures. While one strain of ethnography examines the role of globalizing institutions in *kothi* emergence, the ethnographic narration of *hijra-kothi* socio-religious norms in other studies typically situates the formation of *hijra* and *kothi* as categories or identities separate from or outside of the institutionally mediated emergence of GLBT identities, though *hijra* and *kothi* groups may respond to such institutionalization *a posteriori*. Thus, differing

¹¹⁷ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ Hall, K. 2005. 'Intertextual Sexuality: Parodies of Class, Identity, and Desire in Liminal Delhi', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15 (2005), pp. 125-144; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45-6.

epistemological priorities and sites of inquiry result in diverging suggestions about the historical ontology of South Asian gender/sexual identities.

Rupture and Continuity: The New Homosexual and the Old Transgender

These dichotomous tendencies can be placed within a broader trend in the literatures on gender and sexual identities in Asia. As Jackson insightfully notes, (trans)gender identities have tended to be seen as more ancient and historically continuous, whereas sexual identities such as gay and lesbian (and more broadly, the gender/sexuality split and the concept of homosexuality as personhood) are located as emergences that constitute and symbolize queer modernity as a historical rupture (Jackson summarizes a whole range of literature to demonstrate this tendency).¹¹⁹ In the Indian context too, the *hijra* as a gendered identity appears as relatively continuous with pre-colonial gender difference, whereas *kothi* is positioned ambivalently vis-à-vis older *hijra* formations and the modern history of homosexuality. The focus on the role of postcolonial institutional networks (NGOs, donors and the state) in the emergence of the *kothi* as a category of same-sex desiring males in Cohen, Boyce and Khanna's ethnographies recalls Foucault's widely influential theorization of the historical emergence of identity-based conceptions of sexuality within modern regimes of power and knowledge.¹²⁰ In contrast, studies that locate the cultural dynamics of *kothi* identification in relation to the (trans)gendered

¹¹⁹ Jackson, *Capitalism and Global Queering*, p. 360.

¹²⁰ Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 68-70.

difference of *hijras* – for example, Hall explicitly locates both *kothi* and *hijra* as ‘transgender’ identities – suggest a greater historical continuity in its formation.¹²¹

In contradistinction to this dichotomization of homosexual/transgender as rupture/continuity, Boellstorff and Jackson suggest that *both* gender (transgender) and sexual identities, and indeed the separation of gender and sexual identities, emerge within modern nationalism/capitalism (which for them is not reducible, as noted in the introduction, to western imperialism or hegemonic domination, but have pluralizing effects). The modernizing forces of nationalism and capitalism allow apparently ‘traditional’ transgender identities to appear as such, such that to speak of ‘tradition’ itself becomes anachronistic:

‘(I)t appears that male transvestites in Southeast Asia are not legacies of prior “traditions.” Rather the available evidence suggests that male transvestites emerged as “commodified transgender” subject positions only in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth.’ (Boellstorff 2008: 192)

‘Future historical research will need to abandon the mistaken association of transgenderism with precapitalist residues of tradition and instead trace how the market has provided a space for the modern Filipino bakla, Thai kathoey, Indonesian waria, and other transgender identities beyond the West to form around the commodification of modern norms of feminine beauty.’ (Jackson 2009: 360).¹²²

¹²¹ Kira Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’, pp. 125-144; Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45-6.

¹²² Boellstorff, *Coincidence of Desires*, 192; Jackson, *Capitalism and Global Queering*, 360.

Here, the historical rupture caused by modernity/capitalism/nationalism (etc.) becomes even more all-encompassing as informing the emergence of *both* (trans)gender and sexual identities (furthermore, there is an uncomfortable dismissal of ‘legacies of prior “traditions”’ (Boellstorff) and ‘precapitalist residues of tradition’ (Jackson), and almost a celebration of the space of the market).¹²³ However, literature that takes a more localized focus on *hijra/kothi* communities (such as Reddy, Hall and Nanda) retains an emphasis on what Reddy terms ‘local moral worlds’ of gender/sexual and caste/class norms and differences, reiterating the epistemological connections between ethnography and the local, and between temporal continuity and the spatial localization of traditions.

This chapter will attempt to imagine a different history of the *hijra* that goes beyond the temporal rupture/continuity divide. I will suggest that the apparent historical precedence and relative continuity of the *hijra* as compared with *kothi* emergence masks how the category emerges in its contemporary form through structural collusions between (sub)cultural processes of community formation (particularly *hijra* clans or *gharanas*) and governmental power.¹²⁴ Its emergence parallels and is related to the emergence of the *kothi*, which will be traced in the next chapter. By charting historical and ongoing

¹²³ At the cost of potentially reverting to a narrow version of identity politics, one could perhaps argue that it is not entirely coincidental that these theorists of difference, even as they denounce western dominance and homogeneity, remain metropolitan academics (and white gay men), an epistemological advantage that is arguably not sufficiently interrogated at least in these moments of their work.

¹²⁴ I refer here to the Foucauldian concept of governmentality and the ‘art of government’; see Foucault, M. 1991. ‘Governmentality’ in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 87-104.

convergences between subcultural logics of community formation and the emergence of minority identities within post/colonial governmentality, I hope to go beyond the historicist paradigm of colonial/postcolonial rupture or historical continuity, extending feminist and anthropological interrogations of the spatial dichotomy between local/regional cultures and transnational or globalizing formations.¹²⁵

Drawing upon colonial ethnology, postcolonial ethnographies and my own ethnographic fieldwork in India, I will argue that there have been locally variegated, yet translocally connected, formations of gender/sexual variance of uncertain provenance that are networked across West Bengal and adjoining regions of South Asia, with different degrees of distinction or overlap between *hijra* clans and lesser-known categories of male-born gender variance such as *dhurani* and *kothi*.¹²⁶ I describe how this variegated terrain of gender/sexual variance might be increasingly consolidated into a more standardized identitarian rubric, where the *hijra* emerges as a bounded identity clearly distinct from non-*hijra* communities, through collusions between the self-representation of (sub)cultural networks or communities such as the *hijra* clans and (post)colonial cartographies of identity, ranging from colonial ethnological compendia in the 19th century to contemporary representations by the media and NGO activists. Such structural collusions between (sub)cultural and institutional logics of identity formation attempt to

¹²⁵ Sivaramakrishnan, K. & Agrawal, A. 2003. 'Regional Modernities in Stories and Practices of Development' in Sivaramakrishnan, K. & Agrawal, A. (Ed.s) 2003. *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India*. Stanford University Press: Stanford; Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. "Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate". *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463.

¹²⁶ See 'method' section in introduction.

translocally standardize the distinction between *hijra* and non-*hijra* identities, constructing emergent normative identitarian divisions that might circumscribe lived practices. While this process attempts to standardize *hijra* and non-*hijra* (*kothi*, MSM) categories within official rubrics of identity authorized by the state and trans/national activist networks, it elides and/or vernacularizes discursive usages that overlap between *hijra* and other categories like *dhurani* and *kothi*. Thus, the spatial consolidation of *hijra* vs. non-*hijra* creates significant temporal discontinuities between older forms of gender/sexual variance and emerging identitarian formations in India, but this rupture itself may be instituted in collusion with older communities and subcultures, at least in the case of *hijra* and *kothi* identity formation.

By ‘collusion’, I suggest both intentional linkages (such as representations to the state or media by *hijra* community members) and transformative interactions that go beyond intentionality or agendas – processes ‘collude’ or play together to unpredictable effect, and also deceive by their appearance, such that the separate appearance of *hijra* and *kothi* is deceptive. In analytical terms, ‘collusion’ may encompass various forms of articulation in the Althusserian sense, where different logics (governmental and sub/cultural) are ‘articulated’ together rather than acting as overarching or governing logics.¹²⁷ While ‘articulation’ suggests the linkage between logics that cannot be reduced to a single temporality of historicity, collusion more specifically suggests how articulations may tend *towards* certain effects, both intended and not – in this case the emergence of the

¹²⁷ Althusser, L. 1970. The errors of classical economics. In Althusser, L. & Balibar, E. *Reading capital* (B. Brewster, trans.). London: New Left Books. (Original work published 1965).

hijra and the attendant *hijra-non-hijra* divide. I shall be particularly concerned with elucidating the articulation between constructions of respectability, gendered authenticity, space and territoriality by *hijra* clans (or *gharanas*) and governmental constructions of a bounded minority identity.

A study of these emergences could also illuminate broader debates in postcolonial and subaltern studies on the historical emergence of identity formations in South Asia vis-à-vis governmental institutions of colonial and postcolonial modernity. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's influential theorization of the role of print capitalism and colonial institutions such as the census in forging national and ethnic identities, scholars like Sudipta Kaviraj and Arjun Appadurai postulate a sharp transition from ambiguously-bounded forms of social difference to more rigidly defined identities through colonial and postcolonial institutions of power.¹²⁸ Kaviraj has argued that pre-modern collectivities were 'not enumerated' and had 'fuzzy boundaries', while, as Appadurai states, '[colonial] enumerative strategies helped to ignite communitarian and nationalist identities'.¹²⁹

Nicholas Dirks argues that colonial administration systematized 'India's diverse forms of

¹²⁸ For such arguments see Kaviraj, S. 1992. 'The Imaginary Institution of India' in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, vol. 7. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-39; Arjun Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in Peter van der Veer and Carol Breckenridge (eds), *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 314-39; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Modernity and Ethnicity in India: A History for the Present', *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (1995), pp. 3373-3380; Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Partha Chatterjee, 'Community in the East', *Economic & Political Weekly* 33 (1998), pp. 277-82.

¹²⁹ Kaviraj, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', p. 26; Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', p. 315.

social identity' into the overarching framework of caste.¹³⁰ Others like C.A. Bayly and Sumit Guha argue for a more continuous trajectory of identity formation from pre-colonial to modern collectivities that was not radically ruptured by (post)colonial institutions.¹³¹ Sumit Guha critiques Anderson, Appadurai and Kaviraj for overemphasizing the role of (post)colonial governmental power and neglecting to study how seemingly traditional collectives such as religious communities dynamically reproduce themselves from pre-colonial to modern periods.¹³² He argues that communities demonstrate historical agency and evolve without direct input from (post)colonial governmental technologies.¹³³ However, this overview is not to reduce this complex literature into a static dichotomy between historical continuity and postcolonial rupture. Kaviraj's later work theorizes how pre-colonial conditions influence postcolonial social formations, although he does not demonstrate this for specific identities.¹³⁴ Partha Chatterjee's recent work charts mutual interactions between communitarian or kinship-based collectives and postcolonial governmental institutions, particularly focusing on the formation of populations by non-elite groups that have restricted access to citizenship or

¹³⁰ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 26.

¹³¹ See Bayly, C. A. 1994. 'Returning the British to South Asian History: The Limits of Colonial Hegemony', *South Asia* 27 (1994), pp. 1-25; Sumit Guha, 'The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India c. 1600-1990', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003), pp. 148-67; Sumit Guha and Michael Anderson (eds), *Changing Concepts of Rights and Justice in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Radhika Singha, 'Civil Authority and Due Process: Colonial Criminal Justice in the Banaras Zamindari, 1781-1795' in Michael Anderson and Sumit Guha (eds), *Changing Concepts of Rights and Justice in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 30-81.

¹³² Guha, 'The Politics of Identity', pp. 149-50.

¹³³ Guha, 'The Politics of Identity', pp. 149-50.

¹³⁴ Kaviraj, S. 2005. 'Outline of a revisionist theory of modernity', *Journal of European Sociology* 46 (2005), pp. 497-526.

civil society.¹³⁵ While arguing that ‘classificatory criteria used by colonial governmental regimes have continued into the postcolonial era’ and shape the ‘dominant criteria for identifying communities’, Chatterjee also notes the historical agency of communities that use putatively ‘traditional’ logics of kinship to represent themselves to governmental power.¹³⁶

Reading Guha and Bayly in conjunction with rather than opposition to Kaviraj and Chatterjee, I will explore the interaction between the self-reproduction of communities and postcolonial institutions in the case of gender/sexual identities, and trace how continuities between historical logics of community formation and postcolonial governmental processes might underlie profound shifts in identity formation for both *hijra* and *kothi* categories. Through this and the next chapter, I will suggest that both *hijra* and *kothi* may be evolving through interrelated and active epistemological projects of naming, describing and classifying gender/sexual identities, through which their definitional boundaries become more standardized in relation to each other. As I describe, the consolidation and definition of *hijra* in terms of gender variance as a (trans)gender identity enables and parallels the separation of *kothi*, defined with reference to (homo)sexual behavior as a sub-section of MSM, thus enabling an increasing separation between gender and sexual identities that, as noted by scholars like Valentine, Jackson and Altman, distinctively marks contemporary discourses of gender/sexuality.¹³⁷ Moving

¹³⁵ Chatterjee, P. 2011. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹³⁶ Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, pp. 199-203.

¹³⁷ Jackson, ‘Capitalism and Global Queering’, p. 360.

beyond the rupture-continuity paradigm thus may enable an epistemological ‘creation of infrastructure’ In Spivak’s terms to better understand the role of translocal formations that cannot be encompassed either by capital or nation, while informing and being informed by both.¹³⁸

Methodologically, the investigation of *hijra* emergence as seemingly consolidated (bounded and distinct) identities necessitates an epistemological practice that bridges multiple modes and sites of enquiry to illuminate the collusion of multiple governmental and subcultural processes of identity formation, spanning post/colonial cartographies of identity and the standardisation of pre-existing subcultural demarcations. To that end, this chapter will study the consolidation of the *hijra* by bridging archival study, oral histories and ethnography, particularly focused on several community-based organizations, NGOs and associated community networks eastern India since 2007.¹³⁹ It will connect relatively well-documented information – colonial archives, the postcolonial history of organizational activism – with oral histories and ethnographic notes to fill in the nebulous histories of non-institutional networks. The first section of the chapter examines British colonial censuses and ethnology as an early attempt to translocally consolidate the *hijra* as an ‘eunuch’ group. Subsequent sections focus on the contemporary period, examining the attempted standardization of the *hijra* and non-*hijra* distinction in relation to institutional projects of gender/sexual rights and HIV-AIDS prevention. More broadly,

¹³⁸ Regarding Spivak’s call to ‘build infrastructure’, see Spivak, G. C., ‘More Thoughts on Cultural Translation’, *Transversal* 4:8 (2008), Available at <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en>> (Accessed January 9, 2013).

¹³⁹ See section on ‘method’ in the introduction.

the chapter suggests that the analysis of collusions between vernacular(ized) subcultural formations and governmental discourses of identity helps to illuminate the complex imbrications of historical continuity and postcolonial emergence in modern South Asia, and to explain the historical involvement of non-elite communities in the emergence of normative rubrics of gender/sexual identity.

I. Consolidating *hijra* as eunuch: Colonial epistemologies of truth

As noted by Lawrence Preston, British observations of groups they called ‘eunuchs’ began roughly in the late eighteenth century, and are scattered within the correspondence from contingents of the British East India Company in the early phase of mercantile colonialism.¹⁴⁰ Most accounts describe ‘eunuchs’ as malformed and repulsive.¹⁴¹ Preston chronicles British interactions with the community known as *hijra* (or *hijda*) in western India as one of the first colonial encounters with ‘eunuchs’. The *hijras* of western India enjoyed hereditary rights such as revenue shares under the indigenous Maratha regime. As the British gradually took over Maratha territories from 1817 onward, these rights were curtailed, and this community was increasingly forced into the expanding urban underworld of low caste workers, prostitutes and beggars.¹⁴² ‘Eunuchs’ were

¹⁴⁰ Preston, L. 1987. ‘A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 21 (1987), pp. 371-87.

¹⁴¹ For example, see Forbes, J. 1834. *Oriental Memoirs* (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), pp. 359-60; John Warden, ‘On the Customs of Gosawees or Gosaeens’, Appendix B to Arthur Steele, *Summary of the Law and Custom of Hindoo Castes within the Dekhun Provinces Subject to the Presidency of Bombay* (Bombay: Government of Bombay, 1827), pp. 67-8.

¹⁴² Preston, ‘A Right to Exist’, pp. 385-87.

subsequently criminalized under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a law that was revoked in 1952 after independence.¹⁴³ In the original act, ‘eunuch’ could refer both to ‘any person dressed or ornamented like a woman’ and anyone who ‘upon medical inspection appeared to be impotent’, encompassing both gendered performance and physiology.¹⁴⁴

British administrators and officers started compiling ethnological compendia on different regions of British India after the inauguration of monarchical rule in 1858. The first census was undertaken between 1868 and 1872, and thereafter at ten-year intervals. In this literature, one notices several diverging names and descriptions for groups described as ‘eunuchs’, including differences in physiological characteristics and group initiation rites. While the colonial literature seems to have discovered ‘*hijra*’ as one of the first known Indian terms for ‘eunuch’, it references other regional names and fails to suggest a uniform community across the diverse systems of rule in early colonial India. *Hijra* appears as a distinct caste in the first detailed list of castes and tribes compiled by Kitts in 1885, based on the census of 1881.¹⁴⁵ Subsequent compendia list different names – *khoja*, *pavaya*, *khasua*, *mukhanas* – but they are often listed as synonymous with or redirected from ‘*hijra*’, thus helping to establish *hijra* as the consolidated label for groups that appear to be regionally diverse, notwithstanding their similarities.¹⁴⁶ *Hijra* seems to

¹⁴³ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁴ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁵ Kitts, E. J. 1885. *A Compendium of the Castes and Tribes Found in India*. Bombay: Education Society Press.

¹⁴⁶ For ethnological compendia with entries on ‘*hijra*’, see Crooke, W. 1896. *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. 2. Calcutta: Government of India, pp. 495-6; Risley, R. 1891. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 2. Calcutta: Government of India, pp. 319-20; Thurston, E. 1909. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 3. Madras: Government of

be a word in Hindi and Urdu,¹⁴⁷ languages that assumed national character through the colonial period as opposed to more ‘regional’ languages like Marathi, Tamil or Bengali, which might explain its use as the most common signifier for ‘eunuchs’ in the colonial archive.

The ethnological compendia following the censuses of 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 are commonly concerned with investigating the physiological characteristics of eunuchs but diverge in their descriptions. As Reddy notes, there is an overarching epistemological concern with discovering the physiological truth of eunuch bodies.¹⁴⁸ Drawing upon ‘native informant’ accounts and anecdotal evidence, some reports make the membership of ‘eunuch’ groups contingent upon congenital deformation,¹⁴⁹ some upon ‘natural’ impotence,¹⁵⁰ and others upon ritualistic initiation through castration and penectomy.¹⁵¹ Moreover, several reports distinguish between ‘natural’ eunuchs and those ‘artificially’ made into eunuchs through castration, designated by different names. For example, in Thurston’s *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), the entry marked *hijra* is redirected to an entry on the *khoja*, which includes a description of the *hijra* – *khojas* are described as ‘artificial’ castrated eunuchs employed by wealthy nobility, whereas *hijras*

Madras, pp. 288-9; Russell, R. V. 1916. *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. 3. London: Macmillan, p. 206-7; Enthoven, R. E. 1922. *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Government of India, 1922), p. 226-7.

¹⁴⁷ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁹ Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 495.

¹⁵⁰ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, p. 292; Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, p. 226.

¹⁵¹ Russell, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, pp. 206-7; Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, p. 226.

are ‘natural’ eunuchs who are born impotent, forming their own groups with specific religious practices.¹⁵² Contradictorily, in Russell’s *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916), *khasuas* are deemed to be ‘natural’ eunuchs with congenital deformation, whereas *hijras* are ‘artificial’, ‘reduced to the like condition through amputation’.¹⁵³

Thus, the precise relation between different localized terms, vernacularized vis-à-vis the construct of the ‘eunuch’, is already a point of contention. As Hall states, ‘Although the term *koti* is largely absent ... a significant number of colonialist texts mention groups that resemble today’s *kotis* as a point of contrast [to] the supposedly ‘more authentic’ *hijra* community. A tension between the real eunuch and its artificial shadow thus governs the colonialist record’.¹⁵⁴ However, I will note that significantly, *hijras* were not always named as the ‘more authentic’ or ‘real eunuch’ community, as seen in Russell above. Rather, the ethnological literature was contradictory in its terminological classification, unable to fix a true eunuch body or coherent ‘authentic’ category such as *hijra*.

As the census stopped enumerating castes altogether after independence, it does not appear that the postcolonial state attempted to standardize these contradictory definitions of the *hijra*. However, the colonial ethnological literature did seem to standardize the usage of *hijra* (rather than *khoja*, *khasua*, etc.) as the most common name for ‘eunuch’ groups in subsequent literature. The question of who exactly constituted these groups

¹⁵² Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, pp. 288-290.

¹⁵³ Russell, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, p. 206.

¹⁵⁴ Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’, p. 128.

remained a point of contention in some twentieth century ethnographic literature. As noted by Cohen, an exchange between the anthropologists George Carstairs and Morris Opler in *American Ethnologist* between 1957 and 1960 agreed that *hijras* were castrated males, but debated whether they were prostitutes, or blessed newborn children in their role as ritual devotees of a mother goddess, Bahuchara Mata.¹⁵⁵ Here, the point of contention was not physiology but rather the real occupation of *hijras*.

II. Postcolonial ethnography: an intersectional epistemology of hijras

Recent ethnography critiques older epistemological concerns with the physiological essence or true occupation of *hijras*, counteracting essentializing moves to locate ‘real’ or ‘natural’ eunuchs. Rather, scholars have focused on the intersection of social, religious and kinship practices through which *hijras* constitute themselves, including religious rituals (Islam and goddess-worship) and kinship structures such as hierarchized lineages comprising tiered ranks of *gurus* (heads) and *chelas* (disciples). Based on his ethnographic research in the north Indian city of Varanasi, Cohen constructs a working definition of the *hijra*, including community membership within hierarchized lineages, comprising the *hijra guru* and her initiated disciples as its smallest unit: ‘*hijras* are organized into households with a *hijra guru* as head, into territories delimiting where each household can dance and demand money from merchants, and into larger regional and supraregional associations or *pancayats* linking them to other cities across South

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, ‘The Pleasures of Castration’, p. 284.

Asia'.¹⁵⁶ Reddy's ethnography on *hijra* groups in the southern city of Hyderabad corroborates this description and further specifies that 'there are seven hijra houses or "lineages" in India', to which all individual households belong.¹⁵⁷ Thus, in Reddy's ethnography, while the community in Hyderabad identifies through the term *kojja* when speaking in the regional language of Telegu, they also represent themselves as part of the larger *hijra* community as members of *hijra* lineages that are spread nationwide.

While describing *hijra* communities, Reddy and Cohen counteract essentialized definitions of *hijras*, noting that members of *hijra* households may or may not be castrated and may pursue a variety of occupations including ritual blessing and sex work.¹⁵⁸ However, while describing occasional transitions or overlaps between *hijra* and other categories, even this intersectional epistemology of the *hijra* has largely focused on household- or lineage-based *hijras* as evidenced in the cited excerpts from Cohen and Reddy, potentially leading to an inadvertently restrictive description that emphasizes lineage-based kinship.

Moreover, while counteracting essentialized hierarchies between 'true'/'natural' and 'artificial' eunuchs, this literature evidences significant differences on the relation between the *hijra* category and other vernacular terms for male-born gender variance, among which the *kothi* has emerged since the late 1990s as the most salient 'sexual minority'. In Reddy's ethnography, *kothi* is a generic label for non-masculine males used

¹⁵⁶ Cohen, 'The Pleasures of Castration', p. 276.

¹⁵⁷ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁸ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45-56; Cohen, 'The Pleasures of Castration', p. 284.

by *hijras* in Hyderabad, encompassing both *hijra* and non-*hijra* sections, with an internal cartography separating *hijras* (*catla kothis*) with other *kothi* sub-groups like *kada-catla kothis* (*kothis* in male attire).¹⁵⁹ In Reddy's meticulous and lovingly detailed ethnography, individuals often shift between these sub-sections and have contextually fluid identities (a fluidity that they sometimes disavow); however such fluidity is more on the level of *personal* identity and the cartography itself remains relatively stable (in her words, 'Shifting contexts, fluid identities'). On the other hand, *kothi* does not occur as an umbrella category in Hall's ethnography in Delhi, but signifies a non-*hijra* transgender group who may parody *hijra* practices but do not self-identify as *hijra*, even though some transition to being *hijra*.¹⁶⁰ In Cohen's 1995 ethnography in Varanasi, *hijras* are compared to groups called *jankhas*, with household affiliation and castration being important to the 'full adoption of *hijra* identity'.¹⁶¹ Cohen argues that *jankhas* are not 'inauthentic' or 'incomplete' *hijras* but a distinct group linked more to low-caste burlesque than *hijra* occupations, though some may also occasionally refer to each other as *hijra*.¹⁶² Later revisiting this work, Cohen notes that *kothi* was only marginally known as a term in Varanasi.¹⁶³

III. Translocal consolidations: relating *hijra* and *kothi* emergence

Building upon the implications of colonial ethnology as well postcolonial ethnography, the following sections of this chapter will develop an argument that is implied but not

¹⁵⁹ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 46.

¹⁶⁰ Hall, 'Intertextual Sexuality', p. 129.

¹⁶¹ Cohen, 'The Pleasures of Castration', p. 283.

¹⁶² Cohen, 'The Pleasures of Castration', pp. 277, 287.

¹⁶³ Cohen, 'The *Kothi* Wars', p. 274.

ethnographically elaborated in the existing literature: there are locally varied vernacular cartographies evidencing varying degrees of overlap or distinction between *hijra* and other categories. Through this and the next chapter, I will suggest that the translocal consolidation of *hijra* and *kothi* as increasingly standardised and distinct identities are *interrelated* processes, both connected to postcolonial governmentality, although the collusion of *hijra* identification with governmental power has not been emphasized in the literature.

In contrast to the focus on *hijras* within lineages (or *gharanas*) in the literature, the subsequent sections will explore both non-*gharana* and *gharana* claims to *hijra* identity, showing how some of the most occupationally visible *hijras* are not ‘authentic’ by the norms of lineage-based kinship, and evidence both transition from and overlap with other categories. Such categorical overlaps seem to have an indefinite historical provenance, and might be a structural feature of the uneven territorial control of *hijra gharanas*. But over the last two decades, *gharana*-based *hijras* have actively undertaken to define ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ *hijras* as a minority in collusion with NGOs and the media, around the same time when NGOs started defining MSM and *kothi* as vulnerable groups. This attempted construction of the *hijra* as a bounded lineage-based group increasingly separates *hijra* from non-*hijra* (*kothi*, MSM) identities in NGO, state and media discourses in a way that colonial ethnology was unable to standardize, such that who can identify as *hijra* becomes more circumscribed at the level of official discourse, and potentially, lived reality. Meanwhile, as described in the next chapter, various subcultural

terms for gender variance related to *hijra*, like *dhurani* and *dhunuri* in eastern India, are increasingly translocally consolidated as *kothi*, which becomes a distinct non-*hijra* identity under the MSM rubric. In the subsequent sections, I will describe the institutional-subcultural collusions underlying the translocal standardization of the *hijra* category with reference to field notes and oral histories that I have gathered as a participant observer with communities and organizations at multiple sites within the eastern Indian state of West Bengal.

IV. *Dhurani, dhunuri, kothi, hijra*: translocal subcultures in West Bengal

My own entry into the aforementioned networks was mediated through non-governmental and community-based organizations. The Counsel Club (1993), one of the first successful GLBT organizations in Kolkata that we encountered in Ranajay's story, facilitated the formation of CBOs in smaller towns during the early 2000s, aided by increasing HIV-AIDS funding for 'sexual minorities' from the Indian state and foreign donors (as will be detailed in the next chapter).¹⁶⁴ Sarswata, an activist associated with Counsel Club in Kolkata, helped found two CBOs whose members I have acquainted and worked with: Dum Dum Swikriti Society in the northern Kolkata suburbs and the adjacent Nadia district, and further north, Madhya Banglar Sangram in the district of Murshidabad. Such CBOs have served to bridge city-based activists with lower class and non-metropolitan communities or networks of gender/sexually variant people. As Sarswata described in one of our conversations, a few Kolkata activists had prior

¹⁶⁴ Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100.

informal contacts with lower class networks and communities: ‘In the mid-90s, some people joined Counsel Club through whom it could extend its reach to underprivileged communities’. One of these associates was Ranajay, who played an important role in introducing relatively less exposed middle class activists like Sarswata to ‘underprivileged communities’, particularly in Kolkata and Nadia.

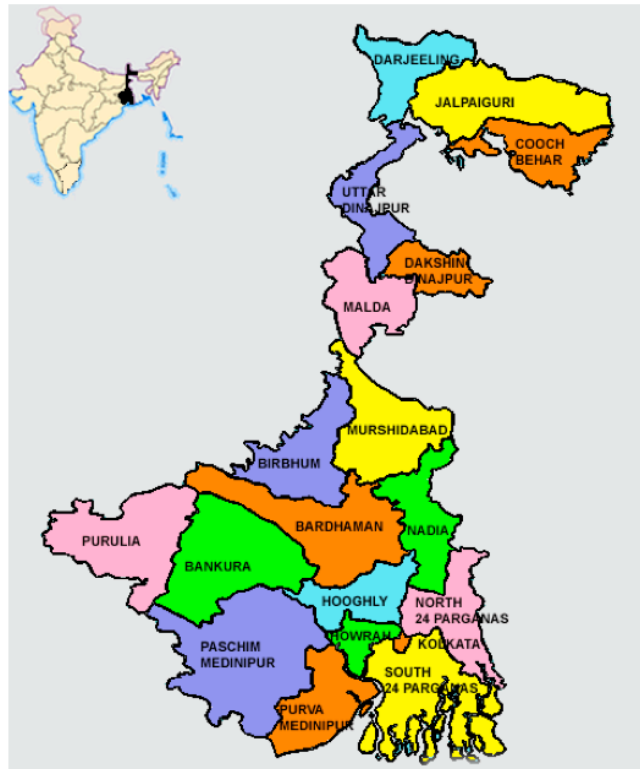


Fig. 1. City of Kolkata, Nadia district, and Murshidabad district, West Bengal, India.¹⁶⁵

Of these communities, *hijra gharanas*, or hierarchized lineage-based clans, seem to have been the best organized. In my conversations with *hijras* as well as NGO activists, I was told that there are three main *gharanas* in West Bengal – Shyambajari, Mechhua and

¹⁶⁵ ‘Map of West Bengal and Districts’, 2011. Kolkata: Deep Prakashani.

Gunghoria or Gunghor – putatively descended from a single lineage. Each of these lineages is organized into tiered ranks of *guru-ma* (mother *gurus*) and *chelas* (disciples) and divided into households. Senior *gurus* serve as heads of independent households with their *chelas*, who might serve as second-tier *gurus* to *nati-chelas* (*chelas* of *chelas*), and so on. Each household has its designated territory where *chelas* undertake *hijra* occupations. Typically, junior *chelas* or *nati-chelas* undertake the ritualized occupation of *badhai* in their territory – proffering blessings in return for money and gifts at houses with newborn children, and sometimes, visiting local shops for donations as well. Some *chelas* also participate in the more secretive occupation of sex work with mainstream men, which is seen as more disreputable by *gharana* norms relative to the asexual religiosity of *badhai*.¹⁶⁶ While *hijre* and *hijra* are the commonly used terms for such transvestites in the Bengali language, *chhibri* (literally, castrated and penectomized) is also used synonymously in intra-community contexts, though many junior *chelas* are *akua* (not castrated). There are also lower-middle to lower class networks of diverse gender/sexually marginalized people outside *gharana* households, who evidence varying degrees of public visibility, and complex relations of overlap or distinction with the *hijra* or *chhibri* category – such as people who sexually network (cruise) in public spaces, sex workers, and people who dress in women’s clothes to bless people for money in public spaces.

¹⁶⁶ On such hierarchies of respectability, also see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 56.

Entering the 'line': The South Kolkata Lakes

As an entry point into the aforementioned networks, we could start out by revisiting and continuing with Ranajay's story. Born in what he describes as a 'poor family', Ranajay lost his father early, and as he grew up, took on the heavily gendered responsibilities of the son in a family without a male figurehead. While still in high school, Ranajay had his first sexual experiences with a teacher who started out by flirting with him casually, exchanges that culminated in a furtive embrace that Ranajay describes, in English, as a 'beautiful pleasure'. This was his first inkling 'that I was different'. He fearfully – *bhoye bhoye* – confessed of his realization to a close school friend, Tapas, who, to his surprise, also professed to share his desire for men. Unlike Ranajay, though, Tapas also became increasingly visible as *meyeli* or 'effeminate' – 'he would even pluck his eyebrows and come to school!' Through Tapas, Ranajay made a few more friends in school with whom he could share his desires and experiences. But these few friends did not yet know the 'language'. That came later, during Ranajay's excursions to cruising sites such as rail station platforms, and of course, the south Kolkata lake area that he first visited around the March of 1988. There, he encountered specific terms of gender/sexual difference that were unknown in mainstream Bengali, such as *dhurani*, signifying 'feminine' males who often desire relatively 'masculine' men, known as *parikhs*. *Dhurani* could also refer more specifically to sex workers, being connected to the verb *dhurano* (to have sex) within the subcultural 'language'. Yet, it did not seem to be a consolidated gender/sexual identity in the way that *kothi* or *hijra* have been increasingly conceptualized. This is evidenced in Ranajay's narrative:

One evening, I heard a young boy (*chhele*) call out, ‘hey, this boy is a *dhurani*!’ I wanted to understand what the boy had said... I went back and asked, ‘what did you call me? What is *dhurani*?’ ‘Oh, those who take it in the mouth or the butt’. ‘But I don’t do that!’ I replied. ‘Well, you know, those who walk in a feminine way (*neche neche chole*), are a bit girlish (*meyeli*), like us’. ‘But I am not like that, I don’t do that either!’ So finally this person told me, ‘Well, anyone who loves to keep our company/gives us respect/care (*jarai amader khatir kore*) is *dhurani*!’

This exchange indicates the process of interpellation into the network and the concurrent mapping of insiders and outsiders through a loose reading of perceived difference – even though the mapping fails to be accurate in Ranajay’s case. However, the gendered line defining the *dhurani* (including both receptive sexual acts and ‘feminine’ embodiments) seems to have been extensible beyond strict identitarian boundaries, such that the network (or at least that subset of it comprising Ranajay’s friend circle) could include differently gendered persons bound by affective bonds of respect, care and company (‘anyone who gives *khatir*’ – which could be translated as both respect and care – ‘is *dhurani*’; *khatir kora* also translates as to entertain, or to keep the company of). Thus, despite his ‘masculine’ behavior and disavowal of sexual penetrability, Ranajay gained acceptance as a friend (rather than a *parikh*) within this network of ‘feminine’ persons, in part by learning their subcultural code – the *khaurir bhasha*, the language of trickery or play.¹⁶⁷ As noted in the introduction, he also encountered *hijras* outside his friend circle

¹⁶⁷ On similar languages/codes called *Farsi*, see Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’, p. 129.

who lay claim as originators and possessors of the ‘language’ – to them he identified himself as simply ‘of the line’, given his lack of overt effeminacy.

While Ranajay never dressed in feminine attire, even those of his acquaintance who did, would not necessarily present themselves in uniformly gendered ways. Bindiya, for example, is another old participant of the South Kolkata networks. From an even poorer background relative to Ranajay, she was born and brought up in various slum areas of the city. She began dressing in women’s clothes in the late 1990s and eventually joined a *Hijra gharana* in the 2000s. But, as she narrates with some pride, ‘I was an *arial tonna* (very masculine man) to begin with! All the *dhuranis* of the lake were mad about me!’ The mention of Bindiya often elicited strong responses from several people with whom I conversed about the lake networks. ‘She was not like us, you know’, said Nandini, a young *hijra* who started visiting the lakes in the late 90s, after Bindiya had taken to *satra* (feminine clothes). ‘She would dress up and entice the *parikhs* and then instead of getting fucked by them, she would fuck them (*tader diye dhurato na, tader dhurto*)’, she narrated in somewhat scandalized and disapproving tones. Bindiya, however, is unrepentant about her switching between gender/sexual roles – ‘when I would see a *kothi*, I would turn more *parikh*, when I would see a *parikh*, I would act more like a *kothi*’, she narrates with a mischievous smile. At present, however, Bindiya both identifies as *hijra* and as a (trans) woman: ‘I have become a total woman nowadays (*puro nari hoye gechhi*)’. Her trajectory of becoming-woman however does not preclude or disavow her earlier gender-switching and overlap with masculinity, unlike emergent transnational narratives of transgender

womanhood that emphasize an ontologically consistent femininity (as will be elaborated in the third chapter on the emergence of the transgender). The lake networks thus evidence a varying gendered constituency, as well as varying levels of acceptance of such gendered differences within the network. How did such differences vary between different communities/networks at different locations within West Bengal, and how did such tendencies feed into emerging terms of identification as currently understood, including *hijra*, *kothi* and MSM?

The Dhunuris and Hijras of Berhampore

To chart the translocal span as well as local variations of these subcultural networks and their ‘language’, it is insightful to compare and connect contrasting sites such as Kolkata, the metropolitan capital of West Bengal, with Berhampore in the Murshidabad district, a regionally important town and the administrative headquarter of the district, which like other similar smaller towns has served as a node of organizational expansion. Located about two hundred kilometers north of Kolkata, Berhampore is also situated in a historically significant area, as the Murshidabad region was the historical seat of the Nawabs (Islamic rulers) of Bengal, and served as one of the first centers of British colonial expansionism in India after the defeat of the Nawab Siraj ud Daula’s forces at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 (Plassey, the anglicized spelling of Palashi, is itself situated south of Berhampore in the neighboring district of Nadia). The exact genealogy of the subcultural networks in Berhampore and their relation to *hijra gharanas* prior to recent institutionalization is undocumented. However, over the years, I met two older

participants of these circles, Govinda and Shyam, who provided me with an account of the years of their youth during the late 1970s and 1980s, long before the local CBO Madhya Banglar Sangram ('Struggle of Mid-Bengal', henceforth Sangram) was established in 2006.

When I met him in 2009, Govinda did not immediately stand out as different from any other man that I might meet in Berhampore. Middle aged and unmarried, he lived alone in a sequestered section of his larger family house, and managed a business that supplied wholesale spices to markets. He started his narrative with the initial discovery of his desire for men through early sexual encounters, before the subsequent discovery of friends like him: 'At first, I knew that I was the only one, I thought only I would do such actions (*ei kaaj*)'. At the same time, he also experienced a gendered process of public demarcation, where young males perceived as effeminate or non-masculine would be targeted in public through terms like *meyeli*, *chhuri* (girlish), *magi* ('woman', here roughly 'sissy'), and even through names of Hindi film actresses:

People used to do a lot of *khitkal* (abuse/harassment) those days... they would look at me and say, see, a *magi* is going, or, see Helen is going, Madhubala is walking by! Earlier they used to say this more, now as the years have gone by, it happens less... now if I move to a new neighborhood, may be again they will start noticing and saying things!

However, in response to such demarcation and stigma, there also seemed to be a converse process in which older gender variant males would pick out younger or more newly

visible persons through their perceived behavior: ‘they would notice our gait and how we would walk (*haanta-chola*), and recognize us’. A loose network of trusted peers was thus established. Govinda fondly narrated his initiation into this network in a way that closely echoed Ranajay’s story. One day while bathing at the river Ganges, ‘someone called out to me – *Ayi chhuri, tor nang achhey? kota nang achhey?*’ (Roughly, ‘Hey girl, do you have husbands? how many husbands do you have?’) Initially startled, he soon identified the person who called him out as ‘someone like me’. ‘This is how I first became acquainted with them’, he explained. Similar to Ranajay’s narrative, we see the process of hailing insiders into the network through a reading of perceived non-masculine behavior. Jaydip, his new friend, interpellated Govinda both as non-masculine and as desirous of relatively masculine men (*nang* or husbands), even appropriating a term of abuse (*chhuri*, ‘girl’) as a recognition of their commonality. ‘After that day, I started going around town with Jaydip and our friends’, Govinda reminisced. ‘We would go to fairs, where we would find *parikhs*... we would also go to Lalbagh, there would be a lot of *bajar!* (bazaar, ‘marketing’ for men).’ (Lalbagh, about seven kilometers from central Berhampore, is the historical seat of the Bengal *nawabs* in the pre-colonial period). Similar to the South Kolkata lakes, the term *parikh* here designates relatively ‘masculine’ men who are both objects of desire and potential sexual partners.

The prevalence of such terms indicates that while the network developed through responses to immediate social demarcation and stigma, they also inherited an intra-community code or ‘language’ similar to the Kolkata networks. Govinda said, ‘We

picked up our language from the older ones among us'. Govinda's narrative presented a range of terms to describe their gender/sexual variance – *dhunuri*, *moga*, *chhuri*, *lavani* – all referring to a combination of (homo)sexual behavior and femininity/effeminacy. Of these, *dhunuri*, signifying 'feminine' males who desire men, seemed to be relatively the most common term. Only a few among Govinda's group had heard the term *kothi*, which gained greater linguistic prevalence among a younger generation after the formation of Sangram. Govinda called their language *dhunuri bhasha* and described it as '*amader bhasha*', 'our language'. He claimed its origin for his circle – 'this was our invention (*amader abishkar*)!' However, the use of common terms like *parikh* and the linguistic correspondence between *dhunuri* and the *dhurani* of the Kolkata cruising areas suggests the translocal span of the networks through which such terms would have disseminated.

Such translocality is also suggested by the presence of people from outside Berhampore in Govinda's friend circle. For instance, Shyam is one of the several sons of a relatively upper caste landowning family from a village near the town of Kandi, about twenty-five kilometers from Berhampore. While Shyam had frequented Berhampore with his family from his childhood onward, he was initiated into the 'line' through Govinda. Shyam describes himself as '*purono amoler*' – from an old or bygone period; someone who has been doing '*meyelipona*' (feminine/effeminate behavior) for a long time, and has played a lead role in expanding the network to the present generation. Shyam's narrative provides insights into the prevalent modes of socializing and 'cruising' within this network, and the initiation of relatively younger or less visible members into their circle:

We are *purono amoler*... we have been around since a long time ago! We have been doing *meyelipona* (feminine or effeminate behavior) since we were nine or ten years old... If we cannot recognize (others like us) then who can! I found Bappa (a younger participant in the network) on the road... she would see us and would be scared, she would only go after older men, she didn't even know that young men could be interested in us! There were many others as well, like Jaydip... who was a well known *matir* artist (potter and craftsman) of this area, and *adawali* (ginger-woman), that is, Govinda. It was Govinda only who brought me into the *line*. He would tell me, first you put one finger in, then two, then three, and then on the day when you can are able to take four fingers in there, you will realize that you have entered the *line* (*line-e dhuke gyachho*)! ... Have you seen the field in front of the Rabindra Sadan (a municipal hall)? There, Govinda and all would congregate, they would bring drinks, have sex with *parikhs*... I had fun with so many men (*tonnas*) there! We wouldn't come to the square field so much back then, but we would visit nearby towns, like Lalbagh. At that time we didn't know the word *kothi*, we would say *dhunuri*, and *lavani* (to describe ourselves). We started hearing words like *kothi* after some of our friends, Annapurna and Mina, joined *hijra* houses... some of the language has come from Bihar, some has come from Andhra [Pradesh]

There are many intriguing points suggested by this brief extract – the pride in public femininity; the atmosphere of guiltless promiscuity and sexual excursions; the association of anal receptivity with feminine/effeminate behavior; the consciousness of a large network stretching across other states of India which includes both friends from his circle and 'hijra houses', and the circulation of language and words (including *kothi*) through this network. In his mention of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, Shyam differs from Govinda in his awareness of the expansiveness of the network and the language (Govinda had

simply claimed the language as ‘our invention’). More locally, his narrative also points to the presence of several open public meeting places as networking hubs, spaces where participants socialize as well as pick up or bring sexual partners. Of these, the ‘barrack square field’ in central Berhampore, a large field created by the British for military exercises, is at present the largest and most prominent meeting venue, while other spaces such as the field in front of the Rabindra Sadan have been popular hubs in the past. ‘We used to come such spaces (*jayga*) long before Sangram was established’, Shyam told me. No one could remember when socializing had begun around the barrack square field, though it is not simply a spontaneous phenomenon, and over the years, has required active defense against hostile reactions from the police. These dangers have necessitated the *thek* or the *khol*; houses of *dhunuris* (or today, *kothis*) where their peers congregate to exchange news, gossip, and even bring in sexual partners. That these *theks/khols* have been usually the houses of feminine or gender variant males rather than any of their *parikhs* suggests that ‘masculine’ men remained the fringes of the network even if they did frequent the public spaces; they also did not usually pick up the subcultural language or use *parikh* as a self-designation. There are also various humorous feminized names devised for participants in the network, like *adawali* – the ginger-woman – for Govinda, owing to his ownership of a business in spices. However, as seen previously in Ranajay’s case, the boundary between a feminized inner circle and masculine outsiders is also variable, and does not signal a homogenous inner space. For instance, sex within Govinda and Shyam’s *dhunuri* circles where one of them took on a ‘masculine’ penetrative role was also prevalent, though somewhat taboo – possibly drawing from *hijra* restrictions

against intra-community sex.¹⁶⁸ Somewhat hesitantly, Govinda admitted to having had penetrative sex with one of his *dhunuri* friends. Shyam, on the other hand, finds such behavior scandalous and professes both a feminine and a strictly sexually receptive role, proudly describing how his *parikhs* would find his smile as beautiful as that of Suchitra Sen, a prominent Bengali actress of yesteryears (I will have occasion to further analyze such variations in gender/sexual behavior among *dhuranis/kothis* in the next chapter).

Prior to the formation of Sangram, neither Govinda nor Shyam seems to have used any of the inherited terms designating gender/sexual variance for representation to the mainstream as a separate community, though their gender variance was clearly visible enough to have provoked demarcation and harassment. As in the Kolkata lake areas, the ‘language’ was also relatively private in the sense of being restricted to members of the circle, although, as we shall see, *dhurani-kothi-hijra* languages may also incorporate discursive practices (e.g. *bhel* or gendered flamboyance) that mark distinctive modes of public visibility. Both Shyam and Govinda straddle their visibility as gender variant with a degree of affiliation and assimilation with ‘mainstream’ familial and social structures – they live with their families and dress as men, and at least Shyam’s family seems to be accepting of his difference without necessarily naming it as such (for instance, some of his nephews and nieces humorously refer to him as their ‘aunt’ in front of other senior family members, and he has often taken on relatively feminized roles such as cooking during family functions). Though neither Shyam nor Govinda have married, some others in their circle have been married men, indicating a further level of familial affiliation, and

¹⁶⁸ On this restriction, see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45-47.

possibly a greater privatization of their gender/sexual variance. In socio-economic terms, most of their close friends range from lower middle class to lower class, and pursue relatively ‘mainstream’ occupations.¹⁶⁹ Like Govinda, Shyam also manages a small business, making and selling handicrafts, and also works as an attendant in a shop owned by one of his *parikhs*. Thus, for them, the distinction with *hijras* seems to be clear in terms of sartorial choice, occupation, as well as familial co-habitation – *hijra* being a publicly known term claimed by visibly feminine-attired persons living in separate *gharanas* – even though their ‘language’ may evidence many overlaps with that of *hijras*. During our conversation, Govinda asserted that he ‘did not know any *hijras*’, implying his avoidance of the more socially sequestered *hijras* based on his relatively mainstream position and respectability.

Axes of distinction: The gharana hijras of Murshidabad

Shyam’s circle is more expansive, perhaps owing to what he describes as ‘an ability to adapt and get along (*maniye chola*) with everyone’. His friends include Annapurna, who had been initially a part of this peer group but subsequently joined a *hijra gharana*. ‘The original *hijras* of Murshidabad were at Lalbagh, they were employed by the Nawab at the palace’, Shyam narrated. ‘But now all the *hijras* are people we knew in our circle who got castrated’. At present, Annapurna is the leading *guru-ma* (mother *guru*) of one of the two *gharana hijra* households in Murshidabad, which are affiliated with the Mechhua *gharana* and undertake the ritualized blessing of newborn children for money and gifts

¹⁶⁹ As I noted during conversations, members of this peer group would use Bengali phrases like *nimno moddhobitto* (lower middle class) in their self-description.

(*badhai*) within their respective territories. Shyam had known Annapurna as one of their *dhunuri* peers, who had grown up in a nearby village and would frequent Berhampore and Lalbagh during their youth. But she differed from them in that she began dressing in women's clothes in public, started living separately from her family, took initiation under the older leader of the *hijra gharana* in the area, and underwent castration and penectomy (by her generation, most *hijras* underwent the 'operation' secretly through illicit doctors in the neighboring states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, rather than the *dai* [nurses] who were previously affiliated with *hijra gharanas* for this purpose).¹⁷⁰ In both Shyam's and Annapurna's narration of this story, there is a transition from *dhunuri* to *chhibri* or *hijra*, but also a clear distinction between *dhunuris/lavanis* or *meyeli* persons like Shyam and Govinda and *hijras* like Annapurna, though they had participated in the same extended network in their youth. As Shyam describes:

Annapurna and her friends would dance and act in *alkap* and *manasa gaan* ('traditional' or 'folk' operatic forms). They would perform the female roles and cross-dress (wearing *satra*) during these events, and then, some of them started living together apart from their families. They started cross-dressing more freely then. Then they joined a *hijra* house and got castrated and penectomized (*chhibralo* – literally, became *chhibri*).

This account is corroborated by Annapurna, who describes her decision to become *hijra* in quite matter-of-fact economic terms:

When I was young, I used to dance and I also learnt cloth-stitching work (*selai-er kaaj*). I also started visiting the houses of *hijras*.... I saw the wealth of *hijras*, I saw how much money and ornaments they had... it all went into my head; thus

¹⁷⁰ On this point, see also Reddy, G. 2005. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 72.

suddenly one day I went and got myself castrated and penectomized (*chhibriye phellam*), and became a *hijra*.

However, this trajectory of transition from *dhunuri* (or *kothi*, *dhurani* etc.) to *hijra* is by and large not explicitly revealed to people outside these communities, and indeed, *hijra gharanas* may try to maintain such transitions as a secret, seeking to retain popular perceptions of congenital difference – that is, the idea that *hijras* are born as congenitally distinct, lacking male or female genitalia.¹⁷¹ (Indeed, this is the narrative about *hijra* difference that I had heard in my family as a child in small town West Bengal, though later as I grew up I also heard rumors that they were in reality castrated men – like the aforementioned colonial literature, the public perceptions of *hijras* may thus be conflicting and contradictory, even as *gharanas* may try to fix the categorical boundaries of the *hijra*). During a subsequent conversation, Shyam described how many *gharana hijras* he knew objected to *dhunuri/dhurani* persons outside *gharanas* wearing feminine attire, as it may give away the link between feminine males (or male-assigned persons) of the area and the *hijras* – ‘one *hijra guru* I knew told me that she would break the bones of anyone who dared to wear *satra* (women’s clothes) outside the *gharana* in her area’. As indicated by the very need to articulate an injunction against people outside *gharanas* appearing dressed as *hijras*, there are potential overlaps between *dhurani/dhunuri/kothi* and *hijra* communities – as we shall see, this tense overlap informs attempts by *gharana*-based *hijras* to distinguish themselves from non-*hijras* or ‘fake’ *hijras*. *Hijra gurus* like

¹⁷¹ On the prevalence of such ideas about *hijras*, see Cohen, ‘The Pleasures of Castration’.

Annapurna may seek to assert their differences from *dhunuris/dhuranis* along several axes or registers of difference.

One obvious distinction is in terms of living arrangements – following the usual practice of *hijra gharanas*, Annapurna lives with her disciples in a large house in a lower middle class neighborhood, which is sometimes described as a *moffoshol* or *moffussil*, a suburban area that is half village, half town. While she does maintain connections with her natal family, they do not live with her. Apart from this clear spatial and sartorial distinction from ‘men’ living with their families like Shyam and Govinda, Annapurna also places herself within distinctive socio-religious traditions that mark *hijra gharanas*, traditions that are claimed as Islamic but differ from dominant versions of Islam in involving several aspects of common Hindu practices such as mother-goddess worship.

I was born in a Hindu family... but we *hijras* follow Islam (*Islam mani*)... I follow the *parampara* (tradition) as I have seen my *naan guru* and *daad guru* do; I perform the rites and rituals around the house as they were taught to me by them... I had a [Muslim] disciple who would interrupt/object to some of these rituals, she would ask that I do it in this way or that way, as she had known them being in a Muslim house.

Another important register of difference is Annapurna’s dissociation from the sexual desire for *parikhs*, so common in the earlier narratives. When I first visited her house in 2008 with a few friends from the younger generation of the Berhampore network, one of the first things she asserted was her abstention from *parikhs* and the restriction on bringing too many *parikhs* into the house:

I don't do *parikhs* any more... it is a matter of respectability (*man shombhrom*). I used to earlier. Some of the others here do *parikhs*... when my *chelas* they go to the market, they may pick up one or two... But you can't bring in too many *parikhs* into this house. Our *jojman* (neighbors, clients, houses where *badhai* can be performed) will create trouble (*bila korbe*). This is a *bhodro para* (genteel/respectable neighborhood)!

Whether of her own accord or for the fear of the *jojman* finding out, Annapurna wishes to maintain a relatively ascetic version of *hijra* identity and respectability, in keeping with their role as 'ritual specialists' with the power to bless people, as has been described in previous ethnographies on *hijras*.¹⁷² Moreover, there is also an interesting convergence between *hijra* respectability (*man shombhrom* or *shomman*, corresponding to *izzat* in Reddy's ethnography) with Bengali (lower) middle class respectability (*bhodrota*), indicated by Annapurna's injunction that one can't bring too many *parikhs* into the house as it is a respectable (*bhodro*) neighborhood. Even so, she concedes that her *chelas* do indeed have *parikhs* – the disciples lower down the *guru-chela* hierarchy thus seem to have greater sexual license vis-à-vis the ideal of *hijra* and middle class respectability.

Annapurna's claim to sexual asceticism indicates how respectability or respect (*shomman* in Bengali, *izzat* in Hindi/Urdu) is an important point of concern and distinction between social groups. Contrary to Annapurna-*mashi*'s invocation of the respectability of a *bhodro para*, *hijras* are commonly characterized in societal perceptions by their lack of respectability. As Gayatri Reddy argues in her ethnography of *kothis* and *hijras* in South

¹⁷² See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 45.

India, *hijras* are often pejoratively characterised by middle class society through ascriptions of lack – firstly, by the literalised lack of the procreative phallus as transvestites who may be castrated or congenitally deficient,¹⁷³ and moreover, by also a lack of shame (*sharam*) and respectability (*izzat*).¹⁷⁴ Such ascriptions, of course, serve to naturalise and maintain gender/sexual and class/caste order and attendant hierarchies. In their turn, *hijras* may employ a variety of tactics to resist and/or place themselves within social hierarchies of respect. One common tactic used in response to unwilling clients or harassment during *badhai* may be the threat of exposure of (the lack of) genitalia, which as both Cohen and Reddy note, may not only shame and shock the audience but also carry the implicit threat of emasculating the spectator, transferring stigma through what Reddy terms ‘scopic pathways of contagion’.¹⁷⁵ However, *hijras* may also simultaneously claim and aspire to respectability – both by claiming a dissociation from sexual desire and sexuality (and thus claiming the valorization of asceticism within Hinduism), and the aspiration to wealth and class (the reason that Annapurna says she joined *hijra gharanas*). As, Raina, a transgender activist in Kolkata, once explained to me, many *hijras* aspire to ‘*poyshar ijot*’, the *ijot* (Bengali version of *izzat*) of money – ‘since they don’t usually get *izzat* from society, they think they can get at least the *izzat* of money by accumulating houses, cars’. Here, it must be mentioned that *hijra gharanas* are economically uneven

¹⁷³ Reddy, G. 2005. ‘Geographies of Contagion: Hijras, Kothis and the Politics of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad’, *Anthropology & Medicine* 12 (3), p. 257.

¹⁷⁴ Reddy, G. 2003. “Men” who would be Kings: Celibacy, Emasculation, and the Re-production of Hijras in Contemporary Indian Politics - Gender Identity, Social Stigma, and Political Corruption’, *Social Research* 70(1), p. 163,166.

¹⁷⁵ Cohen, L. 1995. ‘The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics’, in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 276-304; Reddy, G. 2005. ‘Geographies of Contagion’, p. 257.

and hierarchized such that the low-tier *chelas* often come from poor backgrounds, but senior *gurus*, as they climb up intra-community hierarchies, may sometimes accumulate significant amounts of wealth from their share in the collections from *badhai*, particularly by the economic standards of the small town middle class in India. Annapurna-*mashi*, for instance, hails from a poor family, has never been to college, and can't read English, but when I met her, I noticed that she was significantly wealthier than my own family, and owned both a car and a large two-storey house on the outskirts of Berhampore, where she still lives with her *chelas*.

However, despite the attempt to gain *shomman* or *izzat* through such accoutrements of class, respectability may be hard to gain. *Shomman* remains an important axis of distinction from the side of *dhuranis* and *kothis* who dissociate from *hijras* – *hijras* may be derided by younger generation of *kothis* as not having *shomman*, as described in next chapter. In turn, *gharana*-based *hijras* dissociate from the disreputable sexual promiscuity of *dhuranis/kothis*, as evidenced in Annapurna-*mashi*'s pronounced assertion that she doesn't do *parikhs*, and later, in her dissociation from HIV-intervention projects for MSM, as described in the next chapter.

Blurring the Lines: The Chhallawalis of Murshidabad and Nadia

The aforementioned distinctions between *dhunuri-lavani-meyeli* persons and the *hijra*, on the lines of both gender/sexual embodiment and respectability, is less clear for many people lower down the socio-economic strata relative to Shyam and Govinda. This

particularly applies to people who dress in feminine attire while performing sex work (*khajra*) or while blessing people for money in commuter trains (*chhalla*), when they are publicly perceived as *hijra*. But they may also otherwise dress as men or live with their families, blurring the categorical distinction between *hijra* and *dhunuri/dhunuri/kothi*, and threatening to disrupt perceptions of congenital *hijra* difference. There may be different modes and degrees of such overlap: some people may generally refer to themselves as *dhurani/kothi* but present themselves as *hijra* professionally, sometimes known as being in ‘*chhibripon*’ (in *chhibri* mode). Others may actually live temporarily in *hijra* kinship structures without assimilating to the *gharana*. Moreover, *hijra* identification as well as kinship structures may also be claimed outside *gharanas* by people who have not undergone castration-penectomy.

Take for instance the *chhallawalis* (*chhalla* seekers) of Beldanga, a village south of Berhampore in Murshidabad. On several trips to Berhampore, I encountered Suleiman and Ravina seeking *chhalla* on the train, when I, like the other passengers, took them as *hijras*. When I enquired about them in Berhampore, Shyam and others referred to them as the ‘Beldanga *chhibris*’, and offered to take me to their *chhibri khol* (*hijra* house). Once in Beldanga, we were escorted by Suleiman, who was dressed in women’s clothes, to their *khol*, which turned out to be a small hut with a courtyard. To my surprise, there were just the two of them in the house, with no sign of a *guru* or any other *chelas*. Suleiman proceeded to explain how her natal family lived nearby and she interacted with them everyday: ‘my mother, elder brother, his wife, they all live there... they send us food for

two meals a day'. She continued that as *chhibris* from Beldanga, they did not mix with the *chhibri* houses in Berhampore: 'there is a lot of conflict and trouble (*biltaliya jhagra*) among the *chhibris* there, (so) we stay away'. During this conversation, Shyam looked around and noticed some commonly used household male clothing lying around, and the following exchange ensued:

Shyam (pointing to the clothes): *e ma!* Who has left all this men's *satra* lying around? (*satra* usually indicates women's clothes in the 'language'; *hijras* are supposedly always in *satra*).

Suleiman: Why, I wear those clothes.

Shyam (feigning scandal): oh, what are you saying!

Suleiman – yes, I wear such clothes only at home... they are more comfortable.

(Starts changing into them)

Shyam: *e baba*, what am I seeing! The sister has now become...

Suleiman (with a mischievous smile): why, make me into your *parikh!*

As I had figured out by then, while Suleiman presented as *hijra* professionally and was referred to as *chhibri* in the Berhampore circle, she was neither literally *chhibri* (castrated and penectomized) nor initiated under a *hijra guru*. She used her natal male name, and evidenced a playful overlap with masculinity (being *parikh*) while also cross-dressing regularly. However, she was not entirely satisfied with her current occupational situation, and expressed her plans for joining the male lower class (and largely Muslim) workforce that had through the last decade began immigrating to the middle east from their region, particularly young members of Muslim peasant families like her own. Mohammed was a friend who had already been to the region and worked in Saudi Arabia, and he had offered to negotiate a deal for them. 'We will go to Dubai', said Suleiman, 'to work in

people's houses, we want to leave in a few months only... one can earn a lot more there than here, about Rs. 20,000 (\$ 374) per month'. While her choice of domestic labor could indicate her preference for relatively feminized professions, she didn't seem uncomfortable with the prospect of joining the predominantly male immigrant workforce. (Suleiman and Ravina's participation in such transnational labor markets was however atypical among the Murshidabad network – it might have specifically to do with their position as Muslims within a certain transnational economy mediated by Islam, indicated by the fact that most of the middlemen they mentioned who would arrange for such contracts in Dubai were Muslims, and the migration was seen as to a hospitable Muslim country – but that is a different story). On the way back to Berhampore from Beldanga, Shyam speculatively explained to me how Suleiman's and Ravina's family had come to accept her cross-dressing: 'see, right from their childhood onward, their mothers and aunts must have noticed. They didn't start wearing *satra* suddenly on one day, it started gradually... first they may have taken just the *orna* (a loose draping worn by women over the shoulders), then they wore a *saree* (draped garment for women)... and so on.' Whether Shyam's account is entirely accurate or not, what it reveals is how Suleiman and Ravina, through their proximity to their natal families and their simultaneous professional presentation as *hijra*, disrupt the association of cross-dressing and public appearance as *hijra* with the idea of congenital difference, and rather create a different kind of visibility based on gradually habituating their families and neighbors to their gendered difference.

However, even though their families might have accepted them, it seemed that the *gharana*-affiliated *hijra* households of Murshidabad did not view them in high regard. As Annapurna subsequently told me during a conversation where I brought up the Beldanga *chhibris*, these people were not really *hijras*: ‘those ones sometimes call themselves *hijras*, sometimes *dhuranis* ... as it suits their purpose’. As people who switched between attires and even occupations, Suleiman and Ravina both resisted the norm of castration-penectomy and potentially gave away the narrative of congenital *hijra* difference, and thus had to be derided as illegitimate relative to the *gharana hijras*. Moreover, as Reddy also notes in her ethnography, *chhalla* and other occupations like sex work may be derided as disreputable and lacking in *shomman* or *izzat* relative to the religiosity of *gharana*-based *badhai*; during several conversations, Annapurna-*mashi* insisted that none of the *chelas* in Murshidabad who actually belonged to *hijra gharanas* would ever do *chhalla* or sex work (*khajra*). This tension, then, was possibly the real reason that Suleiman and Ravina avoided the *chhibris* of Berhampore. Even so, such differences need not imply a uniformly hostile relation between *gharanas* and these ‘other’ *hijras*. While there have been occasional media reports of ‘real eunuchs’ assaulting and exposing ‘fake’ ones, and even taking them to the police,¹⁷⁶ the quotidian relations between non-*gharana* and *gharana hijras* in Bengal seems to be a more delicate practice of tolerance, premised on the maintenance of the territorial rights of the *gharana hijras* in a particular locality.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Real eunuchs beat fake ones’, *Hindustan Times*, 30 June 2005, p. 3; ‘Eunuchs show all for truths sake’, *Hindustan Times*, 20 July 2005, p. 5.

Ranaghat and Kalyani: the Mahatirtha of Dhuranis

About a hundred kilometers south of Berhampore and halfway on the rail link between Kolkata and Murshidabad, there is a small town called Ranaghat in the district of Nadia, a region that has over the years become the third site of my fieldwork. Similar to the Kolkata region, *dhurani* seems to have been prevalent here as a term for gender variant males during the years before the formation of CBOs and NGOs, which is now accompanied by an increasing usage of *kothi*. *Dhurani* and *kothi* networks of the region seem to be old and well developed: so much so that Subhash, one of the senior community members at Ranaghat, once proudly described the region as a ‘*mahatirtha*’ or hallowed pilgrimage spot of *dhuranis* (‘*dhurani-der mahatirtha*’).

One evening in 2010, I accompanied Arijit and Arghya, two staff members of the CBO Swikriti that has an office in Ranaghat, on a bicycle trip to nearby small towns and villages that serve as ‘field areas’ where they undertake community outreach to increase HIV-AIDS awareness. Arijit and Arghya used both *dhurani* and *kothi* to refer to themselves, but their sense of distinction from *hijras* seemed to be less marked than for Shyam or Govinda. Arijit is an artist who makes idols, paintings and small handicraft items besides working in the Ranaghat office; he typically dresses in casual ‘jeans and top’ (the ‘top’ here indicates unisex t-shirts rather than explicitly feminine ones), but also wears nail polish and ties up his luxuriant hair in a hair band. He had grown up in a village adjoining the nearby town of Kalyani – incidentally also my place of birth – in a family that seems to have been reasonably loving and accepting of his ‘feminine’

(*meyeli*) attributes: ‘I would play house with dolls (*ranna bati khela*) while growing up; my aunt’s daughters would help me to get dressed up. My parents would fear for me and caution me not to play rough games, they would tell me, don’t run and jump about too much, you might fall and break your limbs!’ From a young age, he was aware of *hijras* who would come into his neighborhood for *badhai*, but he was scared of them: ‘when I was young, I feared *hijras*... I would run away when they would come... later, I realized that it is us only who wear *sarees* and become *hijras* (*amrai shari pore hijra hoye jai!*) (Just like the concern with respectability, the fear of the *hijra* among *kothis/dhuranis* as well as more ‘mainstream’ persons is a recurrent trope and may work at several registers – the fear of being associated with them and being exposed as gender variant, the fear of aggressive behavior, the threat of genital exposure and scopic emasculation, and ultimately an existential threat to gendered/sexualized personhood. We will have occasion to return to this fear in its various manifestations in later chapters). Arijit’s overcoming this ‘fear’ was congruent with his discovery of the local *dhurani* circle. In his adolescence, he was initiated into the local circle of *dhuranis/kothis* as well as the ‘language’, which they called ‘*ulti*’ (literally, ‘inverted’), through Dilip, an older member of the community who had been a dancer in his youth, and now supplied dancers from the Nadia region for *lagan* (literally meaning auspicious moment or time, here *lagan* describes the practice of contracting feminine-attired dancers called *laundas* to dance during occasions such as weddings and religious festivals, especially prevalent in the neighboring states of Bihar and the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh – this is also often accompanied by *khajra* or sex work, typically undertaken at the risk of sexual violence

and HIV infection).¹⁷⁷ While Dilip had himself been a successful dancer in the *lagan* circles for many years, he had eventually married a few years ago and now lived with his mother, wife and two small children in a working class settlement on the outskirts of Kalyani. Arijit and Arghya referred to him as Dilip-*da* – ‘*da*’ being a common Bengali appellation for an elder brother or respected senior male – and called his house Dilip-*da*’s *khol*, thus indicating its function as a hub where people within their network would gather (I had myself grown up in middle class neighborhoods in Kalyani, and had no idea about Dilip-*da* or his *khol* through my childhood and adolescence, discovering the network many years later when I returned to the Kalyani-Ranaghat region during my fieldwork). The circle around Dilip’s *khol* includes a complex range of people with varying degrees of distinction or overlap with *hijras*, which may also be contextually evoked or suspended. I reproduce a section of our conversation that evening as an introductory glimpse into the network:

Arijit: Many *kothis* come to Dilip-*da*’s place, especially dancers; they go to *lagan* from there. Many of the *dhuranis* have also become *chhibris*, and work in *badhai* (*badhai khate*).

Me: so Dilip-*da*’s house is quite *pakki* (‘ripe’ – mature, aware, accepting)?

Arijit: Yes, Dilip-*da*’s mother is especially *pakki*!

Me: Are there also any *hijra* households in Kalyani?

Arijit: No, not in Kalyani... But there are in Kandinada and in the Madanpur side (all small towns near Ranaghat and Kalyani). Then in Krishnanagar, there is Sitamasi’s *khol*, which we sometimes visit.

Me: The *chhibris* who do *badhai*, have they been initiated into a *hijra* household?

¹⁷⁷ For an overview of *Lagan* from an HIV-prevention and human rights perspective, see PLUS, 2006. *Dancing Boys: Traditional Prostitution of Young Males in India*. Kolkata: PLUS.

Arijit: Yes you have to become a *chela*, otherwise why would they (the *hijra* household) allow you to do *badhai* in their area (*elaka*)!

Me: But since there is no *chhibri khol* here in Kalyani, where do the ones who do *badhai* take initiation?

Arijit: The ones who work in *badhai* here, they have gone to the Naihati *chhibri khol* to become *chelas* there (...)

Me: And those who haven't become disciples in *hijra khols* but cross-dress... don't they do *badhai*?

Arijit: No, but they do ask for *chhalla*!

Arghya: Even we do it... God (*bhogoban*) has made us as *kothi*, doing *challa* is my god-given right!

Biking along the narrow lanes of Kanchrapara, a town adjoining Kalyani to the north, Arijit and Arghya pointed out an apparently abandoned old house where a group of their friends who did *chhalla* had lived together, separately from their families. These *chhallawalis*, as Arijit described them, would even visit the local *hijra* household of the area to maintain pleasant relations and would acknowledge *hijra gurus* as seniors without undergoing full initiation.

Ari: A few *kothis* had set up house in this place. We used to come here very frequently then (...)

Me: Like a *chhibri khol* (*hijra* household)?

Ari: Yes.

Me: Did they rent the place?

Ari: No, this was abandoned. Seeing that it was empty, they took possession of it. Now they have gone for *lagan* or dispersed elsewhere.

Me: Did they take *anchal* (initiation) in any *hijra* house?

Ari: No, but they would just go there casually from time to time (*jaowa asha chhilo*)... like how we, too, visit *hijras* from time to time... they wouldn't do *badhai*, (but) they would do *chhalla*.

From the above conversations, it appears that the territoriality of *gharana hijras* in Nadia is exercised through a relatively strict control on the practice of *badhai* in their area (*elaka*), to do which one must be initiated, but cross-dressed *chhalla* does not impinge upon territorial rights enough to attract active censure, and *chhallawalis* might even have reasonably pleasant interactions with *hijra* households. Arijit went on to describe how they were indistinguishable from castrated/penectomized *hijras* when cross-dressed – clearly, becoming *hijra* as a livelihood required neither castration nor *gharana* affiliation.

Ari: Its *kothis* only who wear *sarees* and do this (*chhalla*) outside.

Me: yes...

Ari: How many *hijras* are there? If any one challenges me about being *hijra*, I will strip off my *saree* and make a *chipti* (simulate a vagina) and show them!

Thus, according to Arijit, *gharana*-based and castrated *hijras* are far outnumbered by *kothis*, who if needed can effectively simulate the *hijra* marker of having undergone castration-penectomy (or even of being congenitally different). Such performance of being *hijra* can be taken to even greater extremes. During a conversation at Dilip's *khol* a few months after the aforementioned trip, Arijit described his recent excursion to the neighboring district of Howrah where he had taken part in a group of *chhallawalis*, led – ironically enough – by a (cisgender) woman who had effectively done *chhalla* as a *hijra* for many years in local commuter trains, and had subsequently created a relatively safe environment for her juniors in the trade by striking covert deals with the railway police.

On his own part, Arijit took pride in being able to present himself as a ‘full’ *hijra* when dressed in *chhibripon* (in *chhibri* mode):

Since I am *mota-shota* (full figured), when in *chhibripon*, I look entirely (*puro*) *hijra*. People would look at me and give me money promptly!

At the same time, when confronted by a hostile *parikh* who said he would go and expose him to his train clients, Arijit declared that he was not afraid to disclose his bodily maleness if it came to that, professing the simultaneity of his presentation as a *hijra* and his being a *byatachhele* (boy/man):

What will you reveal? I don’t need to hide that I am *byatachhele*, I do this *as* a *byatachhele* (*byatachhele hoyei kori*)! If you want, you too can put on a *saree* and bangles, let’s see how you can do it!

For Arijit then, the *chhibri* mode (*chhibripon*) may be understood as a form of skilful performance that both parodies *hijra* authenticity and does not shy away from the assignation or ascription of bodily maleness; yet his sense of separation between the *chhallawalis* who do *chhibripon* and the *hijra* households and their initiated disciples who do *badhai* is clear, and he does not adopt *hijra* as a personal identity. This suggests that this is merely an inconsistent performative mode taken up for professional purposes, rather than a more fundamental overlap with the *hijra* category.

That is certainly the interpretation favored by *gharana hijras* of his acquaintance, such as Mishti, a mid-level *hijra guru* who was originally a member of the Kalyani *dhurani/kothi* circles, but now has transitioned into being a *chhibri* and heads a household in

Kankinada, living separately from her senior *gurus* at Naihati. Mishti drops into Dilip's *khol* from time to time when she visits her natal family in Kalyani. During one such visit, Mishti encountered us (Arijit, Arghya, me, and some other friends) at the *khol*, and in the course of the conversation, proceeded to lecture us on the distinctions between real *hijras*, who are characterized by their gendered consistency, and *dhuranis/kothis* who like *bohurupis* ('chameleons') inconsistently pretend to be *hijra*:

We who are *hijras* we are in the *pon* (here, trade/profession), and those who do *chhalla*, they are in *be-pon* (non-profession, invalid profession)... I will not take a *chhallawali* as my *chela*, she will have to come into the *pon* first!... if anyone asks, you guys should not say that 'we are like *hijras*', you should say that you are men only... you guys are like *bohurupis* (chameleons), even if you dress up, you will take the *anchal* (the loose end of the *saree*) on your shoulders one day, and then you will shrug it off! But we have taken the *anchal* (here – both the garment, and a metaphor for *hijra* initiation) for our entire lives.

Mishti therefore repeats the injunction earlier encountered in Shyam's narrative – *dhuranis/kothis* should not claim cross-dressed visibility as *hijra* and rather remain as 'men', thus concealing their links with *hijras*. Arijit challenges this distinction through his appearance in *chhibripon* – which for Mishti is *be-pon*, an invalid *pon* associated with inconsistency and opportunism. But while Arijit defies this devaluation of *chhalla* as *be-pon*, like Mishti, he still maintains a relatively clear distinction between professional *chhibripon* and *hijra* discipleship.

However, some others may go on to blur even this line between *chhallawalis* in *chhibripon* and *chelas* initiated with *hijra* households, living both within and outside *hijras gharanas*: that is, staying as *chelas* in *gharana*-affiliated *hijra* households from time to time without maintaining a strict affiliation with the *hijra* house or *gharana*, or even a consistent *hijra* identity. Here, *chhibripon* goes beyond professional performance into an actual overlap with *hijra* kinship. It seems that certain structural flexibilities or ambiguities in the lower tiers of *hijra gharanas* permit such overlap, as hinted by a conversation I subsequently had with Arijit and Arghya:

Me: so... the *chelas* who do *badhai*, do they all live in the *hijra khol*?

Ari: Some go and stay... others don't, they stay separately.

Arghya: Actually, if you live in a *hijra khol*, you can't save money, everything tends to get spent! If you stay on your own, separately, then one can save some money.

Me: And those who do *badhai*, have they all undergone castration-penectomy?

Ari: some have, but there are some *akuas* (non-castrated) as well... You need *akuas* during the *dhol puja* ceremony!

(The *dhol* is a ritualistically significant drum used during *badhai*; *akuas* have ritual role in the worship of the *dhol* prior to *badhai*).

This suggested that even initiated disciples may live outside *hijra khols* and not be castrated – furthermore, there may be levels of initiation, with a relatively casual ‘*anchal deowa*’ for low-tier disciples whence a *hijra* guru just touches the tip of her *anchal* on a potential *chela*'s head, and a more formal ceremony with an exchange of gifts between the *chela* and the *guru* for disciples who pursue *gharana* affiliation more seriously. Moloy, a friend of Arijit, was one of these initiates who had the *anchal* at a *hijra* house in

a neighboring district, and who worked in *badhai* from time to time while also doing *chhalla* in trains, thus challenging the normative separation between *pon* and *be-pon*, *badhai* and *chhalla*. While Moloy would be usually in *chhibripon* (i.e. cross-dressed) and had lived in a *gharana*-affiliated households as a *chelanati* (junior initiate); she did not maintain strict *gharana* fidelity and evidenced a complex overlapping sense of identification. One evening, we met Moloy on a train near Ranaghat. I reproduce a section of our conversation:

Arijit: Hey, are you going to get castrated?

Arghya: Yes, can't you see how she is in *chhibripon*?

Moloy (claps loudly): No, I am a *tonna* (man)! If I can't do well as *chhibri* I will cut my hair and become *tonna*! (clapping is a gesture associated with *hijras*).

Arijit: So who is your *guru* now? Sometimes you say Chandramukhi (a *hijra guru*), sometimes you say Puchki (another *chhallawali*)!

Moloy: The truth is, there is no certainty to who my *guru* is! ... I became the disciple of Chandramukhi, but when they asked me to get castrated I quarreled with them and came back home ... then I started doing *chhalla*, and took Puchki as my *guru*.

Unlike Arijit, Moloy had lived both inside and outside *hijra gharanas* and performed *chhalla* cross-dressed while living with her natal family, appropriating *chhibri* ('castrated') as a metaphor even while claiming to be *tonna* (man). This overlap with social masculinity, and resistance to actual castration, had earned her *guru*

Chandramukhi's disfavor, recalling hierarchies based on respectability among *hijras* who disparaged gender shifting in Reddy's ethnography.¹⁷⁸

In Murshidabad, two of the younger members of the network, Suresh and Golu, also professed that they would do *badhai* from time to time at the house of a renegade *hijra guru* – a '*bila hijra*' – who flouted *gharana* norms and only took temporary disciples instead of formal initiates. 'She is too jealous and suspicious of everyone, she wants to keep her whole *elaka* (area) for herself!' This arrangement, however, suited Suresh and Golu well. 'It is a lot of trouble (*jhamela*) to take full initiation in a *hijra* household... one has to constantly wear *satra* (cross-dress), one has to give gifts to the *guru*', Suresh said. Golu and Suresh cross-dressed from time to time even in their own town of Berhampore, so their problem with constant *satra* was not due to fear of exposure:

We wear *satra* on special days, but the next day we are back in our usual wear... tops, t-shirts, jeans... we do a little *bhel* (flamboyant/campy behavior)... we are never in entire (*puro*) *tonnapon* (masculine dress/demeanor), you can always tell by our *bhel*.

Thus their partial overlap with *hijra* kinship is also an expression of their gendered flexibility and a complex sense of embodiment, where they profess that they do not need to be always in *satra* (i.e. cross-dressed) to be flamboyant and visible in gendered terms. Suresh also appropriated the term *hijra* as a expression of a generic third-ness – not man,

¹⁷⁸ On intra-community hierarchies among *hijras* and *kothis* based on respectability (or *izzat*), see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, pp. 44, 60.

not woman – rather than a *gharana*-bound identity: ‘If a *byatachhele* (man) wears a *saree* then s/he becomes a *hijra* only, not a woman!’ Thus, while full initiation imposes an identitarian strictness which they feel to be undesirable trouble (*jhamela*), their partial initiation and the switching between *hijra* and non-*hijra* professions is also a part of a broader gendered position claimed as *hijra* and expressed through their sartorial switching; a gendered fluidity that does not partake in patriarchal masculinity (unlike, say, Dilip-*da*’s switching between the role of a married man and that of a cross-dressed dancer) but rather involves a simultaneous visibility in *satra* and ‘usual’ male attire (*tonnapon*).

A Hijra Guru outside the Gharanas: Shyamoli ma

These overlaps are all relatively lower down in the *hijra* hierarchy – between the position of lower-tier *chelas* and that of non-*gharana dhuranis/kothis*, who may take advantage of certain structural ambiguities within *gharana* norms. But how far can non-*gharana* claimants to public *hijra* visibility or professions stretch such concessions from *gharana* territoriality and hierarchy?

At Ranaghat, I also heard the story of Shyamoli-*ma* (mother Shyamoli), variously described as a *hijra* or a *dhurani guru* who had gathered many *chelas* who pursued occupations like *khajra* (sex work) and *chhalla*. She had also been a well-known dancer in the *lagan* circuit, and had died of AIDS-related causes in 2007 before I commenced my fieldwork in the area. Till her death, she lived in a house in Ranaghat – in full *satra* –

with her *chelas* as well as her parents. While I never met her in person, the Ranaghat branch of Swikriti includes several of her *chelas* or *nati-chelas* (*chelas* of *chelas*). One afternoon in the CBO office, I had the following conversation with one such *nati-chela*, Subhash, along with some other community members:

Me: Did Shyamoli-*ma* ever become a *gharana*-based *hijra* or do *badhai*?

Subhash: No, she lived with her family. I never saw a *dhol* (drum used for *badhai*) in her house. But she would have many *chelas* who would visit or even stay with her. She would select the beautiful ones and send them to dance for *lagan* in Bihar. She would take commissions for this; it was her business.

Me: Was she regarded as a *hijra*?

Subhash: No ... within the town many knew her as a feminine male, she had grown up nearby and lived with her parents, and was *akua* [non-castrated] ... But outside the town, I cannot tell if she was. She was not really a *hijra*.

Sumeet (another community member): How can you say that? Her identity was up to her, no one can say you're not a *hijra* if you say you're one. Also, didn't she do *badhai* elsewhere, outside Ranaghat?

Subhash: Maybe, I don't know. She had some *chelas* who had ... joined *hijra* households in Bihar. But they would still respect her as their *guru-ma* (mother *guru*) ... whenever they visited Ranaghat. I heard that she would do *badhai* with some of her *chelas* in the Raniganj area (in a western district of West Bengal).

Me: What was her relation with the *gharana hijras* of the Ranaghat area?

Subhash: They would tolerate but avoid each other ... She also did not do *badhai* in the area like these *hijras*, even if she did it elsewhere.

Shyamoli-*ma* therefore occupied the position of a *guru-ma* vis-à-vis initiated *hijras* – her *chelas* who had joined *hijra* houses elsewhere – without entering *hijra* professions (at least in Ranaghat) or the *gharana* system. Occasionally, she claimed a public *hijra*

identity as well. Before her death, Shyamoli-*ma* had produced a ‘video’ in which she and her *chelas* danced to various popular Bengali songs. This was produced and distributed locally among the network, and some of her *chelas* still retained a copy. I had the opportunity of watching it alongside Subhash, who pointed out that the ‘video’ includes both *dhuranis* who are in women’s attire and some who are not, acting out the part of the male partners in the dance songs. This indicated the range of Shyamoli’s disciples, including *dhuranis* who stayed habitually in men’s attire (whom Subhash referred to as *byatachhele dhuranis* or ‘man *dhuranis*’), *dhuranis* who at least occasionally dressed in women’s attire, and even initiated *hijras*. Significantly, the ‘video’ itself was titled ‘*Moolsrotay Brihannala*’ – ‘The *Brihannala* in the Mainstream’ – *brihannala* being the usual term used to designate *hijras* in Sanskritized Bengali, used in media reports and the Bengali literature on *hijras*.¹⁷⁹ The culminating dance of the video depicted the scene of *hijras* dancing during *badhai*, set to common *hijra* songs used during such occasions, and including only cross-dressed dancers. In this fashion, Shyamoli represented herself and her disciples (at least those in *satra*) as *brihannala* and *hijra* to the ‘mainstream’, without assimilating to the other norms and features of the *gharanas*.

Hijra territoriality: Expanding norms of kinship

Back in Murshidabad after the aforementioned conversations about Shyamoli-*ma*, I spoke with one of the two senior *hijra gurus* of the district, Annapurna-*mashi* (Aunt Annapurna) of the Mechhua *gharana*, on the relation of *hijra gharanas* with these liminal yet widespread *hijra* figures outside formal lineages, of which Shyamoli seemed to be an

¹⁷⁹ E.g. see Dutta, M. 1999. *Brihannalar Sansar*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publication.

exceptionally successful example. In her explanation, Annapurna-*mashi* expanded on the workings of *hijra* territoriality. *Hijra* households divided their local region into distinct territories, such that one may not encroach into another's area. However, there might be small areas that were bypassed by these designated territories, or that *hijras* could not cover adequately. It was this uneven and ruptured territoriality that created the possibility of *hijra* figures outside *gharana*-affiliated households:

Suppose in a village where *hijras* do not go, there is a *dhurani* who has taken to cross-dressing in public. Maybe over the years, she starts posing as *hijra* ... Some people of the area regard her as a *hijra*, some people still regard her as male, and call her *moga* [sissy]. Maybe she buys a *dhol*, and starts doing *badhai* for money. Now, at some point the actual *hijra* household of the area comes to know this ... So they go there, create trouble and ask the *dhurani* to stop [acting as *hijra*]. But maybe she is already too powerful, has local *chelas*, and resists the *hijras*. So they visit her again, but this time, offer her a position in the *gharana* hierarchy. After all, you have to give her credit ... she took a wild uncultivated area, where *hijras* did not go, and cultivated it, made it suitable for us!

Thus, faced with the inevitable unevenness and incompleteness of their territoriality in practice, the *gharanas* try to regain territorial control by either preventing external *hijras* from pursuing characteristic *hijra* occupations (especially *badhai*), and failing that, by attempting to assimilate renegade *hijras* as members and re-establish the consolidated kinship network. This marks an acknowledgement of the labor of making space for *hijra* existence and occupational visibility ('cultivating' an area and 'making it suitable' for *hijras*), which according to Annapurna-*mashi* renders *hijras* outside the *gharana* eligible

for *gharana* membership and attendant legitimacy, even though they may have challenged the territorial control of *gharanas*. However, not all challenges to *gharana* territoriality merit equal attention. During a previous conversation when I had asked her about the *chhallawalis* in trains, Annapurna had replied dismissively, ‘oh, those ones sometimes call themselves *hijras*, sometimes *dhuranis* or *kothi*, as it suits their purpose’, disparaging their shifting identifications without seeking to actively censure them. But Shyamoli-*ma*, with her own kinship structure of *chelas* and her thriving business of supplying *laundas* (dancing boys) to Bihar, clearly mattered more. According to Annapurna-*mashi*, Shyamoli-*ma* had also been approached by *gharana hijras* several times, and while powerful enough to resist them, ultimately she did join the *gharana* hierarchy: ‘in later years she came into our system’ (‘system’ in English). Even if this is true, the community in Ranaghat remembers her as an institution unto herself, distinct from the *gharana hijras* of the area. The varied forms of overlap between *hijra* and *dhurani/kothi* subject positions, including professional *chhibripon*, inconsistent household belonging and the replication of *hijra* seniority and kinship outside of *gharanas*, thus indicate the spatially uneven hold of *gharana* norms that would seek to distinguish between true and false hijras, resulting in locally variegated cartographies and practices of representation.

V. Gharanas go public: The institutional consolidation of the ‘authentic’ *hijra*

While Annapurna, Mishti of Kankinada and the *hijras* of Ranaghat seem to tolerate *chhallawalis* and other non-*gharana hijras* even as they might privately disparage them,

over the last decade, some of the major *gharana* leaders of West Bengal have made increasingly public attempts to assert *hijra* authenticity and thus standardize the cartographic distinction between *hijra* and *non-hijra* identities, in collusion with non-governmental organizations and the media. One person who has acted as a *gharana* representative in this capacity is Ranjana, who works with a large NGO in Kolkata and is a prominent *hijra* activist. While I had previously known her as a middle class transgender-identified NGO activist, in early 2010 she identified herself at a public event as a *hijra* initiated under a *guru* from the Shyambajari *gharana* of Bengal. As an NGO official overseeing HIV-prevention projects, Ranjana did not pursue any typical *hijra* occupation and belonged to a higher economic stratum than both *chhallawalis* and *gharana hijras*, except perhaps senior *hijra gurus* who tend to be relatively wealthy. Thus, her identification as a *hijra* struck me as both atypical and significant, given her public stature as an activist.

In the course of an extended conversation, Ranjana recounted that she had decided to formally join a *hijra* group while retaining her NGO job and independent living arrangement and argued that these occupational and residential choices were not the determinants of actual *hijra* identity:

Many people may call themselves *hijras*, does that mean that they become *hijras*? The real criteria for becoming a *hijra* is not cutting off one's genitals or taking up the *dhol* (drum) to demand money for blessings ... If you have gone through the

rit (initiation) and been given the *anchal* (ceremonial blessing) by a senior *hijra* in a *gharana*, then only you are a *hijra*, and then it doesn't matter what else you do!

Ranjana described her initiation as a new trend in which *gharanas* were opening up to newer forms of recruitment to keep up with changing times when *hijra* occupations were harder to sustain, and to establish good relations with the emerging NGO-based movement for gender/sexual rights. While on one hand this broadens *hijra* identification by downplaying occupation and castration/penectomy, it insists on formal discipleship under a senior *hijra* leader within a lineage or *gharana* as the ultimate criteria of *hijra* legitimacy, in the absence of other markers of *hijra* belonging.

As Ranjana was well aware, this leaves out people who might both self-identify as *hijra* (or *chhibri*) and be perceived as such in public, without being strictly *gharana*-affiliated. Ranjana stressed that 'begging in trains' (*chhalla*) is forbidden to *chelas* in all three *gharanas* of West Bengal, and those who do *chhalla* are not actually *hijras* even if they have loose associations with *hijra* households (as *chhallawalis* like Moloy had). Ironically, cross-dressed 'beggars' in trains are among the most common representatives of the group recognized as '*hijra*' by the 'mainstream' public in Bengal, a recognition on which their occupation depends. To go by *gharana* affiliation, then, some of the most visible *hijras* in everyday life are not legitimate *hijras* at all.

During a 2011 interview on a television talk show in which Ranjana was called as a *hijra* activist,¹⁸⁰ she decided to clarify this point to the media:

See, my *gharana* is an authentic ('authentic' in English) *hijra gharana*. (But many people think that any man dressed in a *saree* or clapping their hands in trains is a *hijra* ... but they are not! *Hijra* is a tradition, *hijra* is a lineage, *hijra* is a practice, transmitted through a *guru-chela* system. The ones who beg or extort money in trains, they too are a kind of *hijra*, but they are not a part of *hijra* society.

Interviewer: But how are the common people supposed to understand this? The whole blame is being shifted to your community!

Ranjana: The matter is ... a few people have utilized it [the *hijra* identity] wrongly ... (but) the whole blame has fallen on our shoulders.

In this process of a *gharana*-based legitimization of *hijra* identity, the train *chhallawalis* appear both as inauthentic *hijras* who are really cross-dressed men, and disreputable beggars spoiling the public reputation of the legitimate '*hijra* society'. Though they remain 'a kind of *hijra*', they are not 'a part of *hijra* society' – an inauthentic yet hypervisible category of illegitimate *hijras*. This normative distinction, as Ranjana was well aware, is often contradicted in practice by *gharana hijras* themselves, especially given the ambiguities within *gharana* norms regarding low-tier *chelas*: during our interview, she decried certain wayward *hijra gurus* who continued to tolerate and even patronize *chhallawalis* as *chelas* despite being warned and sometimes even fined by their respective *gharana* heads.

¹⁸⁰ 'Bhalo Achhi Bhalo Theko', Tara Muzik, 2011.

From these examples, one could argue that the *gharanas* are a system of spatial consolidation, expanding a hierarchical kinship structure and associated norms of respectability and gendered authenticity over locally diverse practices and subject-positions that might claim visibility as *hijra*, and thus seeking to establish a normative territoriality over uneven spaces. In the process, the *gharana*-based kinship structure has to be strategically flexible, accommodating exceptional figures like Ranjana and Shyamoli-*ma* as required. Even as *hijra* occupations might be pursued by non-*gharana hijras* and forms of *hijra* kinship – such as the *guru-chela* relation – may be selectively replicated outside *gharanas*, the *hijra gharanas* contingently expand to include some outsiders, sometimes even permitting non-traditional professions. Overall, the desired effect is a consolidation of the *hijra* category through kinship, extending its incomplete discursive consolidation in colonial ethnology through postcolonial media and activist representations.

Cohen notes how *hijra* leaders have actively represented themselves to the national media as a ‘sexually underprivileged’ minority since at least the 1980s, appealing to the governmental function of the modern state to demand special concessions as a disadvantages population group.¹⁸¹ As Reddy has argued, this transforms the institutional representation of the *hijra* category from the asexual religiosity of ritual specialists to a

¹⁸¹ Cohen, ‘The Pleasures of Castration’, p. 297.

gender/sexual minority.¹⁸² But during this process, *gharana*-affiliated *hijras* have also forwarded the claims of ‘real’ *hijras* and exposed ‘fake’ ones, seeking to establish the boundaries of this minority identity based on *gharana* norms of authenticity and respectability over and above local distinctions or overlaps. For instance, Ranjana’s representation of ‘authentic’ *gharana hijras* as distinguished from inauthentic cross-dressed men recalls how *gharana* leaders such as Annapurna and Chandramukhi disparage *chhallawalis* for their gender shifting and overlap with masculinity, but also transforms such pre-existing tendencies by attempting to establish the truth of the *hijra* to the media.

This process has resulted in documented instances of police violence on ‘fake’ *hijras*.¹⁸³ For instance, in July 2012, the *Times of India*, a leading national English daily, reported that four ‘fake eunuchs’ had been arrested in a train near the north Indian city of Kanpur by policemen from the Railway Protection Force (RPF) for ‘harassing passengers’. A senior RPF official told the reporter, ‘we have got them medically examined and all the four are men. They harass and extort money from passengers on board trains’.¹⁸⁴ Their exposure as being really ‘men’ parallels Ranjana’s disparagement of ‘any man in a *saree*’, imposing a potentially violent standard of gender authenticity whether based on anatomy (castration/penectomy) or kinship (full initiation as a *hijra chela*). Later in July,

¹⁸² Reddy, G. 2005. ‘Geographies of Contagion: *Hijras*, *Kothis*, and the Politics of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad’, *Anthropology & Medicine* 12 (2005), pp. 255-70, here p. 262.

¹⁸³ ‘Real eunuchs beat fake ones’, *Hindustan Times*, 30 June 2005; Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’, p. 126.

¹⁸⁴ Times News Network, ‘Four Fake Eunuchs Held for Harassing Passengers’, *Times of India* 10 July 2012.

while visiting several community-based organizations for ‘sexual minorities’ in eastern West Bengal, I heard anecdotal evidence of similar incidents in the region where railway police would raid stations or commuter trains, harass and even strip-search the *chhallawalis*, and throw them off the train if found to be ‘fake’. ‘Sister, it is very difficult to do *chhalla* in trains, or even do sex work in public spaces,’ one of my respondents at a community-based organization in South Kolkata complained. ‘This is forcing people to go for castration’, said Sanjana, a senior member of the organization. These examples suggest that distinctions between real *hijras* and cross-dressed ‘men’ might be gaining increasing normative force and effect in the daily lives of poor gender-variant persons who pursue occupations such as *chhalla*. Significantly, as described in the subsequent chapters, such ongoing processes of *hijra* representation and distinction have also been formalized in the state-sanctioned cartography of identities within national AIDS policy, where, since 2007, *hijras* have been defined as a distinct transvestite ‘socio-religious group’ organized ‘under seven main *gharanas*’ and ‘covered under the term ‘transgender’’, distinct from non-*hijra* male-assigned persons such as *kothis* who become grouped as feminine MSM (men who have sex with men).¹⁸⁵

Conclusion: Collusion and (dis)continuity

To conclude, I will return to questions about historical continuity, postcolonial emergence and historical determinants with reference to these processes of identity

¹⁸⁵ National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1: *Core High Risk Groups* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2007), p. 12.

formation. I have attempted to demonstrate how the *hijra* emerges as a (seemingly) coherent identity through the collusions of multiple subcultural and governmental processes. An epistemology of these collusions must necessarily bridge multiple sites of enquiry – ranging from colonial censuses and ethnology to contemporary media representations and the territoriality and kinship system of the *gharanas*, all of which have contributed to consolidate the identity in official discourses. As an ongoing process of consolidation across subcultural and institutional registers, *hijra* identity formation speaks to the aforementioned debates about the historical continuity or emergence of gender/sexual identities in South Asia. While Kaviraj argues that South Asian communities have had ‘fuzzy’ and overlapping boundaries,¹⁸⁶ it appears that *hijra* and non-*hijra* distinctions have not been uniformly ‘fuzzy’, but rather, there have been translocally variegated cartographies. For Kaviraj, modern governmental instruments such as maps and censuses have a determinant influence in the rise of territorially bounded and enumerated identities.¹⁸⁷ However, as argued above, the contradictory ethnological discourse on eunuchs produced via colonial censuses failed to create a coherent *hijra* category: it is rather the seemingly traditional *gharana* kinship system, with its associated logic of territoriality, that actively undertakes the ongoing process of consolidation more effectively. Functioning through ritualized practices like *badhai* that are not directly describable in terms of capitalistic exchange relations or commodity chains, the translocal kinship system of the *gharanas* is not easily reducible to the terms of ‘capital’ or ‘nation’, which as argued previously, have often functioned as explicatory rubrics for the

¹⁸⁶ Kaviraj, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’, pp. 21-26.

¹⁸⁷ Kaviraj, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’, p. 27.

emergence of gender/sexual identities in scholars like Jackson and Boellstorff. Yet the *gharanas* interact with the governmental state to establish norms of identification, thus belying Boellstorff and Jackson's relative devalorization of 'pre-capitalist traditions' in the formation of contemporary gender/sexual identities.

The role of the *hijra gharanas* seems to corroborate Guha's argument that 'the warm fuzzy continuum of pre-modern collective life was not ... arbitrarily sliced up by colonial modernity',¹⁸⁸ but rather, as Bayly contends, an indigenous 'critical public' was already in place from the pre-colonial period, and has actively participated in constituting various 'modern' identities.¹⁸⁹ However, as Chatterjee argues, the interaction of communities and (post)colonial institutions brings about profound changes such as 'a deepening of the web of governmentality ... as practices of everyday life among rural people',¹⁹⁰ extending the reach of governmental institutions and discourses outside metropolitan centers. The 'determinant' in these processes of dis/continuous transformation and change is thus impossible to locate either inside or outside any totality defined as 'capitalism' or 'modernity', and suggests an articulation of disparate logics such as *gharana* territoriality and postcolonial governmentality. The collusive articulations between *gharana* kinship and media, NGO and state discourses to construct a bounded and 'authentic' subject of governmental welfare result in a historical rupture in identity formations. The consolidation of a translocal *hijra* identity and the increasingly standardized distinction between *hijra* and other categories both vernacularizes translocally varied discourses of gender/sexual

¹⁸⁸ Guha, 'The Politics of Identity', p. 162.

¹⁸⁹ Bayly, 'Returning the British to South Asian History', p. 9.

¹⁹⁰ Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, p. 92.

marginality relative to an emergent national cartography of identity, and elides the shifting boundaries and overlaps between subcultural categories, potentially delegitimizing and circumscribing the quotidian discourses and lived practices of various marginal subjects.

Chapter 2: The Cartography of MSM: The Consolidation and Vernacularization of the *Kothi* in the ‘HIV-AIDS Industry’

‘First we knew only *kothi* and *hijra*, but since then there have been so many terms... then we heard MSM, then TG, then trans woman, and so on...’

- Sonia, member and activist working with Koshish (CBO), Kolkata

Introduction

Parallel to the consolidation of the *hijra* as a category of identitarian representation, several non-*hijra* categories of gender variance emerged as significant categories of identity in the sphere of organized activism for gender/sexual rights and health in India in the late 1990s. Even as the *kothi* gained visibility within institutional (NGO, funder and state) networks as a cultural category of feminine male-assigned persons who desire men, MSM (men who have sex with men) emerged as a transnational rubric for male-assigned gender/sexually variant persons who did not identify as gay, including *kothi*. The late 2000s saw the further emergence of transgender or TG as an umbrella term for gender variant persons, including *hijra* and sometimes *kothi* as sub-categories. Whether at the level of institutional definitions or the negotiation of identity within communities and subcultures, the definition of MSM, *kothi* and TG and the fixing of their categorical boundaries vis-à-vis each other have been contested processes. As Sonia’s quote attests, there may be a sense of transition from relatively simpler time with fewer terms of

identification to a proliferating, complex and confusing lexicon. But as we shall see, rather than just the import or adaptation of new terms, this proliferation may have occurred as much through translocal consolidations of subcultural vocabularies within India, which enabled the translation and hegemony of Anglophone terminology circulated via transnational GLBT and HIV-AIDS activism.

This chapter will chart the intersections and translations between institutional and subcultural discourses that enabled the increasing circulation of *kothi* as a non-*hijra* identity, and its vernacularization as a regionalized sub-category of MSM. This circulation was enabled through an emerging institutional network of NGOs and CBOs (non-governmental and community-based organizations) working on HIV-AIDS and GLBT rights, particularly from the late 1990s onward. This period evidenced increasing conjunctures between transnational funders, the Indian state, and large city-based NGOs working on groups they defined as ‘sexual minorities’, resulting in a loose formation or assemblage that Khanna has termed the ‘HIV-AIDS’ industry.¹⁹¹ However, this institutional formation extends beyond just HIV-AIDS activism to also encompass issues like sexual minority rights and community empowerment. Funders and NGOs facilitated and depended on the emergence of smaller community-based organizations (CBOs) within and outside metropolitan cities to promote the developmental agendas of sexual health and rights. The *kothi* soon emerged as a salient category within this expanding formation in multiple senses – a community that was less elite and more indigenous than

¹⁹¹ Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A Political Economy of Development’s Sexual Subject’, *Development* 52 (2009), pp. 43-51, see esp. p. 49.

the gay identity, a vulnerable target group for HIV intervention and empowerment, and a crucial constituency of workers and low-tier activists represented by the CBOs. However, as briefly noted before, the institutional emergence of the *kothi* also prompted several important academic and activist critiques. Countering its indigenist usages, Boyce and Khanna emphasize the role of state- and donor-funded HIV-AIDS interventions in constructing the *kothi* as a vulnerable Indian sub-group within the globalizing category of MSM (men who have sex with men) used in transnational HIV-AIDS prevention discourse.¹⁹² Paul Boyce argues that the reification of the *kothi* ‘a culturally indigenous category with self-evident meanings’ excludes more ‘complex understandings of sexual subjectivity’,¹⁹³ and Cohen critiques the creation of *kothi* as a ‘black box’ concept, an unquestioned cultural category for same-sex desire in the HIV-AIDS discourse.¹⁹⁴ Cohen argues that *kothi* communities often grew around NGOs and NGO workers, though he notes in passing that *hijra* networks could have also aided its dissemination.¹⁹⁵ While these accounts of the emergence of *kothi* are not unidimensional or just top-down, they largely focus on role of metropolitan NGO networks in mediating the formation of the *kothi* or enabling the conditions of its emergence. In this aspect, such accounts inadvertently parallel the common activist/media narrative of metropole-to-periphery globalization of GLBT rights, even as they critique that trajectory.

¹⁹² Boyce, P. 2007. ‘Conceiving Kothis: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India and the Cultural Subject of HIV Prevention’, *Medical Anthropology*, 26 (2007), pp. 175-203, see esp. pp. 181-2; Khanna, A. 2009. ‘Taming of the Shrewd Meyeli Chhele: A Political Economy of Development's Sexual Subject’, *Development* 52 (2009), pp. 43-51, see esp. pp. 49-50.

¹⁹³ Boyce, ‘Conceiving Kothis’, p. 178.

¹⁹⁴ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 285.

¹⁹⁵ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, pp. 278, 285, 293.

In this chapter, I will build upon such critiques of the reification of *kothi* as a culturally indigenous category, but at the same time, qualify the potential metrocentricity of the argument about *kothi* emergence. As I will argue, the reification of indigeneity marks an important logic of vernacularization. The institutional emergence of the *kothi* exemplifies both the retrieval or recuperation of sites of non-elite gender/sexual variance to provide authenticity and legitimacy to NGO projects, and their simultaneous subordination as localized vernacular discourses relative to official transnational cartographies of identity, producing them as a culturally bounded, ‘traditional’, disempowered and ‘backward’ target group. Even as the HIV-AIDS and NGO sector retrieves ‘Indian’ identities to gain cultural legibility and spatial reach for developmental agendas, *kothi* is simultaneously translated into and subsumed within the transnational rubric of ‘men having sex with men’. However, qualifying the aforementioned epistemological focus on metropolitan institutional agency, I will also explore the role of lower class subcultural networks spanning metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in the emergence of *kothi* and its translation as a regionalized sub-category of MSM. I will chart how emerging institutions and NGOs for gender/sexual rights and sexual health crucially depended on extant non-metropolitan subcultures, particularly on the aforementioned networks of lower class gender-variant males (or male-assigned persons) with varying extents of distinction or overlap with *hijra gharanas*. The increasing usage of *kothi* in West Bengal has relied on its correspondences with older subcultural terms such as *dhurani* and *dhunuri*. Even as the *hijra* becomes a more bounded term in official discourses, emerging usages of the *kothi* attempt to standardize the distinction of subcultural networks from *hijras*,

complimenting and reinforcing the categorical consolidation of the *hijra*. This chapter therefore follows up on the overview of the *gharana*-based consolidation of the *hijra* category by analyzing how the consolidation of the *kothi* as a non-*hijra* MSM identity evidences the collusion of NGOs and governmental technologies of HIV-AIDS control with subcultural networks that may overlap with *hijra* identification, but are less structured than the *hijra gharanas*.

As I argue, the emergence of *kothi* as an MSM group, through both the strategic recuperation of cultural categories and their scalar subordination, indicates forms of vernacularization in at least two senses. Firstly, the subsumption of *kothi* as an MSM sub-category casts it as a culturally static and relatively localized identity, eliding its ongoing dynamic construction by both NGOs and communities. Even as the globalizing MSM rubric expands into India through institutionally constrained translations with translocal discourses of gender/sexual difference, the cartography of MSM sub-groups *selectively* reifies preexisting logics of gender/sexual differentiation from their dynamic contextual forms, standardizing contextually variable divisions between more and less feminine community members and attendant negotiations with marginality and privilege. Here, it is pertinent to revisit Althusser's theorization of articulation as contingent linkages between different levels of the social whole that maintain a relative degree of autonomy vis-à-vis each other, and cannot be reduced to a singular temporality or historicity.¹⁹⁶ I envisage translations between MSM/TG cartographies and subcultural distinctions of

¹⁹⁶ Althusser, L. 1965/1970. The errors of classical economics. In Althusser, L. & Balibar, E. *Reading capital* (B. Brewster, trans.). London: New Left Books. (Original work published 1965), see esp. p. 104.

gender/sexual variance as one particular mode of articulation between institutional imperatives and subcultural formations. I will particularly build upon Lefevere's theorization of translation as 'refractions' or adaptations of a text to a different audience within the ideological and economic constraints of the literary system within which translation takes place.¹⁹⁷ While Lefevere's theory is largely confined to literary analysis, I extend its purview into non-literary domains of translation, studying how linguistic demarcations used among *dhuranis*, *kothis* and *hijras* are translated into an official cartography of identity, and vice-versa, within systemic constraints such as the construction of bounded populations as vulnerable 'high risk groups' for governmental technologies of AIDS control. As Chatterjee has argued, vast sections of postcolonial societies without access to stable citizenship and rights must represent themselves as enumerable 'population groups' to be counted as 'targets of particular governmental policies'.¹⁹⁸ The formation of institutionally legible populations with statistically enumerable disadvantages (such as rates of HIV-infection) becomes crucial for access to 'governmental policies'. These processes contribute to the hegemonic construction of an MSM cartography legible to transnational funders, the state and NGOs, and feed into the elision and 'vernacularization' of quotidian (sub)cultural discourse and contextually dynamic usages of the *kothi*, as already seen in case of the consolidation of the *hijra*.

¹⁹⁷ Lefevere, A. 2000. 'Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature', in Venuti, Lawrence. (Ed). *The Translation Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁹⁸ Chatterjee, P. 2008. 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 19 April: 53-62; here p. 58.

Secondly, the simultaneous recuperation and subsumption of subcultural terms under the MSM rubric also accompanies the strategic use of ‘community-based’ labor within the political economy of CBOs, NGOs and funders, such that *kothi* is also produced as an exploitable group. While HIV-AIDS interventions involve and depend on non-elite and/or non-metropolitan gender variant persons through discourses of ‘community-based organization’ that seemingly promote non-metropolitan participation and empowerment from below, institutional hierarchies devalue low-tier labor and the knowledge of subcultural languages and spaces without which finding ‘target groups’ for HIV-AIDS control would be impossible, parallel to the broader devaluation of vernacular(ized) linguistic knowledge. As noted by feminist critiques of development, the general devaluation of feminized labor within transnational economies is often replicated within the development sector.¹⁹⁹ I extend this critique by studying how the establishment of labor hierarchies that devalue feminized labor corresponds with the vernacularization of knowledges, languages, and attendant skills. This also points to the mutual alignment of hierarchies of scale and gender/sexuality, as transnational feminists have argued.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Naples, N. & Desai, M. (Eds). (2002). *Women’s activism and globalization: Linking local struggles and transnational politics*. New York: Routledge; Poster, W. & Salime, Z. (2002). ‘The limits of microcredit: Transnational feminism and USAID activities in the United States and Morocco’. In A. Naples & Desai M. (Eds). *Women’s activism and globalization: Linking local struggles and transnational politics*. New York, NY: Routledge; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, R. (2006). *Playing with fire: Feminist thought and activism through seven lives in India*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Nagar, R. & Faust, D. 2001. ‘English-medium Education, Social Fracturing and the Politics of Development in Postcolonial India’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2878-2883.

²⁰⁰ Massey, D. 1993. ‘Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place’, in Jon Bird et al. (Eds.), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge; Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press; Nagar, R., Lawson, V., McDowell L. and Hanson, L. 2002. ‘Locating Globalization: Feminist (re)readings of the subjects and spaces of globalization’, *Economic Geography* 78:3: p. 257-284;

While institutional-subcultural translations enable the hegemony of metropolitan funders and NGOs, such translations are slippery and negotiations of identity and community within communities cannot be entirely controlled by state and NGO apparatuses. Through such an analysis of translation as articulation, I modify a Foucauldian analysis to suggest that governmental technologies and the biopolitical constitution of populations do not diffusely encompass the entire social field, but rather are particular modalities of power that are articulated with (sub)cultural logics of community formation (which may predate and exceed their biopolitical function) through contingent processes of translation. In this regard, Spivak's approach to translation may help to guard against the potential institutional determinism of Lefevre's theory of institutional constraints – as Spivak puts it, in translation meaning enters into the 'spacy emptiness between languages', and is actuated through perilous, contingent and slippery linkages.²⁰¹ The open-ended nature of translation results in shifting, contingent articulations and fractured hegemony rather than a coherent uniform cartography of MSM.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section charts how locally variegated networks, like the *dhurani* circles of Kolkata and Ranaghat or the *dhunuris* of Berhampore, are translocally consolidated as *kothi* and then vernacularized as an MSM

Mountz, A. & Heindman, J. 2006. 'Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1/2), 446-463; Nagar, R. (2008). Languages of Collaboration. In P. Moss & K. Falconer Al-Hindi (Ed.s), *Feminisms in Geography: Rethinking Space, Place, and Knowledges*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 120-129.

²⁰¹ Spivak, G. C. 2000. 'The Politics of Translation', in Venuti, Lawrence. (Ed). *The Translation Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

sub-category, constructing, in Foucauldian terms, ‘domains and objects of knowledge’ for an emerging funder-state-NGO nexus.²⁰² Over the second and third sections, I describe how extant tendencies of identity formation evidenced through subcultural languages collude with institutional cartography, creating hegemonic identities at the intra-community level - even as there are continuing alternative usages of the *kothi* that contradict or challenge the official cartography of MSM.

I. The Arrival of MSM: Consolidating Target Groups for HIV-AIDS Prevention

Kothi does not seem to have been a widespread usage among the subcultural networks in West Bengal before the late 1990s, nor (as Lawrence Cohen notes) in North Indian cities like Varanasi.²⁰³ However, while not commonplace, it was known among some participants within the older generation of the Berhampore network. For instance, Shyam recalled that he had heard of the term only after Annapurna and her friends joined *hijra gharanas*, and speculated that such terms might have come from Andhra Pradesh (south India) and Bihar (central north India). Similarly, Shyamoli-*ma*’s disciples in Ranaghat such as Subhash narrated that they may have come across the term through Shyamoli-*ma*’s network of disciples who did *chhalla* and *lagan*, which stretched to Bihar and other parts of north India. ‘I think we started hearing of *kothi* from the time of Shyamoli-*ma* onward’, Subhash speculatively explained to me. However, they seemed to have used the

²⁰² Foucault, M. (auth.), M. Senellart, F. Ewald, A. Fontata and A.I. Davidson (eds.), 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, tr. G. Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 118.

²⁰³ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 272.

term much less frequently than it is used today – in fact, Subhash still mostly uses *dhurani* and *hijra* when referring to his peers, disciples or seniors. But since the late 1990s, *kothi* gained extensive usage within NGOs and CBOs across India and community networks in West Bengal, alongside terms like *dhurani*, *dhunuri* or *moga* for older community members, and sometimes replacing these terms for the younger generation.

Following the increasing visibility of *kothi* as both an NGO and subcultural usage in the late 1990s, in the mid-2000s it entered the AIDS-control policy lexicon of the Indian state as a sub-group of MSM (men who have sex with men), a ‘high risk group’ (HRG) for HIV infection. The emerging definition of the *kothi* in HIV-AIDS discourse is summarized in the guidelines for the third phase of the National AIDS Control Policy (NACP-III, 2007-2012): *kothis* are males ‘showing varying degrees of femininity’ and ‘involved mainly ... in receptive anal/oral sex with men’, called *parikh* in West Bengal and *panthi* elsewhere in India.²⁰⁴ Defined as feminine MSM, *kothis* are distinct from *hijras* who are described as lineage-based ‘transgenders’ or TG’, though the guidelines concede in passing that ‘self-identified hijras may also identify ... as kothis’ (but not vice versa).²⁰⁵ These official distinctions thus potentially override overlapping subject positions, such as the *chhallawalis* of the previous chapter, who might switch between *dhurani*, *kothi* and *hijra/chhibri* as terms of self-reference or public presentation.

²⁰⁴ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1, p. 12.

²⁰⁵ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1, p. 12.

Metropolitan organizing and the expansion of community-based activism

To chart the emergence of this official cartography, I will elaborate on the processes through which NGOs in eastern India interact with, draw from and mediate lower class and non-metropolitan subcultural usages. As previously mentioned, the institutional movement for gender/sexual rights in Eastern India may be said to properly begin with the two Kolkata collectives, the Counsel Club and the Naz Calcutta Project, which were both formed in 1993, and subsequently helped the formation of activist groups in Kolkata and beyond.²⁰⁶ They were loosely affiliated with two larger rival non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that pioneered the combination of HIV/AIDS-prevention and GBT activism in India: the Counsel Club with the Humsafar Trust, and Naz Calcutta with the Naz Foundation International (NFI). The Humsafar Trust and the NFI were associated respectively with Ashok Row Kavi and Shivananda Khan, leading national activists and professional rivals who built connections with both transnational LGBT activism and HIV-AIDS funding during the 1990s, garnering support from a diverse array of funders, including UN agencies such as UNAIDS, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), and gradually the Indian state's health ministry.²⁰⁷ According to the accounts of Sarswata and Ranjana (the transgender/*hijra* activist whom we met in the last chapter), the separation and implicit rivalry between Counsel Club and Naz Calcutta resulted in a bifurcated genealogy of subsequent organizations. As per Ranjana's account,

²⁰⁶ Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100.

²⁰⁷ On the rivalry between Humsafar Trust and NFI, see Cohen, 'The Kothi Wars', p. 270; On the emerging patterns of funding, see Joseph, S. 2005. *Social Work Practice and Men who have sex with Men*. New Delhi: Sage Publications; Cohen, 'The Kothi Wars', p. 270-280; 'History of INFOSEM', available at <http://www.infosem.org/about.htm> (Accessed May 8, 2013).

all CBOs in or near Kolkata emerged from either the Counsel Club or Naz Calcutta camps:

Swikriti came out of the Counsel Club group, and then from Swikriti came Sangram; and Pratyay came out of Praajak (a collective that had emerged in the aftermath of the Naz Calcutta project), and from Pratyay, other groups emerged, like PLUS and Bandhan, and from them, Kolkata Rista, Koshish (other CBOs based in or around Kolkata).

She instructed that I write down this history: ‘you should know this for your work’. However, such a quasi-official construction of a metrocentric genealogy, emphasizing the almost parental role of the early big city groups – in keeping with Ranjana’s role as a salaried activist working in a large metropolitan NGO – may be contested, and the respective leadership of newer CBOs have understandably tended to claim more independent histories for their collectives. For example, Sonia, the activist from Koshish, insisted that while she had frequented both Praajak and Counsel Club, she was a member of neither group, and independently formed Koshish with some of her friends in a neighborhood of South Kolkata over 2003-04. Indeed, if she had a parent, she joked, it was Minto Park, a cruising area in central Kolkata and its attendant network, through which she had been initiated into the language: ‘Minto Park is my *ma!*’

Moreover, apart from the contribution of lower middle and lower class cruising networks within Kolkata, early city-based initiatives like Counsel Club also gradually intersected with several other strands of mobilization outside the city. We have previously come across the article entitled ‘Homosexual magazine being sold openly’, which ran in the

Bengali newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika* in 1995: this report, and a subsequent 1999 article in the same newspaper on emergent lesbian organizing entitled ‘*Chhaichapa Fire*’ (‘Ash-stifled Fire’), reached several small-town readers.²⁰⁸ (The second article referenced Sappho for Equality, the pioneering collective of lesbian and bisexual women in eastern India, which was formed in 1999 by a group of six middle class feminist activists in Kolkata – but that is a different story).²⁰⁹ Sarswata, who was like Ranajay from a small northern suburb and a pioneer in small-town organizing, narrated his discovery of these two articles to me as crucial moments of political initiation, enabling his movement from a relative suburban isolation to metropolitan activism. But like Ranajay, he did not just move to the city as might be expected from the typical metrocentric tendency of queer migration in the west, a pattern documented by Kath Weston and others.²¹⁰ Rather, even as they looked to the metropolis, activists like Sarwsata and Ranajay often continued to live and work in smaller towns like Berhampore and Ranaghat and helped establish CBOs there, thus playing significant roles in the rapid state-wide expansion of organizations in the 2000s. Thus, parallel to the trans/national networks through which the Kolkata groups established contacts with other metropolitan activists and funders, their reach also expanded into non-metropolitan areas. Activist and academic narratives commonly attribute this expansion to the organizational initiatives of groups like Counsel Club, which organized networking meets in Kolkata, and subsequently expanded outward

²⁰⁸ ‘Prakashye Bikri Hochchhe Samakami Patrika’, *Anandabazar Patrika*, 1995.

²⁰⁹ On the emergence of lesbian feminist activism in Kolkata, see *Swakanthey (In her own voice)*, Kolkata: Sappho for Equality, 2000-2013; Also see the Sappho and Sappho for Equality website, <http://sapphokolkata.org/sappho/> (Accessed May 9, 2013).

²¹⁰ Weston, K. 1995. ‘Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration’. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2(3): pp. 253-277.

into the districts: ‘By 2000, Counsel Club (had) established satellite groups in four districts of West Bengal’.²¹¹

This emphasis on metropolitan institutional agency that ostensibly drives organizational expansion outward from the big city elides not only the involvement of small-town activists but also translocal *dhurani-dhunuri-hijra* subcultural networks, which often actively facilitated non-metropolitan institutionalization. After Counsel Club disbanded in the early 2000s, Ranajay became associated with Dum Dum Swikriti Society, which was established in 2003 under Sarswata’s leadership in Dum Dum, a northern suburb of Kolkata, and included several people who had formerly participated in Counsel Club. Ranajay helped expand its reach to towns like Ranaghat through his prior contacts with cruising and *hijra* networks. Shyamoli-*ma*’s *chelas* played a significant role in this process – as *chhallawalis* traveling and working in commuter trains and market areas, they came to know of HIV-prevention projects in Kolkata and other small towns. After Ranajay came into touch with this network, Shyamoli-*ma* offered her *khol* in Ranaghat as the office of the first project that opened in Nadia region in 2006, which was initially administered by MANAS Bangla, a CBO network based in Kolkata, and was subsequently taken over by Swikriti after Shyamoli-*ma*’s death. Meanwhile, a participant in the Berhampore network heard about Kolkata CBOs through the Bengali media, and started visiting Swikriti meetings in the mid-2000s. Around the same time, Sarswata propitiously happened to shift to Berhampore himself with a tenured job as a professor in the humanities at a local college. Gradually gaining familiarity with the Berhampore

²¹¹ Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100.

circle, Sarswata helped establish the CBO Madhya Banglar Sangram there in 2006. Several such small-town CBOs, including Sangram and Swikriti, joined an organizational network named MANAS Bangla. MANAS was constituted in 2003 under the leadership of activists (including Sarswata) bridging both the erstwhile Counsel Club and Naz Calcutta/Praajak/Pratyay sides, and was active in the 2003-2012 period. Several of these CBOs also joined a nationwide network, INFOSEM (India Network of Sexual Minorities, subsequently renamed Integrated Network of Sexual Minorities), which was also established in 2003 under the initiative of the old and powerful organization Humsafar Trust in Mumbai.²¹²

The shift from informal networks (whether of middle class activists or lower class *chhallawalis*) to institutional networking and expansion was fostered by the increasing availability of funding for HIV-AIDS prevention from western and multilateral funders during the 1990s, later joined the Indian state. From the early 1990s onward, transnational meetings such as the International AIDS Conferences, which were attended by NFI and Humsafar delegates, evidenced a growing global awareness of the AIDS epidemic. Donors like the UK's DFID (Department for International Development) began to provide funds for mapping vulnerable groups and community outreach through larger NGOs such as the Naz Foundation International.²¹³ Later in the 2000s, the National AIDS Control Programmes (NACPs) of the Indian state's health ministry also supported HIV-intervention projects administered by 'sexual minority' organizations (even as other

²¹² On the emergence of INFOSEM, see 'History of INFOSEM', available at <http://www.infosem.org/about.htm> (Accessed May 8, 2013).

²¹³ Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100.

wings of the state opposed the decriminalization of homosexuality, as we shall see in the fifth chapter). On the other hand, the formation of CBOs and CBO networks such as MANAS Bangla also exemplified an increasingly prominent discourse and practice of community-based empowerment and organizing, both claimed by activist networks such as MANAS, and increasingly valorized by the policies of transnational and national funders (as detailed in a subsequent section, the National AIDS Control Programme advocated the shift to community-based interventions from 2007 onward; moreover, in 2011, MANAS Bangla was recognized as one of six successful ‘community-based HIV intervention projects’ for ‘MSM-TG-*hijra*’ in India by the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] in a report which also lauded INFOSEM for ‘developing... community related activities’).²¹⁴ On one hand, the discourse of ‘community-based’ mobilization signals how interventions for HIV-prevention and empowerment came to crucially involve and depend on non-metropolitan and non-elite ‘communities’ like the aforementioned subcultural networks; on the other, it also serves to conceal the persistence and reproduction of metrocentric organizational structures that continued beyond the early metropolitan groups. While conceptualized as a community-based network, MANAS Bangla functioned for most of its existence as a relatively centralized organization with its nodal hub in Kolkata.²¹⁵ Though smaller CBOs like Sangram were

²¹⁴ UNDP, ‘From the Frontline of Community Action: A Compendium of Six Successful Community Based HIV Interventions That Have Worked for MSM- TG-Hijras in India’. UNDP, April 30 2011. Available at http://www.undp.org/content/india/en/home/library/hiv_aids/from-the-frontline-of-community-action--a-compendium-of-six-succ/ (Accessed May 9, 2013).

²¹⁵ Subsequently, Manas Bangla was decentralised into several zones from 2010 onward; however, this decentralization was often accompanied by allegations of the continuing dominance of certain activists. In 2012, MANAS Bangla collapsed due to a combination of these internal

technically equal members of MANAS, in practice, the administration was largely conducted from the Kolkata office, which received and disbursed HIV-prevention funds from the state to the project offices of MANAS Bangla in various parts of West Bengal, administered by members of some (but not all) of its constituent CBOs. For example, Swikriti was closely associated with MANAS Bangla's HIV-intervention projects at Dum Dum and Ranaghat and subsequently took over the Ranaghat project, but there was no corresponding project in Murshidabad associated with Sangram, or with several other CBOs like Koshish or Kolkata Rista. Thus, MANAS Bangla effectively functioned like a separate NGO and a selective intermediary funder even as it claimed representational legitimacy as an equal network of 'grass-root level CBOs'. Constituent CBOs entered a tiered metrocentric structure wherein access to donor and state funds was mediated via larger organizations – as we shall see later, this was one of the factors that prompted various CBOs to become alienated from MANAS and form their separate network. Some of the aforementioned organizations and networks are summarized in the table below.

Organization name	Year estd.	Official Mission Statements	Geog. Area
Naz Foundation International (International NGO)	1991 (registered 1996)	'With a primary focus on low-income marginalised males who have sex with males, our mission is to empower socially excluded and stigmatised males to secure for themselves social justice, equity, health and well-being through technical, financial and institutional support, along with advocacy to support this.' (http://www.nfi.net/mission.htm)	UK; South Asia (India, Bangladesh) ; South-east Asia.
Humsafar Trust (Large, pioneering CBO)	1994	'Empowering the spectrum of MSM and TG community since 1994. Humsafar's Mission Statement: A holistic approach to the rights and health of sexual minorities and	Mumbai, Maharashtra , India.

ruptures and allegations of corruption by the West Bengal State AIDS Control Society, the state subsidiary of the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO).

		promoting rational attitudes to sexuality’ (http://www.humsafar.org/)	
Pratyay Gender Trust (NGO – Trust)	1998	‘The Pratyay Gender Trust is a sexuality rights initiative that was started in 1997-98 by members of Calcutta’s kothi, hijda and other gender non-conforming/ transgender women who remain excluded from the mainstay of broad human rights movements. Pratyay aims at empowering transgender women to live their lives with dignity, free from violence & discriminations (...)’ (http://www.facebook.com/PratyayGenderTrust/info)	West Bengal (Kolkata, North Bengal)
SAATHII (Solidarity and Action against the HIV Infection in India) (International NGO)	2000	‘SAATHII strengthens the capacities of individuals and organizations working on HIV prevention, care, support and treatment, and sexual and reproductive health interventions in India through information dissemination, networking, operational research, advocacy, training and other technical assistance services.’ (http://www.saathii.org/about)	India, USA.
Dum Dum Swikriti Society (CBO)	2003	‘ <i>Dum Dum Swikriti Society</i> is a community-based organization that works for the social equality, human rights and sexual health of persons marginalized for their sexual orientations or gender identities. <i>Swikriti</i> fosters the mainstream acceptance and recognition of diverse gender/sexually marginalized people, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, <i>Kothi</i> , <i>Hijra</i> and other sexual minorities’	West Bengal (North 24 Parganas, Nadia, Kolkata).
Kolkata Rista (CBO)	2003	‘a) To empower targeted LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) groups through adult literacy and awareness building programmes; b) To combat trafficking of children and “kothi”s (an Indian term for men behaving like women) in sexual exploitative situations; c) To create information and awareness on general health, STD and HIV/AIDS (...)’	West Bengal (Kolkata, South 24 Parganas).
Koshish (CBO)	2004	‘Koshish is working with gender diversity, sexual health and human rights. It was founded in 2004 on the initiative of a few MTH (MSM, Transgender and Hijra) friends, wanting to find a space in society with sexual preferences, gender variances and same sex relationships.’	West Bengal (Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Bankura, Bardhaman)
MANAS Bangla (CBO Network)	2004	‘MANAS Bangla is a state wide network of 13 (thirteen) grass root level CBOs with the	Network Spanning

		common agenda of social advocacy around issues related to males marginalised for their non-conventional sexualities and/or gender non-conformity and promotion of their sexual health and rights in the state of West Bengal. (http://www.ngogateway.org/user_homepage/index.php?id=672)	West Bengal.
Madhya Sangram (CBO)	Banglar	2006	“Sangram’ is an organization that fights for the acceptance and human rights of those people who are marginalized for their different sexual orientation, or for falling outside of social gender constructions.’ West Bengal (Murshidabad).

Table 1. Partial list of NGOs and CBOs working in West Bengal and India.

(N.B. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but covers some of the significant organizations at the India level (Humsafar Trust, Naz Foundation International, SAATHII), and some of the salient CBOs or CBO networks in West Bengal (MANAS Bangla, Dum Dum Swikriti Society, Madhya Banglar Sangram, etc.). The mission descriptions of the groups are the most recently available ones cited from official brochures, pamphlets or web sites in English, and have evolved over the years (e.g. ‘transgender’ was a later entry as a term). All of these organizations primarily work with male-assigned persons even though the ‘GLBT’ or ‘LGBT’ acronym may be used in some official representations. I was personally involved in translating and adapting the Bengali pamphlets for Swikriti and Sangram into their English versions, cited above.)

Kothi becomes MSM: The Recuperation and Subsumption of Subcultural Language

The arrival of trans/national HIV-AIDS funding was accompanied and aided by various ‘baseline’ or ‘needs-assessment’ surveys to ‘map’ male-assigned gender/sexually marginalized groups and ‘assess’ their needs, initially conducted by large metropolitan organizations like NFI and Humsafar, and later by smaller CBOs and CBO networks. ‘Around the late 90s, we started doing the needs-assessment surveys’, Sarswata told me; there were at least two such surveys in Kolkata, ‘one in 1996 and one around 1999-2000’. These surveys were directed at trans/national funders and aimed to demonstrate the health and rights-related requirements of communities that were now termed ‘sexual minorities’,

particularly male-assigned gender/sexually marginalized people who were seen as being at higher risk for HIV-AIDS relative to most women or female-assigned persons (except female sex workers). The first survey in Kolkata was undertaken by the Naz Calcutta project, which generated the report ‘STD/HIV outreach among sexual networks of men who have sex with men in Calcutta’, presented at the International AIDS Conference in 1996.²¹⁶ This was followed by a survey by Integration Society, the activist arm of Counsel Club, in which Sarswata himself took part as a surveyor.²¹⁷ There were similar surveys in other cities like Mumbai, where Humsafar Trust conducted at least four ‘Baseline Studies’ between 1999 and 2005.²¹⁸

Through these surveys, activists like Sarswata were introduced to lower and lower middle class spaces in and around Kolkata before the formation of CBOs, identifying vulnerable populations for HIV-AIDS prevention. At the same time, surveyors also picked up subcultural language; as Sarswata narrated, ‘we learnt words like *dhurani* and the language of *ulti* through these field visits’. As the surveys extended beyond middle class gay-identified circles and discovered these ‘languages’, the categories to be used to identify lower class or non-metropolitan communities became a contentious question in metropolitan NGO circuits. The most salient subcultural term that gained national currency within NGOs was not *dhurani* or *dhunuri* used in West Bengal, but rather the

²¹⁶ NFI, 1996. ‘STD/HIV Outreach among Sexual Networks of Men Who Have Sex With Men in Calcutta’, Naz (Calcutta) Project, Kolkata (1996),

<<http://www.aegis.org/DisplayContent/download.aspx?type=pdf§ionID=299635>>

²¹⁷ Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100.

²¹⁸ These studies are available at http://www.humsafar.org/research_papers.htm, (Accessed May 15, 2013).

word *kothi*, which became the first and most prominent subcultural term (apart from *hijra*) to be circulated within NGO and funding networks. As Cohen argues in his critique of the institutional emergence of the *kothi*, the word was discovered during surveys on male sex workers in Chennai by Sahodaran, an NGO associated with Naz Foundation International, and seemed to have signified a spectrum of ‘feminine’ or gender-variant persons in some South Indian cities.²¹⁹ Cohen argues that field visits by Naz Foundation and its affiliates in the late 1990s mapped the *kothi* as a disempowered minority group, and subsequently expanded it to places where the term had not been used before.²²⁰ In a Foucauldian vein, Cohen’s critique suggests that the conditions for the emergence of the *kothi* emerged within and through biopolitical technologies of surveillance and mapping, such that *kothi* communities formed as a ‘new social fact’ around NGO workers in cities like Mumbai. Qualifying Cohen’s argument, my ethnographic narrative suggests that *kothi* gained greater visibility in eastern India from its previous relatively marginal presence – apart from its occurrence in Shyam and Subhash’s narratives at Murshidabad and Nadia respectively, the Naz Calcutta survey had also noted the term in Kolkata in 1996, suggesting its existing subcultural dissemination, though, as noted above, it was not a widespread usage. However, as I will describe, it gained prominence over other words as the unifying signifier for a minority group in both translocal subcultural and

²¹⁹ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 284.

²²⁰ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 270-85.

institutional CBO/NGO networks,²²¹ consolidating existing translocal linkages while potentially eliding locally varied dynamics of gender/sexual marginality.

Based on surveys in multiple cities, the Naz Foundation International and its associates propagated *kothi* at the national level as a transregional indigenous community of feminized males who desired mainstream masculine men (variously called *panthi*, *parikh* and *giriya*), and were less elite than putatively westernized gay-identified men.²²² For the UK-based Naz Foundation International and their affiliated activists, *kothi* provided cultural authenticity and legitimacy for South Asia-specific HIV-AIDS interventions.²²³ However, the rival Humsafar Trust (particularly its influential leader, Row Kavi) contested the asymmetrically gendered *kothi-panthi* model as the supposed dominant indigenous structure of male same-sex desire, condemned NFI and Shivananda Khan as orientalist, and advocated gay identity politics as relatively empowering for non-elite groups.²²⁴ This led to what Cohen terms ‘the *kothi* wars’ – contests over the authenticity of ‘indigenous’ terms vis-à-vis the promise of an emerging gay identity politics.²²⁵ However, the indigenist and potentially nationalist advocacy of *kothi* by NFI went only so far – *kothi* was soon subsumed under the rubric of MSM or ‘men who have sex with men’ in their surveys and cartographies. Indeed, as we shall see, the official discourse became quite similar across the Humsafar and Naz camps over the years.

²²¹ ‘STD/HIV Outreach among Sexual Networks of Men Who Have Sex With Men in Calcutta’, Naz (Calcutta) Project, Kolkata (1996),

<<http://www.aegis.org/DisplayContent/download.aspx?type=pdf§ionID=299635>>

²²² Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 271.

²²³ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 270-85.

²²⁴ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 271.

²²⁵ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars’, p. 271.

As Tom Boellstorff notes in his pioneering study of the category, MSM had arisen in US public health and HIV-AIDS discourse as a term for participants in same-sex behavior who did not identify as ‘gay’.²²⁶ The Naz Foundation’s Calcutta report of 1996 adopted the term as a functional non-identitarian and behavior-based label that both included ‘regional’ or ‘local’ terms and would be intelligible to the English-speaking audience of the International AIDS Conference, where it was presented.²²⁷ MSM was also similarly adopted by ‘baseline studies’ of the Humsafar Trust in Mumbai.²²⁸ Thus, despite their differing attitudes to the *kothi* construct, both Humsafar and NFI gradually adopted an emerging transnational rubric of categorization, and began mapping *kothis* as a vulnerable sub-group within MSM in their respective studies.²²⁹

Subsequently, MSM became an nationally hegemonic rubric for designating communities and identities in at least two phases. Firstly, in response to extensive advocacy by NGO activists such as Ashok Row Kavi of the Humsafar trust, the initially apathetic Indian state and its National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) gradually acknowledged high

²²⁶ Boellstorff, T. 2011. ‘But Do Not Identify as Gay: A Proleptic Genealogy of the MSM Category’, *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (2011), pp. 287-312, here p. 291.

²²⁷ ‘STD/HIV Outreach among Sexual Networks of Men Who Have Sex With Men in Calcutta’, Naz (Calcutta) Project, Kolkata (1996); On the use of MSM in these surveys, also see Joseph, *Social Work Practice*, p. 100-110.

²²⁸ ‘1st Baseline Study’, The Humsafar Trust, Mumbai (2000),
< http://www.humsafar.org/research_papers.htm>

²²⁹ ‘4th Baseline Study’, The Humsafar Trust, Mumbai (2005),
< http://www.humsafar.org/research_papers.htm>

rates of HIV transmission among groups designated as MSM.²³⁰ NACO partially funded the first consultation for MSM activists and groups organized by the Humsafar Trust at Mumbai in 2000 – a consultation that led to the formation of the aforementioned INFOSEM network in 2003, and marked the initiation of a negotiated nexus between the state and large NGOs that continued through the ensuing decade. Even as other wings of the Indian government opposed the decriminalization of homosexuality, NACO expanded the National AIDS Control Programmes (NACP) to men who have sex with men and (later) ‘transgender’ groups through the 2000s – indeed, MSM was designated as a core target group in the third phase of the NACP (NACP-III, 2007-2012). In doing so, there was much to gain – NACO received transnational HIV-AIDS funding from agencies like the World Bank’s IDA (International Development Association) and UK’s DFID, and other operational support from the United Nations, particularly UNAIDS and UNDP.²³¹ Through this emergent nexus between the state, transnational funders and the larger NGOs/CBOs, institutional appropriations of (and differences over) subcultural usages like *kothi* were gradually subsumed within an emerging *lingua franca* of national and transnational HIV-AIDS discourse that subordinated or ‘vernacularized’ such terms. As Reddy notes, the transnational adoption of MSM to designate non-gay sexualities marked a well-intentioned bid to acknowledge ‘cross-cultural variations in ... sexual identity’.²³² However, ironically, its increasing official usage by both donors and the state made it into a hegemonic form of representation. As Sarswata narrated, ‘Around 1999, a senior

²³⁰ Row Kavi, A. 2008. ‘Criminalizing high-risk groups such as MSM’, *Infochange Agenda* (2008), <<http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/hiv/aids-big-questions/criminalising-high-risk-groups-such-as-msm.html>>

²³¹ Row Kavi, ‘Criminalizing high-risk groups such as MSM’.

²³² Reddy, ‘Geographies of Contagion’, p. 262.

activist told us to use MSM instead of ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’, so that we would get government projects’. The hegemonic adoption of the MSM category as a standardized rubric seems to have functionally neutralized the Naz-Humsafar tension around the *kothi* construct, as evident in the collaboration of Humsafar and Naz representatives in the technical advisory teams that designed MSM interventions for NACP-III.²³³

Secondly, in the mid-2000s, MSM was further divided into sub-categories by the Indian government’s National AIDS Control Programmes in consultation with representatives from prominent NGOs including both NFI and Humsafar Trust, following the cartographic tendencies that were already evident in the NFI and Humsafar’s surveys and ‘baseline studies’. Formulators of the third phase of the National AIDS control policy mapped MSM into sub-groups according to their relative sexual risk for HIV infection, which is in turn associated with anal penetrability in the biomedical discourse on HIV-AIDS.²³⁴ Given the symbolic position of the *kothi* as a non-elite sexual minority, it entered national AIDS policy as a one of the core ‘high risk groups’ under the MSM rubric, based on its association with both feminization and sexual penetrability.²³⁵ This seems to parallel a transnational process of resignification of MSM, where MSM, as Boellstorff notes, increasingly shifted from denoting non-identified behavior to a rubric designating vulnerable ‘populations’, including identity-based communities at risk of HIV-AIDS.²³⁶

²³³ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p. viii.

²³⁴ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p. 26.

²³⁵ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1, p. 12.

²³⁶ Boellstorff, ‘But Do Not Identify as Gay’, p. 298.

The Translocal Standardization of Subcultural Language

Although funded interventions targeted at ‘MSM’ emerged under the aegis of metropolitan NGOs, the project of providing services to ‘high risk’ populations in West Bengal soon began to involve small-town CBOs, associated communities and subcultural languages. This process forged a generational shift in terminology, with *kothi* emerging as the most common term across different districts. As CBOs like Sangram in Murshidabad and Swikriti in Nadia were established and inducted into the MANAS Bangla and INFOSEM networks, the associated non-metropolitan networks began interacting with Kolkata circles through a combination of institutional forums like AIDS-awareness workshops organized by nodal organizations like MANAS, and older *dhurani-dhunuri-hijra* networks formed around cruising sites and occupations like *chhalla* and sex work. This process resulted in an increasing standardization of subcultural usages, evident in Berhampore in the shift from the older circle of Govinda, Shyam and their friends to the current generation of Sangram members. Akhtar, one such member and an aspiring community leader, narrated to me, ‘we heard how the people in Kolkata would speak, and picked up new words like *kothi*’. As Govinda narrated, ‘now they all say *kothi*; before, we would say *dhunuri, magi*’. Thus, the Kolkata *dhurani* and Berhampore *dhunuri* circles were increasingly bridged under the emergent consolidated term *kothi*.

The organizational initiatives of MANAS Bangla and some of its constituent CBOs also fed into this translocal consolidation. Prominent affiliate CBOs of MANAS Bangla, like

the Pratyay Gender Trust and PLUS, helped produce documentaries on the communities that they represented, such as *Manash* (2005) and *Being Male, Being Kothi* (2007).²³⁷ *Manash*, the earlier of the two documentaries, portrayed the communities associated with three of MANAS Bangla's constituent CBOs (namely Pratyay Gender Trust, Astitwa Dakshin and Prantik Bongaon), situated in Kolkata, South Bengal and the eastern districts respectively. All of the protagonists across these various sites are designated as *kothi* in the film - as the blurb of *Manash* proclaims, 'Kothi' is a term that is used across South Asia with local variations. Kothis often see themselves as non-English speaking, with a feminine homosexual identity.'

The film thus clearly demonstrates both the process of translocal standardization, and the stratified logic of vernacularization – *kothi* is established as a relatively standardized non-English/vernacular term at the regional South Asia level, which subsumes more 'local variations' like *dhurani* or *dhunuri*, even as it is itself subsumed under transnationally expansive terms like 'homosexual' or 'MSM'. *Kothi* thus comes to occupy an intermediate position between transnational and 'local' terms. *Manash* was often screened at MANAS Bangla's events in the 2007-2012 period, which were attended by several younger community members associated with Sangram and Swikriti. Swikriti's annual magazine *Swikriti Patrika* (and an earlier short-lived magazine called *Arshi Nagar*) also featured narratives by *kothis*, some of which I will have occasion to reference in later chapters; these magazines, along with other media such as street plays

²³⁷ Pizzolato, E. & Kranna, R. 2005. *Manash* (Documentary). Estonia/India (Produced by NGO Support and NGO Praajak).

on harassment, stigma, or HIV, also fostered the increasing circulation and standardization of *kothi* as a term.

Meanwhile, the quotidian process of interpellating outsiders on the basis of perceived non-masculine behavior, through which Govinda and Shyam were introduced to the Berhampore network, has continued, but newer members are now commonly hailed as *kothi*. During my early trips to Berhampore in 2007, Akhtar and his friends quickly mapped me as *kothi*, and subsequently would often point out various persons whom I read as young males, and excitedly claim them as *kothi* based on a host of variable signs to do with gait, speech, general comportment, and/or sartorial choice – ‘see that guy on the bicycle, he is *kothi*, but *gupti* (hidden, closeted)’.²³⁸ A number of the persons who were identified as such did become friendly with the *kothis* who would frequent cruising sites such as the Square Field, and were subsequently inducted into the network. Such new members were also initiated into the ‘language’, partly passed down from seniors like Govinda and Shyam, but also adopted from Kolkata through intermediary figures such as Sarswata. The increasing salience of such translocal circulations is indicated by the usage of *Ulti* (literally, ‘inverted’) as the common name for the subcultural language itself among younger generations across Kolkata, Nadia and Murshidabad; this name seems to have increasingly replaced the diverse designations used by older generations (*dhunuri bhasha* in Berhampore, *khaurir bhasha* in the Kolkata lake areas).

²³⁸ On the process of reading people as *kothi*, also see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 32.

This changing vocabulary parallels broader cultural shifts signaled by the increasing prevalence of newer terms for gender/sexual variance colloquial Bengali, adopted from Hindi and English. For instance, while *magi* and *chhuri* (both roughly ‘sissy’, ‘effeminate’) were common pejorative terms used by relatively mainstream persons as described by Govinda in the last chapter, contemporary generations of visibly gender/sexually variant or ‘feminine’ (*meyeli*) persons are more likely to be described and abused as *chhakka* (literally ‘sixer’, connotatively fag/sissy – a term adopted from the Hindi), as well as ‘homo’ or ‘ladies’ (both adaptations from the English), signaling the loose adaptive circulation of ‘homosexual’ within colloquial Bengali and its conceptual association with effeminacy (apart from common encounters with these terms as narrated by participants of *dhurani* and *kothi* circles, I was myself occasionally described in such terms in high school). However, the rise of a more common vocabulary among the subcultural networks that arise in response to such differentiation and stigma does not entirely overshadow local variations. For example, in Ranaghat, while *kothi* is now commonplace (as we saw in conversations with Arijit and his friends in the last chapter), *dhurani* persists as a usage among Shyamoli-*ma*’s disciples like Subhash.

II. Dynamic Cartographies: Gender/sexual subject positions across generations of the *dhurani-kothi* spectrum

Before elaborating how the emerging institutional cartography of MSM sub-categories drew upon and fed into subcultural usages, it may be useful to note some salient

dynamics of community formation and intra-community differentiation that seem to have persisted across older and current generations of gender variant male-assigned persons in West Bengal, even as languages and vocabularies have acquired a greater degree of translocal commonality. As indicated by their intergenerational nature, these tendencies may predate institutionalization, but mediate and are mediated through institutional cartographies of MSM sub-categories (and subsequently, the MSM-transgender divide).

As we already saw in the previous chapter, *dhurani* or *dhunuri* networks may include a broad spectrum of gender/sexual variance, ranging from ‘masculine’ persons like Ranajay, to ‘feminine’ but male-attired persons like Govinda and Ram, to *chhallawali hijras* like Suleiman or Moloy who dress in women’s clothes and present as *hijra* for at least part of the time. This spectral character has continued from the older to the current generation, now commonly hailed as *kothi*. At the same time, counterbalancing this diversity, there seems to be a common and potentially normative association between gender variance (femininity, effeminacy) with ‘receptive’ sexual roles across the varied *dhurani-dhunuri-kothi* subcultural languages I have encountered, which may draw both from dominant cultural constructions of femininity and female sexuality, as well as *hijra* ideals of phallic lack.²³⁹ For instance, to revisit Govinda’s narrative of community formation at Berhampore, Govinda often used *dhurani* in the feminine gender to refer to his friends, and lingered on his desire for masculine *parikhs*, boasting that he could ‘take’ the largest of penises, and thus associated behavioral femininity with a receptive role in anal sex. Yet, somewhat shyly, he conceded that he, too, could ‘give’, and sometimes did

²³⁹ On this issue, see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 44.

so with a fellow *dhurani*. The complex and sometimes contradictory negotiations of such simultaneously sexualized and gendered roles across the older and younger generations of community members is well demonstrated in the story of Subhash, whom we met earlier in the discussion on Shyamoli-*ma* in Ranaghat.

Subhash's narrative: from kachchi to pakki

Subhash is usually attired in men's clothes, and refers to himself as a *dhurani* who was a *nati-chela* (disciple of disciple) of Shyamoli-*ma*. He is currently the *ma* or *mom* (mother) of the younger *kothis* of Ranaghat, while also being commonly called Subhash-*da* by them (in Bengali, *da* is an affectionate suffix denoting an elder brother – this curious gendered overlap between *da* and *ma*, naturalized in everyday speech, has never seemed to draw any explicit reflection or comment by any of the community members). Subhash's narrative evidences the pressures of a normative gender/sexual role that he encountered within some *dhurani* circles, but at the same time, he also displays some degree of recognition and acceptance of what we might term as gender/sexual 'fluidity'. His narrative also evidences the continuation of these tendencies into present day *kothi* circles, mediated by intergenerational bridge figures like Subhash himself. I reproduce salient sections from his narrative about his life, stretching from his initiation as a *chela* to becoming a community mother himself, compiled and edited from our conversation on a lazy afternoon at Swikriti's HIV intervention project office at Ranaghat:

Let me start with my childhood... right from my childhood, I was very (ekdom) like girls and would stay at home... I would go around with my elder sisters

(*didi*), would wear my sisters' shoes and dresses, like how feminine males (*meyeli chheler*) usually are... Then when I was at primary school, even then I would wear *alta* (red pigment word by Bengali women on their feet). Right from then a lot of people would call me *ladies*, *homo* or *boudi* (sister-in-law) at school... and then when I was at high school, no actually even from my childhood, I would feel that I liked older men, that I wanted to see them (nude). Then when I became an adult, say in class eight or nine, there was I classmate whom I really liked... at that point, I did not know anything, that there was such a large group of us, that we had our own language! Like this, I passed my class twelve (high school completion) exams, after which we shifted neighborhoods, and came where we live now...there in the next house lived (the person who became) my *guru-ma*, several *meyeli chhele* (feminine males) would come to his place. They had been coming there from before. Now I wouldn't go out all that much ... I would only go out to meet the classmate whom I liked. So they (the people who visited his future *guru-ma*) would call me, they would say, '*ayi meye, ayi meye!*' ('hey girl, hey girl!') I would be shy and embarrassed, yes... and they would loudly tell each other so that I could hear: 'you know, today I had sex with a guy, sucked him, had anal sex (*pod dhuriechhi*), he gave me so much money!' Now I realize, they would say such things to make me *pakki* (ripe/mature/aware). But then, I wouldn't understand... among them I would see that they would love *active* men, romance them, find happiness with them ('active' in English - probably a term that entered Subhash's vocabulary in retrospect). Then I realized that just like I loved that guy (the classmate), they also loved someone like I did, and that they would have physical relations with them just like *swami* and *stree* (husband and wife). These are the things that I gradually learned. Then I learnt that language (*bhasha*), our *dhurani bhasha*, which was widespread among them... this was a long time before (CBOs like) Swikriti... about 18 years ago actually. (This conversation was in 2011, so Subhash was speaking about the early 1990s). Around that time I started liking a Bihari guy (man from neighboring state, Bihar) in the neighborhood. They would tell me, 'go to him, just go to him!' Though I liked the

boy, I didn't realize then that 'going' to him meant doing *that*... so they took me to him. Now, he first wanted to fuck me (anally; *pod martey cheyechhilo*). But I couldn't (do it)... so he left, and I came back. The next day Shivam (the *guru-ma*) told Mohan (another of the 'feminine males') – what kind of a *chela* have you got for me, he can't even take it in the ass! Then they started telling me, if you can't do this, you will never get a husband! (Subhash laughed at this point, suggesting that their comments were lighthearted, and not perceived as insulting or traumatic – at least in retrospect). Then they explained to me, see this is how you do it! They also taught me words from the *bhasha* to do with sex... they said, you are a *kachchi dhurani* (a *dhurani* who is not mature, unaware, unripe)... so like this, I learnt more words of the *bhasha*. After this, I saw that even larger groups (of *dhuranis*) were coming to their house! I saw that even above them they had a *guru-ma*, Shyamoli-*ma*. One day, they took me to her. Shyamoli-*ma* told them, 'oh, you have got a *nati-chela* for me, so pretty!' Then I started visiting Shyamoli-*ma*, and slowly came to understand everything, know everything, and gradually started having sex with men. Then I saw *gurus* even higher up than Shyamoli-*ma*, (*hijra*) *gurus* who are dead now. I realized how large our group was, how many people like us there were! Then I saw that many of them had fixed *parikhs* (masculine partners) and that they would cry when they saw these *parikhs* get married (to women). I realized that I too loved men like they did. Meanwhile, after I realized that I too fell within this group, I started noticing a boy (*chhele*) who had been school with me, junior to me. I noticed that he too was feminine, and shared my mentality/interests (*monobritti*). When he joined college, by that time all of us *dhuranis* would go around town with our heads high, I would go out in groups with my mother (*guru-ma*) and my aunts. One day we saw him, and I called out the *dhurani* – 'hey, listen'! He was initially scared and called his father, but Shivam-*guru* (Subhash's *guru-ma*) knew his dad and assured him everything was fine. After that, this boy came into the group, and became my first daughter!

Subhash's narrative thus evidences his initiation into a certain notion of social and subcultural femininity, which actually began before his contact with the *dhuranis*, through his affinity with his natal sisters and associated cultural ideas of femininity (this familial affiliation and the closeness with his sisters seems to have continued into his adult life). Subsequently, his *dhurani* seniors initiated him (made him *pakki*) into certain expectations of gender/sexual role (i.e. subject positions and associated patterns of behavior that may be analyzed as both gendered and sexual – indeed, Subhash does not make any strict distinction between 'gender' role and 'sexual' orientation/behavior). This enabled his interpellation and acceptance into the *dhurani* circle under Shivam, his *guru-ma* and Shyamoli-*ma*, his *nan-guru* ('grandma-guru', or *guru* of *guru*). These kinship terms are all shared with *hijra gharanas*, and as noted in the last chapter, Shyamoli-*ma* in fact publicly identified herself as *hijra* on occasion. However, Shyamoli-*ma*'s circle included a range of *dhuranis*, and many like Subhash stayed in men's attire, whether for familial or personal reasons. While viewing Shyamoli-*ma*'s video *Moolsrotay Brihannala* ('*Brihannalas* or *hijras* in the mainstream'), Subhash pointed out some of the male-attired *dhuranis*, and commented: 'but they are not *parikhs*, there is only one *parikh* among all the male dancers, who was Shyamoli-*ma*'s *parikh*: the rest are all *byatachhele dhuranis* (man *dhuranis* or manly *dhuranis*)!' While separating them from the *parikh*, the masculine males who were potential partners, Subhash also displayed sexual interest in such *dhuranis*: 'you know, I really like some such *dhuranis*, some *byatachhele dhuranis* are in fact very good-looking.'

Subhash's *guru-ma* Shivam was present during this conversation, and while he had played an active role in initiating Subhash into proper feminine sexual conduct vis-à-vis the masculine *parikh*, Shivam not only did not censure this expression of interest in other *dhurani*s, but also shared Subhash's appreciation. 'Yes, that *byatachhele dhurani* (a gay-identified middle class activist) who had come to Ranaghat from Kolkata the other day was really handsome! Even I like those types!' Thus Subhash and Shivam performed a flexible mapping of potential male partners, placing them within *dhurani* circles rather than always strictly externalizing them as the *parikh*, and thus also indicated a graded spectrum within *dhurani* circles where some *dhurani*s could conceivably take on relatively masculinized roles. While Subhash did not refer to himself as *byatachhele dhurani*, he did refer to himself as a *chhele* (boy/male) on some occasions, prompting the following conversation with Sumeet, one of his *kothi* 'daughters' from the younger generation:

Sumeet: Subhash-*da*, you are a *kothi*, but you still think of yourself as a man, right?

Subhash: Hmm, well actually I myself don't know what I am!

Sumeet: Oh, you have aged so much, and still you don't know what you are?

Subhash (Laughing): Well, I still don't know who I am, but see how many daughters like you I have given birth to!

Subhash thus bypassed strict questions about identification, and humorously asserted his senior position in the kinship (as a 'mother') without resorting to any identitarian essence (indeed, he used his seniority in the kinship to bypass identitarian questions). Subhash was also highly encouraging of sartorial and behavioral switching among his daughters.

On a shopping trip to one of the main market areas in Ranaghat with Sumeet and several other *kothis*, he instructed his daughters on what to wear to look good in *tonnapon* (masculine mode/attire) as well as in *laharanpon* (feminine mode/attire): ‘Wear this shoe in *tonnapon*, and that one in *laharanpon*!’

Both the expectations and behavioral fluidity marking gender/sexual roles evident in the generation of Shyamoli-*ma*’s disciples may also be seen in the younger *kothi* networks of today, as indicated by the narratives of *kothi* community members in Murshidabad within the circle that crystallized during or after the formation of their CBO, Sangram. For example, in 2008, soon after the formation of Sangram, Aniket, a *kothi*-identified community member narrated that her *parikh* had asked to be penetrated by her and she had complied, though after some initial hesitation. Soon after, there was a much-discussed incident when two *kothis* in the core circle had sex among each other. The *ulti* idiom they used for such sex is *porota bela* (‘kneading bread together’ like women in a kitchen – a metaphor that underplays the penetrative role). While perceived as embarrassing by the persons concerned, this incident was more broadly seen as being scandalous rather than actively censured, and elicited much laughter and teasing among the friend circle. In one of these subsequent conversations, the partner who had been penetrated referred to the person who took the penetrative role as a *dupli kothi* (versatile *kothi*), though the penetrator did not use the term to refer to himself. *Dupli* seems to be a relatively new, emerging category for males who take both receptive and penetrative roles, paralleling terms like ‘double-deckers’ and ‘AC-DC’ in southern and western

India. Aniket speculated that the term might have arrived via both *hijras* and NGOs, but – as for most or perhaps all of these terms – no one seemed to be sure of its exact provenance. As a conjoint term, *dupli kothi* parallels the phrase *byatachhele dhurani* used by Subhash in Ranaghat, and indicates the continuing existence of a gendered spectrum of persons across different generations of *dhurani/kothi* communities and subcultures.

Moreover, apart from accommodating behavioral versatility and relatively masculinized persons, subcultural languages might also provide a way of articulating a non-masculinity or femininity that challenges dominant cultural constructions of feminine vulnerability and receptivity. Despite Subhash's characterization of the masculine partners of *dhuranis* as 'active men', many preferring receptive roles in sex are hardly 'passive' in their self-perception. In much colloquial slang of Bengali and Hindi, the act of anal sex is associated with the phallic agency of the insertive partner (*ganr lena* or *ganr neowa* – taking someone's ass, *phodna*, *chodna* – fucking someone).²⁴⁰ However, certain idioms available in the aforementioned subcultural languages (now commonly known as *ulti*) invert this attribution of agency in favor of the 'receptive' partner and thus resignify the act from penetration *by* the phallus to an active consumption *of* the phallus, with an attendant objectification of the masculine male. For instance, idioms like *parikh khaowa*, signifying the sexually consumption (*khaowa* or 'eating') of relatively masculine

²⁴⁰ For a recent discussion on penetrative and violent sexual metaphors in Hindi slang in the wake of the Delhi gang rape in December 2012 that attracted nationwide outrage, see Sanghvi, V. 2013. 'Honey Singh: Why he must face the music', *Hindustan Times Blogs*, Available at <http://blogs.hindustantimes.com/medium-term/?p=570> (accessed April 10, 2013); Roy, N. 2013. 'Warning: Contains Sex, Violence and Honey Singh', Available at <http://nilanjanaroy.com/2013/01/03/warning-contains-sex-violence-and-honey-singh-2/> (accessed April 10, 2013); Also see Hall 2005, 'Intertextual Sexuality', p. 195.

partners, and *parikh deowa*, signifying the sharing ('giving' of) partners, assert the sexual agency of the 'receptive' partner through the agential claim to eating and sharing *parikhs* (mainstream men). In both Berhampore and Ranaghat, I have often encountered *kothis* asking each other how many *parikhs* they have 'eaten' lately, or if someone could share ('give') a particularly attractive *parikh* by facilitating access to him. (The *parikhs*, though, presumably do not perceive themselves as being 'eaten' or 'shared', more so because many mainstream men remain unaware of these subcultural languages and practices even if they may partake in sex with *kothi/dhurani/hijra* community members). Thus, such discursive acts do not necessarily change disempowering social equations where effeminacy/gender variance is subjected to derision and stigma, but do signal expressions of agency that are not readily available standard colloquial Bengali or Hindi.

Such negotiations of gender/sexual roles and subject positions further intersect with tensions and negotiations around class/caste affiliation and respectability (*shomman* or *izzat*). In her ethnography, Reddy notes that some *kothis* may dissociate from stigmatized *hijras* due to reasons of respectability, as previously evidenced in the case of Govinda, who shied away from *hijras*.²⁴¹ Yet *hijra* practices used in occupational contexts such as *badhai* and *chhalla* – whether undertaken within or outside the *gharanas* – have a pervasive role in providing resources for gendered self-assertion and/or resistance for people across the aforementioned spectrum. For example, some *kothis* will adopt gestures and language associated with *chhalla* or *khajra* (sex work) even outside such occupational contexts, using the aggressive ways in which *chhallawalis* solicit money in

²⁴¹ Reddy, 'Geographies of Contagion,' p. 259.

return for blessings to provocatively display gender/sexual difference or assert themselves. Called *bhel kora* (doing *bhel*) or *bila* (creating trouble) in *ulti*, different versions of such flamboyant and/or confrontational displays of femininity and gender variance could happen in various contexts: during cruising, in response to harassment, or when socializing with friends. The most extreme *bheli* act is of course genital exposure – which, like *hijras*, *kothis* may use as a shock tactic in the face of harassment, and which (as both Cohen and Reddy argue in the context of *hijras*) may carry the unsaid threat of a scopical contamination and/or emasculation.²⁴² Indeed, several *kothis* and *hijras* speak of *bheli* gestures as weapons (*astro*) that produce an affective response of fear and shock in their audiences, and permit escape from potential violence better than just a verbal defense would. For instance, Bindiya, one of the *hijra* participants of the Kolkata lake networks whom we briefly met in the last chapter, once claimed during a conversation that the *tali* or the *thikri* had helped her get away from various situations of harassment or violence: ‘our clap (*tali*) is our weapon... without the clap even if we shake our hips (i.e. walk in a flamboyantly feminine manner) people don’t care... when we clap people get intimidated and don’t mess with us. The clap and the hair... the longer our hair, the more people respect and fear us’. *Bhel* and *bila* thus mark a repertoire of disruptive gestures and acts that are used to negotiate a hostile social field through tactics of shaming, shocking or eliciting fear in people (I will discuss the symbolic implications of such practices further in the fifth chapter). However, the repertoire of *bhel* might also

²⁴² Cohen, L. 1995. ‘The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics’, in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 276-304; Reddy, ‘Geographies of Contagion,’ p. 257.

encompass other and less defensive uses of such gestures and acts, such as clapping (*thikri deowa*) as a way of greeting *kothi/hijra* friends.²⁴³

The degree of propensity toward *bhel* marks a salient axis of differentiation among *kothis*, indicating both gender/sexual and class/caste tensions. Those doing *bhel* are variably designated as *bheli*, *lahari*, *bhorokti*: all of these adjectives signify the public display of femininity (e.g. dressing publicly in women's clothes) and/or flamboyance (camp), as opposed to *kodi* (sober, not so feminine) or *gupti* (hidden) *kothis*.²⁴⁴ These usages have been locally varied – for instance, I have heard *bhorokti* and *lahari* used more in Kolkata and adjoining suburbs, whereas *bheli* is the more common designation at Berhampore. With greater translocal linguistic standardization, *bheli* (also sometimes called *bhelki*) seems to have become the relatively more common term, and is understood in *kothi* circles across Kolkata, Nadia and Murshidabad.

The division between *bheli/bhelki* and *kodi kothis* in these locations has often been tensely negotiated, marking salient tensions around feminized marginality and mainstream masculine privilege. In the first few years of my initiation into communities at Berhampore, Ranaghat and Kolkata, I came upon frequent complaints and accusations from both *kodi* and *bheli* sides – *kodi kothis* would typically accuse *bhelis* of social disreputability, unnecessary provocation, or shamelessness, and *bheli kothis* conversely accused *kodis* of social complicity, duplicity or hypocrisy. During a conversation in 2008,

²⁴³ See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 142.

²⁴⁴ For literature in Bengali that acknowledges the complexity and variation of *kothi* identification, see Majumdar, A. & Basu, N. *Bharater Hijre Shomaj (The Hijra Community of India)*, Deep Prokashoni, Kolkata (1996).

Aditya, a young community member in the Berhampore circle, expressed a particularly strong condemnation of *bhel*: as he explained to me, ‘doing *bhel* in public only provokes harassment, and shows a lack of self-respect (*atma-shomman*) – just wearing *sarees* and bangles and clapping on streets is hardly activism’. The lack of *shomman*, which as noted in the last chapter is often socially ascribed to *hijras*, is thus here displaced onto a subset of *kothis*, based on their supposed lack of an appropriate self-regard, and indulgence in behavior that would provoke people or bring about disrepute and shame in public spaces. Aditya’s phobic reaction to *bhel* did not go unnoticed by other, relatively more *bheli kothis* in Berhampore – as one of them explained to me, he was afraid to be seen with them in public, and would sometimes markedly avoid them in public spaces as it might expose that he was himself *kothi*. The fear of the *hijra* is here displaced into the fear of flamboyant *kothis*, and may be explained in terms of the threat of personal exposure and resultant social disrepute.

On the other hand, Roshni, a *bheli kothi* in Kolkata who later came to identify as a trans woman, once complained to me about the hypocrisy of those *kothis* who decried *bhel*: ‘If the *kodi* and *dupli* ones want to pass as masculine one day (*purush shajte chay*), and do *satra* (wear women’s clothes) the next, let them: but they shouldn’t look down on us who always do *satra* and assert ourselves in public’. (In fact, certain assertive *bheli* gestures like hand-clapping [*thikri deowa*] have been censured by activists during pride walks on grounds of ‘indecent’, as I observed during the 2007 and 2008 pride walks at Kolkata – I will have occasion to elaborate on negotiations between *bhel* and civic activism later in the fifth chapter).

Roshni's derision for *kodi* hypocrisy indicates that, similar to the *kothi-dupli* opposition, the *kodi-bheli* opposition is also unstable: *kodi kothis* like Aditya may continue to perform *bhel* in private intra-community spaces, or even public ones with sufficient community members present. Thus the censure of *bhel* need not mark a total abjection of *bhel* or of *bheli kothis*, but rather a strategic distancing allied to negotiations of social visibility and space. Describing one occasion when a group of their friends from Berhampore had been traveling to Kolkata in a train, Aditya narrated how Mallika, a particularly *bheli kothi* who had been in feminine attire, had pole-danced around a vertical rod in the compartment – ‘what *bhel!*’ – with the passengers looking on. In this case, Aditya's censure of the *bhelis* gave way to his own participation in *bhel*: as Aditya narrated, ‘when we *kothis* are together, it is true that we have a lot of fun!’ Meanwhile, *bhelis* may also situationally employ ‘*tonnapon*’ (male or masculine attire/behavior) in particular spaces. As one self-designated *bheli kothi* told me, ‘these (male-designated) clothes are more comfortable at home’. Mallika herself narrated to me how her gendered presentation was different at home, for reasons of both sartorial comfort and family respectability, even though her public presentation was hardly unknown to her parents: ‘When at home I remain as *kodi* only!’ (‘*barite gele ami toh kodi hoyei thaki!*’)

These simultaneous tendencies of both separation and overlap between *kothi* and *dupli*, as well as *kodi* and *bheli*, are indicative of the complex range of subject positions who may be interpellated into both older and current generations of *dhurani/kothi* networks, sometimes resulting in tense inter-personal differences on questions of proper gender/sexual behavior, tied to anxieties around social space, visibility or exposure,

respectability, marginality and privilege. The broader socio-cultural resonances of these anxieties suggest that such negotiations of difference are not necessarily initiated by NGO interventions into identity construction. However, tendencies of demarcation are increasingly mediated and perhaps intensified through institutional cartographies of identity, as I will describe below.

III. Institutional Interventions: The Attempted Reification of Gender/Sexual Divides

I had left the story of the dissemination of MSM at the point of its arrival and increasing institutional usage in India, when it both subsumed or vernacularized and became re-mapped through the aforementioned subcultural languages of gender/sexual variance. Representatives of Humsafar Trust and Naz Foundation International, who designed the third phase of the National AIDS Control Program (NACP-III) in collaboration with the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), marked and graded vulnerable populations according to their relative risk of HIV infection, subdividing MSM into distinct target groups.²⁴⁵ In this process, translocally varied subcultural usages are sought to be reified within an official cartography of MSM sub-sections, where *kothi* represents feminized penetrated males (most at risk for HIV infection among MSM), *dupli* or *double-decker* represents versatile males (less risk), and *parikh* or *panthi* represents penetrating masculine men at least risk.²⁴⁶ Significantly, the qualitative descriptions of these categories in the guidelines for NACP-III admit some degree of gradation and overlap – *kothis* ‘show varying degrees of femininity’ and may be ‘bisexual’ or even

²⁴⁵ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p. viii.

²⁴⁶ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p.13.

marry women; some *hijras* may also identify as *kothi*.²⁴⁷ However, the guidelines for the quantitative mapping of ‘high-risk groups’ belie such qualitative nuances, and define distinct sub-sections in terms of behavior and risk, as shown in the figure below:

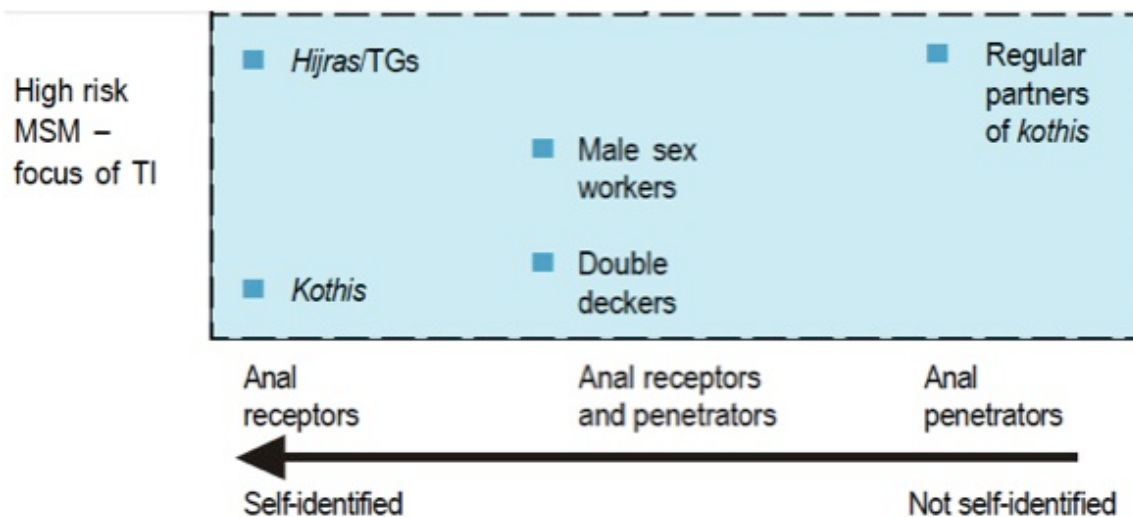


Fig. 2: High Risk MSM as defined in NACP-III²⁴⁸

Mapped as distinct points in the linear graph from anal penetrators to receptors, *kothis* and *hijras* are separated from both ‘double deckers’ and *panthis/parikhs*, and moreover, *hijras* are separated from *kothi* as TG (transgender), even as TG is (for the moment) still included within MSM. The designation of *hijra* separately from other categories of ‘men who have sex with men’ follows a long history of academic and activist representations of *hijra* as a ‘third gender’ and transgender group,²⁴⁹ but this separate designation does not seem to have initially involved direct inputs from *hijras* as no *hijra* representatives

²⁴⁷ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p.12.

²⁴⁸ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p.13.

²⁴⁹ Nanda, S. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990).

were included in the technical support team that designed NACP-III.²⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in effect, it parallels the separate consolidation of *hijra* identity separate from other gender variant male-assigned persons undertaken by the *gharanas*, as traced in the last chapter. The incipient separation of ‘*hijra*/TG’ from MSM is undergirded by the definition of *kothi* within the rubric of MSM, which attempts to standardize it as an identity category in at least *two* senses: reinscribing the distinction of *kothis* from *hijras*, and reifying normative ideas of *kothi* gender/sexual behavior vis-à-vis the *dupli* or ‘double-decker’ and the *parikh* or *panthi*.

Reinforcing the distinction from hijras

Firstly, as the contemporary generation of *kothis* is collectivized via community-based organizations, *kothi* becomes increasingly distinct from *hijra* or *chhibri* in terms of both the institutional and self-representation of CBO members. Sarswata, a salaried activist and tenured professor who has alternated between MSM, *gay/samakami* and *kothi* identifications, is the ‘mother’ to the younger Berhampore circle, being commonly referred to as both Sarswata-*da* (elder brother), and the more affectionate designation of *mum-mum* (continuing the *da-ma* overlap that we earlier saw for Subhash at Ranaghat). Even as this alludes to *hijra* kinship, where *hijra gurus* are mothers to their immediate *chelas*, it further cements the class, respectability and gender-based distinction with *hijras* that had been already evident for the older generation of male-attired lower middle class *dhunuris* such as Govinda and Shyam. For example, Aniket, who is one of Sarswata’s daughters, derided *hijras* for the lack of *shomman* or respectability, which

²⁵⁰ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p.viii.

according to her was evidenced in their aggressive behavior in response to the potential empowerment and rehabilitation into the mainstream offered by NGO activists: ‘(An activist) had gone to help *hijras* into *mainstream* professions like making *bidis* (cigars), but they drove her out their colony! Only if you give *shomman* can you expect to receive *shomman* from the society’, Aniket explained. Sangram’s annual magazine, *Padakshep* (‘Footstep’), has featured ethnographic accounts of *hijras* as a ‘traditional’ Indian group.²⁵¹ Further, a team from MANAS Bangla, including Sarswata, authored a report on the lives and cultural mores of *hijras* in the early 2000s, which was presented at the International Congress on AIDS in the Asia-Pacific region (ICAAP). The report focused on the difficulties of reaching out to the *gharanas* of clans for HIV prevention, thus furthering the circumscribed association between *hijra* identity and clan-based kinship, and the attendant categorical MSM-*hijra* divide, even as it sought to bring *hijras* into the purview of MSM interventions.

Meanwhile, members of CBOs like Sangram and Swikriti began to attend pride walks in Kolkata, and have been interpreted as a sign of globalizing ‘gay’ and *samakami* visibility in media reports.²⁵² (Homo)sexual identification as *samakami*/gay may also be claimed as a rubric of intelligibility and public representation by CBO activists like Aniket, vernacularizing even institutionally recognized terms such as *kothi*. For example, in 2007, a reporter working for the English-language newspaper *The Indian Express* visited Berhampore, and during an interview, asked Aniket what terms like *kothi* (which he had

²⁵¹ Nath, A. 2008. ‘Noorjahan’, *Padakshep* 1 (2008), pp. 15-16

²⁵² ‘Rural gays dominate rally’, *The Asian Age*, July 2 2003, p. 3.

overheard) meant. Aniket seemed a bit embarrassed by the query. ‘Oh those are just *local* words’ (‘local’ in English), she said quite inaccurately but sincerely, and continued: ‘we are *samakami*’. Aniket’s statement demonstrates an internalized and naturalized sense of scale in which *kothi* appears as a ‘local’ term, even as it is being standardized across South Asia. Furthering this logic of vernacularization, *samakami* thus serves as a formal Bengali term of public identification for at least some community members, corresponding to the transnationally expansive homosexual subject, even as the MSM category serves for institutional representation in national HIV-AIDS activist circuits (I explore intersections of *gay/samakami* and *kothi* in further detail in the fourth chapter).²⁵³

For others with less access to metropolitan media and NGO networks relative to CBO representatives, such as the train *chhallawalis* such as Suleiman, the overlap with *hijra* has persisted, though it is not recognized in the official cartography of MSM. Meanwhile, the focus on same-sex behavior also distances MSM-focused CBOs and projects from *gharana*-affiliated *hijras*, whose sexual involvement with mainstream men (*parikhs*) and occupations such as sex work is less public. Annapurna-*mashi* of Murshidabad initially regarded Sangram’s condom-promotion activities with suspicion, although her *chelas* have subsequently availed of Sangram’s services. But such interactions are contingent on maintaining proper distinctions, even if MSM may not be literally invoked as the distinguishing term. As Annapurna puts it, ‘I tell everyone, ‘these people are *homosex*

²⁵³ I will sketch *gay-* and *samakami-kothi* intersections in greater detail in the fourth chapter; the fifth chapter substantially outlines the kinds of civic activism (like pride marches) that are mentioned here.

(sic), and we are *hijras*’. Even though the precise designation is different (*homosex*) – and indeed Annapurna-*mashi* seemed to be more aware of relatively diffusely spread terms like ‘homosex(ual)’ and *samakami* rather than the NGO usage of MSM – her separate designation broadly aligns with the cartographic separation of MSM from *hijras*.

The reification of kothi femininity and victimhood

Further, the institutional cartography of MSM sub-sections and attendant official representations also attempts to reify *kothi* gender/sexual behavior, i.e. freeze its boundaries in ways that belie the contextual suppleness of inclusion and exclusion in *kothi-dhurani* communities. Based on standardized categorical assumptions, representations of *kothi* communities authored by senior activists may deny the variations and diversity within *dhurani/kothi* communities. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in a report entitled ‘My Body is not Mine: Tales from the Kothi Community of India’, sponsored jointly by the Naz Foundation International and the UK-based Department for International Development (DFID). Even as the report purports to represent voices from the *kothi* community, the descriptive sections provide highly schematized and generalized overviews of *kothi* subject formation and identity:

In the *kothi* context, a biological male who is penetrated becomes ‘not man enough’; therefore ‘less than a man’; therefore ‘like a woman’... the penetrated man does not perceive himself as a man, and internalises a stereotypical, often highly caricatured image of the woman, and looks upon victimisation and/or violence as an integral part of existence. (...) therefore ... the gay identity, which

is closely linked to egalitarian relationships between ‘men’ does not find a very strong footing in India.²⁵⁴

Not only is the alleged *kothi* desire for victimization vis-à-vis patriarchal masculinity derided in comparison to putatively ‘egalitarian’ gay identities, the gender roles that supposedly constrain *kothi* desire are also seen as derivative of cultural heterosexuality:

Same-sex relationships therefore often play out in a heterosexual model. It is characterised by the role play of participants where one plays out the role of the more powerful man and the other the role of the less powerful woman. The sex acts also follow the stereotypical notions of what the specific roles of the man and woman are supposed to be. The penetrator-penetrated dynamic is maintained at all levels of the relationship and this in turn defines the power dynamic of the relationship. It is emphatically not a relationship of equals, and is therefore open to violence on the disempowered.²⁵⁵

Besides eliding variations in *dhurani/kothi* sexual behavior, this renders the agency involved in ‘receptive’ roles and in *kothi* femininity illegible within the teleological narrative of political progress exemplified by gay liberation and putatively egalitarian homosexual relationships, such that *kothis* appear to be stuck in a stereotypical and backward heterosexuality. Even as they are positioned as a traditional sexuality of India, they become symbolic of a backward, constricted regional identity that would ideally catch up with the globalizing ideal of the gay (I elaborate this point further in the fourth chapter). The casting of *kothis* as backward, rigid, and unthinkingly imitative of cultural

²⁵⁴ Bondopadhyay and Shah, *My Body is Not Mine: Tales from the Kothi Community of India*, Naz foundation International & DFIF (2007), p. 36.

²⁵⁵ Bondopadhyay and Shah, *My Body is Not Mine*, p. 56-57.

mores is also shown in the previously mentioned film *Manash*. The film features an extended interview with Niloy Basu, a senior representative of MANAS Bangla in its early years, who extensively comments on how ‘*kothis* internalize a stereotype of femininity’ during their adolescence and victimize themselves – yet the film does not cite a single conversation with any of the featured *kothis* to support this claim, who remain relatively voiceless except as fleeting characters in various short visual snippets that punctuate the interview (responding to violence on streets, buying feminine attire in shops, etc.).²⁵⁶

In these ways, the attempted standardization of gender/sexual categories in official representations and middle class activist discourse may reify *kothi* femininity and victimhood and deny resistance and agency, such that *kothi*, as the feminized sub-section of MSM, becomes both an enumerable ‘high risk’ population group and a ‘disempowered’ victim identity – a target group of disease-control and NGO-led empowerment, rather than an agential political minority. Here, their casting as essentially biological ‘men’ (‘men who have sex with men’) who internalize cultural stereotypes of femininity is significant – their feminization is thus reduced to a mere cultural imitation that stultifies the egalitarian potential of sex between ‘men’. Read as failed homosexual ‘men’, their gender non-conformity becomes illegible in the MSM rubric except as sexual risk and gendered victimhood.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Pizzolato, E. & Kranna, R. 2005. *Manash* (Documentary). Estonia/India (Produced by NGO Support and NGO Praajak).

²⁵⁷ Here, I draw from Reddy’s critique of the categorization of *kothis* and *hijras* as MSM, which, she argues, imposes a homosexual identification that they may not ascribe to (Reddy 2005: 262-

Translation and Vernacularization: The Subcultural Mapping of MSM

However, the aforementioned representational processes are not top-down or unidirectional. On one hand, the institutional reification of the *kothi* evidences a biopolitical project where vulnerable target populations, to adapt Foucault, are constructed as ‘domains and objects of knowledge’ through and for state- and NGO-administered technologies of disease prevention.²⁵⁸ But this biopolitical constitution depends on and modifies extant logics of community formations via the collusion of subcultural networks in mapping and constructing hegemonic identities and population categories, translating the risk-based paradigm of MSM cartographies into subcultural languages, and vice-versa, in non-elite and non-metropolitan contexts.

With the establishment of local CBOs such as Swikriti and Sangram by relatively middle class community members like Sarswata in the mid-2000s, associated communities became hopeful of obtaining funding for HIV-prevention interventions targeted at MSM, via the state and metropolis-based organizations such as the CBO network MANAS Bangla. From 2007 onward, the MANAS Bangla network set up HIV-intervention projects funded by the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention & Control Society (WBSAPCS), the state subsidiary of the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), in various districts within West Bengal. Subsequently, Swikriti and Sangram applied for and received their own projects from WBSAPCS in 2009 and 2011 respectively. Through these years, the guidelines and categorizations laid out in the documents of the NACP-III

63); however, I extend her argument to suggest that their inclusion as MSM is also a form of political delegitimization and exploitation.

²⁵⁸ Foucault, M. *Security, Territory, Population*, p. 118.

were propagated through institutional spaces such as meetings of non-governmental organizations, workshops and other training activities for CBO members. As the activist Ranajay explained to his audience during an NGO meeting in Kolkata in 2010, ‘we now map MSM into the following sub-sections: *kothi*, feminine males, *parikh*, the husbands [*sic*] of *kothis*, and *dupli*, versatile males’. Ranajay thus picked up the common husband-wife (*swami-stree*) metaphor that we have encountered earlier in Subhash’s narrative, where it had signified particular relationships as perceived by *dhuranis*, and translated it in terms of the general population categories of MSM. Just as this dissemination of official cartographies through such acts of translation both relied on and fed into the translocal standardization of subcultural language, the Indian state’s HIV-AIDS prevention interventions depended on CBO members for their expansion into non-metropolitan areas. While Kolkata-based activists had undertaken the early ‘needs assessment’ surveys, the third phase of the national AIDS control policy recommended that the mapping of ‘high risk groups’ and cruising areas, integral to HIV-prevention work, should be carried out through local community members, who must be ‘recruited to conduct mapping’ and provide services so that the ‘results will be closer to reality’.²⁵⁹

This stipulated reliance on ‘community members’ once again demonstrates the strategic logic of ‘community-based’ intervention and the attendant recuperation of non-elite and non-metropolitan groups to provide legitimacy and representational authenticity to HIV-AIDS intervention programs. But of course, ‘reality’ itself is mediated and engendered through such attempts at verisimilitude. As community members are recruited as field

²⁵⁹ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1, p. 26.

workers and native informants, CBO members may translate the flexible and locally varied cartographies of *dhurani/dhunuri*, *dupli* and *parikh* – evidencing considerable behavioral diversity within *dhurani/dhunuri/kothi* circles, including *byatachhele dhuranis* and *dupli kothis* – into a more stable and fixed cartography of populations differentiated in terms of sexual behavior.

A short example would serve to elucidate this process. In the summer of 2009, I accompanied Aniket from the Berhampore circle to a nearby village to help her record a survey. It was to be the first one on MSM populations in the district, which Sangram members undertook in the hope of demonstrating the need for a funded HIV intervention project to WBSAPCS. After much bonhomie at the house of her friend and sister Rahim, Aniket proceeded to ask the questions, one of which inquired about sexual roles (options: penetrating, penetrated, versatile). Rahim hesitated before answering – ‘what would I do in sex? I would take, I suppose?’ Aniket chimed in, ‘Of course you would take, aren’t you *kothi*?’ At this, Rahim looked embarrassed, replying, ‘yes, of course, what else!’ While Rahim had been unsure how to map his sexual behavior vis-à-vis his gender/sexual variance, *kothi* (vs. the masculine, penetrating *parikh*) provided a neat grid of identification – of course, ‘feminine’ males would also be penetrated. Such consolidations of identity translate and align translocal languages of gender/sexual variance vis-à-vis the risk-based cartography of MSM sub-sections in transnational HIV-prevention discourse, where penetrated persons are seen as being at ‘higher risk’.²⁶⁰ Playing the part of a good peer educator, Aniket went on to advise Rahim: ‘Sister, be

²⁶⁰ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, vol. 1, p. 13.

careful, always make them (the *parikh*) wear condoms'. Here, wearing condoms becomes the naturalized function of the masculine, mainstream, penetrative *parikh*, while gendered marginality, sexual vulnerability and anal penetrability are conflated in the marginalized and at-risk *kothi*. This process tends to reify the shifting boundaries between feminine insiders and masculine outsiders in *dhurani* and *dhunuri* networks, and provides institutional sanction to the loose taboo against sex among *dhuranis* and *kothis*.

During the survey, a few respondents also identified as *dupli*, but were also relatively excluded from the inner space of *kothi* community and sisterhood, exemplified in this context by Aniket and Rahim. While the MSM rubric attempts to divide *kothi* (penetrated) and *dupli* (versatile) groups into neat sub-sections, we have seen that instead of a noun for a separate group, *dupli* can also slip into an adjectival role, signifying variant *kothi* subjectivities (the *dupli kothi*). But while the equation between marginality, femininity and penetrability reinforced through institutional-subcultural translations is slippery, it does carry normative force. In relation to a consolidated *kothi* identity, *dupli* versatility may gather connotations of a duplicitous position between the community and the mainstream. 'That *dupli*, he refuses to even recognize us *kothis* when he sees us in public', a *kothi*-identified community member once complained about another cruiser at the Berhampore square field, and subsequently extended the observation from the phobic behavior of particular *duplis* to a generalization about all *duplis*: '*duplis* are scared to be seen with us *kothis*, lest people think they aren't *byatachhele* (men)'. In another incident, a *kothi* community member in Berhampore commented derisively about someone who

was sometimes misrecognized as a *parikh*: ‘oh, he is hardly a *parikh*, only a *dupli kothi*’ – i.e. neither truly masculine, nor authentically *kothi*. Such demarcations suggest that the combination of institutional cartographies and informal mapping, within the larger translocal process of linguistic standardization, may further reinforce divides between properly feminine *kothis* and other MSM (versatile and masculine men), and reify the aforementioned mobile negotiations around marginality and privilege, such that mixed terms like *dupli kothi* may be both derided within communities (as relatively mainstream, duplicitous) and elided in official cartographies. A few months after the aforementioned survey, Aniket herself narrated to me, ‘previously, I used to be more *dupli*, but mixing with our group, I have become more *kothi*’. Besides the acts of mapping by field workers like Aniket, informational material to promote condom usage among *kothis* also standardize assumptions about gender/sexual roles, such as the following crude drawing of a *kothi-parikh* couple, displayed in Sangram’s project office and DIC (‘drop-in center’) in 2011. As the text explains, the *kothi* can contract HIV if the *parikh* is not made to use a condom:

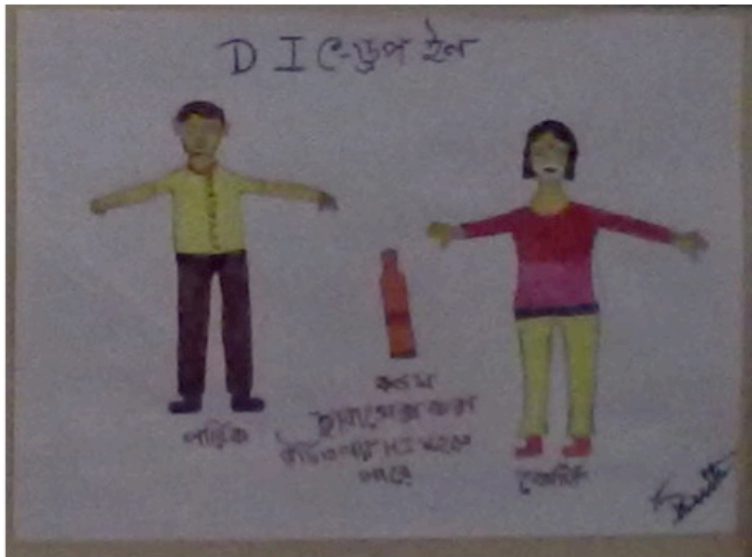


Fig. 3. Picture of *parikh*, condom and *kothi* at Sangram’s DIC or ‘drop-in center’ (Photo taken by author).

However, given that the association between penetrability and HIV infection may potentially increase the stigma against *kothis*, the concept of *kothis* as a ‘high risk group’ is usually not disseminated in public advocacy or condom-promotion initiatives, and such informational material is more directed to the internal *kothi* spaces associated with CBOs, serving not for public representation as much as consolidating an internal sense of *kothi* identification within CBOs and associated communities.

The Interdictions against Bhel: Elided or vernacularized labor

The reinforcement of *kothis* as a relatively more bounded community and population group also produces them as an exploitable labor pool within the political economy of HIV-AIDS interventions, where *kothis* commonly serve as lower-tier workers such as

‘peer educators’. The reliance on *kothis* for low-tier fieldwork was so common during the third phase of the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP-III) that the ‘drop-in centers’ and offices of state-funded HIV-AIDS projects administered by CBOs were often implicitly and/or explicitly marked as *kothi* spaces. For example, on one occasion, Sarswata joked to me about my visit to the Swikriti drop-in center at Dum Dum (suburb north of Kolkata) saying that I would be disappointed if I wanted to meet any *parikhs* there: ‘there are only *kothis* inside there, no *parikhs*!’ Such production of official space further cements the insider-outsider division of earlier *dhurani/dhunuri* circles, and produces *kothis* as a taken-for-granted pool of office and field staff: available, disposable and exploitable. The salary for low-tier field workers or ‘peer educators’ in NACP-III is less than Rs. 2000 (about \$50) per month with no benefits, which is technically less than minimum wage, and even this is often disbursed after months of wage gaps and funding delays.²⁶¹ This economy also produces intra-*kothi* hierarchies, which reduces their potential solidarity as laborers. While officially sanctioned assumptions about gender/sexual roles reinforce the *kothi-hijra* and *kothi-dupli* divides, the class/caste and respectability-based distancing from *bhel* may also be institutionally reinforced, particularly through the production of an opposition between *bhel* and labor/work (*kaaj*) within HIV-AIDS projects. This tends to elide both the involvement of *bhel* and sexualized labor within the process of intervention work, and the overlaps between *bheli*

²⁶¹ For a critique of funding structures and priorities, see ‘Chasing Numbers, Betraying People: Relooking at HIV Related Services in Karnataka’, Aneka and Karnataka Sexual Minorities Forum, Bangalore (2012), Available at <http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/New-Resources2/A-New-Resource-Aneka-and-Karnataka-Sexual-Minorities-Forum-KSMF-Chasing-Numbers-Betraying-People-Relooking-at-HIV-Related-Services-in-Karnataka> (Accessed May 29, 2013).

and *kodi* positionalities, furthering the vernacularization of overlapping discursive constructions evidenced in the standardization of the *hijra-kothi* divide.

For example, at Sangram's office and 'drop-in center' at Berhampore, seniors within the community like Aniket, who occupied somewhat higher positions (e.g. counselors or outreach workers) relative to peer educators, would commonly discipline their juniors with statements like, 'don't do *bhel*, do work!' (*bhel korish na, kaaj kor!*). Here, *bhel* loosely stands for any gendered flamboyance, including dressing or applying make up in office time, jokingly giving *thikri* (the famed clap) to each other, seducing *parikhs* on the field, and so on. Aniket would also often complain that most *kothis* would not work properly due to their *bheli* propensities – 'all these *kothis* only do *bhel*, they don't do any work!' This could, on occasion, be further generalized into ascriptions against all *bheli kothis* – for example, once Aniket expressed her hesitation regarding recruiting *bheli kothis* to the project: '*Bheli kothis* will never work properly, as they are *bheli*, they will only do *bhel*!'

However, there is also a reliance on *bhel* as a strategy for purposes of creating safer spaces on the field, and for seducing and recruiting people for HIV-testing or condom-promotion (since CBOs have to achieve numerical targets set by the state or other funders). For instance, during a Swikriti event for World AIDS Day in 2010 at Kalyani, I noticed how Nina, one of Subhash's daughters and a renowned *bheli kothi* in the Ranaghat area, was being employed to lure more *parikhs* to the condom distribution stall.

Sumeet, another of Subhash's daughters and one of Nina's seniors by project hierarchy, told Nina not to stand in front of the stall but to use her skills to draw more people there: 'Madam, why are you just doing *bhel* here? Go there and seduce those *parikhs* (*okhane giye parikh pota na*), and then after seducing them bring them here (to the stall), so we can increase our (condom) sales!'

The contrast between the strategic usage and distanciation from or disciplining of *bhel* became all the more evident with the development of more elaborate labor hierarchies within the MANAS Bangla network in Kolkata in the 2007-2012 period. The West Bengal State AIDS Control Society (WBSAPCS) and the MANAS network's leadership created a complex multi-tiered stratification of staff at each project site, particularly involving a descending hierarchy from project managers, counselors, outreach workers, shadow leaders, community advocates to the lowly peer educators. Roshni, the *bheli kothi* (who now identifies as a trans woman) whom we met earlier in the chapter, was one such person affected by this hierarchy, and was repeatedly reprimanded and disciplined for being too *bheli*.

One of the first occasions when I spent some time with Roshni was during the *mela* or fair at Ghutiari Shareef. Ghutiari Shareef, a village south of Kolkata, is one of the old hubs of *hijra-dhurani-kothi* networks in South Bengal – it is the shrine of a *peer baba* (a saint in Sufi Islam) where *hijras* would go to pay their respects on the *urs* (the death anniversary of the saint), when a large fair takes place around the shrine. Over the years,

many *chhallawalis* and other *kothis* also started visiting the shrine, so much so that by the latter half of 2000s *gharana*-based *hijras* had decreased their attendance in reaction to the preponderance of their ‘fake’ counterparts. From about 2007 till 2011, MANAS Bangla also used the fair as a site for promoting HIV-AIDS and rights awareness, particularly by setting up a stall to sell or distribute pamphlets, condoms and other informational literature, which further cemented the fair as a *kothi* hub. As a peer educator and (later) community advocate, Roshni, like many other *kothis*, would also use the opportunity to go around the fair, pay respects at the *mazhar shareef* (the shrine of the *peer baba*), and to flirt and talk with young men in the various shops. During the 2009 *urs* at Ghutiari Shareef, she took me along for some of these forays, and I observed how she would mix various messages with her flirtatious advances:

Roshni (to a young man at a shop): It is fine if you guys want to have sex with us, but you must treat every human being (*shob manush*) with respect... and it is to treat people well/to behave well with people that we have come to this world! (*ar manusher shathey bhalo byabohar kortei to prithibitey asha!*)

Young man: yes, one’s (moral/ethical) behavior is one’s identity/It is by one’s behavior that someone is known! (*byaboharei manusher porichoy* – this is a common Bengali idiom).

However, Roshni’s tactics did not always go down well with her seniors. A few weeks after the Ghutiari outing, I met her at another pilgrimage spot, the shrine of *Baba Bhootnath* (the Lord Shiva), which is also a *kothi* networking hub, though less so than the Ghutiari *mela*. This time, however, she seemed to be considerably distressed.

Roshni: A lot has happened, I must tell you... there is going to be a *meeting* regarding me day after tomorrow... some of the *seniors* have called the *meeting*.

Me: regarding what, specifically?

Roshni: well, they say that when I go to the *field* instead of doing work I only do *parikhs*... I can accept that I did wrong sometimes, sometimes I did do *parikhs*, but not that much, and I have also always done my work – like you saw that time at Ghutiari! Even on that occasion, tongues had wagged (*kotha uthechhilo*). It seems that I disrupt their work and cause inconvenience... so there will be a meeting.

Me: what disruption did you cause that they have to actually call a *meeting*?

Roshni: Apparently there was some trouble at a *site*, some locals apparently said something because I had done *parikhs* there... you know, I don't even remember exactly what happened. I have told them, if I have done wrong then you tell me, I will try my best to correct myself... and its not that I am not working... let them observe my work for two or three months, then tell me if I am not doing it properly! Why do they have to do all this?

Roshni's case was hardly unique. Other people derided for doing *bhel*, picking up *parikhs*, for doing sex work (etc.) were left out of higher-level meetings or downgraded in the hierarchy. Eventually a significant number of people became alienated from at least some projects and leaders within MANAS Bangla – some of them, like Roshni, gave up their jobs in the NGO/CBO sector altogether, and eventually took to full-time sex work; another section started identifying as transgender activists and dissociated from MSM activists and networks, as will be traced in the next chapter. Partly due to the censorship of behaviors like *bhel*, several rising transgender leaders and their community-based organizations like Koshish and Kolkata Rista felt that they were being excluded from full

participation in the MANAS network; these organizations later separated into ATHB (Association of Transgender/*Hijra* in Bengal).

Challenges and Slippages within the Cartography of MSM

However, the categorical consolidation of the *kothi* versus other MSM groups like the *dupli*, as well as the distancing from *bhel*, remains incomplete – subcultural usages may both explicitly challenge or less intentionally slip away from institutional cartographies and hierarchies. While Lawrence Cohen and Paul Boyce have critiqued the institutional reification of *kothi*,²⁶² they do not note how quotidian practices of *kothi/dhurani* communities may resist such governmental reification in ways that are illegible within official enumerative cartographies. Both in Berhampore and Ranaghat, some community members may continue to transgress cartographic boundaries and attendant behavioral expectations. For instance, Amit, one of Subhash's daughters at Ranaghat and a staff member in Swikriti's HIV-intervention project there, has often spoken out against rigid categorical divisions and hierarchies. In an extended conversation, she narrated to me that in her friend circle, many *kothis* preferred *duplis* to *parikhs*, and she herself was in a relationship with a fellow *kothi* who was less *bheli* than she was.

All these categories have only strengthened the divisions (*bhed*) among ourselves (...). I am very visibly *kothi*, but I have generally tend liked *duplis* rather than *parikhs* in the strict sense (...). my current partner, he is a *kothi* like I used to be a

²⁶² Cohen, 'The Kothi Wars', p. 285; Boyce, 'Conceiving Kothis', p. 188.

few years back, that is *kodi* (male-attired, sober), whereas I have become more *bheli* (flamboyant, feminine-attired) myself.

Amit thus traverses both the *kothi-dupli* and *kodi-bheli* divides. In this, she has the sanction of her mother Subhash. In the summer of 2011, Subhash was instrumental in arranging a wedding between two members of the local *kothi* circle in Ranaghat, in which one of the partners dressed as the bride and the other as the groom. The groom was variably designated as a *dupli* or a *kothi*, and sometimes even as a *dupli kothi*, by local community members, but never as a *parikh* (he referred to himself as ‘bisexual’, a term that was otherwise not so commonly used in the community). While Ranajay’s translation of MSM cartography adapted the common metaphor of heterosexual partnership to render *parikhs* as the ‘husbands’ of *kothis*, here the signification is both repeated, and slips away from its normative cartographic form. In this case, Subhash’s endorsement of the wedding as a senior respected member of the community probably helped to create a relatively permissive atmosphere, conducive to such slippages and resignifications. Meanwhile at Berhampore, despite the various aforementioned *kothi-dupli* tensions, over the years, at least some persons designated as *duplis* and *dupli kothis* seem to have been accepted within the circle as good friends and partners. As Aniket herself put it once, ‘*parikhs* may come to us temporarily, but eventually they will always run after women! I have seen that *duplis*, on the other hand, stay with us’. Here, the gender/sexually versatile *dupli* displaces the primacy of the *kothi-parikh* dualism (masculine penetrators-feminine penetrated) within the institutional cartography of MSM, and contrary to their suspect intermediary position, are figured as partners who are in fact

potentially more trustworthy than *parikhs*. Such dynamic quotidian negotiations of the *kothi-dupli* spectrum contrast with the function of *kothi* as a standardized term consolidating locally and contextually variable categories into an overarching bounded population.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will return to the larger argument about vernacularization that I have sought to demonstrate through this chapter. On one hand, *kothi* in its officially sanctioned usage serves as a vernacular(ized) intermediary between translocal subcultural usages such as *dhurani* and the transnational risk-based rubric of MSM, such that the shifting boundaries between insiders and outsiders in subcultural cartographies of gender/sexual variance are translated into the institutional cartography of HIV-prevention, producing *kothis* as a high-risk, disempowered MSM sub-group. This process also produces community members as an exploitable labor pool within the political economy of state- and donor-funded HIV-AIDS interventions. Even as the work of HIV-prevention relies heavily on an intimate knowledge of (trans)local subcultural languages and networks, such knowledge, as well as attendant sexualized forms of labor such as *bhel*, are severely undervalued and/or elided. Overall, there is therefore a vernacularization in at least two senses – the languages of *kothi/dhurani* communities are both subordinated relative to the national and transnational rubric of MSM, and their linguistic skills and feminized labor are economically devalued within the broader linguistic political economy of postcolonial

India, where the knowledge of ‘regional’ or ‘vernacular’ languages is economically devalued relative to English. Higher-rung employees in NGOs and CBOs, who need to have some fluency in English, typically earn far more than ‘peer educators’ and ‘community advocates’; moreover, while knowledge of Bengali/Hindi might still be seen as desirable in job descriptions (e.g. for project managers in targeted interventions), familiarity with subcultural codes and dialects is never mentioned as a remunerable and valued job requirement at any level, though the ongoing work of outreach among ‘sexual minorities’ by low-tier ‘peer educators’ (in the face of many dangers like on-site harassment) relies on the skill in utilizing subcultural ‘vernaculars’, as well as the strategies of *bhel*. Therefore, subcultural languages are even more devalued, invisibilized and taken for granted than standard Bengali or Hindi per se. Moreover, such devalued knowledges and labors are also precarious. As I elaborate further in the next chapter, at the end of the third phase of the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP-III) in May 2012, HIV-interventions in several districts of West Bengal – including the aforementioned projects that Swikriti and Sangram had received after years of waiting and hope – were arbitrarily not renewed for the next phase without adequate explanation, forcing erstwhile staff, even those living with HIV-AIDS, to take to sex work with uncertain access to condoms, and underlining their status as exploitable groups who are rendered disposable after funders’ targets have been met.²⁶³

²⁶³ I have elaborated this process further elsewhere; see Dutta, A. 2012b. ‘Indian Sexual Minority Communities Devastated by Funding Cuts’. *World Policy Blog*. Available at <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/23/indian-sexual-minority-communities-devastated-funding-cuts> (accessed 28 March 2013).

Through this chapter, I have also sought to qualify the potential metrocentricity of critiques of institutional formations (such as Khanna's 'HIV-AIDS industry) without dismissing the dominance of metropolitan NGOs, the state and funders. Identity-based mobilizations for sexual health and rights do not just expand outward from metropolitan centers, but depend on the pre-existent translocality of seemingly peripheral subcultural networks. At the same time, centers of institutional power (like big-city NGOs) gain spatial privilege precisely because of combined access to both transnational HIV-prevention funds, and vernacular(ized) discourses and networks. Moreover, MSM, *kothi*, etc., become epidemiological labels for 'target groups' in terms of parameters of intelligibility that have purchase for the state and funders – that is, sexual risk of HIV-infection and gendered vulnerability. Following Lefevre, translations are forms of refraction within institutional constraints: here, the biopolitical imperative of constructing vulnerable target populations graded in terms of risk, *selectively* and *partially* translating subcultural usages into MSM sub-sections in ways that elide their dynamic variations.²⁶⁴ The translocal intelligibility of the MSM rubric depends on establishing correspondences with the 'languages' (that have been already relatively consolidated as *ulti*), thus forging a hegemony that is simultaneously institutional and subcultural – for example, Rahim's initiation into being properly *kothi* by Aniket, and Aniket's own shift to becoming 'more *kothi*' during her years as a Sangram member. Institutional-subcultural correspondences are of course prone to slippage, and cannot prevent usages like *dupli kothi* that breach normative cartographies. In Althusserian terms, different locations and temporal

²⁶⁴ Lefevre, A. (1983). That structure in the dialect of men interpreted. In E.S. Shaffer (Ed.), *Comparative Criticism* (Vol. 6). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Niranjana, T. Siting Translation, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

trajectories, such as the histories of institutional emergence and community formation, are contingently linked through translations to articulate a complex structure of power that cannot be reduced to any singular temporality or logic, *even as* such articulation produces a relatively centralized structure of power.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Althusser, L. 1965/1970. The errors of classical economics. In Althusser, L. & Balibar, E. *Reading capital* (B. Brewster, trans.). London: New Left Books. (Original work published 1965), see esp. p. 104.

Chapter 3: Globalizing Transgender in Eastern India: Transition Narratives, Quantitative Femininity and the MSM/TG Divide

Introduction

The cartographic consolidation of identity exemplified by the MSM rubric entered a new phase in the late 2000s with the increasing prominence of ‘transgender’ as a separate identity and category in the spheres of both HIV-AIDS interventions and rights-based mobilizations. Transgender arrived in eastern India through convergences between transnational circuits of HIV-AIDS activism and globalizing biomedical discourses of transsexuality. The arrival of transgender represents both new political possibilities of identity and minority formation for lower class/caste gender variant persons, and a further entrenchment of the biopolitical enumeration and management of population groups exemplified by the MSM rubric, contributing further to norms of legible identification.

In this chapter, I will trace the emergence of transgender as a salient category within institutional activism in India, and the establishment of its definitional boundaries through its contested relation with the MSM rubric. The adoption of transgender within activist and funding networks, as both a self-identity and a designation for communities, was partly prompted by the emergence of a transgender activist leadership and attendant assertions of an identity that went beyond *kothi*, *hijra* or MSM categories, and drew upon the transnational circulation of the discourse and practices of transsexuality and gender

transition. At the same time, transgender was also propagated within HIV-AIDS circuits in response to activist discontents with the MSM rubric and its restrictive focus on sexual risk and male-male sexual behavior. The emergence of transgender relative to MSM has prompted ongoing conflicts among activists and communities regarding the definitional boundaries of ‘transgender’, and the proper categorization of subcultural terms such as *kothi* as MSM or transgender. As I will attempt to demonstrate, particular tensions arise between the usage of ‘transgender’ as an open-ended umbrella term that can include various gender variant subject positions, and its usage as a gender identity distinct from categories based on sexuality or sexual behavior such as MSM.

A brief introduction to the history of ‘transgender’ may serve to contextualize the arguments of this chapter. While its exact origins are murky, the term ‘transgender’ (or ‘transgenderist’ in its initial articulations) was brought into wide usage within US gender variant communities in the 1960s and 70s by Virginia Prince, who used it to designate male-assigned persons who lived full-time as women without undergoing ‘sex reassignment’ procedures, as distinct from those who elected ‘sex change’ surgery (thus falling into the biomedical diagnostic category of ‘transsexual’), or cross-dressed for part of the time (‘cross-dressers’ or ‘transvestites’).²⁶⁶ However, by the 1990s, usages of ‘transgender’ in the US had shifted and broadened beyond Prince’s definition.²⁶⁷ In the work of pioneering transgender activists such as Susan Stryker and Kate Bornstein, it

²⁶⁶ Currah, P. 2005. ‘Gender Pluralisms under the Transgender Umbrella’, in Currah, P., Juang, R. M. and Minter, S. P. (eds.) *Transgender Rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

emerged as an ‘umbrella term’ that could link older categories such as ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’ to unite a wider range of gender variant persons than those who desired or underwent sex-reassignment (now often called gender affirmation) surgery.²⁶⁸ Paisley Currah notes the emergence of ‘transgender’ as a ‘central, unifying framework’ for the ‘extraordinary diversity of cross-gender practices, identities and beliefs about gender within gender nonconforming communities in the United States’, a framework that can potentially create a common political platform for articulating demands for the rights and well-being of a wide range of gender variant subjects.²⁶⁹ However, the open-ended nature of ‘transgender’ as an ‘umbrella term’ is also circumscribed by its categorical distinction from sexuality and sexual orientation or identity. As David Valentine argues in *Imagining Transgender*, the increasing currency of ‘transgender’ in US activism, social service and academics in the 1990s marked the increasing distinction of gender identification from sexual orientation, and a broader conceptual separation of gender and sexuality as discrete categories of experience and identity formation.²⁷⁰ Even as ‘transgender’ is meant to unify and link various gender non-conforming subject positions, it distinguishes them as gender identities separate from sexualities like ‘gay’, thus potentially excluding or eliding the discursive practices of gender/sexually non-conforming persons in the US who use ‘gay’ as a term of self-designation and community formation.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Currah, P. ‘Gender Pluralisms under the Transgender Umbrella’, p. 5.

²⁷⁰ Valentine, D. 2004. *Imagining Transgender: The Ethnography of a Category*, Duke University Press (2004), p. 4.

²⁷¹ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, p. 4.

As usages of ‘transgender’ have expanded beyond the US context, several scholars have cautioned against the potentially colonizing imposition of transgender or transsexual categories. Towle and Morgan argue that the usage or imposition of ‘transgender’ by western activists in non-western cultural contexts may reify or romanticize other forms of gender variance.²⁷² Cabral and Vitorro critique the adoption and normative judicial construction of the ‘transsexual’ in Argentina, premised on a stable gender identity in binary opposition to socially assigned gender, which casts lower class *travestis* as perverted cross-dressers.²⁷³ On the other hand, Susan Stryker argues that the transgender rubric may also serve to link different sites of gender variance and enable transnational networks of resistance.²⁷⁴ Stryker and Aizura suggest that rather than a colonial imposition, ‘transgender’ may function as a ‘global assemblage’ with transnational circuits of adoption and usage that emerge from and connect multiple sites in potentially liberatory ways.²⁷⁵ However, the extant literature in transgender studies has largely not explored the circulation and adoption of ‘transgender’ in the global south through transnational activist networks and the development industry.²⁷⁶ In the absence of such study, any formulation of transgender as a ‘global’ construct presumes its globalization as

²⁷² Towle and Morgan 2002, ‘Romancing the Transgender Native’, p. 491.

²⁷³ Cabral, M. and Vitorro, P. 2006. ‘[Trans]sexual Citizenship in Contemporary Argentina’, in Currah, P., Juang, R. M. and Minter, S. P. (eds.) *Transgender Rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 264.

²⁷⁴ Stryker, S. 2013. ‘*Kaming Mga Talyada* (We Who Are Sexy): The Transsexual Whiteness of Christine Jorgensen in the (Post)colonial Philippines’ in Stryker, S & Aizura, A. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York: Routledge; p. 352.

²⁷⁵ Stryker, S & Aizura, A. (Eds.) 2013. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York: Routledge; p. 4.

²⁷⁶ For example, the canonical readers in transgender studies (Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013) do not contain sustained critical engagements with transgender activism in the global south.

a *fait accompli* without considering the processes through which it does globalize. Moreover, the assumption that ‘transgender’ functions as a diffuse multi-sited assemblage risks ignoring its complicities with asymmetric transnational formations of power. Rather than assuming its globality – an impossible horizon in any case – we might need to examine how the circulation and adoption of transgender exerts a hegemonic globalizing force through transnational activist and funding circuits.²⁷⁷

As I will argue, the activist adoption of an overarching MSM/transgender schema of identification and its underlying conceptual separation of gender and sexual identity may render the complex spectrum of *kothi* community formations even less intelligible in institutional terms, even as *kothi* and *hijra* are vernacularized as regional identities under the transnational ‘umbrella term’ of TG. However, this is not just a globalizing imposition of an alien conceptual rubric – rather, the increasing separation of a ‘transgender’ category draws from and feeds into both *hijra*-MSM and intra-MSM divides, continuing the creation of hegemony through institutionally constrained processes of translation between transnational categories and their regionalized variants, as traced in the previous chapter. However, while the *hijra-kothi* split and intra-*kothi* (*bheli-kodi* or *kothi-dupli*) divides may be translated into the transgender/MSM division, the overlapping nature of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* community formations also confuses and confounds this separation such that the classification of *kothi* as MSM or TG becomes intensely contested and controversial among CBO and NGO activists. These contests

²⁷⁷ For an overview of transgender studies, see Stryker and Whittle 2006; for an overview of the literature on ‘global queering’, see Jackson 2009.

have been especially evident during attempts to decide and fix the boundaries of MSM and TG through ‘community consultations’ of CBO representatives organized by funders and large NGOs – which again demonstrate the metrocentricity of the state-funder-NGO nexus that deploys the logic of community-based organizing while perpetuating structural hierarchies and constraints that delimit processes of community formation.

Quantifying gender: Transgender and the gender continuum

Through a study of institutionalized and hegemonic versions of transgender identity in India, this chapter draws from and contributes to critiques of gender binaries and body normativity within transgender studies. I will argue that attempts to separate communities of MSM/homosexual men and male-to-female transgender persons contribute to the reinforcement of binary gender constructs on *both* sides of the MSM/TG divide. Even as MSM becomes more aligned with cisgendered homosexuality, male-to-female transgender identification and associated community spaces become aligned with hegemonic narratives of subject formation, often centered on cultural constructs of femininity and the desire for bodily transformation.

Jack Halberstam has suggested that the various ‘border wars’ in the US around the definition and separation of transgender from ‘lesbian’ and ‘butch’ have assumed gender (in the context of Halberstam’s essay, specifically masculinity) both as a quantifiable property and as a measurable acquisition.²⁷⁸ The quantification of gender is particularly

278 Halberstam, J. 1998. ‘Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum’. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4(2): 287-310.

manifested in conflicts on which people are ‘masculine’ enough to qualify as female-to-male transgender (FTM) or trans men, as opposed to butch lesbian women. Halberstam articulates a powerful critique of the continuum model of gender, or more precisely, gender as a *measurable* continuum, where identities are arranged on a scale from more to less masculine (or feminine) positions. In the case of the institutional emergence of male-to-female transgender identity in India, the quantification of gender is reinforced by the biopolitical enumeration of the disadvantages of minoritized population groups. To revisit Chatterjee’s argument, non-elite groups without sufficient access to stable citizenship claim eligibility for governmental policies as ‘populations’ with enumerable disadvantages.²⁷⁹ Thus transgender in its institutional versions becomes articulated through a metric of vulnerability, where disempowerment becomes a measurable property along the singular axis of gender and feminization, neglecting other factors such as class/caste. As previously evidenced in the case of MSM, this process of constructing a (more) vulnerable population is a significant systemic constraint shaping institutional-subcultural translations, selectively reifying identitarian boundaries. Moreover, institutional constructions of transgender may reify the connection between feminization and victimhood; as Wendy Brown has argued, minority identities become constitutively attached to their vulnerability in the process of claiming entitlements from the state.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Chatterjee, P. 2008. ‘Democracy and Economic Transformation in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 19 April: p. 53-62.

²⁸⁰ Brown, W. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I trace various interlocking loci of the globalizing emergence of transgender, including the separation of MSM and TG in HIV-AIDS activist networks, and the transnational circulation of transsexual transition narratives. While narratives of transsexuality propagate an ontological account of gender that emphasizes an internalized and essential femininity, activist usages at the level of CBO/NGO leadership link this ontological account to the quantification of femininity and vulnerability, articulating transgender in terms of its greater marginalization relative to MSM. This results in tensions between the usage of transgender as an ‘umbrella term’ that can include ‘local variations’ like *kothi*, and its cartographic distinction from MSM. In the second section, I explore how the ‘transgender’ category gains hegemony through constrained translations with extant quantitative logics in *kothi-dhurani-hijra* subcultures, such that the TG-MSM division selectively draws from and reinforces divides between more and less feminine *kothis* or ‘real’ and ‘fake’ *hijras*, but elides the overlapping nature of the *kothi-dhurani-hijra* spectrum, which is not entirely translatable as a neatly measurable or divisible continuum. The vernacularization of *kothi-dhurani* etc. as local variants of transgender or MSM thus reinforces certain identitarian tendencies, and elides practices and subject positions that breach the MSM-TG schema. Moreover, the categorical distinction of transgender from sexual identities and particularly MSM/homosexual men results in an emphasis on embodied gendered difference, and fosters normatively desirable trajectories of subject formation as per the binary narrative of male-to-female transition. In the last section, I explore how *kothi/hijra* intersections with transgender activist discourse may

also foster variant articulations of gender/sexual difference that are vernacularized relative to dominant versions of transgender identity, both through intentional challenges to normative identities and slippages within processes of translation.

I. Interlocking Loci of the Emergence of Transgender

While a detailed history of the transnational expansion of ‘transgender’ as a category is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will trace some of the interlocking sites and processes through which it expanded to and was adapted within locations in India. Firstly, transnational circuits of HIV-AIDS activism, such as international meetings of HIV-AIDS activists and funders like the International AIDS Conference (IAC) and the International Congress on AIDS in the Asia Pacific (ICAAP), have evidenced an increasing tendency to move beyond MSM as an umbrella category for male-assigned persons, and to juxtapose it to TG (transgender), where transgender largely stands for male-to-female transpersons (trans women and other transpersons assigned male at birth).²⁸¹ As Boellstorff notes, the ‘biological essentialism at the core of the MSM category’ reduces all those who do not identify as ‘men’ to biological maleness and male-male sexual behavior, and thus some transgender groups have distanced themselves from the term.²⁸² The increasingly visible emergence of transgender activism in the ‘west’ as well as East and Southeast Asia has therefore prompted the addition of transgender to transnational HIV-AIDS discourse, expanding MSM into MSM/TG, to better

²⁸¹ To cite an example, a ‘community forum’ preceding the massive ICAAP (International Congress on AIDS in the Asia Pacific) in 2009 was titled as the ‘MSM/TG and HIV forum’.

²⁸² Boellstorff, ‘But do not identify as Gay’, p. 296.

accommodate gender variant persons and allow for gender identity and gender-based discrimination to be factored into funding policy. In this context, international HIV-AIDS conferences, workshops and meetings have served as locations where Indian activists were not only exposed to the term, but were sometimes interpellated as ‘transgender’ as well, which some of them subsequently adopted as self-identification. Ranjana, the senior transgender and *hijra* activist employed in an HIV-prevention NGO in Kolkata whom we met in the first chapter, recounted to me that she had first heard the term in the early 2000s at an HIV-AIDS conference with international activists present. She had loosely used ‘gay’ (rather than *hijra* or *kothi*) to identify herself to an Anglophone audience, prompting a corrective from a senior activist:

He (the activist) told me, ‘*beti* (daughter), you are not gay, you are transgender!’ I was at that point already dressing in women’s clothes (*meyeder jama*) and my hair was already long, but I did not know the term. Later on, I started calling myself *transgender*.

‘Transgender’ thus functions as a successful interpellation by being attached, seemingly seamlessly, to a pre-existing gendered subjectivity and presentation. Subsequently, as more of such relatively middle class activists with greater access to electronic media started identifying as transgender, an emerging solidarity of transgender activists was enabled through e-groups and mailing lists such as transgender-sisters@yahoogroups.com, which was established in the mid-2000s and marked the attempted creation of a virtual trans feminine sisterhood, serving as a South Asia-based forum for discussion of ‘transgender’ issues and news from various parts of the world

(there were also emerging trans masculine fora distinct from HIV-AIDS activist networks, which lie outside the purview of this chapter). ‘Transgender sisters’ was initiated by Amitava Sarkar, a prominent activist from Kolkata and a staff member of the NGO Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) – the same NGO that employed Ranjana. Many of these activists were located outside MANAS Bangla, the main organizational network in West Bengal in the 2004-2011 period, which had emerged as an (officially) MSM and (unofficially) *kothi* CBO network, as charted in the previous chapter. Thus, they marked a distinct and emerging activist formation – as we shall see, one that increasingly asserted itself as separate from ‘MSM’ organizations.

Transition narratives: Translating Transgender as Rupantar

Several of these activists undertook the translation of ‘transgender’ as a category and concept into their respective languages. By the late 2000s, the corresponding word for transgender in literary Bengali was standardized as *rupantarkami* or alternatively *lingantarkami*, as evidenced in diverse media articles and a pioneering Bengali film on transgender issues called *Rupantar* directed by Amitava Sarkar, the aforementioned transgender activist, which was released in 2009 and screened at several LGBT film festivals within and outside India.²⁸³ The English blurb of the film explains that *Rupantar* addresses ‘the hurdles that most male-to-female transgender people face in their daily lives’.²⁸⁴ Hence, *rupantarkami* is established as the equivalent for ‘male-to-female transgender people’. Lexically, both *rupantarkami* and *lingantarkami* are influenced by

²⁸³ Sarkar, A. (Director). *Rupantar – Transformation* [Motion Picture]. Kolkata: SAATHII (2009).

²⁸⁴ Sarkar, *Rupantar*, 2009.

the older Bengali translation of homosexual as *samakami* (literally, those desiring sameness), and signify ‘someone desiring transformation’ (*rupantar* – transition in *roop* or form; *lingantar* – transition in *linga* or sex/gender). As evident in the film description, *rupantar* here signifies transition from ‘male’ to ‘female’ (MTF), whether at sartorial, psycho-sexual or physical levels, and thus aligns ‘transgender’ closely with western biomedical discourses of transsexuality. Such usages contrast with activist discourse within the US, where ‘transgender’ was articulated in the 1990s as consciously ‘posttranssexual’ so as to also accommodate non-binary or non-transitional narratives of gender difference.²⁸⁵ However, ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’ seem to have garnered overlapping resonances and simultaneous currency in India, such that *rupantarkami* has effectively functioned as a translation for both, and currently there is no widely accepted or standard distinction between the two terms in Bengali (recently in 2013, there have been debates in online activist forums on whether ‘*lingatarkami*’ [desiring transformation in *linga* or gender] could mean transgender as distinct from ‘*rupantarkami*’ as transsexual [desiring transformation in *roop* or physical form], without any consensus). In both cases, the translation of ‘trans’ as *antar* or transition/crossing (*rup-antar*, *ling-antar*) commonly assumes the MTF/FTM model of transition, even if this transition is not effected surgically, thus definitionally prioritizing pre- or post-operative trans women and others who consistently present as women or dress in women’s clothes, like *gharana*-based *hijras*. Several transgender activists in the US, such as Riki Wilchins and Kate Bornstein, have critiqued the MTF/FTM schema as a restrictive way of understanding (trans)gender identities through a two-sex, binary-gender model – but as Jay Prosser has argued, it is

²⁸⁵ Currah, P. ‘Gender Pluralisms under the Transgender Umbrella, p. 5.

also a model that is borne out by at least some narratives of transsexual selfhood, which have actively collaborated with biomedical discourse to establish narratives of transition and transsexuality that may be simultaneously life-giving for some and restrictive for others, if adopted as hegemonic.²⁸⁶

Many of the activists who began identifying as transgender and *rupantarkami* were transgender women who avowed an ontological identity premised on a consistent psychic and/or public womanhood; they were also often some of the first people in eastern India to have sought and undergone hormonal and/or surgical gender affirmation procedures through public or private hospitals, as distinct from *hijra* castration/penectomy conducted by illicit medical practitioners. They therefore mark another salient mode of the transnational circulation of transgender identities and categories, distinct from the HIV-AIDS sector – the biomedical discourse and technologies of transsexuality, which, as Susan Stryker argues, had begun to globalize through images of US transsexual women such as Christine Morgensen from as early as the 1950s.²⁸⁷ Two trans women deserve especial mention as the embodied loci of the arrival of a public transsexual narrative and identity in West Bengal – Manobi (née Somnath Bandopadhyay) and Tista Das, who are first persons known to have undergone ‘modern’ SRS (sex reassignment surgery) in eastern India in the early 2000s. Among them, Manobi was initially a participant in the Naihati-Kalyani-Ranaghat *kothi-dhurani* circles in the late 1990s, but her middle class

²⁸⁶ Wilchins, R. A. *Read my lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*. Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books (1997), p. 4; Prosser, J. 1998 *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁸⁷ Stryker, S. 2013. ‘*Kaming Mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy)*’, p. 348.

provenance set her apart from most others in the network. Subhash knew her from the 1990s as a friend of Shyamoli-*ma*, but was acutely conscious of her distinction from other *dhuranis* on lines of both class and gender: ‘She did not mix very well with us *dhuranis*, she had a sense of superiority even back then. And then after her *operation* she married that guy and lived as a woman’. While her transition attracted some media attention, Manobi never entered the CBO/NGO sector or the ‘movement’, and largely distanced herself from both *kothi-hijra* and transgender activist communities following her transition.

Tista, on the other hand, emerged as a leader of the emerging transgender/*rupantarkami* activist formation in West Bengal. Born in a middle class family in the northern suburbs of Kolkata, Tista had gone through her gender affirmation procedures independently by raising funds among her friends in the mid-2000s, without much connection with the CBO/NGO sector. However, subsequently, she entered CBO/NGO networks as a pioneering and inspirational trans woman figure. Tista was featured in *Rupantar*, the aforementioned film, as a guide who leads a young trans woman from harassment and abuse into self-acceptance and self-respect. Given that Tista had already undergone her ‘sex reassignment surgery’ by the time of filming, the young protagonist of the film, played by a peer educator from one of MANAS Bangla’s projects who was known to Subhash’s daughters as a fellow *kothi*, ‘mistakes’ Tista as a (cis) woman and expresses her surprise when she finds out that Tista is in fact ‘like her’: ‘*Didi* (elder sister), I always thought you were a woman!’ Tista replies, ‘But I *am* a woman!’ The young protagonist

also subsequently establishes her gender presentation in terms of a consistent and confident womanhood, although it is never stated whether she actually undergoes gender affirmation surgery or not, and in fact, the film makes clear that trans women need not have undergone surgery. Here, an ontologically consistent womanhood – demonstrated through a confessional rendition of the self *as* essentially woman and through public gendered presentation of womanhood, with or without medical reassignment procedures – emerges as the premise of transgender/*rupantarkami* identification.

Apart from the relatively fictionalized space of the film, Tista has also avowed her essential womanhood at several public occasions. However, at the same time, she has also spoken of her trajectory of ‘becoming a woman’ as a proud accomplishment: in an event organized by Swikriti in late 2012, she declared, ‘The history of my becoming Tista (her assumed feminine name) is a history of pride to me’. Womanhood is thus both an ontological essence and an external attribute that is ideally actualized and demonstrated through a certain practice on and of the embodied self – this is the familiar metaphysical circle linking essence and manifestation, being and becoming, depth and surface (and so on) wherein the former is supposed to pre-exist and determine the latter but crucially depends on the latter for its apparent actualization. The pressure to actualize essence is all the more on trans women whose identitarian claim to womanhood is more socially precarious (though ultimately no more or less stable) than that of cis women – accordingly, Tista has to elaborate her history of becoming herself, which she does in a Bengali article in the 2009 issue of the CBO Swikriti’s annual publication *Swikriti*

Patrika.²⁸⁸ In the article, Tista describes how transsexual women are born in the ‘wrong body’ (*bhool shorir*) due to hormonal ‘problems’, thus propagating a common trope of the globalizing biomedical discourse of transsexuality – transsexual persons are essentially women/men trapped in the wrongly sexed body. (Amitava, Tista’s friend and the director of *Rupantar*, offers a fairly similar definition of the ‘male-to-female transgender population’ in an English article titled ‘The Transformation’ in the same community magazine four years later in 2013.²⁸⁹) Tista’s version of the transsexual narrative, generalizing the story of her own growing up and transition, posits that trans women are born in bodies assigned male/man (*purush chinhito shorir*) by doctors and society, but have the *monon* (psyche or mind – roughly synonymous to the Bengali *mon* and Hindi *man*) as well as the *anubhav* (feelings) of a woman. While her designation of ‘male-assigned’ (*purush-chinhito*) bodies suggests that the trouble may be more with the social and medical assignation of bodies than the bodies per se – presciently echoing the deconstructive critique of socio-medical sex assignation and its reification of bodily materiality in US transgender academic discourse²⁹⁰ – she goes on to conventionally locate sex as an innate characteristic of the body, albeit one that is at odds with the trans person’s gendered selfhood, thus reiterating the sex/gender divide. Using the biomedical term ‘gender identity disorder’ (nowadays called gender dysphoria to avoid pathological connotations) to describe this condition, Tista describes how this ‘adversity’ or ‘trouble’ (*bipotti*) befalls children with XY chromosomes whose brains (*mostishko*) do not

²⁸⁸ Das, T. 2009. ‘Bibhatsa-Bibar’. *Swikriti Patrika* 6: pp. 9-15.

²⁸⁹ Sarkar, A. 2013. ‘The Transformation’. *Swikriti Patrika* 10: pp. 45-49.

²⁹⁰ See, for example, Spade, D. 2011. ‘About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts’. Available at <http://www.deanspade.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Purportedly-Gendered-Body-Parts.pdf> (Accessed April 1, 2013).

adequately respond to the male ‘sex hormone’ testosterone during their fetal development even as their bodies do, which causes their natal brains to remain ‘like women’ (*meyeder moton*) while their bodies develop with the sexual characteristics of a ‘man’ (*purush*). This discrepancy causes an increasing difference (*boishomyo*) between their *shorir* (body) and *mon* (psyche/mind) as the growing child develops secondary sexual characteristics – leading to inner turmoil (*durjog*) and intolerable and indescribable pain (*dussaha jwala*), till its surgical resolution. Tista thus takes over and re-genders an old conceptual *shorir-mon* dualism in post-enlightenment Bengali literature that is usually not explicitly gendered. A Bengali reader of Tista’s narrative, such as myself, may be reminded of the pre-eminent Bengali litterateur Rabindranath Tagore’s location of the individual’s imaginative freedom in the *mon* – for example, in his famous song *Kothao amar hariye jaowar nei mana, mone mone* (roughly, ‘I am not forbidden to lose myself anywhere, in my *mon*’). Tanika Sarkar has argued that the emergence of such articulations of individuality and self-expression in 19th and early 20th century Bengali literature is connected with the growth of humanism and bourgeois individualism and their opposition to social constraints in Bengali novels and poetry of the colonial period.²⁹¹ For Tista, *mon* or *monon* is the site of an inalienable, essential and expressive selfhood that becomes the premise of one’s resistance to the repression caused by physical and social gender – this is also thus a specifically transgender iteration of what Foucault famously termed the ‘repressive hypothesis’, which marks the conceptual emergence of ‘sexuality’ more broadly. Tista follows up the general template of *shorir-*

²⁹¹ Sarkar, T. 2002. ‘Many Faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in The Home and The World’. In Datta, P. K. (Ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*. New Delhi: Permanent Black; p. 27-44.

mon conflict and its ideal resolution with a moving and inspiring account of her own struggles with social ridicule, the biomedical establishment and state bureaucracy – doctors who did not take her claim to womanhood seriously due to her evidently ‘male’ genitalia; hospitals that refused to admit her because of confusion on whether she should be put in a male or female ward; government officials who refused to change identity documents to female even after she did somehow manage to complete her ‘sex-reassignment surgery’ (she was eventually able to obtain a passport and voter identity card marked ‘female’, but was not able to change her birth and academic certificates).

While her particular story is a powerful indictment of the discrimination faced by trans women and other gender non-conforming people based on social sex assignment, her construction of a generic template for *rupantarkami-lingantarkami* identification effects a significant distancing from (and potential elision of) *kothi-dhurani-hijra* metaphors and narratives of gender variance. In particular, the rendition of trans femininity as a disjunction between the external male *shorir* and the internal feminine *mon* that must be reconciled through the binary trajectory of MTF transition (*rupantor* or *lingantor*) may be contrasted with articulations of simultaneous or dual sex/gender, such as the common phrase *meyeli chhele* (feminine boy/male) that we encountered in the narrative of *kothis/dhuranis* like Subhash and Ranajay, or Moloy’s and Arijit’s self-designation as both *kothi/hijra* and *tonna* or *byatachhele* (man). As we shall see, the narrative of *rupantar* or *lingantar* reinforces governmental pressures to prove or authenticate transgender and feminine identification as both an internal essence and external (bodily)

accomplishment. Moreover, the discourse of transsexuality in Tista's narrative is also accompanied by a class and respectability-based distinction from *dhurani* and *hijras*, both paralleling and modifying the distancing from disreputable *kothi-dhurani-hijra* femininity by MSM activists and CBO/NGOs that we encountered in the previous chapter:

Chhakka, moga, dhurani are neither decent/aesthetic (*shobhan*) nor scientific words. Yet some people are socially marked at every moment for their different nature with such indecent words... it is not respectable (*shommanio*) to any self-conscious (*atma-sachetan*) person. (...) Even in the age of the Internet, there is no usage of the word *lingantarkami* anywhere in Indian society or history. Everywhere, it is the *bijatiyo* (misbegotten, bastard, wrongly derived) words like *chhakka, moga* or *hijra* that are used.²⁹²

This excerpt conflates pejorative ascriptions such as *chhakka* (literally 'sixer' and connoting something like 'fag' or 'sissy') with self-designations such as *dhurani* or *hijra*, and reads the historical absence of the transgender/*lingantorkami* identity India as a socio-cultural lack, eliding *kothi-hijra* communities and subcultures and effectively consigning them to the lack of 'self-consciousness' (*atma-sachetanata*) for using socially pejorative designations like *dhurani* or *hijra*. In contrast, her own narrative by implication marks the emergence of a 'scientific', self-conscious and self-respecting trans womanhood. As we shall see, such constructions of transgender or transsexual subjectivity and identity may relegate other forms of gender/sexually variant subjectivity

²⁹² Das, T. 2009. 'Bihatsa-Bibar', p. 9.

or expression as a form of false consciousness and advocate the achievement of a proper transgender self-identity as part of a modernizing teleology of progress and liberation.

Woman or Transgender? The dilemmas of official recognition

The emergence of transgender/*rupantarkami* narratives propagated by middle class activists such as Tista or Amitava was roughly simultaneous to the trajectory of political organizing by transgender activists for official recognition and governmental welfare, e.g. for identification as ‘transgender’ or ‘other’ on official identity documents, for separate wards in hospitals and prisons, and for the institution of transgender welfare boards in all Indian states, following precedents in South India.²⁹³ Before the articulation of a transgender position as such, *gharana*-based *hijras* had gained increasing visibility in the sphere of electoral politics in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁹⁴ *Hijra gurus* had started contesting and winning elections in the late 1990s, prompting media debates and courtroom battles around the question of whether they could contest from ‘male’ or ‘female’ seats.²⁹⁵ In 2005, after years of political lobbying by *hijra gharanas* demanding the governmental recognition of their communities, the government of India brought back the colonial

²⁹³ There were several sites where such demands were raised, one of which was the annual Transgender Day organized in Kolkata each year since 2010 by the Association for Transgender/Hijra in Bengal (ATHB), which I attended as a participant observer. Sex/gender identification other than male/female is now permitted in several official documents, such as the Indian passport (Butalia 2011).

²⁹⁴ Reddy, G. 2003. ‘“Men” who would be Kings: Celibacy, Emasculation, and the Re-production of *Hijras* in Contemporary Indian Politics’. *Social Research* 70(1): pp. 163-200.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

category ‘eunuch’ (or ‘E’) as an option apart from ‘M’ and ‘F’ in the passport form.²⁹⁶

The recognition of *hijras* as ‘eunuch’ in official documents set a significant precedent for transgender activists, who lobbied for the inclusion of gender option in voter identity cards, electoral rolls, passports, and the suchlike. Perhaps the earliest articulation of a ‘transgender’ demand for gender recognition was raised in 2003, in a pioneering report on violence and discrimination against *kothi* and *hijra* sex workers in Bangalore, South India, titled ‘Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore’.²⁹⁷ Compiled by the civil rights advocacy front People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka (PUCL-K) in collaboration with emergent *kothi* and *hijra* CBOs in South India, particularly Vividha, Aneka and Sangama in Bangalore, the report raised issues of quotidian violence and discrimination against ‘transgender sex workers’ and articulated several ‘recommendations and suggestions’ directed at the police, legal and administrative establishments. These included the demand for ‘comprehensive civil rights legislation’ so as to ‘offer hijras and kothis the same protection and rights now guaranteed to others on the basis of sex, caste, creed and colour’, and for the legal recognition of gender identity: ‘Every person must have the right to decide their gender expression and identity, including transsexuals, transgenders, transvestites and hijras... This includes the demand for hijras to be considered female as

²⁹⁶ Knight, K. 2012. ‘Nepal’s Third Gender and the Recognition of Gender Identity’. The Huffington Post, 24 April 2012. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kyle-knight/nepal-third-gender_b_1447982.html (accessed March 4 2013).

²⁹⁷ PUCL-K. 2003. *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore*. Bangalore: People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka.

well as a third sex'.²⁹⁸ In uniting *kothi* and *hijra* sex workers under the transgender banner and using it to demand decriminalization, legal protections and gender recognition, the mobilization behind the PUCL-K report marked the pioneering emergence of a transgender collectivity and a significant moment of political possibility. Later on, some of these demands were reiterated by transgender activists in West Bengal, particularly in the annual transgender day that has been organized on 30th April every year from 2010 by the Association of Transgender/Hijras of Bengal (ATHB), a new CBO network whose emergence will be traced below. The Indian state has partially responded to this trajectory of political organizing by including the broad and ambivalent 'other' as a category apart from 'male' and 'female' in voter identity cards and electoral rolls starting from 2009, and more specifically, 'transgender' in the Universal Identity or UID Card scheme in 2011.²⁹⁹

However, the adoption of 'transgender' as a distinct gender identity became a point of contention in various parts of India, marking contested and tricky negotiations between ontological and legal identity, and ruptures in the optimistic constitution of a 'transgender' community as exemplified by the PUCL-K report. A clutch of media reports on the process of enlisting transgenders in electoral rolls and other official documentation, particularly in South India, have recorded divisions and contestations on whether emergent transgender communities want to be enlisted as women or as a separate

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Knight, K. 2012. 'Nepal's Third Gender and the Recognition of Gender Identity'. The Huffington Post, 24 April 2012. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kyle-knight/nepal-third-gender_b_1447982.html (accessed March 4 2013).

gender ('other' or 'transgender'). A news article from Bangalore claims that most 'transsexuals' and the 'majority of TGs' want to be identified as 'female' on official forms, and express their dissatisfaction with official identification procedures that since 2005 have made space for 'eunuch', 'other' and eventually 'transgender' without specifying if they can just identify as women.³⁰⁰ But another Hyderabad-based report states that some transgender and *hijra* people complain about being forced to officially identify as 'female' by their friends and families who want to avoid exposure and resultant disreputability, even though they indeed *want* to identify as 'other' or 'transgender'.³⁰¹ While in the first media report an NGO activist claims that the 'majority of TGs' want to identify as women, in the second case the local NGO politically favors that TGs identify as a distinct gender rather than pass as 'female'.

Transgender activist formations in West Bengal have evidenced a complex distinction and negotiation between asserting ontological identity as women and claiming a separate legal and official (trans)gender category. Even as Tista has recorded her struggle for and eventual achievement of the legal recognition of her identity as a woman, several prominent trans women have, on the contrary, weighed in favor of the distinct gender option. Sharmila, for example, is a pioneering transgender activist who broke away from

³⁰⁰ Kushala, S. 2011. "The Majority of Transsexuals like to be Women", *Bangalore Mirror*, March 21, 2011. Available at <http://www.bangaloremirror.com/index.aspx?page=article§id=1&contentid=20110321201103210007282056c4f6938> (Accessed March 28, 2013).

³⁰¹ TNN, 2011. "'Others' column left unfilled by many transgenders", *The Times of India*, February 27 2011. Available at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-27/hyderabad/28638352_1_transgenders-census-exercise-census-officials (Accessed March 28, 2013).

the MANAS Bangla network early in its history, and became associated with the community-based organization Bandhan, based in central and South Kolkata, as one of its founder members. Since 2009, Sharmila has emerged as one of the most visible trans women in the state's activist networks, alongside other leaders like Amitava and Tista. At a gender issues workshop organized by the lesbian feminist collective Sappho for Equality in 2011, Sharmila claimed that she rates herself as '5 out of 5' on the scale of womanhood (*'ami panche nari'*), thus neatly combining the ontological and quantitative logics of femininity. She further distanced herself and her community from the figure of the 'feminine male' (*meyeli chhele*) that we have previously encountered in the narratives of *dhuranis/kothis* like Subhash – 'We are not *meyeli chhele*, we are women only (*meyei*)!' However, despite such public assertions of her complete womanhood as distinct from the partial and behavioral femininity of *kothis*, Sharmila has favored recognition the governmental recognition of the 'transgender community' as a separate gender, given that society will never accept them as women. Sharmila made this point in a conversation with Tista at a public event during the 2012 Kolkata Pride week:

Sharmila: Last year we lobbied and entered the state women's commission meeting, which was a first in its history... however, even though we were able to enter the meeting, yet somewhere there was a block in accepting us entirely as women/as entirely women (*kothao ekta puro mohila hishebe mene nite badha chhilo*).

Tista: Yes, how much ever they may say they accept us, would they actually share the bed or be comfortable with sharing the toilet with us? A block/barrier would always remain (*ekta badha thekei jay*).

Sharmila: So, I have seen that rather than going there, we can build our own *sector* and develop our *community* beautifully (...) particularly as now there is a lot of attention, a lot of *funds* for the vulnerability and needs of *TGs*'.

Here, the benefits of the formation of a separate community – or, as Sharmila revealingly puts it, a separate ‘sector’ with its attendant institutional funding and governmental recognition – outweighs the need for her recognition as a woman. Thus ontological identity (as a woman) and institutional and legal identity (as transgender, distinct from both men and women) need not correspond, and are indeed strategically rendered as disjoint – a significant twist to the straightforward PUCL demand that ‘every person must have the right to decide their gender expression and identity’.

Sonia, a close associate of Sharmila and a founding member of the CBO Koshish in South Kolkata, was also of the opinion that a separate legal category was going to be more expedient than claiming womanhood. I had initially known Sonia as *kothi*, but later on in our acquaintance, she started identifying as ‘transgender’ (but not so much as a trans woman). ‘I know that a lot of *TGs* may simply want to be identified as a woman, and many have even done so.... But if they all get their i.d. cards made as women, then we will become *invisible*,’ she explained to me during a conversation. Her concern was thus to assert the visible presence and numerical strength of the ‘transgender’ community through the various avenues of state recognition. These strategic negotiations demonstrate how the definitional prioritization of ontological womanhood and the binary transition narrative within emerging articulations of ‘transgender’ cannot fix it as a

signifier and indeed render it foundationally unstable – it oscillates between signifying a measurable modality or trajectory of transition into a pre-existing womanhood (or, less visibly, manhood), and signifying a separate identitarian and communitarian category that stands in cartographic distinction from both genders.

Institutional Mediations: Transgender as an ‘umbrella term’ and the MSM/TG split

Both Sharmila’s and Sonia’s statements imply the emergence of ‘transgender’ as not only an ontological narrative (as in Tista’s accounts) or as a legal category (the PUCL-K demands), but also as a visible community and enumerable population (Sharmila’s ‘sector’) that can make claims to funding and governmental welfare. In this context, fixing the bounds of this term became an even more urgent project, especially in the circuits of HIV-AIDS activism, with emerging possibilities of separate funding for ‘TG’ communities starting from around 2009. Through these debates, the emphasis on the attainment of ontological womanhood within transgender transition narratives was reconfigured into the assertion of a quantitative distinction from MSM.

I was introduced to the world of these debates by Sonia, the aforementioned activist in Kolkata. Sonia had initially been a board member of MANAS Bangla. However, over the years she, like several other activists, had become increasingly critical of the hierarchies within the organization, and were looking for opportunities to break away and form their own front. As we saw in the last chapter, a section of community members and leadership in MSM projects and organizations often frowned upon gendered flamboyance, cross-

dressing and *bhel*, given its connotations of disreputability and lower class femininity/effeminacy. Sonia and her other *bheli* friends were seeking space for precisely such gendered self-presentation. This paved the way for incipient articulations of their separateness, which gradually came to be articulated as a distinct identity (rather than just another mode of being *kothi*). Around 2009, Sonia mentioned that she had heard that there would be separate funds for ‘TGs’ like her. But she also expressed her impatience and frustration with the delay in defining the ‘TG’ category: ‘so many meetings, and they haven’t still come up with a proper definition of TG!’

Sonia was referring to several national and regional ‘consultations’ (meetings of community representatives around particular issues) in 2008 and 2009 that had evidenced increasing assertions of transgender identity. As a multilateral development agency working with the Indian government in the design and implementation of its HIV-AIDS intervention program, the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) had organized consultations to discuss and improve the ongoing third phase of the National AIDS Control Programme, such as a national consultation on ‘HIV Related needs of Sexual Minorities in India’ held at New Delhi in October 2008. While such consultations had not been intended to specifically address (trans)gender issues, a growing number of transgender activists like Sharmila used these spaces to voice the need for better policies for transgender and *hijra* rights and health, and justifiably critiqued the narrow focus on

male-male sexual behavior in MSM interventions.³⁰² This led to an increasing demand for the separation of ‘MSM and transgender issues’. The following excerpt from one of these consultation reports provides a useful summary of these developments:

National consultations (...) in 2008-09 revealed serious gaps as well as diversity in the understanding of issues related to male-to-female transgender populations (...) the government and civil society response to the HIV epidemic often overlooks fundamental developmental needs of transgender people, there was considerable debate on how MSM and transgender issues get conflated to the detriment of both populations. No less vigorous has been the debate on the varied ways in which transgender communities identify themselves in India. This led to several transgender support groups and leaders from across India to plan focused consultations on what being transgender means, significance of Hijra as a distinct cultural identity, and (...) the needs of transgender and Hijra communities.³⁰³

As the excerpt shows, even as there were incipient demands for the separation of ‘MSM and transgender issues’ and ‘populations’ at the leadership level, there were debates on transgender identification and no consensus yet on ‘what being transgender means’. Simultaneously, such a consensus was felt to be desirable. While demands for transgender recognition challenge structural discrimination and exclusions, it is significant that demands for more inclusive policy on transgender issues are accompanied

³⁰² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2008. *Missing pieces: HIV related needs of sexual minorities in India*. (2008) Available at http://www.undp.org.in/reports_publications (accessed 15 August 2012), p. 21.

³⁰³ Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII). 2009. *Report of the regional TG/Hijra consultation in eastern India*. Available at http://www.saathii.org/orissapages/tg_hijra_issues_consultation%20.html (accessed on 14 July 2012), p. I.

by processes that seek to officially define and delimit transgender as an identitarian rubric ('what being transgender means'), demonstrating the imperative to form bounded populations to access governmental welfare and transnational funding.³⁰⁴

In this context, agencies like UNDP assumed the role of the mediator in the resolution of definitional conflicts so as to arrive at the desired consensus. In the aftermath of the aforementioned 2008 consultation, UNDP conducted several regional consultations in 2009 that attempted to construct an official definition of transgender as an 'umbrella term', a 'gender identity' that could incorporate various 'local' understandings of gender variance into a single bounded category, in consultation with community members from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.³⁰⁵ The eastern India consultation at Kolkata was held in collaboration with the NGO SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India), a large NGO with offices in several metropolitan cities that had been formed in the early 2000s with the organizational mandate of helping CBOs to build their capacity to tackle the HIV epidemic.³⁰⁶ SAATHII invited CBOs from several small towns outside Kolkata, including Swikriti at Nadia and Sangram at Murshidabad, to send their representatives to the consultation.³⁰⁷ While the procedure was designed to be democratic and to include voices beyond the leadership level, the catch is that transgender was already pre-defined as a 'gender identity' separate from sexual identities like MSM, setting the boundaries of legible transgender identification,

³⁰⁴ Chatterjee, P. 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* (19 April 2008), p. 58.

³⁰⁵ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 14.

³⁰⁶ <http://www.saathii.org/> (Accessed May 15, 2013).

³⁰⁷ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 16.

and belying the ostensibly open-ended nature of the ‘consultation’ where (trans)local understandings were sought to be interpellated within a pre-conceptualized framework of legibility. The CBO leadership mostly sent people who were already considered more feminine and *bheli* and thus amenable to be considered TG rather than MSM, such as Mallika from Berhampore. Moreover, senior transgender leaders present at the consultation played a significant role as mediators or facilitators structuring discussions and summarizing the dialogues.³⁰⁸ The trope of the ‘consultation’ thus concealed the metrocentric, hierarchized structure through which ‘local’ understandings were sought to be retrieved and categorized under the transgender umbrella. Somewhat predictably, the ‘common definition of transgender’ that was put together by the facilitators on the basis of inputs received during the consultation eventually reiterated the binary-gendered transition model, describing TG as ‘a gender identity’ denoting ‘a biological male (who) loves to see and feel herself as a female’, even as it mentioned that transgender was also an ‘umbrella term’ which could also include ‘cross-dressers’ and ‘gender-variant persons’, but without specifying who or what ‘gender variant persons’ could include:

Transgender is a gender identity. Transgender persons usually live or prefer to live in the gender role opposite to the one in which they are born. In other words, one who is biologically male but loves to feel and see herself as a female could be considered as a male to female transgender person. It is an umbrella term which includes transsexuals, cross dressers, intersexed persons, gender variant persons and many more. In eastern India there are various local names and identities, such as Kothi, Dhurani, Boudi, 50/50, Gandu, Chakka, Koena, Sitang (...) Among these, the most common identity is Kothi. A few transgender persons also believe in a traditional culture known as Hijra. It is a historical cult with its own

³⁰⁸ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 14.

hierarchical social system (consisting of the Nayaks, Gurus and Chelas) and set of rules and activities.³⁰⁹

On one hand, the report demonstrates the clear subordination and vernacularization of ‘local names and identities’ vis-à-vis the ‘transgender’ rubric. On the other, the ‘common definition’ of transgender also oscillates between its restriction in terms of the binary transition narrative (and its attendant distinction from rather than overlap with men/MSM), and its open-ended nature as an ‘umbrella term’ that can subsume any number of more ‘local names’ as their institutionally intelligible equivalent. Thus, the report could not stabilize the boundaries of ‘transgender’, which remained a conflicted issue in other meetings and subsequent consultations. The complexities of defining transgender as an ‘umbrella’ has been especially evident in the process of mapping extant terms such as *hijra* and *kothi* as regional or local variants of ‘transgender’, and even as the aforementioned report includes both of them under the transgender umbrella, this inclusion has been contested or challenged in different ways in the case of both terms.

Mapping hijras as transgender

Given their longstanding depiction since colonial times as ‘eunuchs’ and ‘transvestites’, the *hijra* was in many cases the first socio-cultural category to be interpellated as ‘transgender’, long before the term gained its present institutional currency. However, *gharana*-based *hijras* have subsequently evidenced a complex relation with the term. As

³⁰⁹ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 16. Similarly, the Association of Transgender/Hijra in Bengal (ATHB) glosses TG as “female in a male body” and vice-versa in its 2011 organizational pamphlet.

early as 2000, the report of the first MSM consultation organized by Humsafar Trust, authored by non-*hijra* activists, mentioned *hijra* as a ‘transgender’ group.³¹⁰ As mentioned in the last chapter, *hijras* were also designated as TG in the third phase of the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP-III) in 2007, though the NACO ‘technical resource group’ that drew up definitions and guidelines for MSM/TG populations included no *hijras*.³¹¹ Given that the efforts of *gharana*-based *hijras* for the separate recognition of their communities had set a significant precedent for the official recognition of transgender identity, it is understandable why *hijras* were interpellated as or clubbed together with TG in many policy guidelines and reports. However, they are not easily reducible to the common way of glossing ‘transgender’ in NGO discourse, which as argued above, definitionally prioritizes trans women and utilizes a biomedical two-sex model. In much of the ethnographic literature on *gharana*-based *hijras*, they are shown to have a complex relation with womanhood. In Nanda’s 1990 ethnography, her *hijra* respondents tell her that they are ‘neither men nor women’.³¹² The *hijras* in Reddy’s ethnography assert that they are ‘like women’, and take care to dress and appear as much as possible like (cis) women.³¹³ However, they also declare that they are not women even if they are ‘like women’ with varying degrees of regret or pride, one reason being that unlike women, they can never give birth.³¹⁴ Moreover, they may subvert and parody – even as they might aspire to – various accoutrements of socio-cultural femininity.³¹⁵

³¹⁰ Humsafar Trust, 2000. *Report of National MSM Consultation*. Mumbai: Humsafar Trust.

³¹¹ NACO, *Targeted Interventions under NACP III: Operational Guidelines*, p. viii.

³¹² Nanda, S. *Neither Men nor Women*, p. 3.

³¹³ Reddy, G. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 127-133.

³¹⁴ Reddy, G. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 134.

³¹⁵ Reddy, G. *With Respect to Sex*, p. 135.

The *gharana*-based *hijras* whom I had acquainted in Murshidabad and Nadia had similarly complex negotiations with claiming and disavowing legal or social identification as women. Despite governmental accommodations of ‘other’ or eventually ‘transgender’ in identity documents, several *hijras* I met in West Bengal already had obtained identity cards as women before other gender options became available. Annapurna-*mashi*, for instance, had obtained a ‘female’ voter identity card that she used while traveling, completely bypassing the option of an ‘other’ or ‘transgender’ identity. She took pride in this fact and showed off her card on several occasions to *kothis* like Aniket and myself, but otherwise never identified herself as a ‘woman’. (The acquisition of female identity cards for trans women and *hijras* is a legally grey area, and I will not have space here to elaborate its various procedural complexities – as many transgender leaders in West Bengal have pointed out, the process is often contingent on being convincingly perceived as sufficiently like women and seems to be facilitated by gender affirmation procedures, especially genital surgery).

Sweetie, a member of the *kothi* circle at Kalyani who had joined a *hijra gharana* in Delhi and had subsequently undergone castration-penectomy, similarly had a female voter identity card under an assumed name, which was different from her name as a *hijra* even though both were culturally feminine names. While she took pride in ‘passing’ as a woman in contexts of official identification, and showed off her identity card to other *kothis* in Kalyani, she would also object if otherwise socially perceived as a woman. ‘I

went to this house at Naihati were they actually thought I was a woman – I gave three *thikris* (claps)!’ Sweety and Annapurna-*mashi* thus invert the legal adoption of transgender identity by persons claiming ontological womanhood such as Sharmila. Legal and social identity as female/women – while an accomplishment and source of pride – does not translate into an ontologically consistent womanhood, unlike the transgender/*rupantarkami* narratives mentioned above.

This difference in conceptualizations of gender has led to conflicts between some *hijras* and transgender leaders in consultations and meetings. In a workshop on livelihood options of TG and *hijra* persons organized by a national-level NGO in 2012, a *hijra* activist objected to the assertion of trans womanhood by some other activists – ‘What are you guys doing here in a *hijra* consultation, if you think you are women?’ As per the report of my friends from Murshidabad and Kolkata who attended the workshop, this eventually led to a jocular exchange, and did not escalate into a full-blown conflict. Another and perhaps more serious point of contention is class and occupation. In 2009, Sonia quit MANAS Bangla and became involved alongside Sharmila in creating a TG-specific organizational network, and attempted to recruit *hijra* leaders into their organizational front. However, she subsequently narrated to me that inducting *hijras* within the TG umbrella did not always work out well. As she explained, ‘Many *hijras* prefer to call themselves *hijra*, according to their occupation and traditions’. Moreover, *hijras* might dissociate from the supposed class privilege of Anglophone TG-identified

activists.³¹⁶ This was especially evident in several TG/*hijra* consultations in South India. Ananda, a MANAS Bangla functionary who attended a consultation at Bangalore as a TG representative in 2009, recounted acrimonious exchanges between *hijra* and TG activists: ‘People were attacking each other – it was a *mar-mar kat-kat* (war-like) situation! *Hijras* were attacking TGs, saying you people are privileged, you take money in our name, etc.’

At the eastern India UNDP consultation mentioned above, the distinct cultural identity and occupations *gharana*-based *hijras* caused some debate regarding their separate classification, but they were eventually mapped within the transgender umbrella, given their clear segregation from mainstream men.³¹⁷ Moreover, by the time of the UNDP consultation, activists like Sonia, who were conscious of the unfamiliarity or opposition that some *hijras* expressed vis-à-vis ‘transgender’ as a relatively new identity construct, had actively worked to build alliances with some *hijra gurus* in Kolkata and inducted them within their emergent TG activist front. In the summer of 2010, Sonia triumphantly announced to me, ‘we spoke to several *hijra* leaders who came for (one of the) consultations, and they said they have no opposition to be grouped as TG with us’. This process of coalition building between transgender activists and a few *hijra gurus* enabled the formation of a new TG/*Hijra* activist front, the Association of TG/*Hijra* in Bengal, in 2010.

³¹⁶ On oppositions of some *hijras* to be labeled as transgender, see Sukthankar, A. Complicating gender: The rights of transsexuals in India. In A. Narrain & G. Bhan (Eds.), *Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press (2005), pp. 164-174.

³¹⁷ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 15.

Mapping kothis as transgender

On the other hand, the inclusion of the *kothi* within the TG umbrella proved to be even more controversial. Activist conflicts gained greater intensity in case of the *kothi* given that it had been included in erstwhile governmental definitions as a feminized sub-section of MSM. The various regional and national consultations on TG and *hijra* issues set in motion a process of definitional debates in which several aspiring activists, like Sonia, sought to clarify terms and definitions. In this context, a young activist named Dinesh from Chennai circulated the following mail in English on the LGBT-India and transgender-sisters e-lists in 2009, which advocated the inclusion of ‘kothys’ [sic], even male-attired ones, within the transgender category on the ground that gender, unlike sex, is psychological, and thus not about external embodiment.³¹⁸ I reproduce significant sections of the mail, with all its lexical quirks intact:

Hi friends,

This is Dinesh kumar alais bala studying in loyola college, chennai, tamilnadu. I have done a practical assignmets on terms and labels used to denote sexual minorities. I would like to share those things with you. i am only 22 years chota kothy [young kothi]. so my justifications and discussion may be not acceptable. i am always ready to correct myself (...) In india the terms/ labels are being misused by many people. I believe that the influences of organisations who define their target audience (LGBT) also present in these conceptions. (...) even my self i used to confuse with those terms because of different views of different persons. Howerve i am trying to give my own justifications out of little knowledge which i posses among the community of sexual minorities.

³¹⁸ The mail was circulated in various e-lists including the INFOSEM and LGBT-India lists, lgbt-india@yahoogroups.com; cited with author’s permission.

Trans gender: Gender is "social". "Sex is biological" .It is more of psychological (psychological) rather than biological. Gender means how a person perceive himself/ herself. A person irrespective of male or female can perceive himself/herself of opposite gender, then he or she is called trans gender (...) It is not necessary for them to undergo sex reassignment surgeries to hold the label "Trans Gender". But in india only male to female transexuals are given this label. According to my justification, only gender ie mental status should be used as criteria to label someone as transgender. it is not necessary to scrutinise sex or biological status. Even kothys who are male dress can use the label of transgender. I think, equivalent english word to denote kothys is transgender.

While Dinesh retains an overarching binary-gendered and ontologically static model of transgender ('(if) a person perceive(s) himself/herself of opposite gender, then he or she is called trans gender'), his emphasis on the 'psychological' nature of gender as distinct from 'biological' nature of 'sex' emphasizes self-perception as the basis of gender identity, and preserves some flexibility of physical or sartorial embodiment – 'Even kothys who are (in) male dress can use the label of transgender'. For Dinesh, the ontological logic of (trans)gender identification ('how a person perceive himself/herself') thus overrides the necessity of its manifestation in terms of an externalized, measurable femininity. Moreover, while 'transgender' is translated as the 'equivalent English word' for 'kothys', the same mail also goes on to classify 'double deckers' as a kind of *kothi*; and mentions that *kothis* may also be called 'gay' – thus preserving the sense of a transgender/*kothi* spectrum or range, rather than a strictly sequestered sense of transgender/*kothi*.

However, this sense of an encompassing *kothi* category creates potential overlaps between transgender and MSM ('double decker', gay), and thus transgender activists advocating the separation of 'MSM and transgender issues' and 'populations' have specifically targeted and attacked the inclusion of *kothi* as transgender. While community representatives at the 2009 UNDP regional consultation at Kolkata decided that *kothi* was 'the most common identity' within the transgender umbrella,³¹⁹ some activists advocating separate transgender projects challenged the inclusion of *kothis* at a subsequent meeting at Kolkata, where the *kothi* vs. transgender issue became symptomatic of an organizational divide between MANAS Bangla and the emergent ATHB network.³²⁰

MANAS Bangla had initially represented itself as an MSM and *kothi* network at international conferences such as the ICAAP (International Congress on AIDS in the Asia-Pacific).³²¹ However, from 2009, the MANAS leadership explicitly attempted to include TG as one of their constituent groups, given the increasing prominence of 'transgender issues' in the aforementioned consultations. Indeed, some constituent CBOs of MANAS, like Pratyay Gender Trust and PLUS (both based in Kolkata), had already adopted 'transgender' before MANAS publicly extended its purview to cover TG issues. Ananda, a functionary of Pratyay and a participant of the South Kolkata lake *kothi-*

³¹⁹ SAATHII, *Report of the Regional TG/Hijra Consultation*, p. 16.

³²⁰ Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII). 'Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation for Project Pehchan', Personal e-mail communication (2010), p. 5.

³²¹ For instance, in a 2005 public mail titled 'Re: 7th ICAAP: MSM off the HIV prevention radar in Asia?' on the 'AIDS Africa Asia Alternatives' mailing list, a MANAS Bangla representative described MANAS Bangla as constituting 'West Bengal's first ever MSM intervention'. Such descriptions were later reiterated in MANAS Bangla's pamphlets.

dhurani networks, told me that as far back as the late 1990s, when she had been in Praajak, she and her friends had wanted to distinguish themselves from the gay and MSM activists of Counsel Club, like Sarswata or Ranajay: ‘we knew we were not gay – we were very clear we were not gay, but what we were/what term to use, we did not know.... Much later the term transgender came, we started identifying as transgender’. Despite this early incipient sense of difference, activists from both the erstwhile Praajak and Counsel Club sides joined MANAS Bangla when it was formed in 2003 as an MSM network; however, after Ananda gained a senior position in the leadership, she (among other board members) officially included TG in the organizational mandate of MANAS. In March 2010, less than a year after the UNDP-SAATHII regional consultation on transgender issues, MANAS Bangla organized a large ‘State Consultation for MSM and Transgender’ at Kolkata. The consultation marked an attempt to impose an internal separation of MSM and TG target groups within the MANAS network. Marking a departure from the previously mentioned sanction of *bhel* in certain MANAS interventions, the organizers attempted to make space for TG persons, but simultaneously tried to impose a spatial separation between TG and MSM community members. Jayanti, a *kothi* (and later transgender-identified) peer educator with MANAS who later rose within organizational hierarchies and formed her own CBO in a northern district of Bengal, described this process of separation to me: ‘That (the 2010 state consultation) was when MANAS first separated TG (*prothom Manas Banglai toh shei TG alada kore dilo*)... there were separate rooms designated for TGs’. Jayanti narrated how she had started dressing consistently in female attire *after* this imposition of a spatial MSM-TG divide.

However, despite this attempt to adopt the MSM-TG schema within MANAS, and the concurrent adoption of transgender as an identity by at least some *kothis* within the MANAS network, the emergent ATHB network challenged the legitimacy of MANAS to represent TGs on multiple occasions, especially when it seemed likely that new funding opportunities for transgender groups would become available, and that MANAS Bangla might claim such funding. MANAS in turn asserted that many *kothis* in its network were also TG. In this contest, the classification of *kothi* as MSM or TG came to be the proverbial bone of contention.

In December 2010, a ‘community consultation’ was held in Kolkata to prepare local community-based organizations for the launch of Project Pehchan – literally, ‘Project Recognition’ – an intervention program for MSM, male-to-female transgender and *hijra* communities supported by the Geneva-based Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM) and implemented by a consortium of Indian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Humsafar Trust, Naz Foundation International, and SAATHII.³²² A relatively recent entrant to the HIV-AIDS scene in India, Project Pehchan aims to bolster existing HIV-AIDS prevention interventions for MSM and transgender communities instituted by the Indian government (the National AIDS Control Programmes), working in tandem with the state’s AIDS-control programme by setting up small-scale interventions in places where the state had not been able to provide services. At the consultation, the state AIDS control department of West Bengal announced that

³²² SAATHII, ‘Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation’, p. 2.

parallel to Project Pehchan, they would start new HIV-AIDS interventions for transgender and *hijra* people, segregated from MSM interventions in light of the high discrimination faced by transgenders.³²³ Some activists from MANAS Bangla objected that the existing MSM interventions of MANAS already had many *kothis* who were transgender. However, others from ATHB opposed any MSM-transgender conflation, and alleged that MSM and *kothi* leaders were masquerading as transgender representatives to obtain funding, prompting conflicts on the question of who could legitimately claim the transgender category.³²⁴ This resulted in a heated argument that turned physical. Aniket from Berhampore, who was present, recounted: ‘You won’t believe what they (certain TG activists) were doing; they approached this MSM activist and started beating him up; we were all scared and stayed silent’. The official minutes are rather more prosaic:

Questions were raised whether participants present in the meeting were genuine representatives of MSM, TG and Hijra communities specifically, and this lead to heated arguments... Some of the participants became aggressive... some even threatened to remove parts of their clothing’ (presumably to prove themselves ‘genuine’)³²⁵

Eventually, peace was made through the administrative adjudication of identitarian boundaries: an NGO official intervened, mentioning that ‘in order to properly differentiate between MSM, TG and Hijra populations, Project Pehchan would be

³²³ SAATHII, ‘Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation’, p. 5.

³²⁴ I intentionally omit the names of involved activists to protect their confidentiality; their names are also not specified in the cited minutes (SAATHII 2010).

³²⁵ SAATHII, ‘Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation’, p. 5.

developing operational guidelines, which would help in project implementation and population segregation'.³²⁶ Eventually, Pehchan guidelines mapped *kothi* as MSM despite its earlier classification under the TG rubric at the UNDP consultation.³²⁷

Thus, however much transgender is imagined as an umbrella term, the foundational constitution of transgender as separate from (male) sexual identities renders sub-sections of MSM like *kothi* less legible ('genuine') in this schema. Similar to the aforementioned consultation for Project Pehchan, several subsequent TG/Hijra meetings became sites where activists sought to draw the boundary lines of 'TG' and police them. Amit, Subhash's daughter from the Ranaghat circle, was sent as a representative of the CBO Swikriti to a workshop for TG/*hijras* at Guwahati, organized by the national network INFOSEM. She vowed to never go to any TG-*hijra* workshop again: 'they actually pulled the wig off one of the participants, saying she was really MSM, not TG!' In another of these workshops, Aniket from Berhampore was targeted when she went down to dinner in her pajamas, as per her usual practice, rather than in a *saree* or *salwar kameez* (Indian feminine garments). 'You people from WB (West Bengal) are all MSM pretending to be TG,' Aniket was told. In all of these instances, the quantitative logic of a measurable femininity – how much and how consistently one presents oneself as a woman – becomes crucial in the determination and policing of the MSM/TG divide.

³²⁶ SAATHII, 'Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation', p. 5.

³²⁷ Alliance India, 2011. *Management Information System (MIS) Toolkit*, New Delhi. p. 19.

Significantly, even though *hijra* itself does not neatly translate into transgender in the sense of binary transition narratives, such tendencies of categorical gate-keeping indicate that *hijra* constructions of gendered authenticity may inform ongoing attempts to define transgender authenticity. Raina, an ex-employee of MANAS Bangla who speaks of herself as both *kothi* and transgender, and who attended the Project Pehchan consultation and was thus witness to some of the most acrimonious debates regarding the definition of TG, made the following observation while comparing her experience of *hijra gharanas* with these consultations:

What they are doing with transgender is just like what happens in *hijra gharanas* – you have to constantly dress in *satra* (women’s clothes), ideally you should go through castration, and so on. Otherwise, they will clap at you, they will say that you are not really transgender (...) And the government and funders are just watching the fun – we have given you this term, now you die tearing each other’s hair (*chulo-chuli kore moro*) trying to define it!

This suggests that hegemonic senses of transgender are established in institutionally mediated translations with older (sub)cultural logics of *hijra* hierarchy and authenticity that sought to define and delimit ‘real’ *hijras*, as charted in the first chapter. Overall, the aforementioned processes demonstrate how the separation from ‘men who have sex with men’ (whether *kothis* are seen as MSM or not) becomes crucial for the articulation of transgender, even as the boundaries of ‘men’ vs. transgender remains contested and contingent on the consistent demonstration of femininity.

Institutionalizing Vulnerability: The contest over marginality

The aforementioned tendencies of categorical segregation were further reinforced by the demand for institutional separation and separate funding of transgender and MSM activist networks. The Association for Transgender/Hijra in Bengal (ATHB) critiqued the erstwhile dominance of large networks with MSM projects like MANAS Bangla and demanded that TG and MSM funding be segregated, such that MANAS could not claim funding intended for TGs. As the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP-III) neared the shift to its fourth phase, and multilateral aid agencies such as the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM or GF) instituted new developmental programmes like ‘Project Pehchan’, demands to segregate funding were raised on several activist mailing lists, as exemplified by the following mail (in English) by an ATHB member in April 2010:³²⁸

GF Project has come but it is not reaching the TG community (...) When it has been decided that MSM, TG and Hijra are different then why MSM are interfering in the TG/Hijras matter?

Here, the imperative force of governmental identity demarcations is clearly evident in the phrase ‘when it has been decided that’ – the eminently justifiable demand for gaining funds without interference from organizations like MANAS Bangla must be articulated

³²⁸ Correspondence cited from various e-lists including the LGBT-India list, lgbt-india@yahoogroups.com. These mails were circulated in various mailing lists and were also forwarded to me by their authors. As these mails contained controversial allegations against specific organizations, I intentionally omit references to the specific authors and e-mails to maintain both their confidentiality and that of the targeted organizations.

through a claim on separately enumerable communities, without overlap with existing MSM communities and interventions. A subsequent mail by the same activist demands further institutionalization of this separation, based on the greater marginality of the ‘TG/hijra community’:

These MSM people digest all the fund which come for the TG/Hijra community (...) we all know that TG/Hijra are more vulnerable and marginalised than MSM. If TG/Hijra will be separated from MSM then these MSM Leaders/Activist/Network/Agency (...) will not be able to digest all the fund.

Needing to assert greater vulnerability than ‘MSM’ in order to bolster the claim on funding, the articulation of a separate TG/Hijra identity becomes, in Wendy Brown’s words, ‘attached to its own exclusion’ and marginality,³²⁹ continuing the biopolitical quantification of vulnerability that was earlier evidenced in the risk-based enumeration of MSM sub-types. Following such demands for separate TG projects, the West Bengal government’s State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAPCS) announced interventions for ‘Trans Gender [sic] community only’ in 2011.³³⁰ Simultaneously, Project Pehchan began developing operational guidelines to differentiate between MSM and TG to help in ‘population segregation’.³³¹ Through such collusions between activists, state interventions and development agencies, particular tensions between transgender

³²⁹ Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 73.

³³⁰ West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAPCS). ‘Advertisement for inviting applications from CBOs for empanelment’, Kolkata: WBSAPCS. (2011). Available at 210.212.2.193/wbsapcs/notice/Empanelment%20of%20TG%20CBOs.pdf (accessed 14 July 2012).

³³¹ SAATHII, ‘Minutes of West Bengal Community Consultation’, p. 5.

and MSM activists enter into the ‘general economy of power’ that Foucault defines as governmentality, which institutes a standardized cartography of identity.³³² This process tends to establish a generalized cartography of identity and relative vulnerability, defined along the singular axis of gender and feminization (without reference to class/caste), which reifies the contextually flexible negotiations with gendered differences, marginality and privilege within *dhurani-kothi-hijra* communities. While MSM cartographies rendered gender/sexual non-conformity illegible except as sexual risk and victimhood, now the institutional recognition for gender variant subjects becomes contingent on becoming legible as a separate and more vulnerable transgender group, extending the logic of the cartographic enumeration of risk-based sub-sections of the MSM rubric. The most elaborate extension of this cartography is exemplified by the schema for classifying MSM-transgender-*hijra* identities in the operational guidelines for Project Pehchan, which constructs an elaborate rubric of ‘primary identities’ that are to be coded as MSM, TG or *hijra* (MTH), as shown in the figure below:

Col.No	Content	Code
3	MTH Category	Use code - For MSM=1, TG=2, Hijira = 3 (kindly check with primary identity classification - find below)
4	Primary identities	use code : 1.Gay 2. Kothi/B MSM /Managalmurti 3. Panthi/A MSM 4. Double Decker/A-B MSM 5. Bisexual 6.MSM 7.Hijira 8. Transgender 9. Jogappa/Jogati/ Shivasakti (1 to 6 codes come under the MSM category, 8&9 comes under TG)

Fig. 4. Classification of ‘primary identities’ in the MTH rubric, Project Pehchan³³³

³³² I allude to Foucault’s theorization of governmentality as a ‘general economy of power’ (Foucault 2007: 117).

³³³ Alliance India, 2011. *Management Information System (MIS) Toolkit*, New Delhi. p. 19.

As seen in the figure, *kothi* retains its earlier classification in NACP-III as MSM alongside *panthi* (*parikh*) and *double decker* (*dupli*), *hijra* gets its own category even though in practice it is often clubbed into TG/*hijra* (e.g. ATHB – the Association of Transgender/*hijra* in Bengal), and ‘transgender’ is seen as both a ‘primary identity’ at the community level, and one of the overarching umbrella terms of the MTH rubric.

Beyond the classification and policing of individual identities, the MSM/TG rubric also constrains representational processes for community-based organizations. In the context of the increasing conflicts between MANAS Bangla and ATHB and the attendant controversy regarding which organizations could legitimately claim to represent TGs, the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAPCS) recently stipulated that a single CBO cannot cater to both MSM and TG people but must enlist as either MSM or TG to be considered for government-funded AIDS interventions.³³⁴ This recalls Chatterjee’s observation that for the purposes of governmental power, population groups are enumerable as integers, not fractions – ‘one can only be Muslim or not Muslim’³³⁵ – a logic that is here extended to the organizational level, such that one CBO cannot work with multiple ‘populations’. To a non-metropolitan CBO like Sangram at Berhampore, working with a complex community spectrum, this stipulation caused confusion regarding the ‘correct’ term of identification, and anxiety about missing funding for inconsistent representation. CBO members like Aniket even wondered whether they

³³⁴ WBSAPCS. 2011. ‘Advertisement for inviting applications from CBOs for empanelment’. Kolkata.

³³⁵ Chatterjee, P. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections of Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press (2004), p. 6.

should adopt particular attire (either more or less ‘feminine’) in order to be perceived as ‘authentically’ TG or MSM by WBSAPCS officials. The WBSAPCS officials seemed to be conflicted on the question. After enlisting Sangram during the TG empanelment process, they eventually gave the organization an MSM project in late 2011, after at least nine cases of AIDS-related deaths in the community in recent years – only to close the project without giving adequate cause before the shift from the third to the fourth phase of the National AIDS Control Programme in May 2012. Several MANAS projects, and the Swikriti project at Ranaghat, were simultaneously closed as well, accompanying a broader shift of bureaucracy within the state AIDS control society.³³⁶ Meanwhile, CBOs that were affiliated with ATHB gained some new interventions through Project Pehchan in 2011; however, belying the representational claims to a unified TG/hijra constituency, structural hierarchies between the Kolkata-based ATHB leadership and CBOs working in other districts soon led to very similar tensions as those previously evidenced in the MANAS Bangla network. Indeed, the aforementioned CBO Koshish was one of the first organizations that became alienated from and eventually left ATHB by 2012, less than two years after its founding as a network. Ananda, the erstwhile MANAS functionary, derisively commented in conversation with me that despite all their opposition to MANAS, ATHB was in the end following a very similar model: ‘what are they doing that is really different? It is the same old funded network’.

³³⁶ See Dutta, A. 2012. ‘Indian Sexual Minority Communities Devastated by Funding Cuts’. *World Policy Blog*. Available at <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/23/indian-sexual-minority-communities-devastated-funding-cuts> (accessed 28 March 2013).

The MANAS-ATHB conflict did not therefore shift of any of the structural characteristics of the metrocentric and hierarchized state-funder-NGO nexus that had prompted the separation of ATHB in the first place. Rather, it fostered a rigid categorical divide and an identity-based competition for funding which left smaller organizations like Sangram and Swikriti, which were unable to effectively compete in the MSM-TG contest, in the lurch (since the closure of their projects, no new interventions have been started by either the state or Project Pehchan in either Nadia or Murshidabad, both large districts with upward of a million people each; several other CBOs like Prantik Bongaon and their associated districts have also been similarly bereft of funds). To adapt Chatterjee further, this process suggests the ‘utter marginalization’ of all those who cannot become legible enough as distinct population groups to bargain with governmental power.³³⁷ Thus, emergent forms of political representation, while gaining a degree of visibility and governmental welfare for some activists, organizations and community members, restrict identitarian legibility and upward mobility within the NGO/development sector for other lower class/caste subject positions: the biopolitical logic of isolating more vulnerable populations defers all those who are not clearly legible or enumerable as risk groups to neglect and potential death.³³⁸

³³⁷ Chatterjee, ‘Democracy and Economic Transformation in India’, p. 61.

³³⁸ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 35.

II. Translating (into) transgender: Subcultural negotiations with the MSM/TG divide

While initiated at the levels of NGO and CBO leadership, these cartographic tendencies are mediated and translated within lower middle and lower class/caste communities associated with CBOs as well, continuing the process of hegemonic expansion evidenced earlier for the MSM rubric. Over the years, several *kothis*, such as Aniket at Berhampore, have described to me how they feel that they are ‘*mone nari*’ or ‘woman at the level of the *mon*’ (*psyche/heart/mind*) – a self-representation that is seemingly aligned with the dominant interpretation of *rupantarkami* or TG. However, others like Subhash at Ranaghat also use ‘*meyeli chhele*’ or ‘feminine male’ as a common phrase for to describe *dhurani* circles, as is evident in his narrative in the previous chapter. As an adjective, *meyeli* emphasizes behavioral attributes rather than ontological consistency *as* women: as Ranajay explained to me, ‘many *kothis* say they are *meyeli chhele*, rather than women’. Since *kothis* may be variably mapped as TG or feminine MSM, the emergent MSM/TG divide has played into existing tensions between *dupli* versatility and *kothi* gendered authenticity, *kodi* social passing and *bheli* flamboyance (as charted in the previous chapter). While *bhel* was often sought to suppressed or disciplined within MSM organizations, since 2009, the increased funding for CBOs catering to transgender groups has spurred intra-community debates regarding which *kothis* might be considered authentically and consistently *bheli* and feminine enough to be included within ‘transgender’ consultations and projects alongside *hijras*, as opposed to MSM. The

translation of the MSM-TG divide under the constraint of producing a demonstrably feminine (and hence vulnerable) population potentially further extends the division between *hijras* and *kothis* into a divide between more and less authentically feminine *kothis*.

In one possible translation between *kothi* sub-types and the MSM/TG schema, transgender may be translated as *kothis* who are *bheli* and/or dress in women's clothes. In a conversation with Ranajay, he glossed 'transgender' as an equivalent for *bheli kothis*: 'by transgender, they (i.e. senior activists, funders) mean *bheli kothis*, *kothis* who are *satrawali* (who dress women's clothes)'. This understanding is borne out by incipient tendencies within *kothi* communities. For instance, at Berhampore, some visibly feminine or 'flamboyant' (*bheli*) *kothis* have begun to claim the TG label and further dissociate from *kodi* ones. At one level, this may be an assertion against the denigration of public femininity and *bhel*. Mallika, one of the most *bheli* among the *kothis* of Berhampore, explained to me, 'they (the *kodis*) say that one shouldn't behave too flamboyantly in public, but I feel that there is also a necessity to bring our identity to people's attention, to let them know!' Over the last few years, Mallika has increasingly taken on a public TG identification even as she has continued to use *kothi* as a self-designation. She has been sent to TG/*hijra* workshops as Sangram's representative on several occasions, given that she typically and consistently dresses in women's clothes. Thus, one productive effect of the emergence of transgender is that it potentially allows for a space for the assertion of

bhel beyond its suppression by *kodi kothis* and MSM/gay leaders, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Yet, since *bhel* cannot be confined to any one group of *kothis*, there is anxiety about the authenticity and consistency of someone's gender presentation, and strictures to ensure bounded, intelligible identities. In a 2009 meeting, the activist Akhtar briefed Sangram members on proper dressing for the Kolkata pride walk: either 'outright as women' or as passably masculine. Akhtar pointed out that TG activists like Ranjana socially passed as respectable women; everyone referred to them as '*madam*'; they did not do *bhel* in streets. Thus, even as transgender is translated as *bheli*, trans womanhood may thus become part of a desired shaping into a respectable, middle class and consistent femininity, as opposed to the disreputable and potentially inconsistent display of *bhel*. Akhtar also upbraided Prem, a young member for sporting a French beard (too masculine) with long hair (too feminine/*bheli*), which later prompted him to shave his beard. Even so, subsequently, Prem was not selected as a representative to be sent to TG/*hijra* workshops, on account of not being *bheli* enough. As Aniket reasoned, based on her own bitter experiences of being cast as MSM and not really TG in such workshops, 'it's best to send those who are really *bheli* TGs, like Mallika... we are not *akkhar bheli* (totally *bheli*) enough!' Hence, while *kothis* like Mallika do get to assert their *bheli*-ness, to be eligible and legible as TG representatives, they must also be consistent in her gendered presentation.

Whereas in Berhampore the MSM-TG division has been translated as the distinction between *bheli* and *kodi kothis*, there are other possible translations of the MSM-TG schema. Nandini, for example, is a *hijra* clan member affiliated with Sonia's community-based organization in Kolkata, working as a peer educator in their new HIV-prevention project for transgenders. During an extended conversation in summer 2012, Nandini's described having come to age in the *kothi* circles of the South Kolkata lake area, and mapped the MSM-TG divide as a distinction between *kothis* and *duplis*, rather than a divide among *kothis* themselves:

My friends and I would call ourselves *kothi*; that was the term we have been always most comfortable in. We did not know terms like MSM and TG back then... but there were already tensions between MSMs and TGs. All the *duplis* would do *bila* (harass, make fun of) us *kothis*; they wouldn't want to be seen with us in public, even though in private (*ghorer bhettore*) they would take it in the ass!

Here, *kothi* becomes a synonym for TG, contrasted with *dupli* as MSM – a categorization permitted by the relatively uniform gender/sexual behavior of her *kothi* friend circle, seemingly without overlaps with the *dupli* category. Nandini therefore simply reads the MSM/TG split back into the fraught relation between *kothis* and *duplis* of her acquaintance. However, even as Nandini understands the *kothi-dupli* split as that between 'TGs' and 'MSMs' and thus reproduces the MSM-TG separation, her precise rendition of the divide contravenes official cartographies, where *kothi* is mapped as MSM.

Given such variable significations of *kothi* and its uncertain mapping as MSM or TG, many aspiring leaders and upwardly mobile community members have shifted to

transgender as their public identification to avoid the confusing connotations of *kothi*, even if some of them continue to use the term more privately. For instance, Sharmila, one of the aforementioned leaders of ATHB (Association of TG/Hijra in Bengal), regarded both MSM and *kothi* as unreliable and potentially duplicitous positions:

My work (as an activist) is primarily with TG-Hijras. I will always focus first on TGs. From the very beginning I have had problems with MSMs and MSM behavior. The one who is TG, she always fully carries her identity with her (*shey tar identity niye shobshomoy ghure berachchhe*). The one who is doing MSM behavior, he may take it in the butt (*dhurachchhe*) and do *bhel* outside in cruising sites, but then he may go home and stay/be with his wife as well! (...) And the ones who are calling themselves *kothi*... there is no certainty, *kothis* may turn over and fuck (us) in the night!

Sharmila expresses the common suspicion of *dupli* behavior as expressed by *kothis* like Nandini, but in her case, it is extended to a distancing from the *kothi* category as a whole, in favor of an explicit and consistent TG identification. Thus, ironically, the *kothi-dupli* separation that starts within *kothi* circles may be extended to a condemnation of the *kothi* category itself, due to the persistent scare of *kothi-dupli* overlaps. Here, the logic of *kothi* authenticity vis-à-vis the *dupli* is extended to such an extent that *kothi* itself is elided and vernacularized: the subcultural logic of *kothi* authenticity is intensified in translation with the MSM/TG split such that it implodes upon *kothi* itself.

Several people who have identified as *kothi* in the past are increasingly conscious of this suspicion of the *kothi*. As Mallika explained to me, '*kothi* has become a controversial

term, because *kothis* may both get fucked and fuck! (*dhurteo pare, dhorateo pare!*)’ During an interview with a journalist at the 2011 Kolkata Pride Walk, Mallika was asked about her identity, and replied ‘My one and only identity is transgender’ – though back in Berhampore she continues to use *kothi* as a designation for herself and her friends.

This incident suggests a wider process wherein terms like *kothi* (and *dhurani*, *dhunuri*, etc.) that encompass a gender/sexual spectrum may be avoided at the level of public identification, given that they confuse intelligible representation as either transgender or MSM/homosexual/gay: as a result, *kothi* becomes further vernacularized vis-à-vis MSM and TG. At a public meeting among community members in April 2010, Sonia, who had by that time become a leader within the Association for Transgender/Hijras in Bengal, declared that they wanted to gain a certain transnational intelligibility by identifying themselves as transgender: ‘we want to move out of *local* terms like *kothi*, and gain *international* recognition by coming under *transgender*’ (italicised terms English in original). However, Sonia and her friends have continued to refer to each other as *kothi* in private or intra-community spaces. During a subsequent conversation, Sonia elaborated on her position: ‘*kothi* is a *traditional* identity that can include both TG and MSM people; I have explained these terms to many *kothis* so that they can choose either TG or MSM to identify themselves’ (‘traditional’ in English).

Of course, these choices of identification are not so simple – the devaluation and desired subsumption of the ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ (or more precisely, the vernacularized, i.e.

that which is produced as local/traditional/vernacular) suggests both the gender/sexual and class/caste-based exclusions that delimit acceptable identification. Even as MSM and TG are posited as pre-existent and primary subject positions conflated by *kothi* ('*kothi*... can include both MSM and TG people'), the inability to understand and 'choose' between MSM and TG may be figured as a form of backwardness relative to the transnational, self-conscious and implicitly modern form of identification represented by TG. For instance, from 2010 onward, Sonia's CBO expanded its operations to Bardhaman, a western district of West Bengal, through contacts with *kothi* networks in the area. However, soon after beginning work in the district, Sonia expressed her frustration to me with the backwardness of the *kothis* there, relative to Kolkata: 'the situation there is very *backward*, most people are not *visible*... the *kothis* don't even understand MSM or TG – the only term they understand is *kothi*!'

In a similar vein, the eminent transgender activist Amitava Sarkar has lamented the lack of a 'proper' and self-aware understanding of transgender identity among many 'TG' communities that she has interacted with in various parts of India. In an English interview conducted during an international HIV-AIDS conference in 2009 and available on www.youtube.com, she particularly singled out the use of 'MSM' as a term of self-identity in certain northeastern states of India (not West Bengal):

Within my own country I have visited several places where I found people, I am talking about the northeastern states, where TG people are there, but they don't have proper idea about themselves; you will just get shocked, they don't know that they are TG... they consider (themselves) as B-MSM; B-MSM means a guy

who is a receiver, I mean the bottom partner; the guy who is the active partner is called A-MSM; so there is no trans concept, there is only A-MSM and B-MSM. So I started to advocate (to) them as well, they are now having a group called SAVE only for transgender people.³³⁹

In Amitava's comment, transgender emerges as a modern and properly self-aware mode of identification even as it is naturalized as a pre-existent form of subjectivity – the attainment of transgender identification equals the achievement of self-consciousness as opposed to the lack of a 'proper idea' about oneself, similar to the emergence of a self-aware and 'scientific' transgender/*rupantarkami* subjectivity relative to putatively pejorative terms like *dhurani/hijra* in Tista's narrative above. While for Sonia the inability of *kothis* to understand and choose between MSM and TG marks their backwardness, for Amitava, the close association between sexual and gender variance (and indeed the lack of their separation as distinct domains of experience and identification) marks the lack of self-awareness on the part of people who are *already* TG, but who mistakenly label themselves as a subset of MSM.³⁴⁰ Thus, while the MSM rubric had attempted to consolidate and subsume *kothi* as an identity within its cartographic schema, the arrival of transgender both as a funded category and valorized modern identity prompts a further subordination of *kothi* and similar terms, which are vernacularized as 'local', 'traditional' or 'backward', and either elided or explicitly relinquished at the level of official or public identification.

³³⁹ 'From Kolkata, India: Transgender Activist Amitava Sarkar on Action Equals Life', August 12 2009, Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojxSBhgaP7g> (Accessed May 29 2013).

³⁴⁰ This is very similar to the observations in David Valentine's ethnography of the 'transgender' category, where he notes how social service agencies responded to the use of 'gay' by people they deemed to be really transgender (Valentine, 2007, *Imagining Transgender*).

However, as already evident above Sharmila's and Nandini's statements, the adoption of a 'transgender' identity may also mark the reconfiguration of the extant quantitative logic of grading gendered subject positions within *kothi* subcultures and communities, rather than an actual supersession of the *kothi*. At a new transgender intervention at south Kolkata, I observed that community members who claimed the transgender identity would sometimes use phrases such as '*akkhar* TG' (complete TG, substituting the English 'TG' in the older expressions *akkhar dhurani* or *akkhar kothi*, meaning total or extreme *dhurani/kothi*) to assert their hierarchical distinction from *kothis* and *duplis*, thus eliding the categorical overlaps between *kothi* or *dhurani* sub-types through an assertion of their greater or total femininity. Derided by a peer for being a *kothi*, not really TG but MSM, a young community member declared that s/he was saving money for facial hair removal procedures, which was not something that s/he could easily afford – illustrating pressures to fit into a normative ideal of being transgender, based on access to emerging technologies of bodily transformation. Vulnerable subject positions like *kothis* who perform *chhalla*, who may claim *hijra* identification in public spaces without formally joining *hijra* clans, are also further delegitimized by the tenuous and contested position of *kothis* as transgender, which further separates them from *hijras* who are categorically allied with TG. Conversely, the segregation of transgender also produces MSM as a more gender-normative term, allied more with cisgendered homosexual and gay men than gender non-conforming male-assigned persons. The emergence and separation of TG projects and associated community spaces may have only bolstered official injunctions

against cross-dressing and public *bheli* (flamboyant) behavior at certain MSM projects, refiguring the extant strictures against *bhel* and disreputability as a spatial separation from *bheli kothis* as TG. For example, when Sangram received its short-lived MSM project in the period between September 2011 and July 2012, Sarswata suggested that now that they were an officially running an MSM project, the *bheli kothis* should either control their behavior or stay out of the program office – even though in other spaces, *bheli kothis* like Mallika have functioned as TG representatives for the organization. Aniket speculated that given these divides, they may have to start a separate TG/*hijra* collective in Murshidabad parallel to Sangram, though such an institutional separation has not actually materialized by the time of the writing of this chapter, due to resistances to the MSM/TG split that I note below. These tendencies of both identitarian separation and spatial segregation suggest that the MSM-transgender schema tends to reinforce extant exclusionary tendencies and hierarchies on *both* sides of the MSM-TG divide, reinforcing the identitarian tendencies within *kothi-dhurani-hijra* networks described in the previous chapters, while eliding categorical overlaps and fluid practices.

The Incitement of Bodily Desires

The quantitative grading and attainment of femininity, as indicated above in formulations such as ‘*akkhar* TG’, is particularly reiterated in emergent TG spaces through the incitement of desires for newly available technologies of bodily transformation or transition. As Reddy documents in her ethnography, many *kothis* and particularly clan-based *hijras* may have been already using certain relatively crude techniques of bodily

transformation such as the ingestion of hormones for breast development, not to mention procedures like castration-penectomy, long before emergent transgender and transsexual transition narratives.³⁴¹ However, these tendencies may be reconfigured through increasing access to technologies like facial hair removal, breast implantation and of course, sex reassignment (SRS) or gender affirmation surgery itself. Tista, in particular, has played a leading role in not just introducing these technologies to *kothi* and *hijra* audiences, but also connecting them with a measurable trajectory of feminization – a trajectory that further forges the separation of TG communities and spaces from those who cannot afford or are not interested in such procedures. Tista has founded SRS Solutions, a consulting service distinct from the CBO/NGO sector but working in tandem with certain CBOs, which offers guidance to anyone who wants to go through ‘sex reassignment’ procedures and connects them with the hospitals and practitioners. Through her pioneering work, Tista has enabled and validated gender affirmative procedures in a social context where they are often not easily available to male assigned persons, as attested by her own struggles with the biomedical establishment.

However, in the process, she has also articulated transition as a normatively desirable trajectory, and specified it in quantitative terms of feminization. In the summer of 2012, at an event organized by a CBO in a lower income area of northeast Kolkata, various CBO and NGO leaders were asked to speak on their respective engagements. Tista spoke about SRS Solutions, outlining her project thus: ‘those who want to become complete, I help them to become complete’ (*jara shompurno hoye uthte chay, ami tader shahajyo*

³⁴¹ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 146.

kori shompurno hoye uthte). The trajectory of ‘completion’ was elaborated in greater detail in a free workshop that she offered on SRS a few weeks later, where she used slides to take the audience through the process of transitioning. Tista used pictures from several case studies, showing cases that demonstrated relatively successful or satisfactory transitions vis-à-vis those that were less ‘successful’. Tista opened a slide with a picture of a nude pre-transition torso (minus face and genitals) that I read as androgynous:

See, this is an *unfortunate case*, in this case the patient was rather impatient (laughs), because she did only six months of *hormone therapy* and came to us and wanted to have it (the breast implantation surgery) done, so in the circumstance – (she shifts to the next slide, showing a body that I read as female or feminine, with more prominent breasts than the pre-transition picture) – we were unable to do anything more (italicized words as in original).

Then she shifted to the case of another trans woman: ‘She was too skinny’, Tista explained. ‘Those who have so less *breast tissue*, we can’t do all that much for them; in this case she was too skinny for us to do much’. Again, she showed a picture of the initial state and final result, indicating the small breasts and the relative lack of contrast between the pre- and post-transition bodies.

In all of these ‘cases’, the marking of bodies through the language of inadequacy or lack reinforces the scalar notion of (in this case, bodily) femininity as a measurable acquisition. While Tista may be seen as an isolated if influential figure, significantly, such trajectories of feminization have also been instituted within broader organizational

structures, particularly the aforementioned Project Pehchan. The operational structure of Pehchan includes several surveys to be conducted by CBOs implementing its HIV-AIDS intervention projects on their target groups. These surveys typically include separate questions for MSM, TG and *hijra* groups. Even as *kothi* is categorized under MSM in the Pehchan cartography, only the questions directed at TG and *hijra* groups enquire about feminization procedures, the degree and kind of feminization pursued by community members, the availability of such procedures in the locality, and so on. While they are ostensibly aimed at gauging the safety and health of TG community members, and thus mark a broadening of HIV-AIDS interventions beyond just sexual risk, such survey instruments also perpetuate the expectation of bodily transition linked with transgender identification, and quantify feminization in terms of transitional procedures. The allocation of such questions only to the TG and *hijra* component of the questionnaires also reinforces the attempted segregation of TG/*hijra* spaces from persons marked as MSM.

In their own turn, an increasing number of *kothi* and/or TG community members seem to be aspiring to and opting for transitional procedures, as demonstrated by a marked increase in the number of people seeking treatments such as laser-based facial hair removal or breast implantation in Kolkata in the last two or three years, and a correspondingly burgeoning market for such procedures. The aforementioned *kothi* at the TG intervention, who had said that she wished to go in for facial hair removal after being attacked as not really TG, seems to be hardly alone in her aspiration. In 2012, Mallika

from Berhampore introduced me to an expanding network of laser therapy centers in Kolkata, which in the last two or three years have started offering discounted packages for transgender persons – marking the significant entry of newer set of persons into the otherwise widespread commoditization of feminine bodies and attendant ideals of beauty. She had heard about the laser centers from some of her *kothi*/transgender friends in Kolkata, and had painstakingly saved money to buy a package deal of several sessions for herself. ‘There is a craze (*hujug*) for *laser* nowadays! All the *kothis* in Kolkata are getting *laser*! If a *kothi* takes you there, you will get a *discount*’, she informed me. Subsequently, the story gets personal – prompted by my own changing gender presentation and a desire to keep up with the changing dynamics of TG and *kothi* communities in Kolkata, I accompanied Mallika to be referred for a few discounted laser sessions myself. The staff at the center were remarkably welcoming, greeting me by a feminized version of my name, and completely at ease with both of us. ‘Look at their register (*khata*) and you will get a list of all the *kothis* in Kolkata’, Mallika claimed while flipping through one such ‘confidential’ register while no one was looking. I guiltily glanced through the *khata* and noticed that several of the names had ‘TG’ listed in the gender column. However, after this rather pleasant introduction to what seemed to be an emerging safe space and network (not to mention market) for *kothis*/TGs, the laser session itself was experienced as incredibly painful by both of us. At its conclusion, Mallika exclaimed, ‘See how much pain you have to bear to become *shundori*!’ (*shundori* is the feminine form of the adjective for ‘beautiful’ in Bengali, as opposed to the masculine and neuter *shundor* – here it also, of course, refers specifically to a commoditized ideal of beauty).

Subsequently, I enquired about their procedures and realized that they were using relatively cheap technology, without any provision for local anesthetics, to offer discounted rates to this burgeoning clientele of people like Mallika and myself; people willing to bear much pain and risk in their quest to become ‘*shundori*’. Both Mallika and I went for several more excruciating sessions before I discontinued for the fear of permanently scalding my skin, as had happened to some other *kothis* I knew. Mallika has, however, continued her visits, and in one of our last conversations, she informed me that she had asked them to increase the power of the laser for better results: the quantification of femininity here becomes painfully literal.

As always, gender intersects with class/caste in structuring these aspirational trajectories. While *hijra* constructs of authenticity have informed the policing of transgender category, on the other hand, the election of new technologies of ‘sex reassignment’ may be used to assert a sense of superiority vis-à-vis *hijras* who undergo the cruder and less expensive procedure of *chhibrano* (castration-penectomy) conducted by illicit doctors. The *chhibrano* vs. SRS dichotomy seems to be especially clear among some *kothis*/TGs who frequent the new transgender interventions near Kolkata. In one such TG project, one of the visitors to the office told me, ‘I will never go in for *chhibrano*... God! Can you tell me where one gets *sex change* done well? I am saving one *lakh* rupees (one hundred thousand rupees, or about \$2000) so that I can go to Singapore and do it... I don’t want to be like these *hijras*!’ In accordance with her wishes, I referred her to Tista. However, some *hijra gharanas* also seem to have become wiser to emerging technologies. Sweety

from Kalyani, who is a member of a *hijra* household in the national capital of Delhi, was wont to boast how her *hijra* sisters in Delhi looked like models, wore branded clothes and jewellery, and went through expensive procedures of breast implantation (the *hijra gharanas* of Delhi are reputed to be especially wealthy, and accordingly stringent in their selection criteria for new recruits – only *kothis* deemed adequately beautiful are inducted, and subsequently some of their gender affirmation procedures may be funded by their *guru*). To her *kothi* friends in Kalyani, many of whom she knew from childhood, she advised that they don't join *hijra* clans unless they are like the one she belongs to, extending the TG-*hijra* class divide into one between *hijras*: 'if you want to become a *hijra*, become a *hijra* like me! Otherwise, there's no benefit/profit (*labh*) in *chhibrano*!'

III. Challenges and Slippages: Undoing the MSM-TG separation

Of course, like the MSM schema of sub-categories, normative articulations of the TG category and the MSM-TG rubric also invite critiques within affected communities, and cannot produce a uniformly accepted hegemony. There may be explicit challenges to identitarian tendencies and strictures. For instance, several of the poorer members of *kothi-dhurani* networks at Kalyani (Dulal-da's circle, whom we encountered in the first chapter) have explicitly resisted the construction of a transgender identity and subject position premised on consistent sartorial femininity and bodily transformation. During an outing to a shopping area in Kolkata in the summer of 2012, Arijit, Arghya and some of their friends came upon a group of several young trans women, some of whom had

undergone gender affirmation procedures, who derided and mocked them for their overt effeminacy in the absence of other feminine accoutrements (fashionable clothes, lasered face without any traces of a beard, etc.) They clapped (gave *thikri*) back – ‘we will do *bhel* like this only, who are you to tell us anything?’ Later, one of them who was in t-shirt and jeans (i.e. not in feminine *satra*) pointedly remarked, ‘just because these *kothis* have made *dharki* (breasts), they think they are better than us!’ She added, ‘They need to get breasts made, we have breasts by birth (*jonmo thekei*)’, indicating their already ‘feminine’ figures.

While this resistance comes from their position as poor *kothis* who cannot really afford ‘gender affirmation’ technologies, several lower middle class activists and CBO staff (who could potentially try to fit in into emerging transgender ideals) have also explicitly critiqued dominant constructions of TG. For instance, Amit, Subhash’s daughter at Ranaghat, articulated a strong critique of attempts to produce exclusive or rigid definitions of ‘transgender’, based on her experience of attending several NGO meetings and consultations:

So many seminars, so many meetings have tried to fix the definitions of transgender, *hijra* and MSM... at each one there have been conflicts regarding who is *hijra*, who MSM, who TG. Some TGs are assuming that just because they dress in a particular way, other *kothis* will also have to dress like that (to be counted as TG). Otherwise they say that they do not have courage to come out, that they are hiding... (but) *kothis* are of many kinds, some *kodi*, some *bheli*, some even half-*kodi*, half-*bheli* (*adha-kodi*, *adha-bheli*!)

Amit thus continued to valorize the overlapping *kothi* spectrum (*kodi*, *bheli*, half-*kodi* half-*bheli*) and articulated an impatient, frustrated critique of definitional battles and categorical divides. This resistance to divisive tendencies of MSM/TG separation was echoed by Srijan, another young activist and a friend of Aniket's at Berhampore: 'MSM, TG, *hijra* – all of them are in the end having sex with men, they are all taking it in the butt! (*battu-tei nichchhe*). So why all this division?' Speaking of the stipulations of the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAPCS) that CBOs would have to be empaneled either as MSM or TG, Srijan defiantly asserted that s/he could represent himself as both: 'I can go either in MSM dress or in TG dress, as needed!' However, this defiance also came under censure from his friend Aniket: 'now since MSM/TG is being divided, such confusion would only make it worse for us!' This exchange illustrates the tense intra-community negotiations around gendered fluidity and identitarian divides prompted by the pressure of proper representation to the state-funder-NGO nexus.

Apart from explicit challenges such as those mentioned above, there may be also less intentionally directed shifts or slippages in the translation and usage of various elements of the transitional narrative associated with MTF transgender identity. This is particularly evident for the concept/metaphor of *rupantar* (change in *roop* or form), which signals male-to-female transition in dominant articulations of transgender/*rupantarkami* identity. However, *rupantar* and changing of *roop* may also come to signal a flexible switching between modes of gendered presentation, rather than a unidirectional transition.

Chapal Bhaduri, for instance, is a well-known artiste of the ‘traditional’ or ‘folk’ form of *jatra* (drama or opera with costumes and singing, directed at mainstream audiences) in West Bengal, and is particularly known for hir skillful presentation of female characters on stage. While Chapal-*da*, which is how s/he is popularly known, has often been variably mapped as *samakami* or transgender by activists and communities, s/he has mostly remained silent in public about hir purported identity. However, in 2012, Chapal-*da* agreed to an interview with Swikriti’s annual magazine, Swikriti Patrika, where s/he was asked whether s/he had ever desired *rupantar* or identified as a *rupantarkami*.³⁴² Chapal-*da*’s answer playfully and elegantly shifted the usual connotations of *rupantar*:

Rupantar is happening all the time with me! Everyday I am changing my *roop* on stage! As for changing sex (*lingo poriborton*), it once did cross my mind when I was twenty-four or twenty-five. But I haven’t really thought of that since then.

Here, *rupantar* therefore becomes a multidirectional process (s/he freely goes back and forth among hir stage presentations) that can be undertaken repeatedly and at will. This shift in meaning is also evident in Srijan’s use of *roop* as a concept-metaphor for hir contextually changeable sartorial presentation. Early on in Sangram’s history, Srijan distinguished himself from those who envisaged or saw themselves as women: ‘however much we may think ourselves to be women, we are not women... So what if we are feminine, we are not women! (*amra meyeli hole ki hobe amra kintu meye noi!*) In

³⁴² Bhaduri, C. 2013. ‘Interview’. *Swikriti Patrika* Issue 10, p. 7-8.

practice, this disavowal of womanhood while claiming femininity seems to enable a relatively free negotiation with various gendered presentations or *roops*.

For example, during one outing to Annapurna-*mashi's khol* (house) near Berhampore, Srijan regaled Annapurna-*mashi* and her *chelas* with stories about hir experience with *kothis* and *parikhs* during hir visits to Kolkata (Srijan is a professional theater actor and has often traveled to Kolkata and various other cities with the theater troupe that s/he is associated with). Srijan explained how *parikhs* in Kolkata may want *kothis* in various *roops*:

Srijan: There are some *parikhs* who want us in *kodi-tal* (the mode of being *kodi*), some *parikhs* want us in *bheli* or *niharini pon* (the mode of being *bheli* or *niharini*, a woman)... and the *dupli* ones do not want us in *niharini pon* at all!

A friend of Annapurna-*mashi*: It is in *kodital* only that you get more *parikhs*, do you get *parikhs* in *bhelipon*? No, because in *kodital* you can go into the (*parikh's*) house as a friend, and then who is seeing what you do at night!

Srijan: no, actually there is a market (*bajar*) in *kodi-pon*, there is a market in *bheli-pon*... only, the two markets are different, that's what! (*duto bajar alada, ei ja!*)

Srijan's gender fluidity and switching has attracted comment within Kolkata's transgender activist circles, but s/he has usually warded off or responded to comments and queries with admirable aplomb. In one NGO event in the summer of 2012, Srijan encountered Tista, who immediately mentioned how she had noticed various different kinds of pictures on Srijan's newly-opened Facebook profile:

Tista: hey, you are totally looking like a *hunk* in one of the photos! I was thinking, who is this! *Kothi* in one photo, *straight* in another!

Srijan (laughs): yes, see how many *roops* I have! Look at all my *roops*! (*shob roop-i dyakho*)! Chhinnamasta, Bagalamukhi!

(In certain variants of Tantric Hinduism followed in Bengal, Chhinnamasta and Bagalamukhi are two of the Mahamayas or *avatars* of the mother goddess of Shakti).

Me: and all of the *roops* are on the same (Facebook) profile!

Srijan: I have put them there intentionally only, so that the *directors* (theater directors) can see that I can act in various *roles*!

Srijan thus combines and shifts between various metaphors and conceptual frames to describe and justify hir multifaceted gender-switching – *roop* and *rupantar*, the variant *avatars* or manifestations of Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism, and the various theatrical ‘roles’ that can be played by a competent actor. Through hir skillful and easy movement between these various frames with their various conceptual histories, *roop* and *rupantar* are made to move away from their reification into a generalized trajectory of MTF transition, marking a resignification of ‘transgender’ that markedly differs from its dominant version.

Srijan goes further than just asserting an easy fluidity, however. S/he is acutely aware of how s/he is readable as different in hir various *roops* and *avatars*. This readability as differently gendered – in whichever *roop* – also renders hir vulnerable to discrimination. During a conversation with Amit (Subhash’s daughter) and me, Srijan described how s/he faced discrimination even when s/he was at her most *kodi* (sober, less overtly feminine):

But I have noticed that however much *kodi* I become, people still *discriminate*... Maybe they are not saying it out loud (*mukhe kichhu bolchhena*)... everything is fine in the first *interview* or *audition*, but they are not asking me to come for the next *audition*! Even after doing all this (i.e. becoming *kodi*) if one has to face all this... then sometimes I feel that it is better that I become totally *bheli*!

‘Discrimination’ is thus exposed as mobile in its strategies and not linearly or quantitatively related to the extent of visible femininity. Based on hir experience of such stigma, Srijan disputed the activist framing of TG as automatically more vulnerable. Recounting hir experiences during hir outings with hir trans woman friend Roshni (whom we encountered in the last chapter), Srijan asserted:

It is a wrong concept that *transgenders* are always more discriminated! On the other hand I have often seen that they may get the respect given in society to women... like, people will call them *ma'am*, and people will leave tables for them at restaurants.

Here, the relative legibility of people like Roshni, who may be able to ‘pass’ as women or at least as womanly enough, gives them access to at least some of the social courtesy extended to women, however provisionally or tentatively. Srijan, on the other hand, has often lamented how hir position is all the more precarious, uncertain and difficult for not being legible in any straightforward gendered terms. Given this scenario, in our last meeting in Kolkata, s/he told me how she is considering taking up laser therapy (to remove traces of facial hair) and will try to dress more consistently as a woman, though

as of the time of this writing, Srijan has not publicly identified himself as a trans woman. In the absence of a supportive structure for such gendered selves both at the level of social acceptance and activist leadership, sustaining hir subject position may come at considerable personal costs, which are not immediately apparent in her breezy and smooth dismissal of gender roles and expectations that always and relentlessly exert their pressure on every one of us who have inhabited these communities, if not in the same ways.

Conclusion: From MSM to MSM/TG

The globalizing expansion of transgender into eastern India, while promising greater (bio)political recognition for gender variant persons beyond their subsumption within MSM, ironically *extends* the cartographic logic of MSM sub-sections into the MSM-TG (sometimes MSM-TG-*hijra*) schema. Thus, despite all the attempts to dissociate TG identity from MSM, the MSM-TG divide in fact replicates and furthers its underlying logic. While transgender activism has undertaken crucial goals such as countering gender-based discrimination and the expansion of official gender categories to permit the recognition of gender variant citizens, the flip side of the inclusion of ‘transgender’ into state policies and funders’ discourses is the involvement of governmental technologies of power in delimiting transgender through the MSM-transgender rubric of identification, rather than allowing it to function as an open-ended tool for political mobilization. This forges an increasing surveillance of gender non-conformity at both the biopolitical level

of mapping populations ('risk groups') and the minute disciplinary regulation of subjects within communities ('genuine' TGs vs. others).³⁴³ Forms of gender variance are surveyed, categorized and hierarchized by networks of activists, transnational funders and large NGOs, shifting norms of legible identification to better accommodate some male-assigned gender variant subjects (particularly trans women and *gharana*-based *hijras*), but reinstating hierarchies of legitimacy that determine relative access to political representation and organizational funding. If transgender functions in exclusionary ways, MSM does not provide unproblematic routes to legibility or legitimacy either – as noted above, all gender non-conforming people are reduced to biological maleness in the MSM schema,³⁴⁴ and their gender variance might even appear as failed homosexuality.³⁴⁵ The vernacularization of the *kothi-dhurani-hijra* spectrum as regional sub-categories of MSM or TG, which serve to translate the cartography of the MSM-transgender schema and produce its hegemony, ultimately results in the elision of the shifting dynamics of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* community formations through the reification of identitarian divides.

The ongoing consolidation of *hijra*, MSM and transgender as identity categories potentially delegitimizes subject-positions that cannot be easily assimilated into legible, coherent identities – 'inauthentic' *hijras* outside *gharanas* who cross-dress in trains for

³⁴³ I am influenced by Puar's formulation of the 'oscillation' between the 'disciplining of subjects' and the 'control of populations', but there is a crucial difference in that for Puar, the former seems to refer to how some 'queer subjects' are 'folded (back) into life' while the latter designates the construction of (excluded) racialized queerness (Puar 2008: 35); in my case the oscillation is between the contiguous domains of enumerating populations and individualized identity formation.

³⁴⁴ Boellstorff, 'But do not identify as Gay', p. 296.

³⁴⁵ Bondyopadhyay and Shah, *My Body is Not Mine*, p. 36.

their living; *kothis* or *dhuranis* with ambiguous gender/sexual behaviors that breach the institutional cartography of MSM sub-groups or the MSM-TG division itself. Clearly, these processes of identity formation have material consequences of inclusion or exclusion vis-à-vis emergent minority identities. While the consolidation of *dhurani/dhunuri/kothi* networks into an MSM sub-section helped to standardize the distinction between *hijra* and MSM, subsequently these subcultural networks are further divided as MSM or TG. To refer back to the concerns of the previous chapters, the narrative traced in this chapter suggests that *hijra*, MSM and TG all evidence the attempted construction of bounded identities amid the ‘deepening web of governmentality’ that marks the postcolonial period for Chatterjee.³⁴⁶ But as Sumit Guha argues, governmental constructions of identity evidence collusions, complicities or continuities with pre-existent logics of community formation, including both *gharana*-based *hijra* kinship, and divides within *dhurani/dhunuri/kothi* networks.³⁴⁷ However, such apparent continuities elide histories of categorical fluidity and the tolerance of ambiguity, evidenced in the stories of *hijras* outside *gharanas* like *Shyamoli*-ma, masculine *dhuranis* like Ranajay, or the persistent figure of the *dupli kothi*. Through such elisions, forms of collusion and continuity between subcultural and governmental processes of identity formation might constitute profound discontinuities in how gender/sexual variance is imagined and lived on the margins.

³⁴⁶ Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, p. 199.

³⁴⁷ Guha, ‘The Politics of Identity’, p. 161.

Chapter 4: (En)gendering Desires: The Specter and Materiality of the *Kothi* in Incommensurate Temporalities of Gay Emergence

Introduction

Gulabi Aina, or ‘The Pink Mirror’, is a 2003 feature film directed by Sridhar Rangayan, a prominent queer filmmaker and founder member of the Humsafar Trust, Mumbai.³⁴⁸ The title refers to the color pink as a common signifier of gay pride and identity used by Euro-American gay communities, and participates in the globalizing expansion of ‘pink’ as a gay and GLBT symbol.³⁴⁹ However, the primary protagonists of the film, socio-economically marginalized dancers who live and work in Mumbai, dress in feminine attire and refer to themselves as *kothis*. Commonly available reviews on the Internet refer to them as ‘drag queens’ (www.imdb.com) or ‘transsexuals’ (www.wikipedia.com), eliding the language used by the characters themselves.³⁵⁰ However, within the film, this vernacularizing imposition of Anglophone terminology over usages like *kothi* is reversed. Newly introduced to the protagonists, a teenage boy identifies himself as gay, and is immediately answered by one of the characters who sarcastically remarks, ‘O, *angrezi kothi!*’ – ‘Oh, so you are an English *kothi!*’

³⁴⁸ Rangayan, S. 2003. *Gulabi Aina*. Mumbai: Solaris Pictures.

³⁴⁹ For the history of ‘pink’ as a symbol of gay protest, see Plant, R. 1986. *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*. New Republic Books. For contemporary usages, see [^"Website of Pink magazine:"](#). Pinkmag.com. Retrieved 2010-09-11; [^Opportunities in the Pink Economy of the United Kingdom"](#) (PDF). Retrieved 2010-09-11.

³⁵⁰ ‘The Pink Mirror’, www.wikipedia.com. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pink_Mirror (Accessed May 11, 2013). ‘The Pink Mirror’, www.imdb.com, Available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386499/> (Accessed May 11, 2013).

This filmic narrative finds its ‘real life’ ethnographic counterpart in a vignette from the gay activist Alok Gupta’s essay in the anthology *Because I have a voice*, among the first anthologies about the Indian LGBT or ‘queer’ movement, published in 2005.³⁵¹ In the essay, the author-protagonist ventures out from his upper middle class gay circles into a relatively lower middle class area in Mumbai, the Maheshwari gardens, which is also a prominent cruising site. As he walks into the park, he is called out – ‘*ay Englishpur ki kothi!*’ (*kothi* from Englishpur, or the land of English). Gupta interprets this as a sarcastic riposte to the pretensions of Anglicized middle class gay men – his appearance and mannerisms betray both his class provenance (spatially mapped as ‘Englishpur’) and the fact that he is, after all, *kothi*. The essay goes on to critique hierarchies of class within Indian LGBT communities and movements as evident through tensions and spatial divides separating middle class gay men from lower middle or lower class *kothis*. As Gupta narrates, gay men often dissociate from *kothis* because of both gendered and class-based anxieties – the flamboyance and camp often associated with *kothis* threatens to ‘out’ gay men from their middle class male respectability and privilege.³⁵²

Yet, as evident in the aforementioned vignettes, there are also intersections and mutual interpellations such that the gay and the *kothi* do indeed cross paths and become mapped and translated in terms of each other, complicating gendered, class and linguistic

³⁵¹ Gupta, A. 2005. ‘Englishpur ki *Kothi*: Class Dynamics in the Queer Movement in India.’ Narrain, A. & Bhan, G. (Eds). 2005. *Because I have a voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

³⁵² Gupta, A. 2005. ‘Englishpur ki *Kothi*’.

dichotomies. In this context, this chapter will look beyond of the institutional topos of the previous chapters to trace the broader circulation of gay as a rubric of identity, desire and community formation, specifically focusing on the emergence of metropolitan gay communities and globalizing discourses of gay identity vis-à-vis translocal *kothi-dhurani-hijra* communities. As many commentators have noted, the media (print, visual and the internet) have set the broader context for the emergence of gay (and lesbian) categories in the Indian public sphere.³⁵³ Even as NGOs, the state and funders attempt to standardize MSM and TG categories, gay as a category and identity circulates through the print and visual media and the Internet, informing emergent community formations. While MSM has served as an umbrella term for non-gay male-assigned sexual identities in the NGO circuit, ‘gay’, ‘*samakami*’ (Bengali, ‘same-desiring’) or ‘*samlainik*’ (Hindi, ‘same-sex desiring’) have emerged as the most common signifiers in both English and non-English media to indicate a range of gender/sexual variant persons. From the 1990s through the 2000s, media representations of ‘gay’ persons or communities have carried strong connotations of effeminacy, often depicted pejoratively or sensationally (‘transgender’ seems to have entered the media lexicon later, and even then may not be always clearly distinguished from gay).³⁵⁴ For example, articles on civic activism such as pride marches commonly use phrases like ‘gay rally’, ‘gay pride’ or ‘gay community’ accompanied by pictures of gender variant persons in feminine attire, including *kothi* or

³⁵³ For instance, see Dave, N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

³⁵⁴ For a detailed analysis of media representations, see Dutta, A 2008. ‘Narratives of Excess and Exclusion: Nationhood, Class and Queerness in the Indian English-Language Press’ in Kuntsman, A. and Miyake, E. (ed.s) *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Raciality*. Raw Nerve Books, York.

hijra-identified people in case of the annual Kolkata Pride Walk.³⁵⁵ This is evident even in international media such as BBC – for example, a 2009 article on gay activism in Mumbai pairs a picture of persons in feminine attire with a headline titled ‘Mumbai gays’ [sic] long fight for recognition’.³⁵⁶ On the other hand, emergent gay communities have typically disavowed such stereotypes in the media and popular culture, and we shall see, have affirmed an overt or unmarked masculinity as the norm. Paralleling long-term tendencies within gay male communities in the west, middle class gay communities have sought to forward public representations that dissociate gayness from feminization, or at best, contain gender variance at the level of personal or private expression (rather than a signifier or notable aspect of public gay identities as such).³⁵⁷

In the context of these broader tendencies that characterize the emergence of gay as a community and public identity, this chapter will explore the constitution of emerging urban middle class gay subjecthood and communities vis-à-vis relatively lower class feminized subject positions. As I will describe, gay networks and communities, which have increasingly formed around virtual spaces such as online dating websites and social

³⁵⁵ E.g. see ‘Rural gays dominate rally’, *The Asian Age*, July 2, 2003.

³⁵⁶ BBC, 2009. ‘Mumbai gays’ long fight for recognition’. July 2, 2009.

³⁵⁷ Susan Stryker and Stephen Valocchi have charted such tendencies within US gay formations; Stryker in particular uses the term ‘homonormativity’ to indicate gender normativity in gay spaces; See Stryker, S. 2008. ‘Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity’. *Radical History Review*, Issue 100: 145-157; Valocchi, S. 2012. “Where Did Gender Go? Same-sex Desire and the Persistence of Gender in Gay Men’s Historiography”. *GLQ* 18:4, pp. 453-79. As charted in the chapter itself, such tendencies have sometimes been critiqued in activist spaces within India; I have previously examined such tendencies in Dutta, A. (2012) “Claiming Citizenship, Contesting Civility: The Institutional GLBT Movement and the Regulation of Gender/Sexual Dissidence in West Bengal, India”, *Jindal Global Law Review* 5:1 (Special Issue: Rethinking Queer Sexualities, Law and Cultural Economies of Desire.)

media such as Facebook, have particularly dissociated from lower class gender variance and *kothi/hijra* femininity, and often tended to align themselves with an aspirational masculinization and anglicization. On one hand, I will trace how such modes of community formation seek to dissociate from, supersede and vernacularize *kothi-dhurani* formations and posit gay as a relatively more global, modern and progressive identity; on the other, I will trace how gay and *kothi* also intersect in transformative ways, resulting in trajectories of emergence that contradict this teleology of gay globality and modernity. As I argue, the emergence of gay identity often manifests a desired teleological trajectory of progression that is simultaneously spatial and temporal. The spatialized imagination of a gay transnationality is manifested in the aspiration to connect and catch up with particularly Euro-American images of gay identity, masculinity and culture, and this spatial imaginary is further associated with a desired trajectory of modernity that marks the temporal supersession of feminized stereotypes to gradually attain a more masculinized, normalized and respectable gay identity through liberalization and globalization (even as ancient or medieval Indian culture may be strategically claimed to support the authenticity of gay and lesbian identities).³⁵⁸ This trajectory of gay identity formation through globalization and modernization constitutes both a spatial separation from lower class gender/sexual variance and the desired temporal supersession of such subject positions, casting them as both relatively local and traditional/backward vis-à-vis the globalizing gay, and thus reinforcing the institutional processes of vernacularization traced in the previous chapters. Yet, as evident in Gupta's narrative and as I will

³⁵⁸ On the evocation of Indian and especially Hindu ancient or medieval literature and culture, see the first section on the next (fifth) chapter.

elaborate in this chapter, there are also intersections and mutual interpellations between gay and *kothi* communities and subject positions, creating contradictory negotiations of spatial and temporal dichotomies such as local/global or traditional/modern. With increasing bilingualism and code-switching between English, Bengali and subcultural vocabularies in both lower and middle class contexts, the relation between gay identity, English and class is anything but linear, and the binarized script of gay-*kothi* encounter in Gupta's vignette may be interrupted by both the middle class adoption of *kothi-hijra* language and *kothi-dhurani* adoptions of gay identity (*gharana*-based *hijras* don't really intersect with gay identification, and have been allied more with TG, as charted in the previous chapter). Thus, while dominant teleologies of gay identity tend to supersede feminized subject positions, gay and *kothi* may inform each other in ways that contradict the temporal telos of gay modernity and its spatial imagination of globality. Even as they are vernacularized vis-à-vis globalizing formations of gay identity, *kothi-dhurani-hijra* languages and practices act as material influences that may be incorporated into discourses of gay identity and community. This results in incommensurable temporalities of gay emergence – one in which gay identity seeks to supersede associations of effeminacy and disavow the *kothi* (and related subject positions) as local, traditional and backward, and another in which *kothi*, *dhurani*, etc. themselves influence the emergence of gay communities.

These contradictory negotiations with spatiality and temporality that mark gay identities are intricately connected with rubrics of desire. Scholars and activists in the US, such as

Susan Stryker and Mattilda Sycamore, have critiqued ‘homonormative’ tendencies that characterize gay sexual spaces in the US, where normative forms of gay desire valorize a symmetrical masculinity shared by both partners, and dissociate from past associations between gayness and effeminacy.³⁵⁹ Paralleling such tendencies, gendered articulations of gay desire in Indian gay communities tend to valorize masculinity as the desirable ideal of both object choice and subject formation. As I shall argue, this is often accompanied with the abjection of effeminacy, evidenced by the phobia of and disgust at subject positions like the *kothi* – thus extending the already existing patterns of the social fear and distancing from *hijras* and *bheli* (overtly feminine) *kothis*, as charted in previous chapters, into normative constitutions of gay sexuality and desire. The divide between a desirable gay masculinity and gender variance valorizes masculine-masculine forms of desire and elides the feminine-masculine pairing that characterize desire in *kothi-dhurani* discourses, rendering effeminacy and feminization as abject and undesirable. However, there are also contradictory evocations of feminized males as objects of desire. Thus, on one hand, the chapter will analyze dominant spatial and temporal teleologies of gay community formation and their relation to normative rubrics of desire; on the other, the chapter will describe persistent forms of gendered alterity that mark emergent gay spaces, and trouble dominant spatio-temporal trajectories of gay identity formation and desire.

³⁵⁹ Stryker, S. 2008. ‘Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity’. *Radical History Review*, Issue 100: 145-157; Sycamore, M. B. (Ed). 2012. *Why are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots? Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform*. Oakland: AK Press.

However, the contrary temporalities of gay community formation and varied trajectories of desire do not suggest sheer plurality or multiplicity; rather, normative articulations of gay identity and contrary expressions of desire and identity may be tiered and contained within a hierarchized linguistic economy. Here, I depart from a prominent approach in the literature on ‘global queering’ that sees the dissemination of ‘gay language’ as leading to polyvalent, regionally variegated, and contingently modifiable senses of the ‘gay’.³⁶⁰ While *kothi*-gay intersections create different inflections and temporalities of gay subjecthood and community, these are relatively vernacularized and/or elided at the level of dominant articulations and public representations of gay identity. For instance, variant articulations of ‘gay’ may use English terminologies in conjunction with subcultural languages, but as we shall see, these typically do not enter the national or transnational circulation of gay English, or even the articulation of *samakami*/gay identity in standard literary Bangla. Even if *kothi* language is adopted within middle class gay communities, they are often confined to private spaces rather than informing public identification. Moreover, as I will attempt to demonstrate, public articulations of gay identity, particularly by gay activists, may try to contain the tensions between contrary spatio-temporal articulations of gay through a liberal, apparently inclusive version of gay identity which accommodates both masculine and feminized versions of gay identity, but often without countering masculinist and class/caste hierarchies within gay spaces, and maintaining masculinity as the unmarked norm. Moreover, ascendant narratives of same-sex desire and gay relations treat gender roles (e.g. *kothi-parikh*) and associated

³⁶⁰ Boellstorff, T. & Leap, W. (Eds.). (2003). *Speaking in queer tongues: globalization and gay language*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

inequalities as backward and/or irrelevant, thus eliding asymmetries of power within desire and conflating unequal subject positions across gender and class, such that ‘gay’ becomes a politically vacuous category apart from a liberal logic of pluralism and inclusion that retains masculine privilege. Both overtly masculinist and liberally inclusive versions of gay identity tend to elide discourses of gender variance within *kothi-dhurani-hijra* communities and versions of gay that intersect with such discourses, preserving dominant patterns of gay assimilation into transnational homonormative tendencies. Here, I refer to both Stryker’s usage of ‘homonormativity’ as gender normativity, and Lisa Duggan’s formulation where it refers more to the alignment of gay politics with the transnational capital, consumerism and the state.³⁶¹ As we shall see, there are linkages between the two forms of homonormativity; however, in this chapter I will focus more on gender normative aspects of gay community formation, and the next chapter will take up the relation with citizenship and the state.

The abjection and material alterity of the vernacularized

To elaborate the aforementioned critique of the dominant spatio-temporality of gay transnationalism and modernity, the narrative of the chapter draws from two salient critical approaches to gay homonormative formations – one emphasizing forms of abjection that mark normative gay spaces, and the other stressing material alterity of communities that challenge or depart from the norm. In the particular context of gay identity formation in the Philippines, Bobby Benedicto has argued that the abjected specter of lower class gender variance, specifically the figure or image of the effeminate

³⁶¹ Stryker, S. ‘Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity’, p. 146.

bakla, haunts aspirational gay spaces in Manila that wish to merge into an imagined gay globality centered around images of US gay culture, disavowing past associations with *kabaklaan* (the condition of being *bakla*).³⁶² Benedicto draws upon Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, where specters indicate 'the non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present.'³⁶³ In Benedicto's narrative, the globalizing gay present is haunted by the specter of that which it seeks to relegate as its abjected past. The regulation of traces of the *bakla* and the desire to invisibilize its manifestations marks the anxieties of young middle class Filipino gay men who aspire to belong to a gay globality, even as that aspiration is never fully realizable and precarious, given both the racialized exclusions of white gay male identity and the haunting return of the *bakla*.³⁶⁴ Thus, Benedicto argues that specters disrupt the everyday practices of global queering even as they mark its abjected others. The *bakla* has to be 'relocated to an elsewhere and elsewhen' for the imagination gay scene and gay globality to sustain itself,³⁶⁵ resulting in 'the abjected position of *kabaklaan*'.³⁶⁶ However, processes of abjection are never complete or fully realizable. '(K)abaklaan is there, recognized even though hardly anyone will claim being its embodiment.'³⁶⁷ Thus, 'the celebration of the newness of Manila's gay scene is predicated... on the belief that we... have left the *bakla* behind, a fragile belief betrayed

³⁶² Benedicto, B. 2008. 'The Haunting of Gay Manila: Global Space-Time and the Specter of Kabaklaan'. *GLQ* 14:2-3, pp. 317-338;

³⁶³ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 317; Derrida, J. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge.

³⁶⁴ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 317.

³⁶⁵ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 318.

³⁶⁶ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 331.

³⁶⁷ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 332.

by our ability to see and hunt down its traces.’³⁶⁸ In this sense, the abjected *bakla* and *kabaklaan* haunts gay Manila as a specter.

While Benedicto does not explicitly refer to the scholarly literature on processes of abjection and associated emotions like disgust, it may be useful to reference abjection as a concept in the work of feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Iris Marion Young, Nussbaum, Kutzbach and Mueller, among others.³⁶⁹ Kristeva has influentially theorized abjection as the self’s disgusted response to that which threatens its boundaries. The abject is that which needs to be expelled to establish and maintain the border of the inside and outside, the boundaries of selfhood, and psychological and social order. Yet, it also indicates the perpetual failure of this attempt: abjection ‘does not radically cut off the subject from that threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.’³⁷⁰ The abjected is inevitably and irreducibly implicated with the self: ‘I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.’³⁷¹ Thus abject is neither the subject nor a purely externalizable object, but rather, it indicates a liminal zone between subject and object – something that is simultaneously recognized and denied as part of the self; something that provokes a

³⁶⁸ Benedicto, ‘The Haunting of Gay Manila’, p. 332.

³⁶⁹ Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press; Young, I. M. 1990. ‘Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia’, in Dallery, A.B., Scott, C.E. and Roberts, P.H. (Eds.) *Crises in Continental Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press; Nussbaum, M. 2006. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Kutzbach, K. and Mueller, M. (Eds.) 2007. *The Abjection of Desire: The Aestheticization of the (Un)aesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

³⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 6.

³⁷¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

violent, nauseous reaction prompted by a fear of the bodily decay and loss of selfhood.³⁷²

Abjection involves desire as *both* fascination and loathing: ‘It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced.’³⁷³

While Kristeva theorizes abjection in terms of a primal dissociation from the mother to establish self-identity and thus (like much psychoanalytic theory) makes her argument at the generalized level of individual psychology, Iris Marion Young has attempted to link abjection as individual psychology and as a social process, underlining its socially and historically constructed nature.³⁷⁴ She argues that marginalized groups, such as people of color and homosexuals, often become the victim of a ‘body aesthetic that describes some groups as ugly or fearsome and produces aversive reactions in relation to members of that group’.³⁷⁵ This roots social power equations in individual psychology: ‘the association between groups and abject matter is socially constructed; once link is made, however, ... these associations lock into the subject’s identities and anxieties’.³⁷⁶ The relation between an emergent gay subjectivity and lower class feminized subject positions like *bakla* or *kothi* can then be understood as the anxious defense of an emergent, relatively dominant group from those who trouble its boundaries.

However, there is also a risk in using theories of spectrality and abjection to examine

³⁷² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1-2.

³⁷³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

³⁷⁴ Young, *Abjection and Oppression*, p. 145.

³⁷⁵ Young, *Abjection and Oppression*, p. 145.

³⁷⁶ Young, *Abjection and Oppression*, p. 145.

emerging identity formations. Benedicto's analysis of the spectrality and abjection of the *bakla* is careful to indicate that the abjected *bakla* is not in fact disappearing, but rather being 'dis-appeared' through strategies of erasure and discipline.³⁷⁷ However, in my reading, the conceptual repertoire of specters and abjection – if used exclusively or primarily – may itself become inadvertently complicit in the act of 'dis-appearing' or invisibilization by emphasizing the spectral disruption of the abjected image of the *bakla* (and other lower class feminized subjects), rather than their continued material alterity and presence. The focus remains on the anxieties of urbane gay men and the relation of the *bakla* as an image or figure to their sense of subjecthood and globality, rather than the material alterity of the *bakla* or *kothi*, that is, people who might evoke such idioms in their self expression, whether they also identify as gay or not.

In distinction from the analysis of specters and abjection, one could cite Stephen Valocchi's critique of dominant histories of modern gay identity formation in the west, which advocates ethnography as a method to narrate alternative histories.³⁷⁸ Continuing a strain of critique evident in Leo Bersani and Susan Stryker,³⁷⁹ Valocchi traces the invisibilization of gender variance in dominant histories of gay desire and subject formation. In the post-stonewall period, US and European narratives of gay community formation invisibilize and downplay gender as an axis of identity formation among gay

³⁷⁷ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 318.

³⁷⁸ Valocchi, S. 2012. "Where Did Gender Go? Same-sex Desire and the Persistence of Gender in Gay Men's Historiography". *GLQ* 18:4, pp. 453-79.

³⁷⁹ Bersani, L. 1987. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43:197-222; Stryker, S. 'Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity', p. 146.

men, and thus implicitly affirm an unmarked, naturalized gay masculinity. Post-stonewall gay narratives emphasize object choice *between* men rather than the gendered self-representations of gay people, such that gay becomes a ‘sexuality’ and a ‘sexual orientation’ without much reference to its gendered constitution as an identity. Gender, however, persists, both in the normalization of the gay subject as implicitly or explicitly masculine, and in countercultures that express differently gendered senses of gay and belie its normative masculinization. Valocchi advocates ethnography as uniquely suited to unearthing both normative and variant gendered dynamics of gay communities.

As I will argue, the varied gender dynamics of gay identity formation demonstrate how rubrics of desire (i.e. norms and ideals of both object choice and subject formation) are gendered in complex and contradictory ways – such that the *kothi* (and related subject positions) are not uniformly abjected, but also return as loci of desire. Dominant articulations of gay identity articulate desire as the symmetric attraction between men, but desire also may take variant contested forms. In elaborating this argument in the ethnographic sections, I draw inspiration from Butler’s theorization of desire and normativity.³⁸⁰ In her critique of psychoanalytic approaches to desire, and particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis, Butler troubles the reduction of desire to a presumed set of symbolic structures and norms. For Butler, desire may be both normative and unruly; it both does and undoes regimes of gender/sexuality. Accordingly, in my ethnographic narrative, I will attempt to demonstrate the varied ways in which gay identities and

³⁸⁰ Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge. p. 130

attendant rubrics of desire are articulated vis-à-vis the *kothi*; *kothi-dhurani* femininities (and the associated discursive repertoire) may function *both* as abjected specters, and materialized figures of desire and allure. Such contradictions in the gendering of gay desire parallel the tension between the abjection and material influence of *kothi-dhurani* language in the emergence of gay communities, creating incommensurable temporalities of gay identity and community formation. Following Derrida's reading of Hamlet, 'time is out of joint'; in Partha Chatterjee's terms, the time of postcolonial modernity is heterogeneous.³⁸¹ Gay narratives show how such heterogeneous temporalities may be lived simultaneously, even as certain temporalities do emerge as dominant with respect to others.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will trace dominant constructions of gay identity, broadly surveying media representations, emerging gay men's groups (especially virtual spaces) and attendant discourses in metropolitan India to trace spatio-temporal conceptualizations of gay modernity. The methodology here differs from the previous sections of the dissertation in studying new media and virtual spaces, for the purpose of sketching out broad patterns rather than a sustained nuanced analysis of particular virtual sites, which remains beyond the scope of this chapter and demands separate study. I will be referring to recent work on virtual gay spaces as 'sexual fields' that evidence transnational commonalities in order to locate emergent tendencies in gay

³⁸¹ Derrida, J. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge; Chatterjee, P. 2006. 'The Nation in Heterogeneous Time' in Chatterjee, P. *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.

formations.³⁸² This broad overview sets the context for the second section, which offers a more situated and detailed analysis of gay men's narratives and communities in West Bengal. In many cases, lower class gender/sexual variance is anxiously abjected from gay self-representations and rubrics of desire, rendered absent-present, or spectral. However, the *kothi* is not necessarily or uniformly 'dis-appeared'. In the third section, I will attempt to describe how *kothi-hijra* subcultural resources and repertoire may also be adopted into middle class gay spaces, acting as a material influence that contrasts with the desirable narrative of gay masculinization. The specter of lower class gender variance and the material alterity of *kothi*, *dhuranis* (etc.) are interlaced in complex ways, and contrary tendencies and temporalities may be evident within the narratives of even the same persons. However, these tendencies are also privatized (relegated to private spaces) and subordinated to dominant forms of gay identity and desire. The fourth section takes up the adoption of gay identity and discourse in predominantly *kothi-dhurani* spaces, which results in relatively vernacularized usages and senses of gay identification that differ from and are elided by globalizing gay formations.

I. Gay Modernity as Identitarian Separation and Temporal Supersession

The aforementioned tendencies of claiming masculinity and disavowing effeminacy are especially evident in the shift from older metropolitan gay circles in the pre-internet

³⁸² Green, A. I. 2008. 'The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach'. *Sociological Theory*, 26: 25–5; Bridges, T. 2013. 'Toward a Sociology of Grindr'. *Social (In)Queery*. February 28, 2013; Orne, J. 2013. 'Nonsexual Community in Sexual Communities'. *Queer Metropolis: Ethnography Online*. March 18, 2013.

period to emerging gay communities in the 2000s. While gay identification often connotes feminization in Indian popular culture and the narratives of some older gay activists, emergent gay communities have increasingly asserted an identitarian separation and even spatial segregation from transgender, *kothi*, *hijra* (etc.) communities. Such identitarian differentiation may also be linked to a narrative of temporal supersession, where proper representations of gay men must overcome misconceptions or ‘confusions’ that link or conflate gender and sexual identity. A related teleological narrative sees feminized identities (especially the *kothi*) as backward, associated with rigid gender roles, and derivative of traditional heterosexuality, overcome by the equality of gay desire.

Generational shifts: Metropolitan gay communities before and after Internet

The first metropolitan gay groups of the early 1990s, like Humsafar Trust in Mumbai, Counsel Club in Kolkata or Good as You in Bangalore, emerged before the widespread expansion of the Internet in urban India. They were led by pioneering middle class activists like Row Kavi in Mumbai and Pawan Dhall in Kolkata, and relied upon magazines and newsletters such as *Bombay Dost* (Mumbai, Humsafar Trust) or *Pravartak* (Kolkata, Counsel Club) that were distributed via post to gradually build a network of gay activists and media visibility.³⁸³ At the same time, these groups also drew membership from the networks that developed around major cruising spots in their respective cities. As we already saw in the previous chapters, the most successful of these groups expanded into HIV-AIDS activism and came into contact with *kothi-dhurani-hijra*

³⁸³ Dhall, P. 2005. ‘Solitary Cruiser’ in Narrain, A. & Bhan, G. (Eds). 2005. *Because I have a voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

networks, even though the leadership remained with middle class gay activists. This process was accompanied by (sub)cultural intersections as well. In an interview for ‘Project Bolo’, an archival project documenting the early years of the LGBT movement in India, Ashok Row Kavi recounts the adoption of *hijra* language and kinship even within relatively middle class participants in the cruising sites of Mumbai during the early 1990s, where a gay identity was adopted unevenly by the more anglicized members, but everyone in his friend circle participated in a certain degree of feminization.³⁸⁴ Row Kavi compares the scene to early subcultures of same-sex desiring males in England, and contrasts it with the more overt masculinization of the contemporary generation of gay men:

In those days we used to go to Maheshwari Garden and there used to be parties of men who used to consider themselves like us. *Hum aise hain* (we are like that)... With the English group, we would say 'Oh we are the gay groups'. But with most of the Indian speaking groups there was no such word as the word gay. And what they started doing first of all (is), if you were very affectionate with someone you changed gender, '*Kashi us ga bai, kaisee ho?* (how are you, my sister?)'... Secondly you started heavily borrowing from Hijra cultures that was the only openly identified queer culture. So firstly it was separating you from heterosexual cultures by inverting gender. You would call each other female. There is a very good example in England during the time of Oscar Wilde... the Molly culture, where you change gender like ‘how are you Oscarina?’... So I became from Ashok, Asha Bai (sister or lady Asha). Nobody had a problem about it. Today

³⁸⁴ Row Kavi, A. 2011. Interview. Project Bolo: A Collection of Oral Histories of Indian LGBT Persons. Available at <http://www.projectbolo.com/ashok.htm>, Accessed Mar 4, 2013.

suddenly these gay guys get very upset when you change their gender as if it becomes reality. It doesn't, it is a very affectionate way of looking at it.³⁸⁵

Even though Row Kavi claims that ‘nobody had a problem about it’, it is significant that such acts of the middle class adoption or appropriation of *hijra* subculture and kinship did not necessarily translate into solidarity or alliance with relatively lower class communities linked with *hijras*, such as *kothis*, *dhuranis*, *dhunuris*, etc. Indeed, Row Kavi invisibilizes all terms except *hijra* in his claim that ‘with most of the Indian (language) speaking groups there was no such word as the word gay’. Row Kavi was one of the leading activists who opposed the assertion and propagation of *kothi* identity backed by the rival NGO Naz Foundation International during the ‘*kothi* wars’, as described in Cohen’s ethnography.³⁸⁶ Subsequently, he has gone on record decrying the public behavior of *kothis* in Mumbai, especially *kothi* sex workers vulnerable to police abuse, as provocative, aggressive and disreputable (such imputations of *kothi* incivility by gay activists will be examined in the next chapter).³⁸⁷ However, despite the elisions of his narrative, Row Kavi does indicate a broader trend evident across other metropolitan cities. In Kolkata, Counsel Club also came into contact with the *dhurani* subcultures through intermediary figures like Ranajay. The Counsel Club member Sarwata, who has

³⁸⁵ Row Kavi, A. 2011. Interview. Project Bolo: A Collection of Oral Histories of Indian LGBT Persons. Available at <http://www.projectbolo.com/ashok.htm>, Accessed Mar 4, 2013.

³⁸⁶ Cohen, ‘The Kothi Wars,’ p. 271.

³⁸⁷ Row Kavi, A. 2007. ‘Kothis versus other MSM : identity versus behaviour in the chicken and egg paradox’. In Bose, B. and Bhattacharyya, S. *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.

used both *samakami*/gay and *kothi* as forms of identification, recounted the adoption and use of subcultural language within the Club, he himself being adept at *ulti*. Like Row Kavi, Sarswata linked the adoption of the language and the attendant subculture to the formation of a distinct community – in Sarswata’s words, ‘*ulti* helped to differentiate us from the mainstream’. It is significant that here the sense of differentiation arises *after* initiation into a community – Sarswata contacted and entered Kolkata gay circles after reading about them in the media – whereas for many relatively lower class individuals like Subhash or Govinda, forms of public demarcation and stigma (through terms like ‘ladies’, *boudi*, *moga*, *chhuri*, etc.) prefaced their interpellation into a gendered community. Moreover, the sense of differentiation may be expressed as the distinction from a heterosexual mainstream (‘heterosexual culture’ in Row Kavi’s terms), rather than from the *parikh* or *panthi* (potentially, any masculine man). Activists within these circles had begun to align the differentiation of community with the distinction in sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. homosexual), while in *dhurani* or *dhunuri* narratives like those of Govinda and Subhash, the distinction between *dhuranis* and men was made in terms of simultaneously gendered and sexual behaviors such as feminization and receptivity, rather than through the conception of distinct sexual orientations. (In fact, in normative conceptions of *kothi* or *dhurani* gender-sexual roles, sex takes place *with* the relatively externalized *parikh*, rather than *within* a separated ‘homosexual’ community as distinct from ‘heterosexual’ men). In contrast, despite their adoption of *dhurani*/*kothi* languages, Sarswata and other members of Counsel Club undertook public attempts to visibilize and represent gay or *samakami* identity as synonymous with homosexual

orientation, rather than with feminized kinship or a distinct gender presentation (this is implicit in the very adoption of *samakami* or ‘same-desiring’ as the Bengali translation of ‘homosexual’ and the equivalent term for ‘gay’). Both Sarswata and Ranajay typically dress in middle class professional male attire (shirts, trousers, suits), and have always used formal literary Bengali and/or English in public representations such as speeches during pride walks and other events of civic activism. Thus, their mode of visibility remains different from *kothi* community members and especially *bheli kothis*, who may both wear feminine attire and use gestures and language associated with *hijras* to assert their gender/sexual difference in public. For Sarswata and Ranajay, private participation in *bhel* and *ulti*, in effect, feeds into a form of vernacularization where public identification is articulated using only standard Bengali and/or Anglophone discourses of gay identity. Even so, early civic activism such as the Kolkata Pride marches, first organized in 1999 by Integration Society, the activist arm of Counsel Club, had a significant presence of *kothi/dhurani* communities (though not *gharana*-based *hijras*), as suburban or small town CBOs like Swikriti and Sangram joined in pride marches organized under the metropolitan gay leaders and activists – so much so that in 2003, a media article proclaimed that ‘Rural gays dominate rally’ (I will examine the trajectory of pride organizing and *kothi* participation in more detail in the next chapter).³⁸⁸

However, by the early 2000s, even as CBOs were being formed around *kothi* circles in small towns, there was a marked shift and expansion in the metropolitan middle class gay

³⁸⁸ ‘Rural gays dominate rally’, *The Asian Age*, July 2, 2003.

scene. This was in large part due to the advent of both online cruising and social networking sites for gay men who could access the Internet, in the broader context of economic liberalization and cultural globalization in post-90s India. In 2002, the journalist Sandip Roy wrote an article on this emerging gay scene, claiming that ‘in a country with no official gay bars, where gay sex is still criminal, the Internet has revolutionized gay life.’³⁸⁹ While echoing the fairly standard teleology of the awakening of a conservative and repressed society via liberalization and globalization, Roy also noted that the Internet also allowed gay men invisibility and anonymity, thus potentially creating and maintaining a ‘giant hi-tech closet’.³⁹⁰ Roy also notes how pioneering gay activists like Ashok Row Kavi initially decried the Internet scene as not being ‘real’ activism or community formation.³⁹¹ However, subsequently in the 2000s, Internet-based communities have expanded from just sexual networking sites to also encompass social and activist groups, functioning either as independent blogs or websites (such as Gay Bombay) or as networks or groups within social networking sites like Orkut or Facebook. Pioneering online groups like Gay Bombay, which was founded in 1998, have subsequently ventured out from virtual networking to organizing regular weekly meetings, hosting gay parties in bars and nightclubs, and participating in events such as

³⁸⁹ Roy, S. 2002. ‘India’s Online gays: Revolution, or Hi-Tech Closet?’. Pacific News Service, Nov 29 2002. Available at http://www.asianweek.com/2002_11_29/opinion_voices.html, Accessed Mar 4 2013.

³⁹⁰ Roy, ‘India’s Online gays’.

³⁹¹ Roy, ‘India’s Online gays’.

pride marches, film festivals and the suchlike.³⁹² In the late 2000s, there has also been a rapid expansion of online magazines such as Pink Pages, Gaylaxy, Fun and TQC (The Queer Chronicle), mostly catering to an upmarket audience of gay men and covering fashion, lifestyle, careers, gay identity and politics, and establishing a distinct gay presence within broader tendencies of consumerist liberalization. At the same time, there have been several important critiques of such tendencies of consumerist liberalization and attendant class divides by a minority of gay activists, such as Alok Gupta (whose essay I mention above), Ashley Tellis and Nithin Manayath – though most of these critiques, articulated in the form of short essays and newspaper columns, take class divides as a given and do not examine the interaction between emergent gay communities and lower class gender variance in detail.³⁹³ On the other hand, there are also many heroic narratives of how gay men first exposed themselves in public spaces, slowly convinced restaurant, bar and nightclub owners to establish community spaces, how they ‘outed’ themselves to their families, and so on, which I will not repeat here.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Gay Bombay, ‘About GB’. Available at <http://thegaybombay.wordpress.com/about-2/about-gb-1/>, Accessed Mar 4, 2013.

³⁹³ For such critiques, see especially Ashley Tellis and Nithin Manayath’s columns in the newspapers DNA (Daily News and Analysis) and Time Out; for instance, see Tellis, A. 2012. ‘The Queer Movement is Dead, Long Live the Queer Movement’, *DNA*, February 19, 2012. Available at <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/1651963/comment-the-queer-movement-is-dead-long-live-the-queer-movement> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Manayath, N. 2012. ‘The Edict Desk’, *Time Out Bengaluru*, April 27, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/gay-lesbian/features/edict-desk> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Manayath, N. 2012. ‘Political Signs’, *Time Out Bengaluru*. March 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/search%3Fkeyword%3Dnithin-manayath-0> (Accessed May 11, 2013).

³⁹⁴ For such narratives, see Narrain, A. & Bhan, G. (Eds). 2005. *Because I have a voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

The newer forms of networking, activism and leadership that emerge by the late 2000s are less attached to HIV-AIDS and to non-metropolitan *kothi* and *hijra* target groups relative to the earlier generation of gay activists like Sarswata or Ashok Row Kavi. Emerging through less publicly visible processes of online cruising and socializing, these spaces evidence a radically different form of community formation relative to *both* the *kothi-dhurani-hijra* social networks, which had formed around people who were interpellated through their perceived gender variance, and to early middle class gay circles that had adapted *hijra-kothi-dhurani* subcultures to articulate a fledgling sense of homosexual difference. In contrast, middle class sexual and social spaces that formed in the 2000s have evidenced marked desires to dissociate from imputations of effeminacy, and even more so from lower class gender variance, and have adopted extensively from transnationally circulating discourses of gay identity and sexual practice. These communities have different degrees of public visibility – ranging from largely anonymous sexual cruising sites where people network using pictures and usernames, to groups in social media sites like Facebook where people come together in their public identities and partake in discussions as well as organization of events. Thus, the distancing from gender variance also takes varied forms.

Douchebags of Planetromeo and Grindr

The most crude and direct ways are evidenced on online websites for cruising, such as Planetromeo (www.planetromeo.com), previously known as Guys4men

(www.guys4men.com). While owned and managed by a European company and boasting members from over a hundred countries, Planetromeo has emerged over the last decade as the largest personal website for gay men in India, with over a hundred thousand members as of March 2013. Many personal profiles on Planetromeo contain explicit interdictions against ‘effeminate guys’, ‘sissies’, ‘queens’, ‘femmes’, as well as lower middle or lower class sex workers, ‘uneducated’ persons, and older people (‘uncles’). These various terms may not be defined distinctly, and are sometimes vaguely conflated with each other. Witness these sample quotes from four different Planetromeo profiles, all located in Kolkata and active in the 2010-13 period:

‘Looking for good smooth young bottoms for fun (...) No effiment [sic] guys, fat, hairy, girlish guys please. and if u dont have a pic, plz dont message’;

‘A request to all the pansy... sissy... uncles... quinz [queens]... as well as “koti” [kothi] guys, pls stay away from me’;

‘I do not entertain those who are femme men, money seekers, massage boys’;

‘Unfit, uneducated and feminine guys please don’t bother’.

While the exact statistical prevalence of such profiles may vary across locations and specific websites, significantly, there does not seem to be much counter-evidence of profiles rejecting masculine people and preferring feminine males – clearly, then, these profiles mark a salient structural tendency characterizing these virtual spaces and their constitutively tolerant atmosphere for such preferences, rather than just isolated or sporadic individual choices. An emerging body of scholarship in the US has theorized gay men’s virtual spaces in terms of ‘sexual fields’ with distinctive patterns of interaction, sociality and exchange, including patterns of distancing from gender

variance that are similar to the aforementioned profiles.³⁹⁵ Drawing on this literature, one may argue that the distinctive nature of virtual sexual spaces like Planetromeo – their transnational geographical span, their propagation of a globalizing gay language of top/bottom/versatile et al, the anonymity and homogenous template of personal profiles – may foster a virtual culture where the aforementioned patterns become possible and even commonplace across widely dispersed locations, despite the provision of locationally specific profiles so as to find partners nearby. In other words, Planetromeo and similar sites may foster transnational tendencies that are tied with the characteristics of their respective ‘sexual fields’, prompting a certain degree of spatial convergence (though not homogeneity) across geopolitical boundaries – particularly connecting the US and the UK with postcolonies that have large English-speaking middle classes, like India (there seem to be less connectivity between Indian gay spaces and east Asia, where significant visible gay communities have emerged as charted by Boellstorff, Jackson, Benedicto and others: one possible reason might be the lack of linguistic commonality). Significantly, the language used in Indian Planetromeo profiles is strikingly similar to ads in websites used in the US, even if the precise pejorative terms may be different, and racial markers often replace overt references to class. Several commentators writing in the US media have noted simultaneous patterns of racism and ‘femmephoria’ (phobia of feminine men/male-assigned persons) on sexual networking services such as Grindr (an iPhone application for male-male sexual networking) and the personal sections of Craigslist

³⁹⁵ Green, A. I. 2008. ‘The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach’. *Sociological Theory*, 26: 25–5; Bridges, T. 2013. ‘Toward a Sociology of Grindr’. *Social (In)Queery*. February 28, 2013; Orne, J. 2013. ‘Nonsexual Community in Sexual Communities’. *Queer Metropolis: Ethnography Online*. March 18, 2013.

(www.craigslist.com).³⁹⁶ The site Douchebags of Grindr (www.douchebagsofgrindr.com) is a queer community-based weblog that keeps a tab on the discriminatory tendencies evidenced through Grindr profiles. A range of sample user profiles documented on the site include injunctions like the following:

‘Only into 101% masculine: Fems dnt fkin mssg me [sic]. 22College athlete (not some pansy sport)’;

‘Be masculine please! I’m gay don’t want a girl!’;

‘Into other white guys only. No Asians, fatties or femmes’;

‘No Asian, No Indian, No Latino, No Black, No Fat, under 30 years old’.³⁹⁷

While the aforementioned personal profiles across the US and India seek to delimit desirable object choices in terms of gender, class, race and body type, these ideas of desirability affect subject formation as well. Valocchi’s argument that gay identity in the US has been increasingly articulated in terms of desire between normatively masculine men is supported by several studies on contemporary gay men’s self-expression and identification.³⁹⁸ For example, Sanchez and Vilain argue that a significant section of the contemporary generation of US gay men report recollections of gender variance and

³⁹⁶ Rowson, A. “Not Just a Preference.” *Fab: The Gay Scene Magazine*. 12 Oct. 2011: n. pag. Web; Bielski, Zosia. “‘No Indian, No Asian’: Picky Dater or Racist Dater?” *The Globe and Mail* 23 Feb. 2012: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012.
<<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/love/dating/no-asian-no-indian-picky-dater-or-racist-dater/article2348129/>>

³⁹⁷ I have not cited profile names for both Grindr and Planetromeo profiles in order to maintain as much confidentiality as possible, and also because personal identity is less important here than metaphors or tropes that are repeated across different personal profiles.

³⁹⁸ Valocchi, ‘Where Did Gender Go?’, p. 455.

difference from masculinity in their childhood, but desire a more masculine or ‘straight-acting’ self-presentation and distance themselves from effeminacy during their transition to adulthood and entry into gay communities.³⁹⁹ In a 2011 article critiquing these systemic tendencies, Alex Rowlson and Mattilda Sycamore voice a sense of loss at these shifts within US gay communities: ‘the negative language so prevalent on Craigslist and Grindr seems to signal that the culture of sexual liberation has been replaced by sexual segregation’.⁴⁰⁰ Of course, the evocation of a pre-internet culture of ‘sexual liberation’ may be idealized – as Leo Bersani has noted, hierarchies of desirability based on gender and class had been already evident in the gay spaces that developed in metropolitan US cities such as San Francisco in the 60s and the 70s.⁴⁰¹ While there are many variations in sexual roles, broadly speaking, symmetrically gendered attraction between men who desire other men emerges as the dominant template for homosexual desire among white gay men in the US, though many sub- and countercultures with gender variant senses of ‘gay’ might remain.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Sánchez F J and Eric Vilain. ““Straight-acting gays”: the relationship between masculine consciousness, anti-effeminacy, and negative gay identity”. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 41.1 (2012): 111-9; Sánchez, Francisco J., Stefanie T. Greenberg, William Ming Liu and Eric Vilain. “Reported Effects of Masculine Ideals on Gay Men”. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 10.1 (2009): 73–87; also see, Taywaditep, K J. Marginalization among the marginalized: gay men's anti-effeminacy attitudes. *Journal of Homosexuality* 42.1 (2001):1-28.

⁴⁰⁰ Rowlson. “Not Just a Preference.”

⁴⁰¹ Bersani. ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, p. 204..

⁴⁰² For gender variant senses of ‘gay’, see Valentine, D. 2006/2003. ‘I went to bed with my own kind once: The erasure of desire in the name of Identity’, in Kulick, D. and Cameron, D. (Eds.) *The Language and Sexuality Reader*. New York: Routledge; Valentine, D. 2007. *Imagining Transgender*. Durham: Duke University Press.

There are noteworthy attempts to shift the gendered connotation of gayness in the Indian context as well, indicating the transnational salience of this pattern in the development of gay communities. While ‘gay’ still carries strong associations of gender variance, masculinizing tendencies of representation are also operative within emerging middle class gay communities and individuals in Indian cities. For instance, the Hindi television program ‘Zindagi Live’ on the channel IBN7 featured a session on ‘*samlaingikta*’ (homosexuality) on 22nd January 2012, which prominently included stories of gender variance (e.g. growing up as ‘effeminate’ children, dressing in feminine attire) narrated by several males who were interpellated as *samlaingik*; some of them also identified as ‘gay’. On the other hand, an almost exactly contemporaneous report in February 2012, published in the Kolkata-based newspaper *The Telegraph* and titled ‘Gay, Happy and Sad’, quoted several middle class gay men of Kolkata and highlighted how they aspire to a normative masculinity with attributes like strength and athleticism:

‘Gay men are fitness conscious,’ says Sunil. ‘It’s competitive and you can’t let yourself go like any middle-aged heterosexual man,’ he laughs. Jerry explains: ‘Unlike women who are less focused on their men’s looks, gay men set very high standards for each other — opting for a muscular appearance and style.’⁴⁰³

In this extract, gay men are posited as more, not less, aesthetically masculine than heterosexual men ‘who let themselves go’; the gay desire for masculinity both as object-choice and self-identification competitively demands higher standards from both the self and the other.

⁴⁰³ Martins, Reena. “Gay, Happy and Sad”. *The Telegraph (Calcutta)*: 7 Days 26 Feb. 2012: 1.

The revolt against stereotypes

Apart from the cruder versions of ‘femmephobia’ and masculinization evidenced in explicitly sexual or cruising spaces, the distinction from feminized subject positions may be more subtly articulated in social and/or activist spaces and collectives of gay men. One common tendency is the desire to critique and disassociate from ‘stereotypes’ of gay men as feminine, as articulated by members of gay collectives in metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai. For instance, a 2012 article on ‘gay stereotypes’ in Hindi films quotes an organizer of the Delhi pride walk:

(P)arade organizer Mohnish Kabir Malhotra told Digital Spy that a lot of damage has yet to be undone. ‘It’s high time Bollywood stops portraying gay characters as feminine and comical,’ he said. ‘It sets out a strong stereotype and makes things even harder for people.’⁴⁰⁴

There may also be a desired teleological supersession of such ‘stereotypes’ in favor of better representation. In 2011, the Mumbai-based group Gay Bombay published an article on their website, applauds the Hindi television serial *Maryada* for a ‘step-up in the portrayal of gay characters’:

There has been a lot of talk about the gay angle being portrayed on the Indian small screen in the serial “Maryada”... (it) shows a breaking of quite a few stereotypes of most representations of homosexuality within Bollywood. (Actor) Ajit Singh’s concern was how sensitively the character would be portrayed. “In

⁴⁰⁴ Naidoo, N. 2012. ‘Gay Stereotypes Changing in Indian Films. Vancouver News Service’. 24 Hours Vancouver, Nov 29 2012. Available at <http://vancouver.24hrs.ca/2012/11/29/gay-stereotypes-changing-in-indian-films>, Accessed on Mar 11, 2013.

Indian cinema, homosexuals are depicted as non-serious and funny. Thankfully, the creative team of the show... are making no attempts to establish the track of homosexuality through the language or the way I dress up in the show” (...) Whatever the reactions of the general populace and the following ratings of the show, surely this is a step-up in the portrayal of gay characters on the small and big screen.⁴⁰⁵

Significantly, neither of these articles seek to dissociate pejorative attributes (‘comical’, ‘non-serious’, ‘funny’) from femininity/effeminacy per se; rather they evidence a desire to dissociate media representations of gayness from stereotypes of effeminacy as a whole. The attempt to show no ‘track of homosexuality’ through language and dress, which is celebrated as a ‘step-up in the portrayal of gay characters’, implicitly valorizes and preserves an unmarked masculinity as normal. This normalization of masculinity extends beyond the demand for better media representations into the regulation of gay community spaces. Gay Bombay has also stipulated a policy of no ‘drag’ (here, meaning feminine attire rather than drag performances) in its meetings, thus making a spatial separation rather than merely an identitarian distinction from too visibly gender variant persons, as is evident in the following notice for a meeting in June 2011:

Drag is a strict no-no. For the simple reason that though Gay Bombay doesn’t mind drag, the spaces that host us do. There also may be many attendees who will prefer being discreet or may be still coming to terms with themselves hence a request that all be sensitive to this and act and dress accordingly (...) this is a discreet event being held as a clean, safe and social get-together of a non-sexual

⁴⁰⁵ Gay Bombay, 2011. ‘Maryada’ June 11, 2011. Available at <http://www.gaybombay.org/index.php/2011/06/maryada/>, Accessed July 30 2011.

nature.⁴⁰⁶

The organizers take care to clarify that ‘Gay Bombay doesn’t mind drag’, and that their policy is more a matter of social expediency – however, by assuming that ‘discreet’ attendees may be uncomfortable with ‘drag’ and prioritizing their presumed needs, again an unmarked masculinity is established as the implicit norm, and this norm is further associated with a segregated and sanitized middle class space (‘clean, safe and social get-together of a non-sexual nature’), clearly distinct from the cruising sites with their complex inter-class networks and the variously gendered spectrum of *kothis*, *hijras*, sex workers et al. The extension of Gay Bombay’s activism from the virtual world forges the creation of a segregated middle class gay space in Mumbai; as we shall see later, this trend is also increasingly evident in cities like Kolkata. Parties with explicit interdictions against ‘drag’ or ‘cross-dressing’ have also been organized in Delhi and Kolkata.⁴⁰⁷

Even articulations of gay identity that do make space for femininity, flamboyance, or camp may maintain the hierarchical prioritization of ‘mainstream’ or ‘ordinary’ masculinity. For example, in November 2012, a discussion involving several members of Gay Bombay on a Facebook group (i.e. a virtual group formed by users of the social networking site www.facebook.com) decried the ‘projection’ of gay men on a popular reality TV show and advocated the liberation from such stereotypes:

⁴⁰⁶ Gay Bombay, 05 Jun ’11: GB Sunday Meet, available at: <http://www.gaybombay.org/index.php/2011/06/05-jun-11-gb-sunday-meet/> (Accessed July 15, 2012). Also see, <http://thegaybombay.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/3rd-feb-13-gb-bandra-meet/> (Accessed Mar 11 2013).

⁴⁰⁷ For instance, a series of ‘gay parties’ organized in Salt Lake, a posh exurb of Kolkata, and advertized in the site www.planetromeo.com in the 2010-11 period explicitly forbade “cross-dressing” from the events.

Commenter A: It's really wrong how this show projects and has been projecting gay guys - as if we are all bit**es (bitches)!! And it's no joke, it really does leave that kind of impact in the minds of people. (...)

Commenter B: yes we need to break those stereotypes - and the only way to do that (as we have been screaming at the top of our lungs for a decade now at GB [Gay Bombay]) is for a lot of the ordinary - mainstream gay guys to come out of the closet and out on the street and be visible to the public/their circle so that people know what real gay men look like - even now, when I casually come out to some straight people (say at a holiday resort or a vacation) the first response is - OMG you are the first gay person we have met who is not all flamboyant and bitchy.

Commenter A: On a side-note - there is nothing wrong with being flamboyant. Generalizations are stupid for sure. But flamboyance isn't bad.

Commenter B: no no flamboyance is not bad at all nor being bitchy or queenie - but people shouldnt think all gay men are alike that - that is wrong representation.⁴⁰⁸

Here, the identitarian and spatial separation from 'queenie' or 'flamboyant' persons is seemingly replaced by a more inclusive, non-generalized conception of 'gay', but one that does not question the unmarked position of 'ordinary' or 'mainstream' masculinity. This may be also apparent in refigured versions of masculinity, incorporating traditionally feminized traits such as careful grooming, which have been termed 'metrosexuality' in both Euro-American and Indian media and may influence both

⁴⁰⁸ The exact name of the group and participants are omitted to maintain confidentiality; comments are cited with permission.

straight and gay men's conceptualization of masculinity.⁴⁰⁹ While 'metrosexuality' has been seen as challenging hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and has been attacked for 'neutering' men,⁴¹⁰ it may also be re-masculinized or reintegrated into an everyday masculinity, such that headlines like 'Real men get waxed' and 'Metrosexual machismo all the rage' become conceptually possible.⁴¹¹ Of course, such transnational trends in masculinity, consumerism and the various nuances of their relation to sexual identity are complex, and can only be hinted at in the space of this chapter. For our purposes, I will note that in Indian metropolitan conceptions of gay masculinity, 'metrosexual' traits may be integrated with other desirable traits such as athleticism, and thus fit within the broader template of gay identification. For instance, the Chennai gay men's group Chennai Dost regularly organizes competitive ramp shows for men in its parties,

⁴⁰⁹ For a very incomplete list of significant media articles on 'metrosexuality' that may yet indicate some salient trends, see, "Real men get waxed; Metrosexuality. (We're all metrosexuals now.)" *The Economist (US)* 5 Jul. 2003: 57; Ghosh, Biswadeep. "What is Metrosexual Anyway?" *Times of India* 20 Oct. 2010: 12; Drum, Gary R. "The Metrosexual: Fashion-conscious heterosexual or JGE (Just Gay Enough)?" *Hardyboy* n.d.: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012. <<http://www.hardyboy.com/metrosexual.html>>; Dodds, Paisley. "Metrosexual Machismo All The Rage." *CBS News* 25 Nov. 2003: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/25/world/printable585549.htm>; Chrisafis, Angelique. "Neutered Modern Man to be Offered Back his Missing Pride in Exchange for his Wallet." *The Guardian* 16 Jun. 2003: 4; Barker, Olivia. "Regular Guys Cast a Jaded Eye at 'Metrosexual' Trend." *USA Today* 21 Jan. 2004: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-01-21-metrosexual-backlash_x.htm>

⁴¹⁰ Chrisafis, Angelique. "Neutered Modern Man to be Offered Back his Missing Pride in Exchange for his Wallet." *The Guardian* 16 Jun. 2003: 4; Barker, Olivia. "Regular Guys Cast a Jaded Eye at 'Metrosexual' Trend." *USA Today* 21 Jan. 2004: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-01-21-metrosexual-backlash_x.htm>

⁴¹¹ "Real men get waxed; Metrosexuality. (We're all metrosexuals now.)" *The Economist (US)* 5 Jul. 2003: 57; Ghosh, Biswadeep. "What is Metrosexual Anyway?" *Times of India* 20 Oct. 2010: 12; Dodds, Paisley. "Metrosexual Machismo All The Rage." *CBS News* 25 Nov. 2003: n. pag. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/25/world/printable585549.htm>.

featuring ‘shimmers, bronzers, colour contact lenses, styling gels, exotic perfumes, flamboyant outfits, groomed body, expensive accessories, condoms (yep! That too!)’.⁴¹² Chennai Dost’s blog post on the 2013 Valentine’s Day party and ramp show concludes with the following injunction for future aspirants:

Well... there’s always a next year for you guys! Buckle up, hit the gym, and visit the spas! Revamp yourself and present the new you at next year’s valentine to sweep your guy-next-door (or be swept by Prince Charming)!⁴¹³

Here, the relative feminization of grooming (shimmer, bronzers, exotic perfumes, flamboyant outfits) is offset both by the restrictive class constituency of attendees (as indicated by their self-consciously fashionable presentation and accessories) and the integration of typically ‘metrosexual’ traits into a desirable athleticism (‘buckle up, hit the gym’) as well as an everyday masculinity (the ‘guy-next-door’). As I shall attempt to show in more detail in the case of Kolkata gay circles, the constructions of a relatively flexible though ultimately bounded sense of gay identity need not translate into the acceptance of lower class feminized subject positions.

(Unfulfilled) teleologies of gay modernity

The desire for an implicitly or overtly masculinized gay identity may also be explicitly linked to an idealization of gay culture in the ‘west’ and a desired teleology of progress leading to the replication of such a culture, as evident in the following blog post in

⁴¹² Renee, 2012. ‘This Valentine, the Town was Painted Pink!’ Chennai Dost. Available at <http://chennaidost.com/archives/1737>, Accessed Mar 6 2013.

⁴¹³ Renee, ‘This Valentine, the Town was Painted Pink!’

February 2013 on the Sydney Mardi Gras by a member of a Kolkata-based gay men's virtual forum. In the post, written in Bengali, the author describes himself as a corporate professional who has travelled many countries and seen LGBT pride events in Europe, the US, and Australia. He describes the Sydney Mardi Gras as one of the best events he has attended:

Gay people (*samakami*) are everywhere. In every section of society, in every religion, every office, every discussion, every economic level. This truth was well demonstrated by the Sydney Mardi Gras. For the first time, members of the army, navy, and air force marched in their uniforms (...) Gay doesn't mean that we go around in *sarees*. I too am a man, healthy, strong (*amio purush, shustho, shobol*).⁴¹⁴

In the comments following the post, the author discussed how gay men in the west would all go to gyms, and regretted that Bengali and Indian men were yet to catch up with the gym culture. In response, other members of the group assured the author that regular gym attendance was catching on among gay men in India and Kolkata as well.

However, the progressive teleology of gay identity formation is also frustrated by persistent cultural associations between 'gay' and 'third gender' or 'transgender' identities, which for many gay men appears to characterize the inadequate modernity of South Asian societies. A series of essays by gay men from varied parts of South Asia, published in both community-based and mainstream publications, comment on the

⁴¹⁴ Bandopadhyay, Koustubh. 2013. Blog post. Mar 5 2013. Available at <http://banglalive.com/Blog/UserBlog/1577>, Accessed Mar 6 2013.

relative lack of a gay identity distinct from gender identities in South Asia and seek to clarify the ‘confusion’ between gender and sexual identity. In an article in the Huffington Post, the US-based diasporic Indian activist Nish Gera writes about ‘misconceptions’ on homosexuality in India:

The misconceptions about homosexuality in India are as diverse and various as any... (They) range from the bizarrely xenophobic ("Homosexuality is a Western disease that started with Stonewall") to the mildly hilarious ("Is your 'plumbing' OK? I mean, you do have a working penis?"). But the story in India is even more complicated than this. What most people don't know is that India is one of the few countries in the world where the third gender (the "*hijra*" or eunuch) is both feared and revered. They are also ostracized for being a sexual minority, the only visible sexual minority in India. The distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity is often not understood or acknowledged.⁴¹⁵

Gera’s article thus performs a generalizing orientalist depiction of the ‘Indian’ conflation of ‘gender identity’ and ‘sexual orientation’ and transgender-gay identities (which elides the complex and variable distinctions between *hijras* and male-attired *dhuranis* or *kothis*, for instance). Echoing this generalizing move, a Pakistani gay-identified man writes about the ‘confusion’ between gay men and transgenders in Pakistan in an essay published in the Indian gay magazine, *Gaylaxy*:

⁴¹⁵ Gera, N. 2013. ‘Where are the Gay Indians? Being Gay in the World’s Largest Democracy’. *Huffington Post*. Jan 30 2013. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nish-gera/where-are-the-gay-indians_b_2578486.html, Accessed Mar 6 2013.

A typical Muslim society does not even know what the word “gay” means. Let’s see it in a more specific aspect; in terms of a “Pakistani Muslim Society”. I am very sorry to say that Pakistanis, in fact most Pakistanis do not even know what “gay” means? It is often confused with transgender here in Pakistan. People normally call transgenders gay. I have seen many times, people in their 50’s say, “Look! A gay is coming, don’t go near him” and the one who is walking by is a poor transgender.⁴¹⁶

Then, in February 2013, Literophile, a blog that publishes ‘amateur academic writing’, launched a call for papers on representations of ‘gay’ in literature and cinema. Seeking to correct a long record of ‘misrepresentation’, the call states:

Hoshang Merchant [gay academic and activist] writes in the preface to *Yaarana* [an anthology of gay writing in India], ‘Many educated Indians confuse ‘homosexual’ with ‘eunuch’.’ Gay identity is misunderstood. Bollywood, through misrepresentation, further betrays gay identity.⁴¹⁷

The list could go on. In critiquing ‘misconceptions’, ‘confusions’, ‘misrepresentations’ and the lack of understanding in South Asian societies that conflate sexual orientation and gender identity, gay and transgender, or gay and ‘eunuch’, these articles construct an implicit teleology of modern gay identification premised on the temporal supersession of these associations and related stereotypes, which is spatially aligned with gay identities in

⁴¹⁶ Zahid, S. 2013. ‘Feelings of a Gay Muslim’. *Gaylaxy: Empowering Expressions*, Jan 3 2013. Available at <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/articles/personals/feelings-of-a-gay-muslim/>, Accessed Mar 6 2013.

⁴¹⁷ Literophile, 2013. ‘Depiction of ‘Gay’ in Literature and Cinema’, Available at <http://literophilejournal.blogspot.com/>, Accessed Mar 12 2013.

the west – even as the teleology remains unfulfilled and marks the inadequate modernity of South Asian societies.

This normative temporality of gay modernity may also be closely related to another progressive teleology – the derision and desired supersession of rigid gender roles associated with lower class gender variant communities such as the *kothis* vis-à-vis an ostensibly egalitarian homosexuality. In particular, gay activists who have interacted or worked with *kothi* communities via HIV-AIDS interventions have often contributed to this teleological narrative. The second chapter mentioned the report ‘‘My Body is not Mine: Tales from the Kothi Community of India’’, partly authored by the gay lawyer and activist Aditya Bondyopadhyay, in the context of its reification of *kothi* identity. The report is also notable for its construction of an implicit telos of gay liberation:

In the *kothi* context... the penetrated man does not perceive himself as a man, and internalises a stereotypical, often highly caricatured image of the woman (...) therefore ... the gay identity, which is closely linked to egalitarian relationships between ‘men’ does not find a very strong footing in India.⁴¹⁸

Here, the relative absence of a progressive gay identity, linked to putatively egalitarian desire between ‘men’, again marks the inadequate sexual modernity of India. Gay egalitarianism is valorized via the dismissive critique of *kothi* desire as regressively modeled on stereotypical gender roles – ironically, roles that have been reinforced by the paradigms of HIV-prevention overseen by such activists, as charted in the second chapter.

⁴¹⁸ Bondopadhyay and Shah, *My Body is Not Mine: Tales from the Kothi Community of India*, Naz foundation International & DFIF (2007), p. 36.

Several middle class gay activists whom I encountered within West Bengal constructed a similar opposition between *kothi* and gay. For instance, Anurag, a middle class activist working with an NGO in Kolkata, visited the district of Murshidabad to record a survey on local ‘sexual minorities’ in 2007. He described the local CBO, Sangram, as a collective of *kothis*, and presuming that I did not know much about *kothi* communities, gave me a lurid description of their alleged sexual preferences. *Kothis* are ‘*dukkhobilashi*’, he explained – i.e. they take pleasure (*bilash*) in suffering (*dukkho*). He graphically described how many *kothis* would not only put up with physical and sexual abuse from their macho boyfriends, but come to desire it themselves – for instance, someone he knew had had her nipples almost torn off by her boyfriend, and would still assert that she liked getting sexually abused and beaten, instead of protesting the situation. These supposed gendered desires become symptomatic of the internalized victimization of *kothis* and their self-inflicted inequality; a perverse reversal of the modern desire for equality. (This concern with victimization and inequality may partially parallel and partially derive from lesbian feminist discourse – for example, during a workshop for CBO members called ‘Rethinking Gender’ by the lesbian feminist collective Sappho for Equality in Kolkata in August 2011, a Sappho member who was leading a discussion section lamented both the violence on *kothi/hijra* bodies and the occasional internalization of victimhood; in the case of Anupam, the focus on *kothi* victimization outweighs the attribution of responsibility to the male abuser). Later, during the preparations for the 2009 pride walk in Kolkata, I interacted with Avirup, another

gay-identified activist, who during a long conversation described how he preferred 'equal' gay relationships that were not constrained by gender roles:

Gay relations have an equality to them, which is not there in this idea that feminine males will always desire masculine men. I like that idea of equality; both will give each other sexual satisfaction. If you have to be feminine to make a man desire you, then you are stuck in that same social inequality (*shamajik boishomyo*).

Avirup did not understand the desire for 'inequality' within same-sex relationships as evidenced in *kothi* desire, which seemed to replicate the same *shamajik boishomyo* associated with conventional heterosexuality. These oppressive constructs were to be overcome by the equality of gay relationships. In both Avirup and Anupam's narratives and the more official report quoted above, the *kothi*-gay contrast defines a progressive teleology from regressive gender roles to an egalitarian homosexuality, aligned with metropolitan, middle class and symmetrically masculine 'gay' relationships. In this teleology, equality is equated with symmetry – symmetry in gender roles seems to ensure power equality, whereas gender asymmetry (i.e. differences in gender roles between partners) is conflated with inequality in power, perpetuating the association between *kothi* feminization and inequality, and eliding the ways in which *kothis* may well also challenge masculinist hierarchies by 'eating' or 'sharing' *parikhs*, as described in the second chapter.

II. Of Abjection and Desire: The *kothi* in gay men's narratives

However, the categorical boundaries of the progressive, seemingly egalitarian, and overtly or implicitly masculinized gay identity are fragile and fraught with tensions. On one hand, gay identity formation may be linked to a strong phobic reaction and abjection of lower class feminized subject positions like the *kothi*, on the other, the *kothi*-gay opposition is troubled by material intersections with *kothi* communities. The *kothi* may thus both inform gay emergence as abjected specter, and shape it as material influence.

I will turn to narratives of the younger generation of gay or *samakami*-identified men from West Bengal to outline some of these tensions and contradictions. While most CBOs formed in the 2000s crystallized around *kothi* circles, cities such as Kolkata have also seen the emergence of distinct gay communities whose members may or may not have connections or contacts with CBOs and NGOs, and may come from a range of socio-economic locations. Papai, for example, is a young student pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English at a city college, and lives in Kolkata's northern suburbs. When I met him in the summer of 2011, he was both a user of the Planetromeo site, and had loose connections with the organizational network MANAS Bangla and more specifically the CBO Swikriti, which ran a HIV intervention under the MANAS Bangla network in his area. Papai's profile on Planetromeo contained the typical injunction against 'effeminate guys'. Even so, he initiated a conversation with me on Planetromeo and insisted on writing in English, even though I had initially responded in Bengali. When I eventually requested an interview, Papai responded readily, and suggested that we meet in Park

Street, a major road running through one of the city's upscale neighborhoods with many fashionable restaurants and cafes. However, as it turned out, he was not really familiar with the area. In our subsequent conversation, Papai narrated how his family was not supportive, and initially, he himself had not been able to come to terms with being *samakami*, and had sought counseling. He expressed the desire to take up a modern, symmetrical and egalitarian *samakami* or gay identity, but one that was haunted by the return of effeminacy within gay desire. I reproduce sections of our conversation, translated from the Bengali:

Me: So... where do you want to sit? Maybe we could go to Barista (a café chain)?

Papai: I don't know what Barista is... actually, I don't come to this Park Street area all that often. But I can go there.

(We get seated at Barista)

Me: So, since how long have you been on PR (Planetromeo)?

Papai: about two or three years...

Me: How did you come to know of PR?

Papai: oh... I had heard about it from a friend.

Me: oh ok, from this community?

Papai: no... I mean, yes...

(Then, without further prompting, but hesitantly)

Do you know about MANAS Bangla?

Me: why yes, I have kind of worked with them!

Papai: Oh ok, so you know them? I had gone to their Dum Dum office for counseling... someone told me about PR there. (Dum Dum is a northern suburb).

Me: oh, then you must be knowing *ulti bhasha* (the *ulti* language) as well?

Papai: (startled) what *bhasha*?

Me: I mean, if you had gone to the MANAS drop-in center, surely you would have heard it there?

Papai: oh yes, they say strange things like *kothi parikh* (*kothi parikh kishob jano bole*)...

(At this point Papai pauses, then continues hesitantly, with occasional facial expressions of disgust)

This thing I cannot understand... on one hand there is so much movement (*andolan*) going on for rights, but then, using all these languages (*ei shob bhasha byabohar kore*) one is left in that same place of disrespect and insult (*shei oshomman/opoman-er jaygatai theke jachchhe*)... it is like one is disrespecting oneself (*nijeder oshomman-i kora hochchhe*)... *kothi, dupli*, don't these words sound disrespectful, offensive (*oshomman, opoman lage*)? And they don't even have any meaning... what is their meaning? And what are these languages? They don't even seem to be Bengali.

Me (startled by his reaction): well, you know, *kothi* means kind of like a feminine male (*meyeli purush*)

(Listens to my feeble attempts to describe *kothi-dhurani-hijra* subcultures in fascination, then continues)

Papai: I would go to the Dum Dum DIC (drop-in center) till about seven months back... but since seven or eight months, I gave up going there; they way they would speak, behave on streets...

(A few minutes later, in a troubled tone)

We say *samakami, samakami*... both will play equal roles... but it is difficult to find *pure samakamis* ('pure' in English). During sex one is becoming the male, one the female (*keu chhele, keu meye hoye jachchhe*)... at least for that moment! (...) Even on PR, they use languages like top, bottom.

Papai's visceral reaction to the very mention of *ulti* and *kothi*, with its combination of loathing and fascination, fits the description of abjection in Kristeva's classic text ('It

beseches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced’).⁴¹⁹ Significantly, his characterization of the self-disrespecting nature of designations like *kothi* parallels the reaction of some *kodi* participants in *kothi* communities to *bhel* and *bheli kothis*, as we saw in the second chapter – and but here the rejection is extended to *kothis* and the language of *ulti* as a whole. At the same time, Papai was also acutely aware of the contradictions of *samakami* identity, which cannot remain ‘pure’, but is betrayed by the return of gender variance within the very dynamics of gay desire. Papai’s relative unfamiliarity with the Park Street area and Barista told of his lower middle class and suburban provenance, even as his desire to meet me there and his English usage on Planetromeo spoke of his desire for upward mobility, connected to his *samakami* and gay identification. However, his very entry to Planetromeo had been mediated by a *kothi*-focused CBO. In this precarious trajectory, *ulti* and *kothi* must be abjected only to return as specter, and the *samakami* can never be ‘pure’.

The contradictory locus of the ‘bottom’

The contradictions within gay identification and desire that belie any definitive categorical consolidation of its boundaries, as suggested by the lack of a ‘pure’ *samakami*, are especially evident in figure of the ‘bottom’ (anally receptive partner) as a locus of both desire for and abjection of effeminacy. In her ethnography of *hijras* and *kothis* in Hyderabad, Gayatri Reddy notes how the language of top and bottom (as distinct from *kothi-panthi* or *kothi-parikh*) was being taken up by some relatively middle class participants of cruising sites in Hyderabad in the late 1990s, disseminated by early

⁴¹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

gay men's magazines like the aforementioned *Bombay Dost*.⁴²⁰ In the 2000s, the sexual networking websites are perhaps more likely sources for the dissemination of such terms. Planetromeo users have the option of indicating sexual role preferences on their profile (top, bottom, versatile). In this context, the 'bottom' acquires a complex set of significations – on one hand, some PR profiles may explicitly seek to dissociate bottom as a sexual role from effeminacy, with assertions like 'I am a manly bottom, not sissy'. But 'bottom' also has lingering associations with feminization – as we shall see later, *kothis* and trans women may also self-designate as 'bottoms' on such sites. In several gay men's narratives, the 'bottom' becomes a fraught locus of abjection and desire.

Deep, for instance, is a young professional whom I encountered on Planetromeo in December 2011. He categorized himself as a 'top' on the site, and said he was not looking for feminine guys. Unlike Papai, he had not been in contact with CBOs and NGOs in Kolkata, though he had heard of them. After he consented to an interview, I met with him for coffee in Mallickbajar, a commercial area adjoining Park Street, but a relatively less posh side of the larger neighborhood. Deep had come to Kolkata from north India, and our conversation was primarily in English. For the most part, he asked me questions, expressive of his interest in exploring the nascent gay communities and lifestyles in the city, and comparing them to the west – 'Do you have G friends (sic) in Kolkata?' 'It is more open in Minneapolis?' 'Do people have long-term relations there, or is it more like here where most people are just having fun and moving on?' 'Here, even if they are in a relation they are having fun on the side'. He said that had many 'G friends'

⁴²⁰ Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, p. 253.

in Kolkata, some of whom he had met for ‘fun’. But many knew that he was in a relationship, which had lasted for three years, ‘but then I broke up with my BF in a day’. So he was not meeting his G friends for now, as they might tell him what his ‘BF’ was doing currently, and he didn’t want to know. Accordingly, he directed me not to tell anyone from ‘G’ groups that I had met him. However, near the end of our conversation, he asked me if I knew suitable ‘boys’ to whom I could introduce him:

As you know, I’m a top, I like to get sucked and to fuck... Do you know cute small versatile to bottom boys? You know why I prefer cute, small boys... because, you know, they can be easily dominated, they are soft, I can do what I like with them comfortably... (pause) of course, they have to be straight-acting... that is essential! At least in streets and all... so that I can walk and talk with them, not just (have) sex. Otherwise, I can’t go out with them in streets or public spaces.

For Deep, the bottom is both desirable for his potential feminization vis-à-vis his dominant masculinity – small, cute, soft, amenable to be dominated – and threatening for his potential public effeminacy; the bottom thus has to ‘act straight’, ‘at least in streets’. Deep did desire something more than sex with his ‘boys’, but as he was all too aware, there was a potential disjunction between the private erotic role and public presentation that he desired in his partner, necessitating a delicate balance between the bottom’s feminization in bed and the containment of his femininity in public spaces.

Deep, like many gay men on sexual networking websites who have primarily entered gay networks and communities via the Internet, did not seem to be aware of the subcultural terminology of *kothi* and *parikh*. But his negotiation between the desirable and

undesirable attributes of the ‘bottom’ parallels distinctions made by other men between the desirable and undesirable attributes of *kothis*. While for Deep the gender of his partner becomes a point of potential contradiction and concern without overt reference to class, the gendered tensions determining the choice of ‘bottoms’ or *kothis* as partners may be explicitly interlaced with class and caste as well.

For example, Raj is a young college student from a district outside Kolkata who has friends in Berhampore, and through common contacts, knows several persons in the *kothi* community there. I was introduced to Raj by Aniket at Berhampore in the summer of 2011; Aniket was divided on the question of whether Raj was *parikh* or *dupli*. In conversation with me, Raj identified himself as ‘bisexual’ (using the English word rather than its equivalent Bengali neologism, *ubhokami*), which indicated an explicit identification that was rare among the men whom the *kothis* mapped as their *parikhs* in the town. In a conversation, Raj went into details about the kind of partner that he sought among the *kothis* of the town, making a distinction between *chhotolok kothis* (lower class/caste, disreputable, vulgar *kothis*) and *bhodro kothis* (respectable *kothis*), the *chhotolok* being those who performed a kind of explicit and flamboyant femininity in public spaces (i.e. *bhel*, though he did not know or use the term). I recount some translated excerpts from our conversation:

Raj: I am *bisexual* (English in original). But I don’t like it if a handsome guy, a manly one, comes and wants to do me. Only if it is a very hot muscled guy from the *glamour world* (English) then I can do *body sex* (English) with him. But generally I like *kothis*, and I like women. But I can’t go with these *chhotolok*

kothis... I like *kothis* who are somewhat *bhodro*. For example, I like talking with you, and then with Aniket-*da*... but I can't really talk with Srijan and other *kothis* like them. You guys are natural; they behave in such a strange way (*kemon jano ekta kore*); (pauses) ...very *desperate*! (English; with a disgusted expression).

Me: well, that's like a social behavior... no one does *bhel* when alone by themselves... like even guys, when they are together, don't they say *bara* in every other sentence (*bara* - Bengali expletive for penis), or slap each other's backs, and display their masculinity (*pourush dekhay*)?

Raj: yes, even I do it!

Me: well, just like that, there are all these *bheli* gestures, like giving *thikri* (clapping), similar to what *hijras* do!

Raj: *eesh*... (akin to 'yuck' or 'ugh') That is what seems most *chhotolok* to me! So *chhotolok*! (laughs nervously) It just seems really strange to me (...) and then, also calling each other *didi* (elder sister) or *mashi* (aunt)... whenever I hear them it seems really strange (*shunlei kemon jano laage*)!

Very reminiscent of Papai, Raj experienced a visceral reaction to an undefinable *something* about certain gestures or practices that he could not exactly pinpoint, repeating the phrase '*kemon jano laage*' (roughly, 'it seems strange') several times with verbal and facial expressions of disgust. As Kristeva tells us, the abject is not neatly externizable as an object, but remains in a troubling liminal zone between the subject and object – it is something that disturbs and eludes symbolic and psychological order. In the face of this disruption, abjection is the (never entirely successful) attempt to establish boundaries. Thus, when Raj looks for potential partners in *kothis*, he must also police, mark and calibrate expressions of *kothi* femininity, attempting to make neat separations between the desirable and the viscerally disgusting through the social demarcation of different

classes of *kothis*. Benedicto's contention about the *bakla* comes to mind here – in the very attempt to hunt down and exterminate the traces of the *bakla*, the *bakla* remains as a specter haunting gay (here, bisexual) desire and identity.⁴²¹ Raj's aspirational trajectory of desire (articulated in terms of bisexuality, the 'glamour world', 'body sex', etc.) both turns to and recoils from the *kothi*.

However, this is not to imply that there is a static or invariable response of disgust and abjection towards *kothis* and other similar lower class feminized subject positions by middle class gay or bisexual men. Sometimes, middle class gay men's desire and curiosity might also intersect with the materiality (rather than just the abjected specter) of *kothi-hijra* subcultures, and be influenced by or seek to learn from them. This was especially evident for Shobhan and Imon, two young men whom I encountered in the Kalyani-Ranaghat area, midway between Berhampore and Kolkata. In the case of Shobhan, the figure of the bottom again occurs as a contradictory locus of both desire and phobic distancing along lines of gender and class. Unlike Deep, though, Shobhan also ventured out of his comfort zone and tentatively sought interactions with those whom he described as 'effeminate bottoms', which led him to an acquaintance with some participants of the *kothi* circle in the Kalyani area (the network that we encountered in the first chapter, centered around Dulal-da's *khol*). However, I first encountered Shobhan not through the *kothi* circle of Kalyani, but on Facebook, through common friends from Kolkata's gay circles. One day in 2012, I noticed the following status update (in English) on an outing with 'effeminate bottoms' on his Facebook wall:

⁴²¹ Benedicto, 'The Haunting of Gay Manila', p. 318.

Today evening I visited Naihati with two effeminate bottom guys. OMG! What an experience. The way they were gesturing... And people were laughing at them and making comments... They were also replying them. Its (a) really different experience. (Naihati is a town near Kalyani)

Underneath, a Facebook friend of his had commented,

Why have you went there? Those ppl react in such a way ppl will stare (stare) only... spk to ppl first and understnd the way they talk and (you) will be able to judhe (judge) by the way of talking (sic)

Intrigued that Shobhan had at least gone on a public outing with the ‘effeminate bottoms’ unlike his Facebook friend who advised him to ‘judge’ ‘those people’ (that is, discern them in advance) from their ‘way of talking’ and avoid them, I ‘liked’ the status. He responded by messaging me on Facebook. Subsequently, after I introduced my research to him, he consented to a face-to-face conversation, and eagerly added that he had much to ask me as well. Though from Kalyani, he was working as a teacher at an English-medium high school in Chhattisgarh (a state in central India), and was in town on vacation. He asked me if and how my family accepted me, and indicated that his family did not know about him, and that there was some pressure to get married from his family (*‘bari theke biyer chaap’*). He proceeded to ask many questions about ‘gay culture’ in the US, how ‘free’ it was in the states, what were the bars and nightclubs like, and so on. As he described, his entry into gay communities had been mainly through the Internet, and he had met relatively few men from these virtual circles in person. On Facebook, he had found and become a member of certain area-specific Facebook groups for gay men that have been established in the last two or three years, such as ‘Chhattisgarh gays’ and

‘Raipur gays’ (Raipur is the capital city of Chhattisgarh). Most of the members of both groups were from Raipur. But his school was in a ‘remote area’ within Chhattisgarh, and he stayed with male roommates in a bungalow, so going to Raipur to meet any of these men did not work out - what would he tell his roommates? The school authorities might also raise questions, and moreover the men he had acquainted on these groups were also often students or young professionals who stayed in ‘messes’ and did not have a place of their own. Thus, despite his sense of an expansive virtual gay community and his curiosity about ‘gay culture’ in the US, the only located and embodied community that he did know were the aforementioned ‘bottoms’ from Kalyani – people he had noticed and acquainted because of their perceived gender difference either in person or on Facebook, some of whom turned out to be people I knew from the local *kothi* network. I reproduce some sections of our conversation, translated from Bengali:

Shobhan: I had gone from Kalyani to Naihati with Rajat and Pinaki... Rajat is very *girlish* (English in original). Pinaki is not so *girlish* usually, but when he’s with Rajat, he becomes more *girlish*! So they were making these strange gestures... looking at them, people were also making various kinds of comments (the implication is that the comments were derogatory - *lokerao oder dekhe nanarokom bolchhilo*)... and they would also give it back to them (*orao ulte bolchhilo*)!

Me: Yes, *kothis* will obviously do *bhel*! (*hyan, kothi-der bhel toh hobei!*)

Shobhan (recognizing the words): Yes, yes, they were using that strange language (*hyan, ora oshob ki bhasha bolchhilo*)... what did you say, *kothi-der bhel*? I don’t understand these terms very well even now, though I know a little... Rajat was telling Pinaki, don’t teach these things to him! He told me, you are a *parikh*, you should not learn this language! These so-called *kothis*, do you know a lot of them? There is one who lives next door by my house; the neighbors don’t regard them

well! (This turned out to be someone I knew from the *kothi* circle, presently a *hijra gharana* member).

While Shobhan was at least somewhat interested in learning the language and more about their network, the *kothis* did not initiate him into the network fully, and thus his language learning had remained incomplete. Shobhan was simultaneously interested in the circle for sexual reasons, and cautious about being seen with them in public.

Shobhan: So, all the ones whom you know here, are they all *bottom*? Are there *teens* among them? ('bottom' and 'teen' in English).

Me: Well, there are many whom I know in the Ghoshpara area.

(Ghoshpara is a gradually urbanizing village adjoining the town of Kalyani; I was referring to Dulal-*da*'s circle spread throughout a cluster of villages in that area).

Shobhan: Yes, I know that there are a lot of them in that area. By the way, don't you know any people from within the town itself?

(i.e. the middle class neighborhoods within Kalyani as opposed to the outward villages).

Me: Not really, most I know are in that area, especially Kathaltala and Ghoshpara.

Shobhan: Yes, I know those... I have seen them! But they are all *girlish* (in English). I am a scared of going out with them... it will be embarrassing if I am seen in public with them. (...) I heard about one of them who is a *CD* (in English - cross-dresser) and goes out in women's jeans and tops. But Rajat forbade me from contacting her.

Me: Why?

Shobhan: I don't know why... I didn't ask. I don't interfere in these bottom's matters, its best not to interfere much in their affairs. All of them know each other in some way or the other. They have their own ways ... if there is trouble between any of them and me, all of them will come together to affront me! I have seen that bottoms are very organized, but tops are not so organized among themselves!

Me: Why do you think that is so?

Shobhan: I am not sure... maybe because there is sometimes competition between *tops*, regarding sharing *bottoms* (*top der moddhe reshareshi thake, bottom share kora niye*). Otherwise, I quite like hanging out with *tops* because they are not *girly*, so that problem is not there.

Me: Don't you think it also may have something to do with disempowerment and social position?

Shobhan: Ah, yes... well I guess their backs are stuck to the wall (*dewale peeth theke gyachhe* – they are cornered). So they stick together! And then there's that language as well, I have heard it from Rajat, I understand some words... but they don't teach me much of the language.

Shobhan's narrative evidenced a complex trajectory of desire – on one hand he is sexually drawn to and curious about the relatively lower middle or lower class *kothi* circles, on the other, he is cautious to avoid too much public visibility with them. His avoidance is more strategic and less premised on a visceral reaction, showing that the abjection that we encountered in Papai's and Raj's narratives is not a culturally universalizable or static psychological structure. (As Butler argues in her critique of the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition, desire cannot be entirely determined according to a presumed and universalizable symbolic order).⁴²² Shobhan's story is also significant for what it says about the emergence of gay communities outside the aforementioned metropolitan circles, or the failures of such emergence. While he maps everyone according to the transnational gay language of 'tops' and 'bottoms', culled from virtual groups and websites, this is not actualized in terms of a coherent community. The virtual

⁴²² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 130.

world of gay groups offers him but few partners or friends. In comparison, the *kothi* networks are more tangible and alluring, but also socially embarrassing, and given the difference between his positionality and theirs, not entirely welcoming to him. Rather than imagining a coherent ‘gay’ community, he thus realizes the very different position and sociality of ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’, and he realizes that the latter are far more united relative to the ‘tops’ that he knows. During the span of our conversations, he was not able to find the ideal middle ground (‘bottoms’ less publicly feminine than the *kothis*, and preferably from middle class Kalyani neighborhoods, rather than the outer villages). At the same time, he also demonstrated some degree of respect for *kothis* (‘bottoms’) as a community and particularly their solidarity in the face of social marginalization, an understanding that was rare among middle class gay men (especially ‘tops’) whom I encountered.

The lure of uli

Unlike the ‘tops’ mentioned above, Imon was not looking for ‘effeminate bottom’ boys. I came to know Imon again through common friends in Facebook from Kolkata’s gay circles; he was also on Planetromeo, listing himself as ‘versatile’. Imon was a young undergraduate student in a college near Kolkata and resided in Kanchrapara, a town adjoining Kalyani and near Ranaghat (this is one of the towns where we earlier encountered the *chhallawalis* in the first chapter). Imon’s narrative demonstrates a simultaneous attraction and desire to learn *uli* and a fear of the *kothis* whom he had encountered in Kalyani and Kanchrapara. In our first meeting, Imon started the

conversation by lamenting the lack of ‘quality guys’ on Planetromeo, and his frustrated attempts to build contacts from virtual circles.

My family (*bari*) is very conservative. You can’t call me (on the phone) whenever... they also don’t allow me to leave the house at all times, and ask me to return by a certain time. But you can give my number to someone from the *community* (English in original).

Imon went on to mention explicitly which ‘community’ he meant, and qualified his earlier statement that I could give his (cell phone) number to anyone in the community:

Do you know many people from the *gay community* here? (‘gay community’ in English). Don’t give my number to those who are too visible. I feel uncomfortable with them (*tader shathe ashwosti lage*), I am not belittling them, but I don’t feel comfortable going out with them. I have seen some of the people you mentioned, I know them by appearance (*ami tader mukh chini*), but I don’t mix with them.

Subsequent to this conversation, I met Imon at a cultural festival and fair organized by the Kalyani Municipality, the Kalyani Mela (or Kalyani Fair). The Mela is a space where many of my *kothi* friends from the Kalyani-Ranaghat-Kanchrapara region would hang out and cruise for *parikhs*. While speaking to Imon, I saw some of them walk by, and instinctively began to call out to them. Imon reacted immediately and sharply:

No, no don’t call them!! No, don’t introduce me to them... many of my school friends come to the Kalyani Mela, it would affect my *prestige* (*prestige-e lage*)!

However, during the same conversation, Imon expressed his desire to learn more *ulti*. ‘*Tumi ulti chamo?*’ – ‘do you know *ulti*?’ – he asked me, using the *ulti* verb *chama* (to

check out, to know, to see) instead of the usual Bengali *jana* for ‘know’ (*‘tumi uli jano?’* would be the more usual expression.) I was startled by this, not expecting to hear *ulti* from someone who spoke of himself as belonging to a ‘gay community’ and shied away from its more ‘visible’ members. When I asked him where he had learnt *ulti* – since he clearly did not hang out with *kothis* – he said he had picked it up from some of his Planetromeo friends. He proceeded to ask me if I could teach him some more words, and asked specific *ulti* equivalents for several standard Bengali words.

Imon’s narrative thus links several elements that might seem contradictory – the articulation of a ‘gay community’, the acquisition of *ulti* via the Internet, and the strategic public distancing from *kothis*. Imon’s narrative suggests that *ulti* has entered Planetromeo circles via at least some of its users, and as we shall see, this may happen via a variety of bridge figures between *kothi-dhurani-hijra* circles and the emerging virtual gay communities, such as young gay male activists of Kolkata as well as some relatively middle class *kothi* community members with access to the Net. Thus, while for Shobhan the sense of a coherent gay community remained unrealized, here, *ulti* becomes linked to the formation of a gay community, contradicting the aforementioned temporality of gay emergence (e.g. in Papai’s narrative) where gay marks a supersession of the *kothi* and associated subcultural repertoire.

III. Gay communities and incommensurate temporalities of emergence

The contradiction between a teleologically progressive gay identity and continuing reproductions of subcultural discourse may be especially relevant for a rising generation of gay male activists in Kolkata, who simultaneously adapt and use *ulti* (including terms and categories such as *kothi* and *parikh*) and articulate a sense of gay identity and community distinct from or superseding *kothi* networks. These overlapping tendencies may lead to incommensurable senses of temporality in the same people's narratives.

Nakul, for example, is a gay-identified activist in his twenties who has worked with the CBO Swikriti in the northern suburbs of Kolkata over several years. Within Swikriti, he is junior in age relative to Sarswata and Ranajay, and is a rising leader in the next generation. Recently, he also joined the NGO SAATHII (Solidarity and Action against the HIV Infection in India) as a staff member, while retaining his Swikriti membership. Nakul has been actively involved in organizing the Kolkata Pride Walk (or, to use its current full name, the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk) since the mid-2000s (I will have occasion to describe the trajectory of pride organizing in Kolkata in greater detail in the next chapter). One evening before the Pride Walk in 2011, some of the organizers and volunteers, including Avirup (the aforementioned gay activist), Nakul and myself, gathered for a meeting in one of the organizer's apartments in south Kolkata, and subsequently stayed up late chatting. The conversation turned to feminine-masculine or *kothi-parikh* roles among gay and *kothi* males. Avirup commented, 'Why do we think effeminate guys will be bottom or even gay? I met several heterosexual feminine guys

when I was working in Delhi’. Nakul agreed, and added (in English) that ‘sexuality is fluid’, an expression that he had probably picked up from one of the several workshops on sex, gender and sexuality that have been organized by Kolkata NGOs in recent years. Nakul went on, ‘actually, the *kothi-parikh concept* itself will gradually go obsolete/die out’ (*ashole, aste aste ei kothi-parikh concept tai uthe jabe*) – a proposition that was met with general approval by the larger crowd. In response, I mentioned a recent *kothi-dupli* wedding in Ranaghat, trying to make the point that while their discomfort with rigid gender roles was understandable, the easy dismissal of the *kothi-parikh* framework as obsolete or backward both simplifies *kothi-dhurani-hijra* negotiations with gender, and ignores how HIV-AIDS interventions have reified such roles rather than them being a static feature of *kothi* networks (see the second chapter).

However, further into the preparations for the Rainbow Pride Week, I noted that in private or intra-community contexts, Nakul would sometimes also refer to himself as *kothi* – for instance, using phrases like ‘*kothi-r buddhi*’ (the wily cleverness of a *kothi*) to characterize his able handling of finances and other organizational details. Nakul would also use typical *kothi/hijra* tropes of sisterhood and mother-daughter kinship – boasting on one occasion that s/he had mothered many daughters both inside and outside his CBO:

A volunteer (discussing a common acquaintance): So how do you know that guy?
He wasn’t in Swikriti.

Nakul (laughing): Listen, do you think I have any lack of daughters? I have mothered many daughters and sons, both inside and outside Swikriti!

Apart from such relatively jocular claims, Nakul would also actively deploy the conceptual division between *kothis* and men (the *tonna* or the *parikh*) in his daily activism within Swikriti. In the same summer (2011), I witnessed him instructing the ‘peer educators’ working in Swikriti’s HIV intervention to remain united. As he stated, ‘only if you *kothis* stay strong among yourselves will you be able to resist troublemaking *tonnas*’. While mapping and inducting potential new members into his friend circle, he would again use the *kothi-tonna* binarism – for example, clarifying to his friends that a person was really *kothi* despite his masculine appearance: ‘he is not a *tonna*, he is really a *kothi*!’ However, in terms of his public participation in civic activism he identified as a gay man, without much reference to the trope of feminine sorority within which he privately placed himself, and also maintained a relatively standard professional masculine gender presentation. Nakul thus dwelt simultaneously in (at least) two temporalities – one that declares the ‘*kothi-parikh* concept’ as obsolete and to be evolutionarily superseded by a sexually fluid (but implicitly masculine and gender-normative) gay; in this imagination of ‘gay’, the *kothi* potentially becomes a specter from the past in the sense that the *bakla* is a specter haunting Benedicto’s ‘gay manila’. However, he is also located in another time, in which he is contrarily involved in the *recreation* and redeployment of the *kothi* in everyday life, both to build kinships among his daughters/sisters/brothers, and to distinguish this kinship from mainstream men (the *tonna* or the *parikh*). In the span of our acquaintance, Nakul did not seem to be self-reflexive about this incommensurability, and never explicitly reflected on his dual positionality as both gay and *kothi*.

Dada's group: Between a virtual gay globality and the Nandan circles

This intersection with *kothi* in terms of kinship and community building, but its supersession by gay as a public identity, is also evidenced in the case of two other rising gay leaders, Soumen and Anubhav, who have been increasingly involved in organizing events like Pride walks since 2011. Unlike the older generation of activists, the internet played a major role in their initiation into gay communities. Soumen is a few years older than Anubhav, who is Soumen's 'daughter'. Both of them are mid-level professionals working in multi-national corporations, and thus distinct from both the older and younger generation of activists working in HIV-AIDS interventions and NGOs or CBOs. As such, I did not expect them to be aware of *kothi* subcultures or to know *ulti*, but both of them did. Soumen's narrative explains how he entered gay/*kothi* communities, and provides a very rich text outlining the intersections between online communities and cruising sites that developed through the 2000s in Kolkata. I reproduce edited and translated sections from our conversation in August 2011:

Me: So, how did you first come into contact with the community?

Soumen: In today's age (*ajker jage*), everywhere the main medium of communication (*jogajoger madhyom*) is the Internet, whether in middle class or upper class society, because the Internet is the best medium to build connections with many people at the same time. As you know, there are various dating sites nowadays, various kinds of networks have emerged, like Facebook. In the very beginning (*ekdom shurur dike*), there was a site called Male Zone.

Me: When exactly do you mean by 'in the very beginning'?

Soumen: Say, around 1999 (...) In 1999, for the first time, we got a computer in our house; I got online on Yahoo (the web portal www.yahoo.com, which offers both news, e-mail, and chatting services). There were *chat rooms* on Yahoo, and I

saw that they had *male-to-male chat rooms* (English in original), and then while chatting in such a room, someone sent me the link to Male Zone. At that time, there were really few people on G4M (www.guys4men.com, which has now become PR or Planetromeo). One could count the number of profiles in G4M on one's hand. At that point, it (the Internet scene) was not as *open* in the way that it is now ('open' in English).

Me: Did you already have a sense that you were different in some way, then?

Soumen: In the very beginning, when I would have these kinds of feelings, I would think that I am something strange (*ajgubi*) (...) Definitely, I had a lot of women friends, but they were friends. I didn't feel that I don't like women, but I did feel that I wanted (sexual/erotic) contact with men (*purushder shathe shonshorgo*). Then, when I came to contact with like-minded people, they put me in touch with more people who had preferences like this (*jara erom pochhondo korto*), so then I realized that no, I am not the only one.

Me: How did you come to know these people?

Soumen: The first people I knew were before the Internet, some people in my neighborhood (*para*), then friends of friends, just like it happens with everyone. And then when the Internet came, it opened out a whole world at my fingertips (*hather kachhe khola duniya hoye gyalo*). I was able to see what is happening abroad around these issues, what activism is happening, what people are thinking, what people are saying and doing. So I studied these things. And like this, my contacts and interactions with people (*manusher shathe alap*) also grew. For example, many years ago, I came to know a boy at Srirampur (a small town north west of Kolkata) (...) He became really dependent on me, but I never felt that I could be his boyfriend, rather, I had brotherly feelings for him. So I would call him *bhai* (younger brother), and he would call me *dada* (elder brother). Then some of his friends also started calling me *dada*.

Me: What was their social background?

Soumen: Middle class to upper class (*modhyobitto theke uchchobitto*). Like this, a large group started calling me *dada*, and I became very affectionate towards them.

Gradually, I was less known by my name, I became more known as *dada*. Then came Orkut, then came Facebook, and my contacts grew. Then I also started going to various cruising points, like Nandan (a state-run film theater complex in central Kolkata). I was never a regular in the lakes in that sense (the South Kolkata Lake areas), but more in places like Nandan where there would be *adda* (*adda* is an untranslatable Bengali word for aimless, meandering, yet potentially serious discussions). From about 2003-2004 till about 2009, I was a regular at these sites. (...) But that time, it wasn't as *open*. If then I heard that someone was *out to his family* (English in original), it would seem as if he had done an amazing thing. Nowadays in every other family (*ghore ghore*) you hear that people are coming out (...) Acceptance has increased, especially within the young generation (...) Because the young have seen this in the Internet, they are seeing it among their friends; now people are revealing their *orientations* more, just in my neighborhood maybe there are two boys who are *gay* (English in original) (...)

Me: So, can you tell me what kind of terms would be used for identification in 1999, both positive and pejorative terms, compared to now?

Soumen: See, abusive terms are always similar, *homo*, *chhakka*, etc. Those terms were there then, and are there now. But among ourselves... back then, in that sense, we wouldn't really recognize or use distinct terms, like I am *gay*, or I am *bi*(sexual) (English in original). Now those terms seem much more necessary. We weren't as conscious of terms, we wouldn't classify ourselves in that way. Later as we became more conscious of our orientation, we became conscious *that this is also my identity, my orientation is also my identity* (English in original). This was around the 2004... the Internet had come, I had started going to cruising sites. I never actually told my family 'I am gay' in those terms, but I have told them in other ways... like I have a problem with marriage, I won't marry (...) So... back then, we would say, someone was 'like this', or someone was 'like that' (*erokom*, *orokom* – this parallels the expression '*hum aise hain*', 'we are like this', in Ashok Row Kavi's narrative). And then I remember, after I started using the Net, someone posted the link to Mail Zone on Yahoo chat. After that, we became more

habituated to terms like *gay*. I had already known the term *homosexual* before, but not so much what is *gay*. Even now, you know, I am sometimes confused by the meaning of *gay*. In the media, I have heard people say, my daughter is *gay*. So I am not entirely sure what *gay* means. So slowly like this, I came to know all these terms. Then initially, I also did not know *ulti*, till a few years back.

Me: So did you pick up *ulti* from the Nandan cruising circuit?

Soumen: Well, in Nandan I started hearing particular terms like *parikh*, or *kothi*. That must have been around 2006 or 2007; the first years when I went there I wouldn't mix with them that much, so I didn't notice (...) At Nandan, people would call their boyfriends – any boyfriend – *parikh* or *bhatar* (*bhatar* – a term for 'husband' shared between *ulti* and some Bengali dialects). But on PR (Planetromeo) people have taken it in the sense to mean that the top is the *parikh*, and the bottom is the *kothi*! They have classified (the terms) in this typical way.

Me: So at Nandan was there any identity that people would profess, like, we are *gay*, or we are *kothi*?

Soumen: Nandan was the place where there would be *maximum bhel*! We would sit around in circles, where we knew that all of us are *gay*. We would look at men, and say among ourselves, have you eaten that *parikh*, or have you checked out that *tonna*? Someone would reply, oh no, he's not a *tonna*, however masculine, at the end of the day he's a *kothi*! That is how these terms would come in (...)

Me: Was there a dynamic of sisterhood as well, like you were sisters and wouldn't have sex among yourselves?

Soumen (laughs): Well, there was that rhyme that was very popular:

<i>Ai bon, bon ay na,</i>	(Hey, sister, sister come here,
<i>Bon-e bon-e ki hoy na?</i>	Why, can't sisters be lovers?)

That was a very common one! Then we would joke among ourselves, come, will we knead bread together as sisters? (kneading bread – *porota bela* – is a common *ulti* idiom for sex among *kothi* sisters, as described in the second chapter).

And of course it did happen, it would depend (on the persons concerned)!

On one hand, Soumen's narrative clearly articulates both a spatial gay globality and temporal modernity actualized through the internet and the younger generation – it is becoming more 'open' now, people are coming out and revealing their orientations as 'gay', younger people are becoming more accepting than the older generation, people are developing a sense of identity based on their sexual orientation, and so on. The Internet stands in as a revolutionary and epoch-making technology, defining the contemporary age ('*ajker jug*'), making the world available to one's fingertips, enabling and forging transnational communities, fostering gender/sexual progress. While this may be seen as a typical narrative of progressive and metrocentric globalization, Soumen is however also somewhat conscious of the potential restrictive nature and constructedness of identitarian classifications like 'gay' or 'bi', as well as *kothi* and *parikh*. But at the same time, in the cruising circuits, there is also a reproduction of *kothi* dynamics within his middle class friend circle, as evidenced in the practices of *adda* (hanging out, discussions) that developed in relatively newer cruising sites such as Nandan. This is accompanied by an implicit recognition that *kothi-parikh* may be used in more fluid and creative ways that rigidly defined sexual roles. What is entirely and refreshingly missing in his narrative is any sense of repulsion or shame associated with *kothis* or *ulti*.

However, this does not mean that *kothi* or *ulti* are articulated or deployed in a public activist capacity. Among his friends, Soumen often playfully deploys *ulti* categories – as he laughingly boasted on one occasion, 'I am *kothi*, I am *parikh*, I am *dupli*, I am everything!' As a respected elder (*dada*) within his extensive online and offline friend

circle, he has also created a loving and welcoming atmosphere for overtly gender variant persons, at least within the middle class confines of his network – as will be evident from the following narrative of his daughter, Anubhav. The boundaries of gay are not rigidly defined – for instance, in his usage ‘gay’ includes the loose *kothi* sisterhood at Nandan. Indeed, Soumen candidly confesses that he is not sure what the term may mean, and whether it could include (cis) women. However, in terms of public identification, he uses ‘gay’ exclusively – as he explained to me during the 2011 pride preparations, ‘I always say that I am gay; my identity is that I’m gay’. ‘Gay’ therefore emerges as a loose, overarching public identity – which, as we shall see, may inadvertently feed into the elision of substantial power differentials between metropolitan gay men and others, and bolster their emerging hegemony. Despite Soumen’s embrace of *ulti* and creative use of associated subcultural categories, overall, he remains within the larger process of vernacularization that commonly structures the relation between gay and LGBT identitarian discourse and *kothi/hijra* subcultural languages.

The hierarchization between a public gay identification and a relatively private use of *ulti* is even clearer for his daughter, Anubhav. Like Soumen, Anubhav is a professional in the corporate sector. Anubhav’s narrative evidences the intersection of the Internet and a retroactive initiation into *kothi* circles and *ulti* through the Nandan circles. Unlike Soumen, who negotiated relatively seamlessly between *ulti* and the language of virtual gay communities, Anubhav’s initial reaction to subcultural idioms of gender variance and to *ulti* was highly phobic, reminiscent of Papai or Raj above. Subsequently, Anubhav has

incorporated some *ulti* terms into hir self-expression, though s/he mostly uses English for public identification. Anubhav has described himself on occasion as ‘genderfluid’ – as s/he explained to one of hir friends, ‘you can call me *dada* (elder brother), you can call me *didi* (elder sister), I have no problem!’ Anubhav does not shy away from flamboyance and has often presented himself as a ‘diva’ and a ‘queen’ at gay parties and on Facebook. Yet hir public identification is gay, rather than transgender or *kothi*.

My first experience was in (high) school, just like everyone else (...) the boys I did it with, they were enjoying it, so I thought this is pretty normal. But when I was in class 11 (a senior grade), they started creating distance with me... then I understood that I am different, and I started feeling lonely. The same boys I had had sex with would avoid me, they would not recognize me. Then I gradually started chatting on the Internet, without any explicit purpose, just to make more friends (...) One day, I suddenly noticed that someone had posted about wanting to have sex with men, on a chat room in Yahoo. Then I thought, ok, I am not alone. I met that person, and I had sex. (...) That was the first realization that this is just another thing, this is normal, and I can live my life like this.

Me: When you were in school, or first met someone in Yahoo, were you familiar with terms like homo, gay, etc.?

Anubhav: I had heard *homo*, I did not know the term gay. I knew homo because the one’s I had sex with in school, they would call me *homo*, but they didn’t call themselves *homo*. But I didn’t understand the term (...) I was also called *sissy* in class (English); I was told it meant someone who was effeminate... then in college, I would hear taunts like *chhammak-chhallo* (roughly, flamboyant woman) (...) And in college I also slowly came to understand, what is gay (...) Then in a Yahoo chat room I wrote that *I am male, I want to have sex with another male* (English). Slowly responses started coming in. I also came to know about dating sites like Male Zone, Planetromeo... then one day, to find out how many of us are there, I searched for either ‘gay’ or ‘gay porn’ in a search engine. I

found many results; mainly *foreign gays* came in the results. I remember, I was very excited to see this. Ok, so there are many like me, there are gay people all over the world... Like this, I slowly became familiar with these terms.

Me: How did you start meeting people outside the net?

Anubhav: Well, I started meeting people from Yahoo, PR or Male Zone (...) But I would just meet them for sex, and the contact would be over... as I was still fearful of people finding out... Then when in college, I had a relationship with a college friend (...) he first took me to Nandan... At Nandan I saw that ok, people are moving around very *openly*... then I did not know *kothi* or *parikh*, these terms - I just saw many people who are like this, who are effeminate, or who came *cross-dressed*... I would watch then, I wouldn't talk to them (...) Then after we broke up, I stopped going to Nandan... Then one day, I got acquainted with *dada* (i.e. Soumen) on PR (Planetromeo). He is still on PR as 'Soumen the Magician'. Then I again went to Nandan, but I would sit quietly, not interact with anyone. Then one day I messaged *dada*, I told him I had seen him at Nandan, he said why didn't you speak to me? *Dada* and one of his friends, Arjun, asked me to come to Nandan. Arjun said, you know, you should come to Nandan, it's a lot of fun. That's when I first heard those terms from Arjun, like *kothi*, *parikh*, *dhurani*... I said, what are these terms about? (in a slightly disgusted, derogatory tone). They are very *LS type*! (LS – low-status; an abbreviation used in Kolkata's English-medium schools) (...) when he told me terms like *kothi*, *dhurani*, *parikh*, I said, what is this *ashobhyotamo* (literally – uncivilized behavior; obscenity, vulgarity), I won't tolerate this, if someone tells me these things, I will insult them on their face, its better that I don't go (to Nandan)! But Arjun convinced me – go, get acquainted, you will come to like it. So I went... I was fearful, very afraid. I stood alone... But then slowly *dada* came, I got talking, and gradually the fear went away... By going again and again, I slowly overcame my fears. (...)

Me: Before Nandan and before you knew terms like *kothi*, did you have any sense of feeling like or identifying as feminine (*meyeli*)?

Anubhav: see, before, at home, I would sometimes deck up in front of a mirror, I liked it, but I would try not to show it outdoors.... but within me this desire (*ichchhe*) was there, that I will be a *diva*, maybe that sense is there in everyone, I mean everyone who is so-called *gay*... but it did not find external expression, maybe subconsciously it would come out ... but the desire was there, that one day I will go out like this... when home alone, I would dress in my mom's *saree*...

Me: Was that reflected in sexual role-playing?

Anubhav: Well, when I am having *sexual or physical contact* with someone else, I try to understand him and what he likes... My role will depend on the person I am doing it with. It is not necessary I have to act a feminine role in bed; often in bed, I have played the top role as well (...) I find the division of *kothi parikh* very vague... depending on context, a *kothi* might become the *parikh*, a *parikh* might become the *kothi*!

Me: Yes, well, *kothi* doesn't necessarily mean 'bottom'!

Anubhav: (...) I find it very stupid (*boka-boka*), we only make these divisions like *kothi parikh*... no one is born *kothi* or *parikh*... in any case the common people are setting us aside as '*third gender*'. And then why are we further dividing ourselves as this or that, rubbish. There is no need of this... *if someone is a gay, he is a gay!* We divide for our convenience, we want to be a *parikh* or a *kothi*... what is the use of this language? It only serves for purposes of bedding people.

Me: Well, but these terms may not be just about sexual role, but more about social position... since more visibly gender variant people are often more discriminated, irrespective of sexual role, so they form communities (...)

Anubhav: Well, initially even I was very afraid of effeminate guys, I didn't want to go out with effeminate guys, scared of being seen. And now it happens to me. When now I deck up in gay parties, people on PR tell me, why are you dressing like that? I tell them, why are we making a division like this among ourselves? How can we claim that we are *advanced* if we make such divisions among ourselves? (...) But it matters to a lot of people, because they aren't *out* yet, they have a social fear. People will speak to cross-dressed persons within parties, in

closed community spaces, but not outside. Even the people who write all those things on PR, like effeminate people stay away, they are actually often fine with meeting feminine guys in private. Meet me inside, I'm ready to top you – but don't want to be seen outside with you. I've myself seen that the same people who write 'no feminine guys' on PR, are fine when I *cross-dress* in front of them in private (...) They themselves do the same kind of *dhuranipona* in private! (*dhuranipona* – acting in *dhurani* mode) I won't say that it is entirely hypocrisy... because well, its their *choice* and people have their social fears, everyone should be able to have their *choice* (English)

Me: What about class? Like some people in PR will speak only English, they don't know *ulti*...

Anubhav: I think now everyone on PR knows this language, the ones who say they don't are just denying it! I've also heard people use terms like *LS*, *HS* (low-status, high status), telling others, don't be so *LS*... I don't understand, how do you decide what is *LS*?

Starting from the liberating discovery of the Internet and gay communities abroad, Anubhav's narrative articulates a liberal and pluralist ideal of 'gay' that can include both 'feminine' and 'masculine' subject positions. S/he sees the *kothi-parikh* categories as rigid, divisive and useless beyond the bed, which demonstrates the conceptual reduction of complex gender/sexual constructs to just sexual roles, inadvertently paralleling the reification and reduction of *kothi* in HIV-AIDS prevention discourse. In this conceptualization – where *kothi-parikh* becomes little more than top-bottom – such roles are transcended by a more encompassing identity; if someone is 'gay', he is 'gay'. At the same time, s/he is acutely aware of biases against people seen as effeminate or feminine – including hir own initial fear of effeminate guys – and articulates a perceptive critique of

the pretensions of dating site users who avoid public exposure with ‘effeminate’ people but themselves indulge in *dhuranipona*, acting in a *dhurani* mode, in private (signifying the flamboyance associated with *kothi/dhurani* subcultural formations, *dhuranipona* is also inflected by class). In addition to injunctions against ‘feminine guys’, Anubhav also critiques (even as s/he has in the past himself used) LS/HS demarcations, signaling the routine policing of middle class spaces from lower class and caste encroachment. Anubhav’s narrative reveals how gender fluidity and the overlap with lower class *dhuranipona* in gay men’s practices need not entail dissociation from the empowered position of middle class masculinity, but may be strategically managed through spatial divides (private effeminacy, public masculinity) in order to preserve gender and caste/class privilege. Despite his sharp critique of this tendency, Anubhav ultimately sees this as not ‘hypocrisy’ but ‘choice’ – their social fears are regrettable, but justified by the liberal individualist logic of free choice. Both the overarching sense of a simultaneously plural and unified ‘gay’ identity, and the logic of individual choice, ultimately elides the dynamics of class and gender that Anubhav himself so perspicaciously reveals.

Moreover, like Nakul, Anubhav too evidences the contradiction between the spatio-temporal supersession of the *kothi-parikh* schema in favor of the modern, transnational identity of gay, and a redeployment and reproduction of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* subcultural language and repertoire in everyday life. This is evident in his participation in kinship where *dada* (Soumen) is also *buri* (old woman, old mother) and Anubhav is his daughter, much like how Sarswata-*da* or Subhash-*da* double as mothers to their respective

kothi/dhurani circles at Berhampore and Ranaghat. Moreover, when the two of them are together with their friends, typical practices of *bhel* – or as Anubhav put it, *dhuranipona* – are often recreated within the group. Hanging out with their group over 2011 and 2012, I often encountered jocular exchanges when they would ‘give *thikri*’ (*thikri deowa*, clap like *hijras*) to one another by way of humorous sparring. In a typical exchange, someone would playfully insult someone else – ‘hey, where were you last night? Do you always need to be such a slut (*beshya*)?’ – and the second person would ‘give *thikri*’ back to the first.

Uti idioms may even be used within virtual media such as Facebook. Using the Facebook application (program) Bitstrips, Anubhav recently created and posted a series of cartoons on his Facebook profile featuring himself and his friends, often with humorous, bitchy, and socially perceptive dialogues. One particular cartoon comments on the annoying habits of heterosexual couples, deriding their relative social acceptance and visibility as deliberate *bhel*, here used in the sense of an attention-seeking, flamboyant display:

Anubhav: My eyes are getting sick and tired of their *PDA* (Public Display of Affection). What is this couple doing!!

Friend (dismissively): So much *bhel*!!

Here, the Internet – the medium of gay globality, Anubhav’s window to ‘gay people all over the world’ – also becomes the medium of reproducing and creatively extending translocal subcultural idioms and practices. However, this is no reconciliation, as evident

in the implicit disjuncture in the picture between the Euro-American scenic backdrop (with a picket fence, no less), adapted from Bitstrip's transnationally available templates, and the dialogue, which is located, as it were, in another time and space – a vernacularized time-space that cannot achieve such intelligibility and circulation.

Both Nakul and Anubhav thus manifest the lived intersection of incommensurable temporalities of the supersession and reproduction of *kothi/dhurani* subcultures – negotiating on one hand the rubric of gay desire as sexual fluidity, on the other the reproduction of *kothi* kinship bonds and subcultural practices to build community. Overall, this contradiction is managed by the vernacularization of subcultural repertoire vis-à-vis a more public discourse of gay identity, seen as modern, progressive and globally expansive. Since this public discourse does not explicitly confront or negotiate their involvement in *kothi* kinship but rather elides it, this may not be seen as a neat containment, supersession or sublation of the *kothi* by the gay, but a strategic management of tensions around desire, identity and community.

Making gender 'irrelevant': The consolidation of a liberal gay position

The elision of gender and class within a liberal, pluralist version of gay identity may be most clearly seen in context of Kolkata's emerging upper middle class gay communities, which since 2010 have organized themselves as both virtual groups and associated non-virtual spaces such as coffee meets and parties. Encompassing members like Soumen and Anubhav, these communities mark a shift from the overt exclusions of older groups such

as Gay Bombay, which, as we saw above, have had explicit injunctions against ‘drag’. However, as I previously noted for gay circles in Mumbai or Delhi, the inclusion of feminized subject positions within ‘gay’ – and even the inclusion of transgender people and identity within gay spaces – may be token, and preserve gay male dominance. This is most clearly apparent in the articulation of gay identity on an emerging forum for Kolkata’s LGBT community on Facebook, Kolkata LGBT Parties (or KLP, name changed), which despite its use of the ‘LGBT’ rubric is largely dominated by gay men.⁴²³ A non-registered group of upper middle class community members (i.e. not an NGO), KLP was formed in 2011 and has emerged over the last two years as one of the leading organizers of fashionable, upscale ‘LGBT’ parties in the city. As such, Nakul, Soumen and Anubhav are all members of the virtual group on Facebook and have attended their parties, though they are neither the main organizers of its parties, nor the ‘moderators’ of the corresponding virtual Facebook group. The fame of KLP’s ‘gay parties’ have spread beyond Kolkata to Kalyani, Ranaghat and Berhampore, so much so that even Subhash, Aniket and some of their friends have expressed interest in attending them, though with their steep entry fees, they are beyond the reach of most.

In this context, a particular discussion ‘thread’ (chain of comments) on KLP’s Facebook page, culled from January 2012 or less than six months after group formation, provides a revealing glimpse into the articulation of a progressive gay identity where roles like top bottom are rendered ‘irrelevant’ such that an encompassing sense of ‘we’ may emerge,

⁴²³ As the group is a “closed” or private group on Facebook, its name has been changed to protect the confidentiality of individual members. However, the group does organize public community events and some of its members are public activists.

marked as 'gay' and 'queer'. The following reproduction of the comments (all in English) preserves their lexical quirks but omits names to preserve confidentiality:

Commenter 1: Why most of the homosexuals are BOTToM !!!! Think....think....actually i donno the answer....

Commenter 2: this statement reveals a lot about the sequence of parties v had last year! lol

Moderator 1: Commenter 1, why r u still stuck in the day and age of top and bottom?? i think the world has moved on.....do an update...

Commenter 1: No no...m nt into top/bott...simply m vry much into boys....simple as that :))

Moderator 1: Then why put up these silly posts babes.....who told you top is man/boy and bot is girl/woman?? i seriously think you need more education on this!!This whole hetero-normative idea actually is not relevant anymore in this day and age.... it's rather regressive.....

Commenter 1: Shud i delete this post.....n btw u r ri8...c'mon luk @ my age...i hardly knw abut all dis stuf...i mean most of d homosexuals r pref 2 b a bottom.....so i asked....

Moderator 1: I dont think u need to delete... it's education for others in the group..... but in future do a google or wikipedia search u will find better answers...;P

Commenter 1: will :))

Moderator 2: but come on...i don't know if most homosexuals are bottoms (oh i cannot go 'on record' here about what i really think, i have a damn 'activism' to keep!) but somewhere i am sure the entire notion of tops/bottoms haven't become so obsolete after all - it's like looking for 'paanchphoron' in a 'asian' condiment store even as we have migrated to the west! (...)
(*Paanchphoron* – a five-spice mixture used in Bengali cuisine).

Moderator 1: i never said that role playing has become 'Obsolete' rather it has become 'Irrelevant' in todays context.....It does exist in its own shape but it is not the single most thing which decides a homosexuals identity....People invariably end up role playing in a heterosexual context playing the male and the female in a relationship....

Commenter 3: been thinking for some time. did not allow myself to be influenced by other's opinions - so not been through others' comments. excuse me if i'm repeating or writing trash. but i look at it in a different way - those who are adventurous and courageous enough to transgress the gender role assigned to zer biological sex do also muster the strength to get rid of confusion and be self-identified. those who remain stereotypically masculine (popularly known as tops) rarely do self identify. naturally they remain largely invisible. the visible self-identified people appear to be mostly bottom. but who told that bottoms remain bottoms eternally? they might prefer the bottom role. but biologically they are capable to switch. i lost my anal virginity to a so called bottom. scandalised?

Commenter 1: Yes being gay we all r capable to switch....nw its upto them whether they want to switch it or not....

Commenter 4: u know honeslty, top bottom vers is all in d head dude! even the sissiest cross dresser can be a top! we are queer, we are here!

While moderator 1 thinks top/bottom and gender roles are 'regressive' and/or 'irrelevant', moderator 2 locates them as alluring constructs that one is unable to entirely advance beyond (looking for Bengali spices even if one moves to the west – there is a sense of sinful indulgence and defiance, but the progressive teleology is not explicitly questioned). Subsequently, there is some recognition of the gendered dynamics of community construction by commenter 3 (the ones who defy gender/sexual roles are more often visible and form communities) but this is quickly contained by the assertion that anyone can switch, thus relying on a biological reduction and essentialization of everyone as foundationally 'male', much like the MSM schema. At the end of the day, as the last comment sums up, 'we' are all 'gay' and 'queer'. The comments closely parallel Anubhav's articulation of gay identity, but further reinforce it through a regulatory group dynamic where a moderator berates a member for being 'regressive' and uneducated. This also marks the desired supersession of the language and categories used in gay

dating sites like Planetromeo, marking an emerging distinction within even middle class gay spaces. Rendering both top-bottom and (implicitly) *kothi-parikh* as irrelevant, a progressive articulation of ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ emerges at a twice remove from *kothi-dhurani-hijra* subcultures.

Ironically, while the simultaneous accommodation and elision of gender variance in elite gay communities derides the categorizations used in gay dating sites and professes a token diversity, such accommodation may not offer any resistance to the gendered language and hierarchies evidenced in dating sites when they are directly brought up as issues for discussion within the group. For example, soon after the aforementioned ‘thread’ on the KLP Facebook page, the person identified as moderator 2 above initiated another thread on ‘transphobia’ in dating websites like Planetromeo:

The amount of ‘transphobic’ posts and profile texts that are there on Planet Romeo [sic] is simply sickening! Some samples (and these aren’t even exhaustive!): ‘Girlish guys plsss stay awaayy’, ‘I am not going to entertain with ant girlish boy.. if u really proud 2 b a man... then only call me...’, ‘girlies, pansy sort of guys fuck off...’ etc.

Most commentators denied that such phobia exists at a systemic level. To cite one comment:

If they don’t want to have sex with someone feminine they have a right to mention that on thier (sic) profile. ‘Girlish guys fuck off’ is kind of harsh, but even my profile on pr (Planetromeo) says very clearly – unfit, uneducated and feminine guys please don’t bother. (...) You have met me and you know that I am

neither transphobic nor judgmental about transsexuals or feminine guys or whatever but when I'm looking for sex I have the right to make my own decision about what I want and mention that on my profile.

Here, as per the rhetoric of LGBT diversity, one ostensibly respects 'transsexuals or feminine guys or whatever', though one wonders whether they would really feel welcome in the group, even if they could afford to join it. But like Anubhav's defense of 'individual choices', the sexual hierarchies in gay dating scenes are dismissed as matters of personal preference that can be justified by the same liberal discourse of individual choice and rights through which gay inclusion is claimed, denying the systemic relations of power that are reflected within and perpetuated through individual desires.

IV. The resignification of gay in *kothi* community networks

Notwithstanding the overt or subtle exclusions evidenced in both gay dating sites and gay men's social groups, participants of *kothi/dhurani* networks may also take up 'gay' as a form of identification or nomenclature, often resignifying the term in the process (this may be analogous to the process of 'dubbing' gay in Indonesian terms that Boellstorff charts in his ethnography).⁴²⁴ In the communities that I have worked with at Ranaghat, Berhampore or Kolkata, this seems to be a sporadic and uneven process, not mediated through funders or NGOs like MSM or transgender categories, but rather via CBO activist networks, common events like pride walks and gay parties, and the Internet.

⁴²⁴ Boellstorff, T. 2005. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

However, while ‘gay’ may be therefore used flexibly, such usages do not ultimately gain legibility in metropolitan gay circles and transnationally circulating discourses of gay identity.

Evidencing a broad and loose usage of ‘gay’, *kothi/dhurani* community members may pick up and use gay as a designation for themselves and the community. The dissemination of phrases like ‘gay party’, ‘gay pride’, ‘gay rally’ etc., through the activist networks linking Kolkata organizations and CBOs, and through the participation of CBOs themselves in occasions like Pride walks (as elaborated in the next chapter on civility and citizenship), seems to be one important way in which the term may be taken up. For instance, at Ranaghat, Subhash and his daughters Sumeet and Amit would sometimes speak about going to ‘gay parties’ or the ‘gay rally’, though they did not use ‘gay’ as a consistent self-designation. One day in the summer of 2011, Sumeet enquired if any of the others at the Swikriti drop-in center were interested in going to the ‘gay rally’ (the Kolkata Pride Walk to be held in July 2011): ‘Do you want to come to the *gay rally*? Many *kothis* go there! (*arial kothi ashe kintu*)!’ The ‘gay rally’ is thus (re-)mapped as a *kothi* space. Moreover, around the same time, I also noticed that Sumeet’s mother Subhash would sometimes refer to their circle as ‘*gay bondhu*’, or ‘gay friends’ – for example, on one occasion, Subhash introduced the drop-in center to a newly initiated community member: ‘here, we can speak as we wish, because its just us *gay friends* here’. He also referred to Swikriti’s magazine Swikriti Patrika, published annually from its office in north Kolkata suburbs, as a ‘gay magazine’. Subsequently, I asked Subhash what exactly he meant by ‘gay magazine’.

Me: But Subhash-*da*, what is a *gay magazine*?

Subhash: oh, you know, where there is writing about us *dhurani*.

Me: So gay is *dhurani*?

Subhash: hmm, no... I guess the whole *total* thing (*puro total byaparta*) is coming within *gay*, right, like *lesbians* as well, then, *transgender*, *bishesual* (bisexual), the whole thing is called *gay*, right?

Me: well... you know, many people use it in different ways, so it's hard to say!

Participation in dating sites like Planetromeo is another significant way in which 'gay' and related terms like 'top', 'bottom' etc. enter *kothi/dhurani* networks, and are mapped vis-à-vis *kothi*, *dupli* or *parikh*. Since at least 2010, a few participants in the *kothi/dhurani* networks of both Ranaghat and Berhampore have joined sites like Planetromeo, facilitated by the increasing availability of Internet through relatively inexpensive mobile phones. In certain cases, I have been called upon to help open Planetromeo profiles. For example, one afternoon I entered Swikriti's Drop-in Center at Ranaghat to find a small circle assembled around Nina, a very *bheli kothi* and one of Subhash's daughters, who also identifies as TG (transgender). Nina was fiddling with her phone. Seeing me, she called me over to help her with the process of opening a Planetromeo profile. Helping her insert the inputs for different fields of information (location, age, height, body type, relationship status), we paused over 'sexuality' (options: gay, bisexual, transgender) and 'position' (top, bottom, versatile). Nina asked me to select 'gay' – rather than transgender as I had expected – and then we came to 'position':

Me: What should I choose?

Nina (coyly): Well, you know what I am...

Me: hmm, *bottom*?

Nina: Yes, put that!

Just as *kothi/dhurani* community members may thus directly or indirectly categorize themselves as ‘gay’, ‘bottom’, etc., the other side of this process is the mapping of PR members as *kothi*, *dupli* or *parikh*, much like the protagonists of *Gulabi Aina* map the gay-identified teenage boy as *kothi*. And like the *kothis* in *Gulabi Aina*, such mapping may also be a way of puncturing gay men’s pretensions and associated hierarchies of class and gender. Several of Nina’s friends, most of them *bheli kothis* like Nina, joined Planetromeo roughly about the same time as she did. However, they were disappointed by their experience. Not convinced by various injunctions against feminine guys and cross-dressers, they were rather quite sure that all of the users were actually *duplis* or *kothis*: ‘there are no *parikhs* on PR! All of them are *dupli* or *kothi* even if they pretend to be masculine!’ This derisive dismissal was possibly enabled by the fact that none of them – including Nina – actually relied on Planetromeo for either community building or for finding partners, and used the Internet sporadically, rather than actually entering virtual communities and negotiating their intra-community hierarchies.

Not having regular access to the Internet but for her phone, Nina would wait for my arrival in the drop-in center to use my laptop and browse PR members in different locations, and would map people from all over the world as *kothi* or *parikh*. In this process, Nina acquired a German admirer, and boasted to everyone present that this German *parikh* would one day take her to Europe. Sumeet was another of Subhash’s

daughters who joined PR, again mapping herself as gay and bottom. The first time Sumeet logged in, Subhash jocularly warned him:

Oh so you're joining PR too, now you too will turn *dupli*! Be aware, you might go to meet someone thinking it's a *parikh*, but then instead of fucking you he'll ask you to fuck him! (*toke na dhure okei dhurte bolbe!*)

Sumeet and Amit laughed this warning off, and proceeded to map various people on PR as *kothi* or *dupli*:

Sumeet: See, that guy is a *kothi* – just look at his photo!

Amit: He says he's a *top*... but no, he's still *kothi*!

Within the circles in Berhampore, the usage of Planetromeo is less common, but Aniket visited Nandan occasionally during her trips to Kolkata, usually for NGO workshops and other official purposes, and encountered the same extended circle to which Soumen and Anubhav belonged. Aniket mapped this broad circle as *dupli kothi*. She also eventually joined Facebook, and encountered some people from the circle on the Net, and expressed surprise at their overtly masculine self-presentation online:

Have you seen the *dupli kothis* at Nandan? (...) I used to know one of them at Nandan, the other day I found him on Facebook through mutual friends but almost could not recognize him – he was totally looking like a *parikh*! And when I had known him at Nandan, he was such an *arial bheli kothi* (extremely flamboyant and feminine *kothi*)... he would flirt so much with the *parikhs*, he would almost fall down on them (*dhole pore jeto*)! When I saw him online on Facebook, I told him, I can't even recognize you now! He just sent me a smile, and then said, well, what to do, one has to compromise for one's job and

professional life, so I have become like this. (I later realized that this guy was also a member of KLP).

At Kolkata, meanwhile, some participants of *kothi* networks may also adopt ‘gay’ as a self-designation, resignifying it by rendering it as synonymous with *kothi*, and not aligning it with the homosexual-heterosexual divide at all. During a cultural program and panel discussion organized by Swikriti in North Kolkata in summer 2012, one of the performers, a friend of Sumeet’s, choreographed and presented a short ‘dance drama’, i.e. a narrative told through dance, which depicted her as a rejected lover who is lured and then abandoned by her boyfriend. The partner was depicted as masculinized whereas she wore feminine (as in culturally female-assigned) attire and jewellery. Back in the dressing room after a rapturous ovation, she explained the narrative to other assembled performers and organizers:

Wasn’t this totally like our *gay life*? The men come, show us dreams of happiness, and then leave us, shattering our dreams. The *parikh* abandons us.

Here, the locus of desire and disappointment, socially mainstream ‘men’, is externalized to the sense of ‘we’ as a ‘gay’ community, much like the externalization of the *parikh* from *kothi/dhurani* circles. ‘Gay’ here is therefore conceptually displaced from the homosexual-heterosexual divide – desire flows not *within* the community of ‘gay men’ but rather between feminized *gay/kothi* persons and untrustworthy, treacherous men.

Despite such adoptions and resignifications of gay, the actual entry of *kothi* or *dhurani*-identified persons into middle class gay communities or networks may not be smooth,

especially if they are *bheli*. Sujon, a self-designated *akkhar dhurani* (extreme, flamboyant *dhurani*) from a lower middle class family, who is loosely connected to the *kothi/dhurani* circle around Swikriti's office in Kolkata's northern suburbs, connected with me on Planetromeo in 2011. In subsequent conversations, both virtual and in person, she bitterly described her encounter with hierarchies of class and gender in PR networks:

You can't imagine how it is like with *class* on PR now... it is incredible how much *attitude* people can show! People harass me all the more since I have become *bhelki* (flamboyant, feminine-attired - alternative form of *bheli*). (...) When I go out on the streets in a *saree*, people stare, but I still get some *respect*. But there are some people on PR, they somehow even found my landline number and called home, saying that I have become a *male prostitute*! (...) My family is very unsupportive, my father abuses me, scolds me if I go out with even a feminine handbag; now my uncle is telling me, you have no future, you have spoilt yourself by falling into bad company (...) But even I am an *akkhar dhurani*... however much *attitude* these *byatachhele dhuranis* (manly *dhuranis*) show, however much they may flaunt their *six packs*, I too am an equal *khanki* (slut)! I will see to those *magis* (sissies, sluts). All these men (*tonna*), however much manly they are, they are all still finally sucking dick (*likam chamchhe*), right? What are they but *dhuranis*, basically?

Sujon responded to the gendered harassment on Planetromeo – which in her case seemed to have taken a severe form with phone calls to her already hostile family – by bitingly undercutting gay claims to masculinity, characterizing them as *byatachhele dhuranis* who hypocritically flaunt 'attitude' and their 'six packs' (gym-built abdominal muscles) while sucking dick at the end of the day, i.e. being no less *dhurani* or *magi* than she is. This strikingly parallels Alok Gupta's narrative, where Gupta is mapped as a *kothi* from

‘Englishpur’, i.e. a *kothi* with a hypocritical sense of anglicized superiority. In another conversation, Sujon explicitly attacked the anglicized culture associated with upper middle class gay men, and expressed her fear that the ‘*kothi* tradition’ may be disappearing:

I feel sad that the *kothi tradition* seems to be dying out/disappearing (*uthe jachchhe*)... All these guys now are *gay*, it has become such a *fashionable* thing, as if you have to import this from abroad! But we have this *culture* in our country only! A lot of them don’t even know *ulti*, they will speak only English... even some *kothis* with *arial bhel* (flamboyantly feminine persons) don’t know *ulti*!

While the ‘*kothi* tradition’ may not be exactly disappearing or dying out, it may indeed be rendered unintelligible at the level of organized activism, given the standardization of gay, MSM and transgender identities, with their common underlying conceptual division between gender and sexual identity. This illegibility was particularly apparent during the aforementioned cultural program organized by Swikriti at north Kolkata, which featured a panel discussion with some prominent gay, lesbian and transgender activists from the city. During a discussion about gay relationships and marriage, a *kothi*- and transgender-identified person in the audience asked,

The main problem in a lot of *samakami* relations is that the *active* partner tells us, you are not a woman, you can’t give me a child, and then goes and marries a woman. How do you think we should respond?

One of the panelists, a gay activist, responded to the question saying that one should wait for the right partner: ‘if he really loves you, such gender roles will not matter, he will love you for what you are’. While for the questioner the power relations between

masculine and non-masculine persons – as well as between socially recognized women and transgender/gender variant persons – crucially inflect *samakami* relations, for the panelist, the equality of true gay love elides the question of gendered power. The questioner's understanding of *samakami*, inflected by *kothi-parikh* gendered dynamics and premised on an inherently asymmetric desire, is eclipsed by the panelist's understanding of *samakami* as per the transnational discourse of gay identity and desire, which largely elides the gendered power differences between partners.

Conclusion

The intersections and translations linking gay and *kothi*, *dhurani* (etc.) as categories and rubrics of identity, community formation and desire present multiple contradictions. While on one hand 'gay' may supersede *kothi* and the *kothi* may be abjected as a spectral presence, on the other it may be rendered analogous to *kothi*, or *kothi-dhurani* languages may function as a material influence shaping gay communities – and all of these tendencies may be evident in varying extents within single narratives of gay identity and community formation. However, a dominant teleological narrative and temporality of gay identity formation emerges through spatialized hierarchies between a globalizing public activist discourse and other significations of gay, continuing the larger process of vernacularization charted in the previous chapters. Vernacularization thus serves to contain the tensions and possibilities created by the multidirectional translations linking 'gay' and *kothi*. Yet, this containment is not complete – even gay activists who articulate

gay identities in their emergent (homo)normative form may have contradictory investments in the reproduction of *kothi/dhurani* kinship and community dynamics in ways that are not neatly subsumed or sublated (i.e. both negated and retained) by ‘gay’ as a rubric of desire and public identity.⁴²⁵ This is most apparent in the ways in which gay activists like Nakul adapt and recreate *kothi-tonna* or *kothi-parikh* gendered dynamics while dismissing them as ‘obsolete’ in activist contexts. And of course, there are other histories of gay and *kothi* that are elided and/or vernacularized by dominant activist articulations of gay identity, such as *kothi* resignification of ‘gay’ as a self-designation without the attendant conceptual binary of homosexual vs. heterosexual.

Overall, the emergent dominant usages of gay (en)gender desire through and within a biologically essentialized conception of maleness, such that ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’, and various other possible configurations of gender/sexual subject positions, are all understood as gay men, and thus gender/sexual differences become irrelevant except as contingent sexual roles taken up by partners who are ultimately and ideally symmetrically gendered (unless, of course, one is explicitly transgender as per dominant discourses of MTF trans or *hijra* identity – positions that, unlike *kothi*, do not seem to intersect with gay identities). Thus, on one hand, the implicit or overt masculinization of ‘gay’ parallels

⁴²⁵ Here, of course, I refer to Hegelian dialectics and an associated understanding of history as a dialectical progression, which has been much discussed, derided and defended for its potentially developmentalist and teleological view of civilizational progress (ref. Hegel, G.W.F. 1807/1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press). The literature on Hegel and a dialectical understanding of history and time is too complex to reference here; nearest to my concerns are the engagements of postcolonial scholars such as Chatterjee and Guha with Hegel. See, for example, Guha, R. 2002. *History at the Limit of World-History (Italian Academy Lectures)*. New York: Columbia University Press; Chatterjee, P. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books.

and extends the separation of sexual and gender identity beyond the institutional context of the MSM/TG schema, on the other, the apparent fluidity and equality of ‘roles’ within the gay construct (making gender ‘irrelevant’) stands in marked contrast to the reification of masculine/feminine boundaries in the MSM-TG divide – both the fluidity and the reification may serve to elide the contingent negotiations with gendered power that mark the shifting boundaries of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* networks. At the same time, the gendered desires of object choice and subject formation that mark increasingly dominant forms of gay subjectivity are interlinked with socio-economic hierarchies and exclusive forms of upward mobility. As we shall see in the next chapter, emergent discourses of gay (and more broadly GLBT) identity are also linked to constitutively exclusive forms of citizenship and political legibility, linking ‘homonormativity’ in its gendered sense with ‘homonormativity’ in the sense of induction and assimilation into trans/national formations of power.

Chapter 5: Claiming Citizenship, Contesting Civility: Decriminalization, Pride

Activism and the Regulation of Civic Space

What has happened since the judgment (the reading down of IPC 377, anti-sodomy law) is that enormous, exuberant force of people have become unleashed... People have certainly tasted that liberty, so you have film festivals; even small towns that never dreamt of having gay pride parades are having them.

– Aditya Bandyopadhyay, Gay lawyer and activist⁴²⁶

When the police here harass or torture *kothis*, I don't think they do it knowing about 377, they do it just like that (*emni-i kore*)... I think 377 affects *thung-thang* [fragile, elite] *kothis* more!

- Amit, Subhash's daughter and *kothi*/trans activist

Is there a need to do a pride (pride walk) here?... We have pride here everyday!

- Staff members of Swikriti's (now closed) MSM project, Dum Dum

Introduction

Let us return to the moment that began this narrative: the decriminalization of consensual same-sex activity in India and its celebration as 'India's Stonewall'. Responding to a public interest litigation filed by the NGO Naz Foundation (India) Trust in 2001, on 2nd July 2009, the high court of the capital city of Delhi read down Section 377 of the Indian

⁴²⁶ Pande, A. 2013. 'India's Gay Community Fights for Acceptance, Equality'. *Voice of America*, April 11, 2013.

Penal Code,⁴²⁷ the colonial anti-sodomy law that had criminalized all penetrative sex acts except peno-vaginal sex as ‘against the order of nature’.⁴²⁸ While the law may potentially apply to a wide range of acts and people, both the litigation and ruling assumed its primary targets to be ‘LGBT persons’.⁴²⁹ The judges stated that section 377 withheld ‘moral full citizenship’ from India’s large population of gay, lesbian and transgender persons, and violated their constitutional right to privacy and liberty. Citing both the ‘spirit’ of ‘inclusiveness’ in the Indian national constitution and transnational accords such as the Yogyakarta Principles on the rights of LGBTI persons, the ruling excluded consensual same-sex acts conducted between adults in private from the purview of section 377. While the judgment was soon challenged by right-wing groups and is now pending under the consideration of the Supreme Court of India, it was also hailed by LGBT activists, national and international media. The BBC quoted a senior gay lawyer, Aditya Bandyopadhyay, on the significance of the moment: ‘It is India's Stonewall... our civic rights which were denied to us can now be reclaimed by us’.⁴³⁰ The ruling was thus

⁴²⁷ Delhi High Court, 2009. *Judgment on IPC Section 377*, New Delhi. The Naz Foundation (India) Trust referred to here is not the same as Naz Foundation International (NFI), the prominent international NGO referred to in the last chapters; it is a separate NGO also working on MSM, TG and HIV-AIDS, based in New Delhi and founded by Anjali Gopalan in 1994 (whereas NFI is associated with Shivananda Khan). See <http://www.nazindia.org/about.htm> (Accessed May 15, 2013).

⁴²⁸ Text of the Section is as follows: “Unnatural Offences - 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 also be liable to fine.

Explanation-Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.”

⁴²⁹ Delhi High Court, 2009. *Judgment on IPC Section 377*, p. 12.

⁴³⁰ He was referring to the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969 that he and the BBC credited with launching the gay rights movement worldwide. It is significant that instead of the corresponding ruling on sodomy laws in the US – Lawrence-Garner vs. Texas, 2003 – the ruling was thus compared back to Stonewall Riots of 1969, credited with launching the LGBT

read as a watershed event that both promised citizenship to LGBT persons, and marked the nation's insertion into a progressive globalization through it could gradually catch up with more advanced countries and transnational norms of liberal democracy.

However, the promised reclamation of 'civic rights' and citizenship contained hidden caveats. A year later in July 2010, an article titled 'Let's keep the pride' in the national English daily *Hindustan Times* documented a gathering at Delhi⁴³¹ organized by a coalition of LGBT activists to mark the first anniversary of the Delhi High Court judgment.⁴³² Echoing an increasingly common stance in the Indian print media, the article supported the political legitimacy of LGBT persons as equal citizens, and approvingly described 'cheerful slogan shouting by gay rights supporters' and 'provocative images' such as two men kissing.⁴³³ However, it also condemned the 'inappropriate behaviour' of some participants whom the reporter described as 'a few transgenders'. The report berated the aforementioned 'transgenders' for dancing while 'lifting up their skirts and shouting swear words', which apparently embarrassed even 'their own community' and 'threatened to mar the atmosphere' of Jantar Mantar, a

movement in the west. This marks both a liberal re-reading of Stonewall within the discourse of LGBT rights, and a reading of the ruling that sought to endow it with the affective resonance of Stonewall.

⁴³¹ The event, a gathering at the national monument of Jantar Mantar, was organised by a informal coalition of activists and organisations on July 2, 2010, exactly a year after the Delhi High Court judgment on July 2, 2009.

⁴³² Afaque, Z. 2010. 'Let's Keep the Pride', *Hindustan Times*, July 3, 2010, available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/LifeStyle/Let-s-keep-the-pride/Article1-566874.aspx> (Accessed April 30, 2012).

⁴³³ *Id.*

national cultural monument where the anniversary was being held.⁴³⁴ The reporter quoted the leading gay activist Ashok Row Kavi, who was present at the event: ‘we must use our rights responsibly... We have to go a very long way to convince society that we are equal citizens with equal rights.’⁴³⁵⁴³⁶

This was hardly a unique incident – Row Kavi’s statement echoed those of many activists organizing the rainbow pride walk of Kolkata, India’s oldest walk for LGBT rights. As a participant observer and volunteer in the Kolkata pride walks from 2005 onward, I witnessed frequent complaints regarding the unruly and disreputable behavior of some participants, particularly *kothis* of non-elite and/or non-metropolitan provenance. Relatively senior CBO and NGO activists, many of them from *kothi* communities themselves, often spoke out against various public behaviors collectively called *bhel* and *bila* (troublemaking) in the subcultural language of *ulti*. In this context, *bhel* could signify any overly flamboyant display of femininity or gender non-conformity, while *bila* referred more specifically to the creation of ‘trouble’ in public spaces through *bheli* behaviors and gestures. While we have already come across the derision or condemnation of *bhel* within *kothi* communities in previous chapters, this chapter charts how and why the institutional regulation of various disruptive practices and subject positions became a particular point of concern in spaces of civic activism such as the pride walks. In an

⁴³⁴ *Id.*

⁴³⁵ *Supra* note 3.

⁴³⁶ Ashok Rao Kavi is among the most prominent gay rights activists of India. Kavi founded the Humsafar Trust, one of the largest Indian NGOs working with GBT communities on issues of rights and male sexual health, in 1994. *See* Humsafar Trust, About Us, <http://www.humsafar.org/about.htm> (Accessed April 21, 2012). *See also* Project Bolo, Indian LGBT Oral History, <http://www.projectbolo.com/ashok.htm> (Accessed April 21, 2012).

organizing meeting for the 2007 Kolkata Pride walk, an activist closely portended Row Kavi's aforementioned statement: 'the action of some of the participants... during [last year's] walk was indecent and lowered the dignity of the walk. It was also detrimental to the objective of the movement... which is to establish the rights of community people'.⁴³⁷ Thus, if the high court ruling promises LGBT citizenship by decriminalizing consensual sex among adults in private, the public behavior of lower-class gender variant persons, variously described as inappropriate, embarrassing, irresponsible, indecent or undignified, marks them as persons disrupting or hampering progress toward citizenship and equal rights.

In this chapter, I study forms of LGBT political mobilization such as the decriminalization campaign and pride walks, often led by gay activists, and show how they demonstrate convergences of nationalist and liberal democratic discourses of equality, rights, and civility in order to produce LGBT persons as rights-bearing Indian citizens. Both LGBT activism for decriminalization and the Delhi high court judgment align transnational discourses of equal rights (particularly the right to privacy and freedom of sexual expression) with Indian constitutional values to produce a distinctive nationalist resolution of debates around homosexuality. However, as I will argue, such civic activism both draws upon and comes into friction with various practices and modes of resistance used by non-metropolitan and/or non-elite gender/sexually variant groups, which may not be recuperable in terms of liberal logics of equal rights and the public-

⁴³⁷ Quoted from the minutes circulated in English among the participants after the meeting, which was public and open to all.

private divide that underlie the decriminalization argument, and yet on which LGBT activism and the campaign for decriminalization may depend. These discursive practices are not only vernacularized in terms of their scalar subordination to the trans/national liberal discourse of equality and rights, but also rendered illegible and/or illegitimate. While the legal campaign for decriminalization and pride activism strategically draw upon lower class/caste persons and associated forms of visibility and resistance, it demands equality and rights in ways that ultimately render such persons and practices as unintelligible, disruptive or even criminal in terms of liberal logics of equality and rights, particularly the right to privacy. The nationalist-liberal argument for decriminalization and LGBT citizenship produce lower class gender/sexually variant persons as unworthy of being rights-bearing subjects and may even bolster their re-criminalization, resulting in a homonormative and homonationalist activist formation with its attendant hierarchies and exclusions.⁴³⁸

Thus, this chapter focuses on the constitutive exclusions that mark the production of LGBT persons as rights-bearing citizens, furthering the forms of vernacularization and elision that accompany the construction of ‘sexual minority’ population groups (*hijra*, MSM, TG) as targets of governmental policies, as charted in the first three chapters. The

⁴³⁸ For the literature on ‘homonormativity’ and ‘homonationalism’ in the west, see Murphy, K. P., Ruiz, J. and Serlin, D. 2008. ‘Editor’s Introduction’, *Radical History Review*, no. 100, 2008, p. 1. Agathangelou, A. M., Bassichis, D. and Spira, T. L. 2008. ‘Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire’, *Radical History Review*, no. 100, 2008, p. 120. Puar, J. 2008. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*; Sycamore, M. B. 2004. *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Mattilda B. Sycamore ed.) (2004).

analysis of the exclusions marking LGBT citizenship recalls Chatterjee's thesis that the sphere of individual rights-bearing citizens in postcolonial nations, the 'civil society', is a restricted and exclusive sphere guarded from people who are formally citizens but without stable individual rights,⁴³⁹ forming populations to bargain for governmental policy ('political society').⁴⁴⁰ In contrast to the masses relegated to the unstable mechanisms of 'political society', 'civil society' is a putatively orderly zone that 'seeks to be congruent' with normative models of bourgeois liberal democracy and is constituted by equal citizens with 'stable constitutionally defined rights and laws', mostly the 'urban middle classes'.⁴⁴¹ However, as Corbridge et al. argue, the conceptual and material boundaries between political and civil society may be unstable and fragile, such that groups in 'political society' might very well also encroach into 'civil society', or political tactics associated with 'civil' and 'political' societies may co-exist and intermix along a spectrum.⁴⁴² Indeed, critics of Chatterjee such as Chandra have questioned whether anything like the stable and orderly zone of 'civil society' exists at all, given that the upper/middle classes may often resort to various underhand and corrupt tactics to sustain their privilege, rather than necessarily seeking congruence with constitutionally defined

⁴³⁹ Chatterjee, P 2008. 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 19, 2008; Chatterjee, P 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections of Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press, New York.

⁴⁴⁰ While Foucault uses the term 'governmentality' to designate the entire complex of institutional apparatuses and knowledges that characterise the modern administrative state's relation with the population, Chatterjee posits a separation between rights-bearing citizens in 'civil society' and subjects of governmental welfare/control: See Foucault, M. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* 108 (Graham Burchell trans., 2007). Chatterjee, P 2008. 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 19, 2008, p. 57.

⁴⁴¹ Chatterjee, P 2008. 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', p. 57.

⁴⁴² Corbridge, S., Williams, G., Srivastava, M. and Veron, R. 2005. *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

rights and laws.⁴⁴³ However, ‘civil society’ still may be a useful concept to denote a certain ideological construct as well as an imaginary space aligned with liberal-democratic ideals that may not be always followed in practice, rather serving to secure the material boundaries of middle class dominated spaces from those that threaten it.

As I will attempt to demonstrate, the trajectory of civic activism for decriminalization and LGBT rights evidences the desired sequestration of an orderly civic space that aligns itself with liberal models of citizenship and equal rights, analytically corresponding to Chatterjee’s ‘civil society’, from discourses and practices associated with lower class/caste gender/sexually variant communities, which may not be entirely recuperable within liberal models of civility and citizenship, and thus disrupt the imaginary and material boundaries of middle class activist spaces even as they contribute to such activism. I will analyze the liberal discourse of middle class activism and attendant conceptions of civility with reference to Skaria’s formulation of ‘measurable equality’ as a logic that underlies the various versions (neo/classical, social/reform) of liberalism.⁴⁴⁴ *Kothi-hijra* practices that are not entirely recuperable within models of measurable equality are understood as disruptive, aggressive, and uncivil – interrupting civility in the

⁴⁴³ Chandra, N. 2009. ‘Slum-lord aesthetics and the question of Indian poverty’, *Liberation*, March 2009. Available at http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2009/march_09/film_review1.html (accessed April 27, 2013).

⁴⁴⁴ I draw from Ajay Skaria’s analysis and critique of modern liberal democratic traditions as resting on an underlying conception of abstract measure and ‘measurable equality’. See Skaria, A. 2011. ‘Relinquishing Republican Democracy: Gandhi’s Ramrajya’ *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 14 no. 2, p. 203-229.

sense of equal exchange in civil society – and/or criminal for violating the rights and privacy of others, and thus unworthy of equal citizenship. In this process, discourses and practices that are vernacularized through the rubrics of MSM/TG identities may be simultaneously rendered politically illegitimate and/or unintelligible through the logics of measurable equality and the public/private divide. However, like the construction of identities and population categories, this is not merely a top-down process, and is enabled through collusive articulations between liberal-nationalist ideas of equality, rights and civility on one hand and class/caste-based ideas of respectability and related subcultural hierarchies on the other, which converge to create hegemonic practices of claiming citizenship. While respectability or *shomman* as a concept may not be necessarily or inherently connected to civility and civil society, they become interlinked important ways. Practices like *bhel* and *bila*, which (as we saw before) are condemned for their social disrepute, are further condemned for violating equal exchange and the right to privacy, on which the decriminalization argument depends. Indeed, in the quest for establishing LGBT persons as sovereign and equal citizen-subjects, *kothis* and *hijras* may be produced as figures of failed sovereignty, unable to control their social behavior. Moreover, while respectability and incivility are both conceptually distinct from criminalization, constructions of incivility become connected with criminality through the shared conceptual framework of the public/private divide. *Kothis* and *hijra* practices, perceived as lacking respectability, are seen as either aggressively encroaching on the private, or indecently bringing the private into the public – which depending on the context may be figured as uncivil and/or criminal. Activist claims to citizenship through

nationalist-liberal discourses thus perpetuate hierarchized binaries of civility and respectability vs. incivility, indecency, aggression, excess, and criminality, which delimit legitimate rights-bearing citizens. While these various dichotomies are distinct and may not be conflated, they get aligned with each other in shifting and contingent ways that bolster class/caste hierarchies and restrict political legibility and legitimacy, regulating participation in activist spaces and ‘civil society’. For instance, the tensions around status and respectability (*shomman*) and attendant intra-*kothi* divides, as noted in previous chapters, are transmuted into hierarchies that structure activist spaces such as the Kolkata pride walk and similar events of public advocacy. Collusions between ideas of respectability and civic equality transmute intra-community divides between *kodi* (sober) and *bheli* (campy/flamboyant) or ‘good’ and ‘bad’/unruly subject-positions into spatialized divisions within public activism, informing desirable forms of political participation and visibility. Thus, extant gender-sexual hierarchies feed into emergent forms of political participation, and certain *kothi/hijra* modes of resistance or political engagement are sought to be regulated and/or excluded from activist spaces.

At the same time, citizenship and rights might itself be claimed in disruptive ways by a spectrum of unruly subjects, which contest logics of civility and respectability, and point to ruptures within normative discourses of LGBT activism (e.g. the tension between claiming respectable citizenship and showcasing commoditized difference in spaces like Pride walks). These claims may gesture towards counter-normative forms of citizenship and civic participation. In response, as I argue, there have been salient changes of tactic

and leadership within civic activism. While the older generation of activists tended more towards a hierarchized model of leadership and pedagogy reminiscent of nationalist reform, increasingly there has been a shift to ostensibly open and equal civic spaces, actualized through virtual fora like Facebook groups, which have emerged as the dominant sites for pride organizing. While older hierarchies may have been subverted, exclusions may become more covert and yet more severe through the shift to class-restricted online spaces. These shifts also mark ‘civil society’ as a constitutively unstable rather than orderly space, evidencing changing strategies for consolidating its imaginary and conceptual (but also material) boundaries from the outside.

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first section focuses on the campaign against section 377. I draw upon activist critiques of the decriminalization campaign by Dave, Manayath and Tellis, and extend their observations to argue that it effects a certain ‘nationalist resolution’ of public debates on homosexuality, which may in fact re-criminalize *hijras* and *kothis* even as it strategically draws on their bodies.⁴⁴⁵ The second section studies *hijra* and *kothi* practices that come into friction with liberal discourses and the underlying logic of measurable equality, and yet feed into civic activism. The third

⁴⁴⁵ Tellis, A. 2012. ‘The Queer Movement is Dead, Long Live the Queer Movement’, *DNA*, February 19, 2012. Available at <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/1651963/comment-the-queer-movement-is-dead-long-live-the-queer-movement> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Manayath, N. 2012. ‘The Edict Desk’, *Time Out Bengaluru*, April 27, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/gay-lesbian/features/edict-desk> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Manayath, N. 2012. ‘Political Signs’, *Time Out Bengaluru*. March 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/search%3Fkeyword%3Dnithin-manayath-0> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Dave, N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

and fourth sections examine the trajectory of pride organizing at Kolkata since the first pride walk in 1999, tracing constructions of civility and respectability, and also salient shifts in the pattern and style of leadership.

I. The Nationalist-Liberal Logic of Decriminalization: The Strategic Use and Re-criminalization of *Hijras* and *Kothis*

The trajectory of debates and conflicts around ‘homosexuality’ and same-sex behavior in the Indian public sphere evidences both contradictions between nationalist and liberal democratic discourses, and their attempted reconciliation or resolution. The two-decade long history of mobilization against criminalization and section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has increasingly attempted such a reconciliation, which must be located within the broader context of nationalist denunciations of ‘homosexuality’, whether understood in terms of act or personhood. While the anti-sodomy law itself was colonial in provenance, constructions of national culture and identity in both the pre- and post-independence period often constructed same-sex behavior as alien and corrosive to Indian society and cultural values. The literary and cultural spheres in pre-independence India witnessed significant controversies around same-sex behavior; in this broader context, the nationalist leader Gandhi denounced male same-sex behavior as a moral vice.⁴⁴⁶ Such arguments were buttressed with legal sanction in post-independence India. In 1983, predating the contemporary spate of challenges to IPC 377, the Supreme Court of India

⁴⁴⁶ Vanita, R. & Kidwai, S. (Eds). 2001. *Same-sex love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; p. 253.

held that an offence under section 377 implies ‘sexual perversity’, and further declared that ‘neither the notions of permissive society nor the fact that in some countries homosexuality has ceased to be an offence has influenced our thinking.’⁴⁴⁷ It thus provided the legal articulation of a putative national social collective and its supposedly uniform denunciation of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘perversion’. This presaged later positions of nationalist right-wing groups. The onset of economic liberalization in the early 1990s saw growing representations of LGBT identities in the media; in response, dominant right-wing discourses of national identity attacked as foreign to ‘Indian culture’ and even threatening to national sovereignty and security (even as right-wing political parties otherwise supported economic liberalization).⁴⁴⁸ The most publicised instance was the 1998-9 controversy over *Fire*,⁴⁴⁹ a feature film depicting a sexual relationship between two housewives, when the Hindu right wing virulent proclaimed lesbianism as a western import, not only un-Indian but also corruptive of Indian womanhood and family values.⁴⁵⁰ Apart from media controversies, the increasing presence of NGOs catering to and working with ‘sexual minorities’ also drew similar condemnations on occasion. In 2001, *kothi* field workers of Naz Foundation International in Lucknow, north India were

⁴⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *This Alien Legacy*, p. 48 and p. 13.

⁴⁴⁸ Kapur, R. 1999. ‘A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves: Hybridity, Sexuality and the Law’, *Social and Legal studies* 8, pp. 343-358.

⁴⁴⁹ For an overview of the controversy, see ‘Hindu leader says Lesbian film should be about Moslem family’, *Agence France Presse*, December 14, 1999; ‘Deepa Mehta appeals to the Supreme Court’, *Agence France Presse*, December 7, 1999; ‘Activists slam attacks on lesbian film, Hindus vow to widen protests’, *Agence France Presse*, December 3, 1999.

⁴⁵⁰ John, M. E. & Niranjana, T. 1999. ‘Mirror Politics: Fire, Hindutva and Indian Culture,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 6-13, 1999, Vol. XXXIV, No. 10/11 at 581.

arrested under both IPC 377 and charges of distributing obscene material. Representatives of the police force declared that homosexuality was ‘polluting the entire society’ and told the prisoners they were ‘trying to destroy our country by promoting homosexuality’; the prosecutor in the case called homosexuality ‘against Indian culture.’⁴⁵¹ (This was one of the cases that prompted Naz India’s subsequent public interest litigation against 377 in 2001, detailed below). In the wake of the decriminalization litigation, the state itself took contradictory positions. While the health ministry increasingly worked with MSM organizations (as documented in previous chapters), and accordingly sided with the decriminalization argument, the home ministry initially opposed decriminalization and reiterated the cultural nationalist argument.⁴⁵² As stated in their petition against decriminalization, ‘(the) Union of India argues that Indian society is yet to demonstrate readiness or willingness to show greater tolerance to practices of homosexuality. Making out a case in favour of retention of Section 377 IPC (...), Union of India relies on the arguments of public morality, public health and healthy environment claiming that Section 377 IPC serves the purpose’.⁴⁵³ ‘Homosexuality’ is thus marked as an issue to be adjudged according to collective cultural mores and ‘public morality’, determined according to a normative Indian cultural and national identity based on patriarchal and upper-caste values of gendered familial order⁴⁵⁴ – thus constructing, to use Lauren Berlant’s terms, an ‘intimate core’ of national culture and

⁴⁵¹ HRW, *This Alien Legacy*, p. 53-54.

⁴⁵² Delhi High Court, *Judgment on IPC Section 377*, p. 10, p. 51, p. 58.

⁴⁵³ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on IPC Section 377*, p. 12.

⁴⁵⁴ *Id.*

citizenship.⁴⁵⁵

The nationalist resolution of the queer question: Public morality vs. private choice

In response to both right-wing and state-sponsored homophobia, LGBT activism and the mobilization against decriminalization sought equal status within the national citizenry through a *double* move – both contesting and re-claiming national and cultural identity, and evoking transnationally circulating models of liberal democracy. On one hand, as noted before, homophobia may be depicted as an anachronistic and embarrassing reminder of conservative Indian cultural traditions compared to ‘advanced’ societies, and events of public activism such as pride marches and film festivals are indexed as ways to catch up with Western levels of equality and acceptance.⁴⁵⁶ Such activist stances are bolstered by a wave of ‘positive’ media coverage in multiple languages, where liberal values are placed in contradiction to India’s cultural backwardness as indicated by social and political homophobia. Emergent gay and lesbian subjects and communities are highlighted or even celebrated as signs of progress connected with the trajectory of economic liberalisation and cultural globalisation, here seen as desirable. For instance, a characteristic article in the Kolkata newspaper *The Telegraph* cites the Kolkata pride walk of 2005 as evidence of changing social mores and states, ‘One doesn’t have to look

⁴⁵⁵ Berlant, L. G. 1997. *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴⁵⁶ ‘Organisers [are] hailing it as a sign of progress after years of prejudice and discrimination... Such events have been an established part of the cultural scene in Western countries for many years but in socially conservative India... it has been largely an underground activity’, ‘India gets its first mainstream gay film festival’, AFP, 7 April 2010.

too far for the reasons for this change in attitudes. The City of Joy itself is changing. Shopping malls... have mushroomed... satellite television and multiplexes have added spice to life... Call Centers have engaged a brigade of young workers - (who) are making money and willing to spend it.⁴⁵⁷ (This, of course, ignores the crucial participation of *kothis-dhuranis* et al in pride walks, as detailed later – in fact, the 2005 Kolkata pride walk was the first pride that I attended, and I noticed the relative absence of upper/middle classes in the walk apart from some NGO leaders, contrary to the *Telegraph* report).

On the other hand, from early on, activists also combined cultural nationalist and liberal democratic arguments. For example, in response to the *Fire* controversy, lesbian activists highlighted the historical tolerance of same-sex desire within ‘Indian culture’, breaking down a monolithic and conservative view of Indian identity, and stressing the pluralism of gender/sexual in ancient and medieval India.⁴⁵⁸ However, such positions also sometimes deployed essentialisms of their own – like a nostalgic idealisation of a libertarian Hindu antiquity, or of the purported pre-colonial tolerance of different sexualities.⁴⁵⁹ While undeniably important in claiming silenced or marginalised histories, scholars such as Ratna Kapur and Akshay Khanna have noted how such claims are often

⁴⁵⁷ Sengupta, V. 2005. ‘Oh! Calcutta!’, *The Telegraph*, August 7, 2005.

⁴⁵⁸ On the alignment between ‘Indian’ and ‘lesbian’ achieved during the *Fire* controversy, see Dave, N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴⁵⁹ Kapur, R. 1999. ‘A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves’: Hybridity, Sexuality and the Law’, *Soc. & Legal Studies* 8(3), p. 353.

articulated with reference to high or ‘classical’ culture and can be Hindu-normative,⁴⁶⁰ sometimes even attributing the historical rise of homophobic attitudes to Muslim invasions and thus mirroring a classic trope of Hindu-right nationalism, which has often blamed Islamic ‘invaders’ for the downfall of Indian civilization.⁴⁶¹ For instance, an exhibition of photographs of ancient Indian temple art and sculpture by Giti Thadani at an ‘LGBT Film & Video Festival’ organized in 2009 in Kolkata was advertised in these terms: ‘Homosexuality is very much part and parcel of Indic histories... these histories have been ignored, ravaged by different monotheistic invasions’ (i.e. both Islamic and Christian incursions).⁴⁶²

Arguments for decriminalization also deployed the narrative of Indian civilizational tolerance marred by subsequent developments, but focused more specifically on the colonial imposition of IPC 377. The first petition for decriminalization was initiated in the early 1990s, during the formation of the early metropolitan gay groups like Counsel Club and Humsafar Trust. Within this emergent milieu, a short-lived Delhi group named AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Movement against discrimination based on AIDS)

⁴⁶⁰ Khanna, A. 2007. ‘Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A critical engagement with the postcoloniality of sexuality’, In Bose, B. and Bhattacharya, S. (eds.), *The Phobic and The Erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India*, pp. 159-200. Kolkata: Seagull Books.

⁴⁶¹ Kapur, R. 1999. ‘A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves’: Hybridity, Sexuality and the Law’, *Soc. & Legal Studies* 8(3), p. 353; There is also a newer formulation, Homohinduism (broadly congruent with homonormativity and homonationalism) that indicates the various co-implications between discourses of Hindu superiority, civilizational tolerance, etc. and homosexual and queer politics; see Chandrashekhara, S. 2013. ‘South Asian Queer Politics and the Rise of Homohinduism’. Presentation at Homonationalism and Pinkwashing Conference, New York: CUNY.

⁴⁶² Excerpted from the website of one of the organizers; See Sappho for Equality, ‘Excavation of Feminine Memories’, <http://sapphokolkata.org/page/4/> (Accessed April 30, 2012).

launched a petition to repeal IPC 377, which was unsuccessful.⁴⁶³ In the early 2000s, the Delhi NGO Naz Foundation India revived the issue and initiated a fresh public interest litigation (PIL) at the Delhi High Court. Given that many more LGBT groups had formed and become visible by the time of the second attempt, the Naz PIL gradually gathered widespread support from lawyers and NGO activists, including representatives of child rights and women's right's groups. The resultant coalition, 'Voices against 377 IPC', built a strong and more successful case for the decriminalization.⁴⁶⁴ One common strategy, demonstrated both in the Naz petition and in a sympathetic Human Rights Watch report, was to depict homophobia and the anti-sodomy law as an 'alien legacy' of Victorian legislators, who were horrified by the plurality of diverse genders/sexualities in pre-colonial India, particularly *hijras*, who were criminalized by the British.⁴⁶⁵

However, as Naisargi Dave documents, the PIL was not uniformly lauded by queer activist groups, given that it was lodged without a process of discussion and consultation within local activist circuits; in particular, members of lesbian feminist group PRISM critiqued the PIL due to its overarching focus on same-sex activity in private.⁴⁶⁶ As PRISM members (and later, critical gay activists and scholars like Manayath and Tellis) pointed out, the petition and judgment does not guard against persecution in 'public'

⁴⁶³ Joseph, S. 2005. *Social work practice and men who have sex with men*. New Delhi: Sage.

⁴⁶⁴ See <http://www.voicesagainst377.org/> (Accessed May 15, 2013).

⁴⁶⁵ See Human Rights Watch, *This Alien Legacy: The Origin of "Sodomy" Laws in British Colonialism* (2008), available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/12/17/alien-legacy-0> (Accessed 11 May 2013).

⁴⁶⁶ Dave, N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

spaces which affects sex workers and *hijras*; Manayath further points out that IPC 377 may not be that significant a cause of violence on lower class gender/sexually variant persons, and thus the petition marks a misdirected attempt that secures protections only for privileged middle class gay/lesbian persons (this is a point that is borne out by *kothi-hijra* narratives of violence, as elaborated in the next section).⁴⁶⁷

Yet, the petition and judgment, while limited, also perform a crucial and far-reaching shift in the framing of homosexuality vis-à-vis nationalist and liberal discourses. Significantly, the legal argument against IPC 377 is able to combine nationalist and liberal democratic logics precisely through a realignment of the public/private divide, specifically by shifting homosexuality from an issue of ‘public morality’ to one of private choice. This realignment is clearly evident in the text of the Delhi High Court judgment, which frequently cites and largely ratifies the petitions by Naz India and the coalition ‘Voices against 377 IPC’, and justifies them through constitutional liberalism to build the case for decriminalization. Citing the Naz petition, the judgment counters the nationalist argument of ‘public morality’, as evidenced in the state’s petition against decriminalization, on grounds of the right to privacy: ‘enforcement of public morality does not amount to a ‘compelling state interest’ to justify invasion of the zone of privacy of adult homosexuals engaged in consensual sex in private without intending to cause

⁴⁶⁷ Manayath, N. 2012. ‘The Edict Desk’, *Time Out Bengaluru*, April 27, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/gay-lesbian/features/edict-desk> (Accessed May 11, 2013); Manayath, N. 2012. ‘Political Signs’, *Time Out Bengaluru*. March 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.timeoutbengaluru.net/search%3Fkeyword%3Dnithin-manayath-0> (Accessed May 11, 2013).

harm to each other or others'.⁴⁶⁸ Rather than the shifting and arbitrary grounds of 'public morality', the standard is held to be 'constitutional morality' based on the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution.⁴⁶⁹ The replacement of 'public morality' by 'constitutional morality' and the re-location of same-sex behavior within the realm of personal choice and private acts renders it amenable to protection under two particular constitutional rights – the right to life and personal liberty, including personal dignity, autonomy and privacy (Article 21), and the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly (Article 19).⁴⁷⁰ The juxtaposition of privacy and freedom of expression is significant – the realignment of homosexuality as an issue of private acts and personal choice/freedom permits its public expression *so long as* the public/private divide is appropriately maintained.⁴⁷¹ Subsequently, its decriminalization is justified further via arguments of the 'the notion of equality in the Indian Constitution', particularly the equality of the sexes and the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex (Articles 15 and 14).⁴⁷² More broadly, the judgment also justifies decriminalization with reference to the spirit of 'inclusiveness' that underlies the Indian constitution, thus performing a nationalist validation of the decriminalization argument: 'if there is one constitutional tenet that can be said to be the underlying theme of the Indian Constitution, it is that of

⁴⁶⁸ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 61 (point 75).

⁴⁶⁹ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 64.

⁴⁷⁰ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 9-10 (point 9-10).

⁴⁷¹ My critique of the privatization of the homosexual subject in India is indebted to Puar and Agathangelou et al's critiques of decriminalization in the US and the activist celebration of the outcome of the Lawrence vs. Texas case; See Anna M. Agathangelou, M. Daniel Bassichis and Tamara L. Spira, *Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire*, *Radical History Review*, no. 100, 2008, p. 120. Puar, J. K. 2008. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴⁷² Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 9, p. 103 (point 129).

'inclusiveness'.⁴⁷³ Thus, the privatization of homosexuality enables the refutation of nationalist public morality arguments, and its justification via liberal tenets of privacy, autonomy, freedom of expression, equality (etc.) that are aligned with Indian constitutional values, countering the opposition of homosexuality to national interest. The media and activist reception, positioning the ruling as a significant moment of national progress, underscores the recuperation of a privatized homosexuality and the alignment of its decriminalization with national values of equality, inclusiveness, etc. To borrow Chatterjee's famous formulation, the petitions and the ruling achieve a certain 'nationalist resolution' of the queer question (it is usually read as a victory for not just gay/lesbian persons but for all GLBT people).⁴⁷⁴ This is not to say that nationalist right-wing positions are defeated once and for all, but that decriminalization becomes allied with the foundational tenets of the Indian constitution and with national progress.

The decriminalization argument: Harvesting and discarding hijra-kothi bodies

Both the campaign for decriminalization and the resultant judgment evokes *hijras* and *kothis* as violated bodies in order to bolster the arguments for decriminalization, particularly to demonstrate the deleterious effects of criminalization in terms of police harassment and abuse during cruising and sex work. But since the Naz petition and the resultant ruling specifically address consensual same-sex activity in private, some of the ways that *hijras* and *kothis* are most vulnerable to violence may fall beyond the pale of

⁴⁷³ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 104 (point 130).

⁴⁷⁴ Chatterjee, P. 1989. 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question', in Sangari, K. & Vaid, S (Eds). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

the judgment, as Tellis and Manayath have pointed out. Extending their argument, I will posit that practices such as sex work, *chhalla* and *badhai* may even be re-criminalized through its nationalist-liberal logic of constitutional equality and rights. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the overall conceptual trajectory of the petition and ruling is significantly analogous to the trajectory of civic activism and pride organizing, elaborated later in the chapter – the issue of violence in ‘public spaces’ is raised only to be elided via the logic of (rights to) privacy and individual autonomy or choice, which eventually may not do much to protect the very people whose vulnerability is evoked in order to buttress the argument for decriminalization. Indeed, belying the putative significance of the moment of decriminalization in a narrative of national progress, arguments for decriminalization and equal rights may be either irrelevant from the purview of *kothi/hijra* practices or even render them politically unintelligible, uncivil and/or criminal.

One of the first significant documents to examine violence against *kothis* and *hijras* and to make recommendations for legal and state policy was the previously mentioned report by the People’s Union of Civil Liberties, Karnataka (PUCL-K) on ‘transgender sex workers’ in Bangalore, released in 2003.⁴⁷⁵ The PUCL report argued that IPC 377 was one of the primary laws increasing the vulnerability of *kothis* and *hijras* to violence. However, IPC 377 is not mentioned as direct or indirect cause of abuse or harassment in any of the cited narratives of *kothi* and *hijra* sex workers (‘Sachin’s narrative’, ‘Smita’s

⁴⁷⁵ PUCL-K. 2003. *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore*. Bangalore: People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka.

narrative’) in the report; the narratives rather speak of sexual violence at the hands of clients and/or the police. In the absence of explicit links, the report establishes a metonymic contiguity between their specific experience of violence and harassment, and the overarching criminalization of same-sex behavior under IPC 377:

To be a homosexual or a hijra is to draw the presumption that the hijra or the homosexual is engaging in “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”. This particular interpretation of Sec. 377 means that all queer people, particularly the kothi and hijra sex worker population, are particularly vulnerable to harassment under this provision. Going by the nature of availability of space, most often it is these marginalized populations who engage in the sexual activity proscribed under Sec. 377 in public areas such as parks and public toilets and hence end up being vulnerable to arrest... Sec. 377 has not been used extensively to prosecute cases of consensual sex. However this does not limit its significant role in perpetuating a certain kind of discourse about queer people which classifies certain social groups as criminal and stigmatizes their sexual behaviour.

The cited excerpt clearly concedes that Section 377 in itself may not be the most common or primary justification invoked in cases of police violence or harassment. While there have indeed been cases of persecution of *kothis* through Section 377 in north India, as suggested by the introductory quote by Amit, *kothis/hijras* in eastern India did not commonly encounter Section 377 directly in their quotidian experiences of violence, harassment or abuse, which need not seek any legal sanction for itself.⁴⁷⁶ In fact, in cases

⁴⁷⁶ This point may be further bolstered by the fact that a report on structural violences against *kothis* in south India makes *no* mention of Section 377. See Chakrapani, V., Newman, P.A., Shunmugam, M., McLuckie, A. & Melwin, F. 2007. ‘Structural Violence against Kothi-identified Men who have Sex with Men in Chennai, India: A Qualitative Investigation’. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 19(4), pp. 346–364.

of violence where police officers themselves rape and partake in non peno-vaginal sex, IPC 377 *cannot* be judicially used as a tool for sanctioning police violence as it would incriminate the policemen themselves. Of course, this does not preclude the extra-judicial use of 377 to harass, intimidate or abuse those suspected of ‘unnatural sex’ – but as the PUCL report acknowledges, such extra-judicial use remains rare. Indeed, the case studies of violence documented in the PUCL report – as also the contours of stigma experienced by *kothis/dhuranis* like Govinda or Subhash, narrated in the previous chapters – suggest that harassment or violence may be more based upon perceived gendered presentation (as effeminate, *hijra*, sex worker, poor, etc.), rather than the imputation of ‘unnatural’ sex that would equally criminalize *all* involved parties, irrespective of gender and class/caste. (It is significant that no *parikh* I encountered in West Bengal ever spoke of harassment or abuse due to their participation in sex with male-assigned persons). However, contrary to its own evidence, the PUCL report – like the Naz petition and the judgment – attributes an overarching significance to IPC 377: ‘kothi and hijra sex worker population are particularly vulnerable to harassment under this provision... Sec. 377 has not been used extensively to prosecute cases of consensual sex. However this does not limit its significant role in perpetuating a certain kind of discourse about queer people which classifies certain social groups as criminal’.

This loose metonymic connection between legal criminalization and actual specific cases of violence serves to render IPC 377 as a symbolic enemy that stands for a host of ills; indeed, it is in this broad and symbolic sense that 377 became a rallying cry in activist

spaces like the Kolkata Pride Walks, as described later (significantly, unlike the critiques of the Naz petition mentioned above, no CBO leader in West Bengal has questioned the petition and judgment to my knowledge – one possible reason being that the precise terms of the legal argument, and its constitutive limitations, have simply been elided by the symbolic status that IPC 377 acquired through the years of the decriminalization campaign). Yet, the priority accorded to Section 377 as the cause of violence or harassment against ‘queer people’ erases and elides the very unevenly gendered dynamics of sex (whether consensual or violent) between male-assigned persons: the issue is re-framed as the criminalization of ‘unnatural’ sex *per se*, ostensibly affecting all participants in same-sex behavior, rather than the specifically gendered dynamics of privilege and marginalization as experienced by *hijras* and *kothis* (as attested by the fluid yet tense negotiations of boundaries between relatively feminine insiders and relatively masculine outsiders in *kothi-dhurani-hijra* networks). The use of *kothi/hijra* bodies to frame the argument against Section 377 thus simultaneously raises and obscures the gendered (and class, caste, etc.) dynamics of violence. Their narratives supply the required urgency to the case against 377, even as the primacy accorded to 377 elides their negotiations with social gender. In light of the overarching arguments of this dissertation, we may say that this simultaneous use and elision of *kothi/hijra* narratives parallels the broader vernacularization of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* languages and their concern with social masculinity and femininity.

The petitions by Naz Foundation and the coalition ‘Voices against Section 377 IPC’, and

the resultant ruling, further adds to this elision and vernacularization by emphasizing the argument for privacy in the case for decriminalization. This neglects the ways in which section 377 is actually applied even in the cited instances of violence in the petitions and judgment, most of which target gender variant persons in public spaces. Again, the text of the judgment, and the petitions that it draws upon, strategically evoke *kothi/hijra* narratives only to elide their implications. Based on the petition by ‘Voices against section 377 IPC’, the judgment cites five specific cases of violence (pages 18 to 21), out of which section 377 is relevant to only two cases.⁴⁷⁷ The first case involves the aforementioned arrest of MSM/*kothi* outreach workers of Naz Foundation in 2001, on charges of both abetting homosexuality (section 377), and distributing ‘obscene’ literature (section 292). The second and third cases involve the arbitrary arrest, custodial detention, sexual abuse and torture of two *hijras* in south India, who were picked up by policemen from public spaces: one of these cases ended in suicide, and none of them involved any charge based on section 377 (and technically they *could not* – the policemen would have had to charge themselves). The fourth case involves the police persecution of two lesbian women in a relationship using section 377; the last case involves the custodial detention and rape of a ‘man’ who was picked up by the police and alleged to be ‘homosexual’; again section 377 was not (and could not be) used. Thus in three out of the five documented cases, 377 was not invoked at all by police, and it was the primary legislation in only one of the two cases where it was used. Yet, after the narration of these cases, the cited petition performs an elision of all these other modes of criminalization,

⁴⁷⁷ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 18-21 (points 21-22).

violence and abuse and focuses only on 377: as the judgment text states, ‘the material on record, according to the respondent No.8 (the coalition ‘Voices against section 377 IPC’), clearly establishes that the continuance of section 377 IPC on the statute book operate to brutalise a vulnerable, minority segment of the citizenry for no fault on its part’.⁴⁷⁸ Moreover, the petitions and judgment conclude that due to 377, ‘LGBT persons’ are ‘criminalised and stigmatized to a point where individuals are forced to deny the core of their identity and vital dimensions of their personality’⁴⁷⁹ – thus generalizing and abstracting the issue as a matter of individual rights and personal identity, and eliding the particular dimensions of publicly perceived gender presentation raised by at least three of the five documented cases of violence.

And through this elision, the subsequent argument is able to largely base itself on the constitutional right to personal autonomy and privacy.⁴⁸⁰ The petitions and the ruling particularly evoke article 21 – the fundamental right to life and personal liberty, which includes the rights to dignity, autonomy and privacy.⁴⁸¹ The liberal logic of the judgment bridges the national with the transnational, examining the right to privacy and concepts of personal rights as treated in international precedents; such as the Universal of Declaration of Human Rights,⁴⁸² as well as Indian legal precedents.⁴⁸³ Citing international precedents in protecting the privacy of same-sex relations, the ruling concludes that IPC 377 violates

⁴⁷⁸ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 21 (point 22).

⁴⁷⁹ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 21 (point 22).

⁴⁸⁰ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 25, pp. 28-31.

⁴⁸¹ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 25-28, see also p. 8.

⁴⁸² Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 28-31.

⁴⁸³ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 31-35.

Article 21, particularly the right to privacy.⁴⁸⁴ The state's argument of homosexuality as a 'mental illness' is raised and refuted with reference to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD), which distinguishes between homosexuality and 'gender identity disorder', normalizes the former, and pathologizes the latter.⁴⁸⁵ By relying on this citation, the judgment cleaves the emergent rights-bearing homosexual subject from (trans)gender identity, betrays the ethical imports of the aforementioned *kothi/hijra* narratives of violence, and does not provide any protection on ground of gender identity or presentation,⁴⁸⁶ even as it extends the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex (Article 15) to (sexual) autonomy, self-determination, individual sexual orientation and choice.⁴⁸⁷ The final summation is restricted to both homosexuality and privacy. The 'prayer of the petitioner' is to declare section 377 IPC as unconstitutional to the extent it affects private sexual acts between consenting adults in private, such that section 377 IPC may still apply to non-consensual sex (thus poorly substituting for the lack of a gender-inclusive rape law in the Indian penal code).⁴⁸⁸ The judges oblige and answer the prayer:

We declare that Section 377 IPC, insofar it criminalises consensual sexual acts of adults in private, is violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution. The provisions of Section 377 IPC will continue to govern non consensual penile non-vaginal sex and penile non-vaginal sex involving minors.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁴ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 31-35.

⁴⁸⁵ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 56.

⁴⁸⁶ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 56.

⁴⁸⁷ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 89.

⁴⁸⁸ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 101.

⁴⁸⁹ Delhi High Court, *Judgment on Section 377 IPC*, p. 105 - 132.

The structure of the argument of the petitions and the judgment thus harvests *kothi/hijra* bodies for their symbolization of violence and then proceeds to elide and disavow the import of gender variance and public visibility, using their bodies and narratives to legally consecrate a privatized construction of ‘homosexuality’ – this, as I argue later, parallels the material exploitation and disavowal/exclusion of gender variant persons and the *kothi-dhurani* spectrum in (often gay-led) civic activism. The petitions and the ruling not only fail to provide protection across the tenuous border of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in sex work, cruising, etc., but the privacy argument may also work to re-criminalize *kothis* and *hijras*. Moreover, the decriminalized homosexual is an abstract individualized citizen figure who minds the public/private divide and is protected in so far as s/he does so – in this aspect, the petitions and judgment corresponds to ideals of civic participation as established in spaces of civic activism such as pride, as argued later in the chapter.

The criminalization and (failed) recuperation of hijras

The failed promise of decriminalization is characteristic of broader problems with liberal logics of equality citizenship when applied to *hijra* and *kothi* practices, as evident in the contradictory discourse around *hijras* in activism and media. Following the increasing visibility of *gharana*-based *hijras* in the Indian public sphere and politics, a broad activist as well as media consensus emerged that they are wrongly denied civic personhood and equal rights, especially due to the lack of appropriate official recognition of their identity. In both the aforementioned PUCL report and various media articles, they are established as Indian citizens, who deserve equal rights as such: to cite one editorial in the Kolkata-

based daily *The Telegraph* from 2003, '(i)f eunuchs are participating members of a polity, there is no reason why they should need to 'adopt' either of the official genders... [there is a] need to rethink the boundaries of 'official' society, whether in the census figures or in electoral policy.'⁴⁹⁰

However, the nominal inclusion of *hijras* through an invocation of constitutional rights may serve to simultaneously condemn them as disruptive of attendant models of civic equality. *Hijra* practices like *chhalla* or *badhai* (ritualised demands for money in return for blessings during events like childbirth or in public spaces like trains) are likened to extortion or encroachment into private middle class spaces and condemned as disruptive, aggressive or (at best) comical. A spate of media articles on *hijras* (often still termed 'eunuchs') over the 2000s target them for their occupations of begging, 'harassment' and 'extortion', violating private property and space. In typical reports, we read, 'Eunuchs... have been causing great harassment to people, barging into homes and extorting money, reports our special correspondent from Agartala'⁴⁹¹ or 'They gatecrash weddings and childbirths, sing lewd songs and make extortion demands.'⁴⁹² *Hijra* practices are therefore criminalized by the logic of private property and the private-public divide.

Such condemnations have also been reiterated within activist spaces from time to time. To cite one recent instance, in 2011, a group of *hijras* in Kolkata demanded money to bless a newly opened boutique run by the friend of a women's rights activist, who

⁴⁹⁰ 'Gendered roles', *The Telegraph*, 10 February 2003.

⁴⁹¹ 'Eunuch Trouble', *The Telegraph*, 7 Sept 2005.

⁴⁹² 'Eunuchs not always born but made', *Times of India*, 8 Dec 2005.

communicated the matter to several MSM/TG CBOs and NGOs in Kolkata, prompting a senior functionary to issue a public condemnation over social media, stating among other things that such violent behavior has to be condemned no matter who the perpetrator, and that transgender and *hijra* groups cannot expect to get their rights if they violate that of others⁴⁹³ – *hijra* practices like *badhai* obviously do not fare well by such a model of abstract equality.⁴⁹⁴ Further, the condemnation may be extended beyond the ‘extortion’ of *badhai* or *chhalla* to less tangible violations of privacy. For example, in 2011, a participant of the Facebook group LGBT-India complained about ‘transgenders’ in Mumbai who were soliciting for money – ‘when someone refused, they threatened to expose themselves!’ To this, a trans woman replied, ‘Yes a few TGs do it, and this gives a bad name to the whole community’. Here, the imputation of incivility (extortion/disruption/aggression) thus becomes linked with disreputability (‘bad name’), a connection that is later elaborated in the case of pride activism. However, on the other hand, *hijra* practices may also be explicated and recuperated into a broader logic of equality, by being defended as a response to marginalization, lack of opportunity, rights, etc. This is particularly evident in a 2012 exchange on the issue of *hijra* ‘*gunda-gardi*’ (hooliganism, rowdiness) in the same LGBT-India forum, when two participants (designated below as participants 2 and 3) spoke up to defend *hijras*:

Initiator of exchange: *i have full respect for LGBTs but whenever i saw Transgenders, i didnt like the way they demand for money and stuffs.. i was*

⁴⁹³ I have omitted the name of the NGO/CBO to which the activist belonged for reasons of confidentiality.

⁴⁹⁴ Here, I refer to the classical liberal idea of equality defined without regard to social position or opportunity; what are sometimes referred to as ‘negative rights’; see Gray, J. 1995. *Liberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

coming from bangalore and in Maharastra, a shemale came and demanded for money widout any reason. my friend refused her. guess what, she spit on his face.. ...gunda gardi (hooliganism)!!

Participant 1: I definitely agree...

Participant 2: Actually given the hatred that society and the gay community belches out towards the hijra community it is understandable. Their logic is very simple. "Employ us or give us when we beg" I am not saying what she did was right. But she has been hardened to this state by the continuous hatred and neglect that she suffered all her life. I have talked to a few transgenders myself and their logic is undeniable. I am not supporting her actions. I am saying that maybe we should try to understand her point of view before making coming to any conclusion....

Initiator: yo point z acceptable, and so iz inconvenience faced by common man by them. Transgenders face discriminations in their native society, so ampathies (empathies) are wid "em (them). but just imagine if every unemployed or discriminated person starts thinking lyk them! its a hard equation to solve..

Participant 3: As every unemployed person does not behave like a 'gunda' (hooligan/goon), it should be also understood that not every Hijra behaves like the one you have posted about. To take one individual/group's behaviour and to project it on the entire community of transgender/Hijra's is generalization by a huge margin. (...) I have talked to them nicely and they have been nice to me (...) But i have seen them get very aggressive with people who try acting funny with them, or who humiliate them. So, treat them as human, and I guess they will treat you the same way (...)

Initiator: i will oppose u in some parts. 1stly (firstly) i have seen hijras having golden jewelries and bags full o(f) money askin for atleast 25000 + 51 sarees in delhi or UP in pious occasions. and if u discard , dey beat their palms makin fun of next person. i didnt say every one z (is) lyk dem but yea, whomsoeva i met, mostly were projecting same image (...) idk (I don't know) bout u bt its unacceptable socialy (...)

Participant 3: not only to you, they are 'unacceptable' to a whole lot of people. Because the first instinctive reaction of society towards Hijras is, disgust!!! You are not an exception. But what do you expect to do with them if their behaviour is so unacceptable to you?

Initiator: other people wud call them disgust, not me! (...) in simple words, how can some1 expect ampathies from me if he is misusing his power. (...) dey're moving free in many railways n homes n even in malls wid der gunda acts

(hooliganism) (...) for me, WRONG is WRONG! whether straights do it or homos do it...

Participant 3: and I appreciate you for that. The question is that a century or more of WRONG done to them by straights, homos, bis and so on and so forth has to be also taken into account for making the Hijras what they are today. Voicing your disapproval is easy, it is difficult to act on that and set things RIGHT. There are people who are working towards the betterment of the Hijra community and it is of course a slow process because there is so much of resistance faced from within as well as outside the Hijra community. A little bit of tolerance and empathy can make the task easier (...)

Participant 2: (...) thing is when you treat them with disgust they reciprocate it in a double manner. Because they are right in believing that everyone hates them (...) If only tolerance was there in workplaces they would definitely work. When educational institutions don't accept them when nobody would employ them when their own family refuses to accept them when the media does nothing to showcase their plight..i think gundagiri (hooliganism) is only a natural reaction for them...

The second and third participants seek to render *hijra* actions intelligible and justifiable by explaining their violations as a response to social wrongs and the lack of opportunity (education, employability, etc.). Through their argument, they critique the initiator's model of abstract equality ('wrong is wrong' no matter who does it) with a more substantive equality that takes historical disadvantages and socio-economic position into account. But both of these positions are based on an underlying logic of measurable equality that, as Skaria has argued, is constitutive of modern traditions of democratic thought⁴⁹⁵ (including both classical/neo and social/reform liberalism – by emphasizing socio-economic situation and the lack of equal opportunity to explain the disruption of equality by *hijras*, and advocating the equalization of opportunity, the two participants

⁴⁹⁵ See Skaria, A. 2011. 'Relinquishing Republican Democracy: Gandhi's Ramrajya', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 14 no. 2, p. 203-229.

who speak up for *hijras* tend towards the latter strain).⁴⁹⁶ *Hijras* are recuperated into the logic of measurable equality that underlies the various strains of liberal democracy through the calculative rationality of their response – this argument relies on a measurable logic of victimhood, broadly similar to the formation of disadvantaged population groups in terms of enumerable vulnerability for accessing governmental welfare (as narrated in the first three chapters). This position ultimately seeks to remedy the particular inequalities that prompt *hijras* towards the disruption of equality – in the words of participant 1, ‘their logic is very simple. ‘Employ us or give us when we beg’... If only tolerance was there in workplaces they would definitely work... when nobody would employ them... i think gundagiri (hooliganism) is only a natural reaction for them’. The argument therefore hinges on the assumption that given a more equal scenario (employment, familial acceptance, economic opportunity), *hijras* would eventually quit *badhai* and *chhalla* and the attendant *gundagiri*, and behave like proper liberal subjects.

This is the argument that NGO and CBO activist have used to advocate for reform and rehabilitation programs – in the 2000s, several CBOs (including Dum Dum Swikriti Society and Madhya Banglar Sangram) have included ‘income generation programmes’ or IGPs in their agenda, prompted by the recommendations of larger NGOs like SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India). However, *kothis* and *hijras* – meaning both *chhallawali kothis/hijras* and *gharana*-based *hijras* – have often been less than amenable to such reform/rehabilitation and not showed much interest

⁴⁹⁶ For an overview of various strains of liberal thought and political practice, see Gray, J. 1995. *Liberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

in IGPs; thus IGPs have mostly failed to take off on a sustained basis.⁴⁹⁷ As previously mentioned, this resistance or lack of interest prompted Aniket (of the younger *kothi* generation at Berhampore) to condemn *hijras* for sending away a senior transgender activist in Kolkata who had gone to various *hijra* households to rehabilitate them into mainstream professions – ‘but they beat her and drove her out their colony! Only if you give *shomman* (respect, respectability) can you expect to receive *shomman* from the society’. Once again, their incivility (aggression, disruption) is linked to the lack of respectability (*shomman*). This demonstrates how the recuperative argument (and its underlying broadened logic of measurable equality) may fail in the face of recalcitrance to reform and rehabilitation. This argument cannot also explain *hijra/kothi* practices that may not necessarily or always adhere to a logic of measurable victimhood. For instance, in response to participants two and three in the aforementioned Facebook exchange, the initiator points out that *hijras* are by no means uniformly disadvantaged; there are also rich *hijras* with jewelry and expensive clothes who still ‘beat their palms makin fun of next person’ (the *thikri* or gesture of hand-clapping) if denied the demanded sum of money. Thus, both the relatively abstract equality of the initiator and the socio-economically situated liberalism of the participants may be ultimately unable to comprehend *hijra* practices within their logics, except as criminal and/or uncivil.

⁴⁹⁷ One notable exception was Swikriti’s IGP at Ranaghat, which ran successfully for about six months under the guidance of Arijit, the staff member of Swikriti from Kalyani whom we encountered in the first chapter.

II. Of Unruly Practices and Illiberal Logics: *Bila, bhel* and making areas *pakki*

As we shall see, certain *hijra* and *kothi* occupational practices, strategies of survival and resistance may not be entirely intelligible and measurable in terms of liberal logics of equality or rights – and yet, some of these practices have actively fed into the liberal projects of civic activism as exemplified by pride walks. Even as middle class activists may condemn *badhai* and *chhalla* as extortion or violation of privacy, associated strategies of defense and of establishing safe spaces may be used by *kothis* who work with CBOs and NGOs. In this section, I will outline at least three broad arenas of unruly and illiberal *kothi/hijra* practices that have frictionally intersected with civic activism – extra-judicial tactics of securing territorial rights or establishing safer spaces through localized negotiations with police, goons and other powers that be; a transcendental logic of lack used to claim entitlements; and strategies of interaction, provocation or defense that interrupt or exceed measurable exchange and equality in various ways.

Of course, *hijras* (particularly *gharana*-based *hijras*) may use constructions of disadvantage and victimhood to claim access to governmental policies, as was noted in the first chapter, thus potentially recuperating themselves into a model of enumerable disadvantages, and eventually, measurable equality and rights. However, on the other hand, *hijra* practices may also often not ascribe to the aforementioned model of measurable equality and rights-based citizenship. This is not necessarily because *hijras* do not understand the calculative rationality of measurable equality; indeed, they may

consciously choose to relinquish that rationality, even at the cost of potential criminalization, for other benefits. This is particularly evident in the occupational choices of *hijra gharanas* in eastern and north India, as distinct from their counterparts in south India. As mentioned in the third chapter, transgender and *hijra* activists in certain south Indian states (also called *aravanis* or *thirunangai* in south Indian languages like Tamil) have successfully lobbied for certain governmental policies over the last decade – for instance, the institution of ‘transgender welfare boards’, pensions for elderly *hijras*, and even free ‘sex reassignment surgeries’ in certain government hospitals – for which south India has often been held up as an ideal by eastern Indian activists, such as the leaders of ATHB (Association of Transgender/Hijra in Bengal). However, though such demands have also been voiced by transgender activists in West Bengal (particularly at ATHB’s annual ‘transgender day’), *hijra gharanas* in the region do not seem to have pursued or received such governmental provisions. In a conversation with Bindiya, the *kothi/dhurani* community member from the lake area of Kolkata who eventually joined a *hijra* clan, I asked her why this might be so. Bindiya’s reply was revealing:

See, the *hijras* of south India don’t really do *badhai* or *chhalla*. South of Hyderabad (the location of Reddy’s ethnography), *hijras* have never done *badhai*, they do *khajra* (sex work) and other things but not *badhai* or *chhalla*. But here, the *hijras* will never give up the practice of *badhai*, not in a thousand years! That is why the government will never offer free SRS and other services in north India.

Bindiya’s analysis was therefore that this was a calculated bargain – since *badhai* has not traditionally existed for *hijras* in places south of Hyderabad, they have campaigned to overcome socio-economic disadvantages through governmental help; however, since

hijra gharanas in eastern and north India have recourse to the lucrative option of *badhai*, they will never agree to give it up, and thus never fully enter the logic of measurable disadvantage and equality through which they might successfully gain governmental concessions. Whether this analysis is accurate in its regional specifics or not, the larger point is that in claiming governmental benefits, one enters into a bargain with the state and its attendant logics of liberal governance and measurable equality – and as per Bindiya’s analysis, many *gharana hijras* may not be interested in this bargain, even though they might interact with postcolonial governmentality in various other ways mentioned previously (particularly for purposes of official identity – informing police/administration and the media of ‘fake’ *hijras* and thus seeking to governmentally consolidate a *gharana*-based *hijra* identity, seeking identity cards as women or as other/transgender, etc.)

Instead of entering into the process of rehabilitation into measurable equality, *gharana*-based *hijras* may claim rights in various ways that are not neatly assimilable into liberal logics (and as we shall see, these tactics inform strategies used by non-*gharana hijras* and *kothis* as well). Firstly, they may establish extra-judicial affiliations with police or administrative powers to assert and secure territorial rights over particular areas (the *elaka*). In Murshidabad, for instance, there was a long-standing territorial war between Annapurna-*mashi* and her sister/rival Mina between 2007 and 2011, even involving death threats and a shootout (which resulted much excitement and gossip among the *kothis* in Sangram). This was eventually resolved extra-judicially with the arbitration of the district

administration, and new ‘official’ borders of their respective territories where they may perform *badhai* were drawn up with police sanction (whether the police had to be bribed or otherwise appeased to lend this sanction, is anybody’s guess). Another example of the process of securing territorial rights through arrangements with police/administration was described by Amit, Subhash’s daughter, who for a few weeks visited the city of Mumbai (Bombay) to work as a sex worker. Unlike *hijras* in Kolkata, the *gharana hijras* there recruited *kothis* to work as sex workers on a temporary basis, offering them some protection from police harassment in return for a share of their daily earnings – thus in recent years, a large number of *kothis* from West Bengal have starting migrating either temporarily or on more long-term basis to Mumbai, similar to the older translocal circuit of *lagan* (dancing in weddings and religious festivals in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh). Amit was highly appreciative of the ways in which the senior *hijras* in Mumbai had secured their trade through negotiations with the local police:

You know one great thing about there (Mumbai) – *kothi-hijras* have a separate *pon* (here, roughly ‘occupational right’ or ‘established trade’) to do *khajra* there (sex work; *okhane kothi hijre der khajra korar alada pon achhe*). They have separate spaces/territories (*jayga*) to do it, which is not there in Kolkata... the old/senior *hijras* there have made these spaces/territories their own (*okhaner jara purono hijrera, tara jaygagulo nijeder kore niyechhe*)... by doing sex work and negotiating with police for many years, they have made these spaces their very own (*jayga mane taderi kore phelechhe*)... you don’t even have to dress/act in very womanly ways (*laharanpon*) there, people (i.e. clients) come there knowing you are *hijra*! (...) But you can’t encroach into the space/territory (*elaka*) of any other *hijra gharana* than the one to which your *guru* has assigned you, else the *kothis* will all gang up on you and drive you out (...) But yes, you have to

sometimes put up with the *danda* (baton) of the police... but they will let you go. You just have to manage the situation/negotiate maturely! (*sheta tomake pakki kore nite hobe!*) Even I had to deal with the strike of the baton on my butt! (*amaro toh battu-te danda porechhilo!*)

Amit uses the metaphor of ‘*pakki kora*’ (making something mature) to denote these particular strategies of securing and making space (*jayga, elaka*) through various contingent, arbitrary and extra-judicial means (ranging from underhand deals between senior *hijras* and the local police – which would be termed ‘corruption’ in popular parlance in India – to potentially violent encounters between lower-tier *kothis* and particular policemen). Similarly contingent strategies of securing space (or ‘cultivating’ space, to use Annapurna-*mashi*’s metaphor from chapter one) may also be used by *kothis* to establish safer spaces for cruising and socialization, as described later in this section. These various extra-judicial negotiations of establishing *jayga* or *elaka* cannot be recuperated into measurable equality or the abstract uniformity of civic space that Chatterjee analytically designates as ‘civil society’, populated by equal individual citizen-subjects – rather, they evince an uneven particularity and variability of space, contingently made ‘*pakki*’ by *hijras* and *kothis*.

Secondly, both *gharana hijras* and non-*gharana hijras/kothis* who pursue *badhai* or *chhalla* may also claim entitlements or rights (*odhikar*) in terms of an economy of lack, which – unlike the socio-economic disadvantages described in the aforementioned Facebook discussion – cannot be recuperated into measurable equality. Instead of being

bound by civic or economic equality, *hijras* and some *kothis* may claim their ‘wound’ or ‘lack’ (of genitalia, whether discursively claimed or surgically materialized) as an entitlement to special privileges. In his ethnographic work on *hijras* in Benaras, north India, Lawrence Cohen notes how *hijras* may describe their ‘wound’ (of castration) as an ‘all-India pass’ entitling them to ticket-less travel on public transport.⁴⁹⁸ *Kothis* of Kalyani and Ranaghat who performed *chhalla* in trains would similarly claim that being in *chhibripon* (in *chhibri* or *hijra* mode or attire, without a necessarily physical literalization of the ‘wound’) entitled them to free travel in trains – ‘when we are in *chhibripon* we always travel for free’, Arijit once explained to me when traveling from Kalyani to Ranaghat.

This logic is further elaborated to claim occupational rights or *odhikar* of *badhai* and *chhalla*. For example, during a conversation on *chhalla* at Kalyani, Arijit’s friend Arghya claimed, ‘God has made us *kothi*, demanding *chhalla* is our just right (*nyajyo odhikar*)!’ This claim of ‘just right’ was backed up by an elaborate myth of a past infraction and resultant divine punishment which both marked *kothis/hijras* as wounded or lacking, and as divinely entitled to certain occupational rights based on that wound/lack. Over the years, I have heard various versions of this ‘origin myth’ of how *kothis* and *hijras* came to their present state from various *hijras* and *kothis*, including Bindiya in Kolkata and staff members of Swikriti in Dum Dum, Kalyani and Ranaghat. A generalized and abbreviated version that I compiled from several accounts runs thus:

⁴⁹⁸ *Id.*

The goddess Mahamaya, an *avatar* or *roop* (manifestation) of the mother goddess Durga or Parvati, was once sent down to the earth from the heavens in ancient times due to some infraction against senior gods. On earth, she dressed as a female ascetic (*sanyasin*), and sustained herself by begging for alms from villagers and nobles. In the process, she once visited a king who was childless, and whom she granted a boon for having children. In return, she claimed his first child, a son who was *meyeli* (effeminate), a *kothi*. This child grew up under her supervision and care, and one day, fell in love with a young handsome prince whom s/he met while bathing by the river. S/he was so enamored by the prince that s/he chose to disobey his mother's instructions for never bringing any stranger back into their abode. After seducing the prince successfully, the *kothi* son transformed the prince into a hairpin and brought him home, safely tucked in his hair. However, the goddess sensed his presence through her divine powers and transformed him back to his original form as the prince. Seeing that a young man had thus been brought into her house, she became livid, as this young man's presence and gaze violated her purity and sanctity as an ascetic. Due to her anger, the earth opened up and she proceeded to descend to the netherworld, but not before cursing her son for his infraction and betrayal – people of his kind would forever be accursed to a lack of acceptance and love; they would never get social respect/ability (*shomman*) and romantic love (*bhalobasha*). However, they would always get sufficient food and money, but at a price. They would have to cut off their genitals using the sharp shoot of a bamboo, and then ideally turn ascetic, thus gaining powers to confer blessings on people. Then they would go around houses and shops doing *badhai* and *chhalla*, and make their living accordingly.

Thus, the wound translates into an entitlement mediated through a transcendent third figure (the goddess) and sanctioned by her divine promise. By articulating their 'just rights' through such a transcendental economy organized around a mythic lack, *hijras/kothis* challenge or fall outside both measurable equality and the governmental

imperative of economic productivity.⁴⁹⁹ However, this myth also circumscribes them into an interstitial location within, and structural dependence on, a broader social order – which will never accept or love them, but is obligated to support them.

Since the occupations of *badhai* and *chhalla* integrally depend on such demands or claims on society, they are effective when supported by a shared belief among the seeker of *badhai/chhalla* and her client in the auspiciousness of *hijras* (whether ‘genuine’ or not) and their power to confer blessings. However, in situations where such belief might be lacking or not sufficient to ensure the desired amount of money, the divinely sanctioned claims of *badhai* and *chhalla* may be bolstered by various other contingent strategies, reminiscent of the various negotiated ways of establishing territoriality as described above. There are two broad interlinked strategies that will be especially relevant for the purposes of this chapter – *bhel* (flamboyance, display) and *bila* (troublemaking) – because of the ways in which they may be adapted beyond occupational purposes and be used for broader purposes of resistance, feeding into civic activism.

Bhel, as previously described, connotes different ways of flamboyantly and/or provocatively displaying gender/sexual difference, whereas *bila* (trouble, ruckus, conflict) and *bila kora* (doing *bila*) refers both to situations of conflict or violence faced by *kothis/hijras*, and strategies for raising a ruckus or making trouble (*bila kora*) in such

⁴⁹⁹ Foucault, M. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, 296, (Graham Burchell trans., 2008), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

situations. While both *bhel* and *bila* might involve arrange of verbal strategies – ranging from flirtation/seduction to insult – they are bolstered by particularly two non-verbal gestures, the *thikri* (the clap), and the threat to reveal genitalia (or their castrated ‘lack’) by lifting up one’s dress. In the second chapter, I noted how these gestures may be explained as ‘weapons’ (*astro*) that produce fear and shock, whether for offensive or defensive purposes. As Bindia narrated during one conversation, the *thikri* had proved to be particularly effective strategy in various situations of harassment that she had faced, particularly by goons and policemen who would target *hijra* or *kothis* in cruising sites: ‘usually when I walk in the streets by myself, I am quiet, I become just like a married woman (*ekdom barir bouder moton hoye jai*)... but when I am with a group of *hijras* or *kothis* and some *bila* happens, then I do *hijrepon* (act in *hijra* mode) and give *thikri*’. On another occasion, she further explained, ‘when we clap people get intimidated and don’t mess with us... (it makes) people respect and fear us’.⁵⁰⁰

In as much as these strategies may be seen as a response or reaction to harassment or violence, they potentially enter the logic of measurability and equality. However, their affective impact signals both an excess and a rupture – something that viscerally interrupts exchange through fear and shock, rather than merely balancing out harassment through a measured response. The affective import (fear, intimidation) of these gestures may be explained in various ways within *hijra-kothi* communities. For example, during

⁵⁰⁰ Bindia also repeats similar assertions as a protagonist of the documentary *Diaries of Transformation*, directed by a Kolkata filmmaker working with transgender and *kothi/hijra* individuals across the city. See Ghosh, A. 2011. *Diaries of Transformation*, Directed & Produced by Anirban Ghosh, digitization & distribution funded by Pratyay Gender Trust.

one public event during the pride week in 2011 where the transgender activist Ranjana was speaking as a *hijra* representative, she explained, ‘see, everyone is afraid of *hijras* because they think that we are like women, so (they think) we will be soft and meek... but when we are not, when we react like this (sharply raises head up, gives *thikri*) – they get scared’. So here, the affective response of fear is explained in terms of a disruption of the symbolic order of gender and attendant expectations. The second explicatory framework, particularly used in reference to genital exposure, is the threat of emasculation. As Reddy argues, this falls within broader socio-cultural ideas about scopic contagion.⁵⁰¹ In the context of *hijra-kothi* communities, the viewing of castrated genitalia is often thought to lead to desire for castration/penectomy – for example, several *kothis* in the Ranaghat-Kalyani area spoke of how their desire for *chhibrano* (castration-penectomy) would increase after tending to friends who had undergone the procedure, or during rituals when newly initiated *hijras* were consecrated and blessed by senior *hijras* after castration, though such desires might subside later. When attending some of these events with *chhallawalis* like Arijit, I noticed that men were explicitly disallowed from being in the room where such ritualized blessings would take place, or in rooms where newly castrated and penectomized persons were being cared for. During a visit to the house of a *kothi* in Kalyani who had just gone through the *chhibrano* procedure, and was to be blessed by a *hijra* through a ritualized ceremony, I was told, ‘this will be just among us *kothis*, no *tonna* (man) can come in.’ Men are not even permitted to view images or

⁵⁰¹ Cohen, L. 1995. ‘The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics’, in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 276-304; Reddy, G. 2005. ‘Geographies of Contagion: Hijras, Kothis and the Politics of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad’, *Anthropology & Medicine* 12 (3), p. 257.

figures of the goddess of *hijras* (variously called Bahuchara, Bedhraj or Murga *mata* – an *avatar* of the goddess mentioned in the myth above). For example, Bindiya advised me that while as a *kothi* I could watch her worship the goddess, no *tonna* (man) was supposed to be in the room, both because it would violate the sanctity of the goddess, and because it might induce him to become *hijra*. Conversely, during *badhai* or *chhalla*, the intentional exposure of genitalia may carry an implicit threat of emasculation (which is not usually explicitly verbalized). However, as described below, genital exposure in itself is a relatively rare and extreme gesture, and usually the threat itself is enough to achieve the requisite effect, rather than actual exposure. On the rare occasions that it is deployed, it may also be used not only as a shock tactic but also as a marker of authenticity. To cite one example – over 2011 and 2012, Bindiya would often tell me stories about ongoing territorial clashes between two groups of *hijras* in central Kolkata, to one of which she belonged at the time. On one occasion, there was much *bila* (here, conflict) among the rival groups regarding which shops they could visit to ask for donations. During the argument, a relatively senior member of Bindiya's group suddenly disrobed in front of a very embarrassed (male) shopkeeper asserting that she and her group was '*asli*' (genuine) whereas the others were not. In Bindiya's words, she lifted her *saree* and said, 'see, all of these are *akua* (not castrated), I am the *asli chhibri* (real *hijra*) here!' This dramatic act cut short the argument, and cemented their territorial claim: the shopkeeper and bystanders conceded their right to ask for donations over that of the rival group.

This instance demonstrates how non-verbal gestures and the ocular economy of exposure is strategic and allied in complex ways with verbal transactions, but also carries an affective excess that may bring about a dramatic turnaround in the situation. Moreover, these gestures and affects may produce ruptures in a gendered economy of power – it is significant that these acts and gestures seem to be most often directed at men, whether to bolster claims of *badhai* or *chhalla* to male clients, or in defense against harassment/abuse from policemen, goons, etc. In 2012, I had the opportunity to accompany Arijit and her friends as a friend and observer on several occasions when they would do *chhalla* in trains and shops. Arijit used the ‘fear’ of the *hijra* – that she had herself described feeling as a child – strategically against mostly male clients. ‘We have a lot of fun in *chhibripon* (*hijra* attire/mode)! When I go into shops I go prepared beforehand to lift the *saree* (*agei thekei shari tule niye jai*)!... I say, see the *mashis* (‘aunts’, here connoting ‘aunt’ as a common *hijra* appellation) have come, you have to give us something! (...) We do *bila* if they don’t listen to us!’ (Arijit has not undergone castration-penectomy, but during these excursions, she often claimed that she could effectively simulate a *chipti* (vagina) by appropriately folding her legs, if needed). Usually, the threat of exposure was enough – the shopkeepers or passengers would most often turn away, with shock or sometimes with nervous laughter – ‘no *mashi*!’ or ‘what are you doing?’ Arijit and her friends would usually laugh, lighten the situation with casual banter, and then bless the shopkeeper or passenger before departing with their prize. In the case of young male clients, such *bila* was also often accompanied by seductive gestures and flirtatious jokes. For instance, while doing *chhalla* in trains and

buses, Arijit would sometimes suggest matches between younger *kothis* in the group who were her daughters and young male passengers, and then proceed to demand gifts as the mother in law. To approximately quote one instance: ‘Now that you have become our *jamai* (son in law), won’t you give us something? Else this will not end well, I warn you!’ Such statements would lighten the mood and other passengers would laugh, even as the young man in question often fumbled and became embarrassed. The flirtation/seduction of *bhel* and *bila kora* (making trouble, giving threats) thus may be effectively combined as strategies, putting male clients in embarrassing situations and momentarily disrupting their social position and privilege by publicly placing them in an uneasy position of desire and kinship vis-à-vis the *hijra* (thus, in a way, this is also a form of emasculation, even as it affirms the man’s desirable masculinity through sexual flattery). Though *gharana hijras* often proffer a greater degree of asceticism relative to *chhallawalis* and *kothis*, the combination of *bhel* and *bila* may also be used in the case of *badhai*, especially by relatively low-tier *hijra gurus* and their *chelas* (daughter/followers). For example, Mishti, the *hijra* who lives in a small town near Kalyani and whom we encountered in the first chapter, told stories about how she and her *chela* would divide strategies among themselves while visiting houses for *badhai*. They would try to find and target the men in the house – and then, ‘one of us gives *lo* (*lo diy* – act in flirtatious or seductive ways), the other person does *bila*’ (if the money is not paid properly).’

Since these situations are highly specific and variable, there may be a great diversity of particular tactics and strategies cutting broadly across *bhel* and *bila*, tweaked according to

the precise context. However, what is perhaps common across these practices is that they combine the utilization of symbolic acts and exchange (verbal arbitration, flirtatious banter, bargaining for the amount of money, etc.) with a strategic reliance on something that escapes complete symbolization, or something that remains in excess of symbolization – even as it is approached through symbolic gestures such as the *thikri* and (the threat of) lifting up the *saree*. To broadly schematize for our purposes, be it the clap or genital exposure, there is the threat of something that the audience has to *turn away from*, whether or not they explicitly share beliefs about scopie emasculation/contagion. In psychoanalytic terms, these gestures may be interpreted as approaching and revolving around a hole or gap in the symbolic order, where gendered economies of power become potentially undone.⁵⁰² The potency of these gestures may be in that they expose the audience to the threat of symbolic chaos, subversion and emasculation, which has to be put at bay through a range of affective reactions (fear, shock, disgust, even laughter). Through such strategically disruptive uses of non-verbal affective ‘weapons’ that foreground gender/sexual difference, *kothis* and *hijras* practices challenge or are at odds with liberal models of citizenship based on the rational arbitration of conflict through juridically defined rights to ensure a measured equality between citizens in civil society.⁵⁰³ In sum, both through a transcendent economy of lack and through the strategic

⁵⁰² Here, I tentatively adapt from Žižek’s reading of Lacan, particularly his interpretation of the Lacanian *objet petit a* as indicating ‘a ‘hole’ in the symbolic order’ that ‘designates the point at which this spatial order itself breaks down’; See Žižek, S. 2005. ‘The Liberal Utopia: Against the Politics of Jouissance’, Available at <http://www.lacan.com/zizliberal.htm> (Accessed April 28, 2013).

⁵⁰³ I draw from Ajay Skaria’s analysis and critique of modern liberal democratic traditions as resting on an underlying conception of abstract measure and ‘measurable equality’. See Skaria, A.

use of affective excess and symbolic rupture, *chhallawali hijras* and *kothis* may claim to occupational rights (*odhikar*) in ways that interrupt liberal models of measurable equality and rights.

A rising visibility: The disavowed backdrop of civic activism

These various strategies can be also appropriated and used outside of the occupational contexts of *badhai* and *chhalla*, such that these older occupations seem to provide resources for newer forms of assertion and visibility. With the rise of new CBOs, many *kothis* have remarked upon an increasing visibility of their kind, extending beyond older cruising areas, and the occupational contexts of *badhai* and *chhalla*. On the surface, this might seem to parallel Aditya Bondyopadhyay's assertion (cited in the introduction) that the last few years have seen a rising visibility, extending from metros to 'even small towns that never dreamt of having gay pride parades', due to decriminalization and the promise of constitutional rights.⁵⁰⁴ This elides how the strategies for gaining such visibility may draw from other sources and even be at odds with civic activism and attendant strategies for gaining rights, even as they feed into such mobilizations. Speaking of changes over recent years at Berhampore, Srijan remarked of certain perceived developments in the area since the growth of Sangram, and during the very act of narration, indicated how such changes may have taken place:

2011. 'Relinquishing Republican Democracy: Gandhi's Ramrajya', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 14 no. 2, p. 203-229.

⁵⁰⁴ Pande, A. 2013. 'India's Gay Community Fights for Acceptance, Equality'. *Voice of America*, April 11, 2013.

Nowadays there has been an *improvement*... instead of just sitting in the field, *kothis* have come up to the streets, now they sit in the sides under the (street) lights rather than the darkness of the field... (gives loud *thikri*) there are so many *visible kothis* in this area now... so people have become much more aware (*owakebihal hoye gyachhe*). There is much less taunting and harassment (*ton-titkiri*). The people of Berhampore now know that there is also a creature/entity called *homosexual* (*homosexual boleo ekta prani achhe*)!

Even as Srijan's use of the word 'homosexual' suggests a new mode of public legibility paralleling the rise of gay/*samakami* civic activism and media coverage, Srijan indicates that *thikri* and related *bheli* forms of visibility have played significant roles in extending and securing safer spaces from the square field (the older cruising area) to the streets. Srijan is himself one of the 'visible *kothis*' who have participated in this process. One night in the summer of 2009, I witnessed one incident involving Srijan and a young man of the locality that might shed some light on his tactics. We were walking together on the road bordering the square field when a scooter suddenly veered in our direction and blocked our path. It seemed that the young man had noticed the activities of Srijan and his friends:

Man: Hey, why do you guys give *tali*? ('clap', the *thikri*) Are you *hijra*?

Srijan: Of course we will do it! (*korboi toh*)... what are we? We are *hijras* only! (*Amra ki? Amra to hijrei!*)

Man (laughs incredulously): What are you saying, you are *hijra*? Even the other day I saw you peeing by the roadside! (*babah bole ki... ei shedino dekhlam rastar pashe dariye mutchhili* – here the reference to roadside urination indicates that they are therefore not castrated-penectomized, i.e. cannot really be *hijra*)

Srijan: Of course you will see that! (*dekhbi-i toh!*) You will see a lot of other things – you haven't seen anything yet! (*Aro koto kichhu je dekhbi! E toh kichhui dekhlina!*) (gives *thikri*)

Man (laughs): Ok no need to show anything!

Here, Srijan claims *hijra*, the other available identity that is widely publicly legible apart from 'homosexual', and inhabits it as comfortably as 'homosexual', thus designating the loosely conflated spectrum that is characteristic of *kothi/dhurani* circles. S/he also asserts modes of *hijra* visibility (the clap, the threat of exposure) while disavowing castration-penectomy (not even keeping up the strategic pretence that *chhallawalis* like Arijit do). Significantly, *what* is to be 'shown' remains unnamed; again, there is the threat of something exceeding symbolization that the young man turns away from - however, here the exchange remains very jocular on both sides, showing that there need not be a set reaction to or static symbolic function of *thikri* and the related repertoire of *bheli* acts and gestures. Indeed, as previously mentioned in the second chapter, *thikri* may serve both aggressive/defensive purposes and more jocular roles, including as a greeting among *hijras/kothis*, as a gesture used when asserting oneself, or arguing a point.⁵⁰⁵ Moreover, even beyond the community, *thikri* may be robbed of its potency and become more tamed – particularly among *parikhs* and other men who remain outside *kothi/dhurani* circles but who may serve as friends and allies. Such men are often called *pakki* (mature, aware), e.g. in sentences like 'that *tonna* is *pakki*, he knows all about us'. Aniket in Berhampore further coined the phrase *kothi-pakki tonna* (*tonnas* who are *pakki* vis-à-vis *kothis*) to

⁵⁰⁵ On the various uses of the clap among *hijras*, see Reddy, G. 2005. *With Respect to Sex*, p.153.

designate such men, which later on caught on among other *kothis* of the town. *Tonnas* who are *pakki* may to a certain extent mix with *kothis*, become partially aware of subcultural language and repertoire, and sometimes even give *thikri* back to *kothis* in greeting. The loss of *thikri* as a threat thus may translate into a gain in friendship, and at least a partial initiation into the circle.

Establishing such relationships is a crucial feature in making an area (*elaka*) and its associated people *pakki*. Unlike senior *hijra gurus*, most *kothis* associated with CBOs like Sangram typically do not have enough power or clout to strike covert economic or political deals with local police leadership or the city or district administration to secure territorial rights – rather, they rely on establishing good relations with local goons and other powerful young men (such as the cadres of political parties and young policemen) in order to establish safer spaces. Often, this necessitates varied negotiations with initially hostile and potentially violent and abusive parties, using a variety of strategies. For example, one night in the summer of 2009, a group of us were sitting and chatting in the square field at Berhampore, when suddenly a young man approached us and demanded to speak to Srijan. It seemed that the man had been recently sexually refused by Srijan and was offended – ‘if you don’t do it in the field, then why do you come here?’ The man flaunted his connections with the local offices of political parties, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), which at that point was the ruling party of the state of West Bengal, and said that he could, if provoked, unleash a ‘river of blood’ (*rokto-ganga*) on the field. If Srijan wasn’t willing to service him, ‘you will have to stop

coming to the field from tomorrow and give up the company of your friends’. Srijan bravely laughed the threats off and occasionally even gave *thikri* back, even as the rest of us were scared silent – ‘Why will I stop coming to the field and why should I leave their company? Do you know since when I have been coming to the field?... I have seen many like you, so many like you have come and gone! I too know many people in the party (CPI-M)’. The man reiterated his threats and said he would be back the next day to teach Srijan a lesson. Srijan continued to return to the field and had several other altercations; in the meantime I left Berhampore and returned after about a month near the end of summer, when I was astonished to find Srijan and the young man chatting and laughing among themselves at a bus stand near the square field. When I asked how Srijan had managed the transformation, s/he laughed it off – ‘I have handled so many like him! This is nothing!’

Such negotiations, including the strategic use of *bila* and *bhel*, are crucial to make the various neighborhoods or areas (*para*, *elaka*) ‘mature’ or *pakki*. Srijan was among the particularly visible *bheli kothis* in Berhampore who have made their respective neighborhoods *pakki*; s/he was known for hir ability at instant repartee in response to any taunting or abuse on the streets of Berhampore. For example, one night during the Durga Puja in 2012 (a four-day long major Hindu festival in West Bengal when idols of the mother goddess Durga are worshipped in *pandals* or stylized makeshift structures in public places), I accompanied Srijan and a group of hir *kothi* friends, all of us somewhat flamboyantly dressed with make up while still in t-shirt and jeans, to view some of the

local *pandals* and idols. While passing by a group of middle-aged women, one of them pointedly remarked:

Woman: Are these people *ladies* or *gents*? (*era ladies na gents*)?

Srijan (sharply, raising hands as if to do *thikri* but desisting): If you've come out to view the goddess (*thakur*) then why so much *analysis*? (*thakur dekhte beriechhen toh eto analysis kisher?*) Look at Durga, no need to look at us and do so much *analysis*!

Srijan's powerful indictment of binarized gendered expectations and the refusal to be pinned down by attendant 'analysis' had its effect at least in as much as the women were stunned into silence, and quickly moved on. Unlike their reaction, as we toured various neighborhoods of the town, most other bystanders seemed to be much less surprised seeing us, and several people (neighbors, uncles, friends' parents) even smiled and greeted some of the *kothis* in the group whom they knew and recognized. One of Srijan's friends who was in the group remarked with evident delight:

Kothis have made this neighborhood (*para*) *pakki* by doing *bila* repeatedly! (*Ei para ta bila kore kore pakki kore diyechhe!*) Berhampore is much more *pakki* now... every area has *kothis* (*shob jaygay jaygay kothi achhe*), each *kothi* has made her respective *para pakki*, and like this the whole town has become *pakki*! (*je kothi tar para ta pakki korechhe, ei bhabe hoye gyachhe!*)

Such spatialized strategies of '*pakki kora*' or 'making (something) mature' mark how *bila* and *bhel* are directed towards the progressive creation of safer spaces, strategically reorienting and renegotiating public spaces such that they become amenable to *kothi* visibility and presence (even though *kothi* as a subcultural term does not become a public

identity, and terms like *hijra* or *homo* may be used if verbal designations are required). These spatial negotiations are temporary, unstable, ongoing and localized (while demonstrating translocal patterns across different towns – *kothis* at Ranaghat, Kalyani or Kolkata would also often speak of how they had made their respective neighborhoods or areas *pakki*). Just like the *hijra* strategies for establishing territories and associated rights, the strategies of making areas *pakki* for *kothis* are not entirely measurable and abstractable into the uniform orderly space of ‘civil society’ – composed of equal individual citizens, stable laws and rights – due to their contingent, extra-judicial, and potentially violent nature. Rather, we see particular and variable strategies corresponding to uneven spatialities and territorialities.

III. The Regulation of Civic Space: The *Kothi* Spectrum and Pride Organizing till 2010

The rising visibility of *kothis* associated with various CBOs, and the concurrent establishment of *pakki* areas and neighborhoods, has yielded a large number of ‘visible’ people who can be drawn upon for events of civic activism such as the pride walks. The first pride walk in 1999, while significant as a pioneering event, was a relatively small-scale affair, mainly comprising fifteen gay male activists from metropolitan collectives like Counsel Club and Humsafar Trust who had met at a nominally ‘LGBT’ (but largely gay) conference organized at Hyderabad in February 1999, Yaarian (‘Friendship’).⁵⁰⁶ The

⁵⁰⁶ Khan, O. 2012/1999. ‘Friendship Walk 1999’. *Gaylaxy*, August 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/cover-story/friendship-walk-1999/> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

participants of Yaarian launched the mailing list and ‘communication collective’ called LGBT-India (currently hosted at lgbt-india@yahoogroups.com - this is distinct from the Facebook group ‘LGBT-India’, which was launched in 2011 in Kolkata by one of the younger generation of gay activists we encountered in the last chapter). Initially hosted on egroups.com before taking its contemporary shape as a mailing list on yahoogroups.com, LGBT-India was intended as ‘an inclusive group for lesbians, bisexuals, gays, kothis, hijras, double-deckers, transsexuals and other queer and transgendered people in India’ and ‘non-queer allies (were) welcome’ as well⁵⁰⁷ – it thus marked perhaps the first attempt to constitute an equal and inclusive civic forum and collective space for discussions and mobilization, later emulated in pride organizing. Its broadly liberal stance was also accompanied a certain imagination of the nation – LGBT-India proclaimed itself as the ‘country's primary online networking, activism and discussion forum for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues’, and as per the words of Owais Khan, one of the activists who had helped organize the Yaarian conference, it was an attempt ‘to ensure that all LGBT groups and individuals within India start talking the same language, if not the same dialect’.⁵⁰⁸ (The national language vs. dialect opposition here neatly and schematically outlines the logic of vernacularization). This attempt to create a national discourse was based on the assumption of a common national language, English – the language of much online activism. Thus, liberal and national(ist)

⁵⁰⁷ Cited from the description of the mailing list on www.yahoogroups.com (Accessed April 27, 2013).

⁵⁰⁸ Khan, O. 2012/1999. ‘Friendship Walk 1999’. *Gaylaxy*, August 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/cover-story/friendship-walk-1999/> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

logics were constitutively linked in the imagination and institution of LGBT-India as an inclusive countrywide space – a convergence that engendered distinctive exclusions, as we shall see.

The idea for having a pride walk emerged from conversations within the first participants of the LGBT-India forum, and subsequently the idea was taken up by activists from Counsel Club's activist wing Integration Society, particularly Pawan Dhall (who subsequently became a senior functionary of SAATHII, the large HIV-AIDS-prevention NGO mentioned previously) and his then partner, Ranjan. Integration Society hosted the first pride walk in Kolkata and India on July 2, 1999 – fortuitously, exactly a decade before the Delhi Court Judgment on section 377 (July 2, 2009).⁵⁰⁹ However, subsequently due to internal fallouts and tensions, Counsel Club and Integration Society both disbanded around 2001, and small-town members of the Club like Sarswata and Ranajay subsequently branched out to form their own CBOs. This process stalled the Kolkata prides for a few years; the next pride walk was not organized until 2003.⁵¹⁰ This time, the constituents were distinctly different, though senior Kolkata activists like Dhall still retained leadership positions. Between 1999 and 2003, several CBOs had formed in Kolkata and outside through the contact between middle class activists and *kothi-dhurani* networks, including Swikriti, Koshish, Kolkata Rista, and Bandhan (as mentioned earlier, *gharana*-based *hijras* have maintained varying distance from CBOs). With the

⁵⁰⁹ Joseph, S. 2005. Social work practice and men who have sex with men. New Delhi: Sage.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

consolidation of CBOs into the MANAS Bangla network in 2004, their middle class leaders (people like Sarswata and Ranajay) took center stage in Pride organizing. The Kolkata office of MANAS Bangla often served as the meeting spaces for pre-pride planning meetings between 2007 and 2009, even though MANAS Bangla as a network did not officially take part in the pride walk (its constituent CBOs did). Given that the metropolitan gay circles charted in the last chapter were still to ‘come out’ in their present form, most of the participants between 2003 and 2010 were from these networks and the *kothi-dhurani* spectrum, who would be variously represented as MSM, gay or transgender at the media and activist level. ‘Rural gays dominate rally’, proclaimed a 2003 article in the English daily *The Asian Age*,⁵¹¹ in 2009, Amitava Sarkar, the leading transgender activist associated with SAATHII, delivered a presentation at a regional meeting on transgender issues saying that ‘transgenders’ had taken the lead in Kolkata pride for all these years. ‘80 per cent of those who come are *kothis* only’, Sanjana, the TG and *kothi*-identified leader of the CBO Koshish, explained to me during a conversation in 2011 (though by that time the younger gay generation had moved into pride organizing). While several leaders like Sarswata identified as *gay/samakami*, many middle class gay men stayed away from the pride in the 2003-2010 period, given the widespread fear of association with *kothis* and visibly gender variant and trans people, as explored in the last chapter. In a conversation I had in 2007 with a gay-identified student of Kolkata’s Jadavpur University, where I completed my master’s degree between 2005 and 2007, he frankly explained: ‘I understand that *kothis* are often the most *visible*, and so they go, but

⁵¹¹ ‘Rural Gays Dominate Rally’, *The Asian Age*, July 2 2003.

maybe if more *middle class* people went rather than just the *kothis*, then more of us would attend'. (The pioneering lesbian feminist collective in Kolkata, Sappho for Equality (founded in 1999), also did not take part in pride for other reasons, mentioned later).

On paper, however, the leaders and organizers of the Pride Walk maintained a broadly inclusive stance, using LGBT and the 'rainbow' to indicate that anyone could join in this space, thus continuing the stance of inclusion and equality maintained by the LGBT-India mailing list. The pride walk itself has been officially called the 'Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk' since at least 2007. For example, the 2007 Kolkata pride pamphlet – which I helped author as a volunteer for SAATHII – proclaimed: 'The rainbow stands for diversity in gender and sexual expressions, each of which is equally worthy of 'pride' just like each colour in the rainbow. The word 'rainbow' has been adopted by many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and other sexual minorities the world over as their symbol of 'equality and unity in diversity'.'⁵¹² This marks the convergences of a transnational LGBT imaginary, the liberal discourse of equality and diversity and the attendant imagination of an inclusive civic space, and the rhetoric of Indian nationalism ('unity in diversity' or '*boichitrer modhye oikyo*' is a common slogan of Indian national integration).

⁵¹² 'Kolkata Rainow Pride Walk' (Pamphlet). 2007. Kolkata.

While well intentioned and aimed at inclusion, this convergence of trans/national liberal discourses largely elided and vernacularized *kothi-dhurani-hijra* formations and languages under the transnational terminology of LGBT, rainbow, etc. (a process in which I, as a volunteer for Kolkata NGOs, was complicit), even as most of the actual participation in pride drew from the increasing visibility of *kothi* networks. However, sometimes *kothis* were explicitly evoked as violated bodies to bolster the main activist agenda of Kolkata pride in the 2003-2010 period – decriminalization and the campaign to repeal section 377 IPC. For example, the 2008 pamphlet began with brief case studies of three *kothis* who had suffered from violence, harassment or abuse: ‘Ashok, an HIV positive Kothi individual from Baruipur, 24 Parganas (S) was denied treatment at a government hospital in Kolkata and driven to suicide... Amit... is a Peer Educator with an NGO that runs sexual health programmes for Kothis, Hijras and other males who have sex with males... Amit was sexually assaulted by ruffians on his way home from outreach duty. When trying to register an FIR he was denied outright any help from the police.’ (The Amit referenced here is the same as Subhash’s daughter Amit). Similar to the Naz petition and the judgment itself, all of these cases are reduced to the symbolic cause of section 377, to be addressed by the anti-377 campaign: the pamphlet goes on, ‘Section 377 IPC goes against our Constitution... though it applies as much to heterosexual couples as it does same-sex couples, it is the latter that bear the brunt of the law.... Though the number of actual convictions under Section 377 till date remains very small (only 29 between 1860 and 2000), the threat of the law looms large. Its existence allows the police to harass and threaten lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and

extort money from them'. The pamphlet also reflected the attempt to extend the decriminalization campaign at the national level: 'Campaign against Section 377 IPC: A public interest litigation (PIL) was filed by Naz Foundation (India) Trust, New Delhi in 2001... Supported by... (the) National AIDS Control Organization, the PIL is currently being heard in the Delhi High Court.... lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender support groups are also organizing an online signature campaign against the law... You can join in too by visiting <http://www.voicesagainst377.org/>'.

This official agenda continued the elision of the dynamics of violence against *kothis/hijras* evidenced in the petition and judgment: years later, when I pointed Amit to the pamphlet and asked her about the effect of section 377, she explicitly revoked the claim that it was a prime factor in propagating police violence, as cited in the introduction. 'When the police here harass or torture *kothis*, I don't think they do it knowing about 377', she said, and added that 377 probably affected *thung-thang* or fragile, elite *kothis* who were unused to the realities of quotidian harassment and abuse. The discrepancy between her articulation of her experience and the case study as used in the 2008 pamphlet is both reflective of the hierarchies that structured pride organizing (a hierarchy of which I was a part), and of the larger elision of *kothi/hijra* concerns under the liberal-nationalist agenda of decriminalization, parallel to the vernacularization of associated languages and discourses of gender/sexual variance.

At the same time, this emerging scene of civic activism relied on the aforementioned *kothi* strategies of visibility and making space (*elaka pakki kora*), particularly through the involvement of low-tier outreach workers and peer educators of the existing MSM projects, who were recruited by NGO and CBO leaders for various onerous tasks like doing the legwork for police permission, organizing supplies and amenities (like drinking water) for the walk, drawing other *kothis* into the walk to shore up participation, raising funds, and so on, given that these tasks often necessitated good working relations with the powers that be in particular areas of the city. The emergence of the abstractly inclusive civic space of pride thus often depended on particular space-making strategies.

In 2008, for instance, Piyush, a low-tier worker with a CBO in south Kolkata, narrated how he and his friends had to skillfully deal with the police during repeated visits to obtain the permission for holding the walk on its designated route: ‘We went to the police station last evening... they harassed us, saying, is this a group of Rituparnos? (Rituparno, a well known film director in Bengal who recently passed away in May 2013, was known for his flamboyant stage presence, and had come out as *samakami*)... but we are each a Rituparno! You know how *kothis* do *bhel*... We are all *pakki*... what could they do to us?’ Saroj, a rising leader of Kolkata Rista, a CBO based in low-income areas of north-eastern Kolkata, also helped with police permissions and other work such as arranging for drinking water in several years. She repeatedly took pride in how *pakki* she and the other *kothis* had made their particular *para* (neighborhood), which meant that they had established the functional relationships that helped in such tasks.

The *kothi* labor pool of existing MSM projects in or near Kolkata also fed into pride-related work. Nakul, the gay activist whom we encountered in the last chapter, worked as a relatively senior staff member of MANAS Bangla's project at Dum Dum, which till its closure was run mainly by community members associated with the CBO Swikriti. The *kothis* who worked under Nakul had become adept in establishing amenable (*pakki*) spaces through *bila* and *bhel*. In the summer of 2011, when there was trouble in a local hospital that refused to test and counsel people for HIV, Nakul instructed the *kothis* to go there and do *bila*: 'Go and do *bila* there! These people just need to be given *thikri*! (*Giye bila/khutni kore diye ashbi! Eder thikri dite hoy!*)' Later that day, I went out with a group of these *kothis*. Walking through the neighborhood, the conversation turned to the pride walk.

Group member 1: hey, how would it be if we had *pride* at Dum Dum one year? Couldn't we do it?

Group member 2: (laughs) *Pride* at Dum Dum? Is there a need to do a *pride* here?

Group member 3: Yes, we have pride here everyday!

Group member 2: Yes, everyone is *sensitized* here... everyone is *pakki*!

Through the assertion of how they have 'pride' in the neighborhood everyday, the *kothi* staff members deflate the self-importance of mainstream activism and its grand, national teleology of liberation ('What has happened since the judgment is that enormous, exuberant force of people have become unleashed', etc.). At the same time, this particular network of *kothis* and the areas that they have made *pakki* over the years have come into use for several pride walks. For example, during a planning the 2011 walk – the year

when the leadership began to shift to younger gay activists like Soumen (see last chapter) – it was decided that the funds required for the walk would be collected through donations from LGBT community members. However, participants of the meeting wondered where to get sufficient number of people to raise enough donations. A senior NGO activist immediately recalled Swikriti's 'field' at Dum Dum:

Senior activist 1: Say Nakul goes to visit one of his *field sites* at Dum Dum; if you sell ten *coupons* to ten *kothis*, then you will be able to collect ten rupees each... and they in turn can collect more.

Participant 2: Should we price the *coupons* at ten rupees or five rupees? Many people would not want to give ten rupees...

Participant 3: but we are targeting *kothis* only!

(the implication being that they, as participants of pride, will be more likely to donate).

Senior activist 2: (in a slight reprimanding tone) Hello, *LGBT!*

Participant 4: (laughs) yes, sorry, *LGBT!*

The exchange demonstrates the extent to which *kothi* networks and associated 'fields' (*elakas* made *pakki* by *kothis*) may be taken for granted, even as a newer gay-identified circle becomes active within pride planning – and not only as a potential catchment area for funds. Later in the meeting, it was further suggested that members and staff from CBOs like Swikriti be recruited as volunteers (and Swikriti members or staff at both Dum Dum and Ranaghat – including Arijit's circle in Kalyani-Ranaghat – did indeed collect funds that year; some additionally worked as volunteers). Significantly, despite this dependence on *kothi* networks, *kothi* is not included within the official, politically correct and inclusive term 'LGBT' used to designate the communities participating in pride,

marking the boundaries between public and activist usage and vernacularized terms – the reprimand on correct terminology and the laughter in response demonstrates the tacit agreement (and perhaps also embarrassment at the use of inappropriate language) through which such a boundary gains hegemony. This also parallels the larger disavowal of the dependence on *kothi* networks in much pride related literature such as pamphlets (both Bengali and English), which mostly credit metropolitan gay and ‘LGBT’ (at the most ‘transgender’) activists for their leading role in civic activism.⁵¹³

The regulation of pride walks: Civility and respectability

While the exclusion of K(othi) and H(ijra) (not to mention even less recognized terms like *dhurani*) from the ‘rainbow’ of LGBT might seem to be a relatively minor semantic point, there are broader patterns of regulation of the space of pride against certain kinds of *kothi-dhurani-hijra* visibility. Even as such strategies like *bila* and *bhel* have informed the emergence of ‘visible’ communities and safer spaces, leaders and senior CBO representatives may seek to such circumscribe and contain such strategies within pride walks and similar activist events, in the process instituting and enforcing hierarchies that determine access to civic space. In particular, there may be an alignment between respectability (*shomman*) and civility/civilizedness (*shobhyota*), particularly through convergences between nationalism, liberal discourses, and socio-cultural ideas of

⁵¹³ For example, the pamphlet for the 2010 pride described how ‘front rank activists’ from Indian cities had come together to organize the first Kolkata pride walk, which subsequently extended to include participants from small towns – there is no mention of how such participants have aided pride planning and mobilization; see Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk (Pamphlet). 2010. Kolkata.

respectability and decency. This would be often enforced through a style of pedagogy and leadership reminiscent of, or explicitly drawing upon, nationalist reform movements.

The Kolkata Pride walks in the 2003-2010 period demonstrated a distinctive convergence and co-implication of nationalist and liberal frameworks, particularly through the legacy of Bengali humanism drawn from the anti-colonial movement and literature of the pre-independence period. LGBT rights are articulated through the claim to a humanity worthy of respect and dignity, cross-fertilised with discourses of universal human rights shared through activist ‘advocacy networks’ and the transnational ‘civil society’ of NGOs across the world.⁵¹⁴ This is manifested in the close association between an elevated rhetoric of *monushotwo* and *manobota* (humanity, human dignity) drawn from pre-independence Bengali humanism (which included both cultural nationalist and anti-nationalist/cosmopolitan strains), and *manobadhikar*, a more contemporary formulation corresponding to the transnational ‘human rights’ framework, disseminated through NGO networks, UN agencies, and state discourses. The coalitional slogan for the pride walk through 2007-2010, *Chai manusher adhikar niye banchte*, or ‘We want to live with the rights of the human’, references both these spheres of influence. As a phrase, *manusher adhikar* – ‘rights of the human’/‘human rights’ – has an exact precedent in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), arguably the central figure in Bengali literary and

⁵¹⁴ Keck, M. E. & Sikkink, K. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

cultural spheres in the first half of the 20th century. Tagore's 1900 poem *Apoman*⁵¹⁵ (Insult/Disgrace) protests centuries of denial of '*manusher adhikar*' to the oppressed and outcaste sections of Indian society and indicts dominant culture for this millennial disgrace against humanity, which has resulted in civilizational downfall and the present colonized state of the sub-continent; the poem thus concludes with a 'programmatic... call to all' towards social equality.⁵¹⁶ In other poems, the concept of *monushotwo*/humanity is also extended to anti-colonial critique, for instance, in the indictment of British colonial atrocities in Africa (Tagore articulated a strong critique of both colonialism and nationalism in his writing, but was still associated with the nationalist movement in various capacities and composed what became the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh; thus he is often cast as a nationalist icon).⁵¹⁷ As both cultural capital and political strategy, Tagore's poetry and music have been appropriated and frequently performed in pride marches and associated cultural programs – for example, the singing of Tagore songs during and after the walk, as described below.

Given their anti-colonial legacy and nationalist deployments, *manush* (the human) *manobota* and *monushotwo* (humanity) are heavily affectively loaded terms in literary and formal Bengali. Many of the speeches by leaders such as Sarswata and Pawan Dhall

⁵¹⁵ Tagore, R. 1910/1998. *Song Offerings/Gitanjali* (Joe Winter trans., 1998). Vancouver: Anvil Press Poetry.

⁵¹⁶ Spivak, G. C. 2002. 'Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching', *Diacritics*, Vol. 32 no. 3/4, 2002, p. 19, 20, 29.

⁵¹⁷ Tagore's own literary corpus is large and there is moreover a vast secondary literature, especially in Bengali; for an overview of his life and work, See Tagore, R. 2011. Fakrul Alam (editor); Radha Chakravarty (editor), Rabindranath; Alam, F. (editor); Chakravarty, R. (editor) (2011), *The Essential Tagore*, Harvard University Press (published 15 April 2011).

during the pride walks of 2007-08 commonly stressed the importance of being given human rights (*manusher adhikar*) and well as respect or dignity due to humanity (*manusher shomman*). One common aspiration, found across several speeches, is that ‘*amra shommaner shathe banchte chai*’ – we want to live with respect and/or dignity. Several slogans also emphasize the demand for *shomman*. For instance, a placard from 2009, made by a staff member of the erstwhile head office of MANAS Bangla in Kolkata reads - ‘*ghrina bonchona lanchhona, e amra chai na, shomman prem prerona, ei amader kamona*’ (hate, deprivation, abuse – we do not want these; respect, love and inspiration – these are our aspirations/desires).

However, as evident across so many strains of liberal humanism, the association between the human, rights, respect and dignity is double-edged – the attainment of the *shomman* due to humanity is also predicated on becoming worthy of such *shomman* and demonstrating one’s self-respect (*atmo-shomman*) through one’s behavior and comportment. Thus, the evocation of humanist ideals may accompany the condemnation of behaviors deemed unworthy of such respect and dignity, and the attendant pedagogical disciplining into becoming respectable, dignified and responsible citizens. This draws from and feeds into the common disparagement of *bheli* behavior within *kothi* communities, and attendant hierarchies of respectability. For example, as mentioned previously, relatively senior community members among the younger generation at Berhampore, such as Aniket and Aditya, often condemned the behavior of *kothis* and *hijras*, particularly marking them as unworthy of respect – in Aditya’s words, ‘to get

respect, you have to be worthy of respect (*shommaner jogyo*)'. As Aniket was wont to put it, 'to get *shomman* from society, you have to behave in a respectable (*shommanjonok*) way' - thus connecting social respectability with the mutual reciprocity of liberal ideas of equality and civility. The connections between humanity (*manobota*) and *shomman*, as both social respectability and individual dignity, are particularly evident in an open letter that Aditya wrote and got published in the spring 2008 issue of *Swikriti Patrika*, the magazine of Dum Dum Swikriti Society. Addressed to the broad 'community', the letter struck a cautionary note about the behavior of certain community members, which it argued was coming in the way of the struggle for acceptance and rights, reminiscent of Row Kavi's injunction cited in the introduction.

Please remember, all our problems will not disappear only if Section 377 is revoked. When people come to truly understand the problems of *kothis*, only then the real purpose of our movement would be fulfilled. And to accomplish that task we need reason, education, skill, self-respect (*atmo-shomman*) and the sense of humanity (*manobota*). Remember, certain strange behaviors employed by [some] *kothis* - such as doing *bila* or giving *thikri* in public spaces - is not seen in good light by even other *kothis*, let alone the mainstream.⁵¹⁸

Shomman here denotes not only social respectability, but also a proper self-regard and respect (*atmo-shomman*), and comportment in accordance with human dignity – a proper awareness and conduct of the self that marks one as worthy of social respect, acceptance and rights ('only then the real purpose of our movement would be fulfilled'). The connections between public behavior or comportment, self-respect and social

⁵¹⁸ *Supra* note 88 at 2-3.

respectability were even more specifically elaborated by Sarswata on several occasions when he sought to discipline his *kothi* daughters. During a meeting among members of Sangram preceding the Kolkata pride walk in 2009, various issues such as appropriate dressing and behavior during the pride walk were discussed. At one point, Sarswata went into a pedagogical monologue – suited to his position and demeanor as a professor – that particularly targeted their public behavior of certain *kothis* in both Berhampore and Kolkata:

You people *imitate* women but don't do it thoughtfully (*tomra meyeder imitate koro kintu bhebe koro na*)... why don't you take what is good from women (*bhalo ta nebe na keno*)? Women have so many talents... the way you behave on streets, do women do that? Doing *bila* on the streets – that means (you) have no self-respect (*atmo-shomman*)! (*Rastay danriye bila kora, tar mane toh atmo-shommani nei!*) No one here has any *respect* in the town except Akhtar. I don't like saying this, but it is true. Standing on the streets, standing beside the field (square field, Berhampore), and doing *ha-ha-hi-hi* while wearing sarees and bangles (at this point, he imitates typical *bheli* gestures) – that basically means you have no self-respect (*atma-shomman*)... have you thought about how it looks/appears to the society (*kerokom dekhay sheta*)?

Here, Sarswata conflates and aligns a broad range of practices/behaviors with the lack of certain self-consciousness ('you don't act thoughtfully... have you thought about how it appears') and an attendant lack of self-respect (*atmo-shomman*). (Some) *kothis* are thus marked not just as socially disreputable (as opposed to respectable middle class cis women whose behavior/comportment they should 'imitate'), but also as insufficient or

failed sovereign subjects (sovereignty here in the sense of self-awareness and self-mastery), who consequently cannot ensure or do not deserve social respect and dignity. Such denunciations were also evident during pride planning meetings in Kolkata, when *bila* and *bhel* were explicitly linked to a lack of civility. Till 2009, the meetings were typically held in the head office of MANAS Bangla, and were in principle open to everyone, like pride itself – however, NGO and CBO representatives repeatedly targeted disruptive practices such as *bhel*, *bila*, and *thikri*, and voiced injunctions for both externally enforced rules and an internalized sense of greater responsibility and self-awareness, particularly within the space of pride and similar events (even as they otherwise may rely on such strategies for other purposes, as previously described). One particular exchange from a meeting in 2009 stands out as an example, where Nakul (the Swikriti activist) was present, along with Akhtar from Berhampore and Sonia from Koshish, whom we met in the second and third chapters.

Participant 1: Every time (at the pride walk) there is *bila* (ruckus/trouble-making behavior) – there need to be *rules*... and I don't mean *rules* against dressing/make-up (*shajano*).

Nakul: yes, self-critique (*atma-somalochona*) is very necessary... everytime there is *bila*! Good *kothis* come (to the pride) but *biltal kothis* (*kothis* prone to do *bila*) come as well!

Participant 1: yes, but we have to take them alongside/include them as well... (*oder-keo niye cholte hobe!*)

Akhtar: *Kothis* themselves must take responsibility (*dayitwo*), and must communicate that to their respective groups (CBOs) as well.

Sonia: In 2005-06 there was a lot of *ashobhyota* (uncivil/uncivilized behavior), for example, making gestures like this (demonstrates a *thikri* and then a *bheli* facial gesture signifying mockery of the audience), then doing like this and this in front of the media (demonstrates an undulation of breasts), but from 2007 it has become less... because we are all taking responsibility (*dayiwto*) for our respective groups (*je jar dayitto nichchhi*).... (...) but one thing, every time I see that after the *rally*, *kothis* do *arial bhel* and *bajar* (do a lot of *bhel* and ‘marketing’ for *parikhs*)... this time maybe, we should say that after the *rally*, everyone should go back to their respective places... each *organization* should take responsibility for their members going back (without *bhel* or *bajar*).

This exchange produces several dichotomies and aligns them vis-à-vis each other – responsibility (*dayitwo*), self-respect (*atmo-shomman*) and self-critique (*atmo-shomalochoha*) on one side, as opposed to incivility and uncivilized behavior (*ashobhyota*) on the other, as exemplified by overmuch *bhel* or *bila* (in Bengali, ‘*shobhyo*’ translates as both civilized and civil – therefore *ashobhyota* can signify both incivility, and the state of being uncivilized). Through such discussions and injunctions, the shifting intra-community hierarchies along lines of respectability (*shomman* and *izzat*), which as described in previous chapters are reflective of anxieties around public gender/sexual behavior, are here translated into civic hierarchies – i.e. hierarchized dichotomies which determine access and position within public activist spaces, and more broadly, the imaginary-material space of Chatterjee’s ‘civil society’ constituted by equal sovereign citizen-subjects (or persons who wish to attain such a status).

As indicated by Sonia's quote above, the pride planning meetings from around 2007 onward gradually led to a consensus among senior CBO activists on the necessity of greater self-policing of excessive flamboyance, public cruising, etc. There was a specific ban on the particular gesture of *thikri*, enforced through surveillance by appointed members of the 'community', particularly relatively senior staff members of MSM projects.⁵¹⁹ Such surveillance extended the governmental technologies of 'behavior change communication' (BCC) and 'information, education, communication' (IEC) used in targeted interventions for HIV/AIDS control.⁵²⁰ The complex hierarchical structure of peer educators, community advocates, shadow leaders, outreach workers, etc., established by the state AIDS control society and CBO networks like MANAS Bangla in the process of administering BCC/IEC, thus comes to be utilised for the purpose of not just educating 'target groups' on health issues such as safer sex (the standard functions of BCC and IEC), but also on civic behavior during public events. In 2007-09, community members occupying relatively senior administrative ranks were designated to police the walk and control errant behavior. People who used *thikri* in response to real or perceived taunts from surrounding crowds, or used 'vulgar' or foul language, were monitored disciplined by senior community members – 'don't you guys have any sense of shame?' (*toder lojja kore na?*) Such reprimands were not necessarily always effective – people would sometimes laugh, desist for the moment, and continue once out of earshot; many of the

⁵¹⁹ The 'consensus' I mention here was not officially recorded in the meeting minutes; however, it was evident in attempts by senior community members and activists to regulate behaviours such as *thikri* that I observed in the Kolkata Rainbow Pride walks of 2007, 2008 and 2009.

⁵²⁰ On the use of BCC and IEC in national health discourse, see National AIDS Control Organisation, *National BCC/IEC Strategic Framework for HIV/AIDS Programme* (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, 2004).

kothis targeted were also used to hearing such reprimands from their seniors within MSM projects (recall here the disciplining of *bhel* as opposed to legitimate *kaaj* or work, as recounted in the second chapter). However, it did demonstrate how governance and the disciplinary gaze were sought to be internalized within the community and the individual.

The injunctions against particular ‘shameful’ behaviors also signals how the public-private divide, integral to the liberal-nationalist discourse of decriminalization, may feed into the dichotomy between respectable/civil and uncivil/disreputable behavior. This was particularly evident in distinctions between legitimate public self-expression of one’s identity and excessive displays of gender/sexual difference (e.g. the flamboyance and provocation of *bhel*). As a local celebrity and LGBT icon, the singer Siddharta, put it in an interview to Swikriti Patrika: ‘It’s great to express oneself, and there is nothing objectionable should someone choose to *cross-dress*, for that is their personal gender choice; however, one shouldn’t do it so *loudly* that it trivializes the issues of the movement.’⁵²¹ *Bhel* and related practices are thus relegated to just ‘personal’ self-expression, which if brought too much into the public sphere, detracts from and trivializes the real ‘issues of the movement’ (decriminalization, equal rights) through their overmuch ‘loudness’ (excessiveness, crassness). Siddharta’s injunction against ‘loudness’ has been echoed by other activists. For example, some *kothi*- and trans-identified persons from Sangram (including Mallika) were harassed by the police for being sex workers when they went to tour a cruising area of Kolkata right after the 2011

⁵²¹ Translated, see Swikriti Patrika 14 (5th ed. Surya Dipta Nag ed., Dum Dum Swikriti Society) (2008).

pride walk; after they informed me, I contacted several activists from among the pride organizers who stepped up and helped to extricate them from the situation. However, the next day, one of the younger activists opined that the *kothis*' own behavior and dress during the pride walks had also been too *ugra* (excessive, extreme), and indicated that might have had a role in provoking the police harassment. (This is, of course, reminiscent of the common pattern of blaming (cis) women for provoking sexual violence and rape through their dress or comportment, in India and worldwide). These instances demonstrate how the activist demand for freedom of gender/sexual expression may be simultaneously raised and contained in terms of the constitutional rights to privacy ('personal gender choice') linked to the modern conception of an interiorised gender/sexual personhood that does not challenge the broader public ordering of intimacy and gender (one slogan used at various prides in India, which has several variants, is that 'the state should not enter the bedroom' – this may be traced back to at least the 1960s, e.g. the Canadian minister Pierre Trudeau's remark that 'the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation'.⁵²²) Through policing gender/sexual excess within its constituencies, tendencies within the movement seek to conform to both an ordering of civic space and cultural nationalist injunctions of proper femininity (i.e. feminine sexual expression should be familial, private, and restrained if it is not to be too 'loud', disruptive of civic exchange, or provocative – an injunction that may be applied both to (cis) women and to other feminized subjects). The public/private divide – which can

⁵²² Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canadian Minister of Justice, Remark to Newsmen, Ottawa, Canada, (December 21, 1967) (Reported in THE GLOBE, Toronto, December 22, 1967. He was commenting on the government's proposal to overhaul Canadian criminal law, giving new recognition to individual rights in several areas, including sexual behaviour.)

understand *hijra* occupational practices only as criminal – thus also renders the associated repertoire of *bila* and *bhel* as uncivil, extreme, excessive, and/or crass.

However, given the crucial dependence of the pride walks on *kothi* communities through the 2003-2010 period, in addition to the condemnation and/or exclusion of errant behavior and people, community representatives and leaders also sought to include them into the civic space of pride and related events through a pedagogical training into citizenship, reminiscent of nationalist reform. Processes of division and exclusion are accompanied by simultaneous assimilation through the deployment of Bengali nationalist and humanist legacies, used to educate unruly community members into more disciplined and civil forms of expression and dissent. During the pride walks of 2008 and 2009, senior activists led participants through pre-set slogans and iconic nationalist songs. At designated points within the rally, activists sang inspirational songs ranging from the Bengali version of ‘We Shall Overcome’ (*Amra korbo joy*) to nationalist-era songs such as Tagore’s rousing *Ekla chalo re* (‘If no one comes in answer to your call, walk alone!’). Everyone was encouraged to join in if they knew the words; at other moments, slogans were raised in a call-and-response fashion, reminiscent of mainstream political rallies with their multi-tiered hierarchy among party leaders and cadres. Again, this was enforced through the same hierarchical structure that administered MSM (and later TG) projects. During one meeting in 2009, Ajit, a senior activist and friend of Sarswata’s based in Kolkata’s southern suburbs, lectured the attendees on how they should learn from the example of nationalist heroes like Subhash Chandra Bose, a Bengali

revolutionary icon, and described how Bose aroused the masses against British policies through his lectures. (Ajit was also a prominent singer of Tagore songs in the walks, and gave many speeches over several years of the Kolkata pride). These processes mark the insertion of the Bengali nationalist and humanist inheritance (the discourse and rhetoric of *manobota*, *adhikar*, *shomman*, etc.) into state and NGO-administered technologies of governmental power, directed at the welfare, uplift and (self-) governance of the community under the aegis of middle class leaders. Overall, the pride walk becomes a space where lower class/caste sections are sought to be educated into civic norms both to maintain the ‘dignity of the walk’ and to ‘establish the rights of community people’, claimed via both *manobota* and *manobadhikar* (humanity, human rights).⁵²³

Beyond the specific case of pride walks, forms of middle class culture such as classical or ‘fusion’ dance, art songs and theater may also come into play as safe and contained venues for gender/sexual expression in other events for advocacy or awareness-raising held during the pride week, where the display of gender/sexual difference need not interrupt the ethos of civility but rather find space within it. As Bourdieu argues through his influential sociology of culture, mediums of cultural expression such as music index class and social position, and thus become crucial to processes of social mobility.⁵²⁴

CBOs such as Sangram and Swikriti have particularly organized ‘cultural programmes’ during the ‘pride week’ in June or July, and sometimes also at other times of the year, as

⁵²³ As cited in the introduction, these lines are quoted from the minutes of a meeting in 2007 circulated in English among the participants after the meeting, which was public and open to all.

⁵²⁴ Bourdieu, P. 1979/1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Pure Taste* (Richard Nice trans., 1984), Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

a way of communicating pride-related agendas to a mainstream audience. In this context, Aditya's open letter in *Swikriti Patrika*, which advocated the attainment of 'reason, education, skill, self-respect and the sense of humanity' among *kothis*, further went on to state that there is a lot of talent within the community, which needed to be utilized and highlighted to achieve the aforementioned goals:

I have seen that a lot of *kothis* tend to be very talented, through their talent they can become exemplary for the rest of society... then they will truly take part in the struggle for rights.⁵²⁵

Aditya signed off the letter as a *shongheet-shilpi* (musician), and is in real life a singer of both Hindustani (North Indian) classical and Tagore songs – thus it cannot be in doubt what kind of 'talent' is referenced here. Such 'talents' mark *kothis* as productive, creative subjects who are worthy of becoming proper rights-bearing citizens ('then they will truly take part in the struggle for rights'). Soon after his 'open letter' was published in *Swikriti's* magazine, Aditya sought my help in writing a proposal for ICAAP, the International Conference on AIDS in the Asia-Pacific, which was about how 'cultural' activities like music and dance could help in bringing together the MSM community across class and behavioral splits, thus bolstering their struggle against both HIV-AIDS and social discrimination. 'As you know, here is a huge fissure between *bheli* (flamboyant, campy) *kothis* and rest of the *kothi* community', he told me while we drafted the abstract. 'But *cultural programmes* with music and dance can bring them together...and can also be a space for awareness-raising and expression', he went on.

⁵²⁵ Sarkar, A. 2008. 'Letter'. *Swikriti Patrika* 2008.

Thus, as he argued in the proposal, these forms of cultural advocacy needed more attention from funding agencies, and current targeted intervention programs on health issues like safer sex were not enough.

Akhtar, another Sangram activist whom we have met before, is a professional *Bharatnatyam* dancer who organised a ‘dance drama’ on the broad theme of ‘marginalisation’ in 2007, a year before Aditya’s open letter. One evening during rehearsals, he told me, ‘Our dance is not going to have any depiction of vulgar taunting on the streets’. ‘Nor any *kothis* giving *thikri* in response to the taunting,’ interjected Mallika, who was a prospective performer. ‘Yes,’ replied Akhtar, ‘we are going to show everything but in a much more *abstract* manner’ (italicised word in English). He continued, ‘else, it looks distasteful, of low standard (*nimno-maner*).’ Artistic ‘abstraction’ here signaled a safe distance from the actual modes of on-street resistance undertaken by many *kothis* and *hijras*, seen as distasteful and vulgar, even though the theme was the marginalisation of these very people. One can also perhaps sense here the necessary abstraction of intimate and embodied experience in order to ascend to the proper political culture of the liberal public sphere.⁵²⁶ Akhtar’s ‘dance drama’ aspired to use abstract art to convey serious socio-political meaning without the vulgarity of embodied resistances – ‘The paintings of M.F. Hussain might be difficult to understand,

⁵²⁶ Compare Berlant, L. G. 1997. *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham: Duke University Press; and Fraser, N. 1990. ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, 25/26, p. 60, with Habermas, J. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 28 (T. Burger and F. Lawrence trans., 1991), Cambridge: MIT Press.

but don't they mean anything?', he asked. Here, different senses of abstraction that characterize civil society and high art become functionally conflated as modes of distinction from 'low standards'.⁵²⁷

For the music, Akhtar chose a lushly orchestrated track from the film *Guru* by the noted composer A R Rahman, *Jaage Hain*. As he explained, 'it shows a process of awakening, of coming together' (of the marginalised). In the film, the song is a rousing paean to the efforts of an industrialist to build an entrepreneurial empire; a much celebrated inspirational figure for the Indian middle classes in the post-liberalization period.⁵²⁸ As the music developed, the dancers – initially scattered and debilitated through unspecified traumatic experiences – recovered and gathered together, hand in hand. Into this veritable *bildungsroman* of the awakening political subject – set to the theme song of an icon of middle class aspiration – Akhtar recruited some of the most *bheli kothis* of the area such as Mallika, who, as mentioned earlier, has been frequently upbraided for her inclination towards provocative *bhel*, including public cruising and aggressive response to harassment or abuse. During the rehearsal, she told me, 'I don't know why it is that *kothis* take to dancing so well... If I can dance, I don't want anything else'. Even as she spoke and Akhtar looked on, she illustrated the pleasures of dancing by performing *mudras* (ornamental gestures) through graceful hand movements, reminiscent not so much of

⁵²⁷ For the abstract rationality of civil society as a mode of distinction, *see* Fraser, 1990, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 60; for art as social distinction, *see* Bourdieu, P. 1984, *Distinction*, p. 2.

⁵²⁸ Ratnam, M. *Guru* [Motion Picture], 2007. The song is used in the climactic scene of the film, with the industrialist celebrating national leadership and pledging international success to a stadium-full of staff, family and admirers.

actual ‘classical’ (*Bharatnatyam*) gestures as their popularised versions in Hindi film dances. Clearly, this was a permissible forum for ‘feminine’ gender expression and flamboyance. Various community-based events organized by MANAS Bangla in and around Kolkata in the 2007-2011 period demonstrated the use of popular culture, particularly Bollywood, to create a circumscribed space for various sexualized and unruly embodiments, akin to the space of the carnivalesque. A typical COC (‘cycle of celebration’) event would start with speeches in highly formal and literary Bengali delivered by leaders like Sarwsata and Ajit, followed by a sequence of programmed dances, recitations and plays, and lastly, as the night wore on and the senior leaders and guests left, a disruption of the stage-audience boundary through licentious Bollywood dances in which everybody would join in. Eventually, seniors like Ranajay (who often functioned as a host in these events) would come on stage and break the party, announcing to everyone that the fun was over, and summing up some of the messages of the day. Through the institution of such spaces, the containment of potentially provocative or disruptive embodiments becomes a part of the pedagogical reform of unruly subjects into citizenship – though, of course, such projects may fail.

IV. Challenges to the Old Guard and the Gentrification of Pride, 2011-Present

Just as *kothi-dhurani-hijra* networks may resist the reification of ‘target groups’ for governmental policy (Chatterjee’s ‘political society’), they may also challenge their pedagogical assimilation into ‘civil society’ by contesting and refiguring forms of civic

engagement and modes of claiming citizenship. This is not to argue for a voluntarist or entirely self-conscious idea of agency, but rather their potentially productive location within structural contradictions and possibilities, prompting the contestation and reinvention of civic spaces. Further, from around 2008-2009, there were also various challenges to older activist hierarchies by representatives of certain CBOs, particularly the set of upwardly mobile *kothi* and transgender activists who became associated with ATHB (Association of Transgender/*Hijra* in Bengal). However, while these processes momentarily created new political possibilities, they eventually culminated in a crisis of leadership such that the 2010 pride was almost cancelled. Subsequently, in response to a temporary vacuum created by the fall of the old guard (particularly the MANAS Bangla leaders) and the increasing visibility of middle class gay circles like the groups of Soumen and Anubhav, there was a takeover of pride organizing and leadership, leading to a decrease in the participation of CBOs and associated *kothi* networks – which might be termed the gentrification of pride.

To begin with, it did not take long to perceive the contradictions of middle class leadership, which may contradictorily balance the disciplining of lower class visibility with the performances of class distinction and the visibilisation of LGBT identity through consumption. The Berhampore activist Aniket, who was herself quite censorious of overmuch *bhel*, was struck by what she perceived as the double standards of Kolkata leaders while attending NGO meetings in the city. She particularly commented on the behavior of one senior MANAS activist, Ananda, who had been quite active in the

censoring of *thikri* during the 2006 and 2007 prides. ‘Ananda was so distracted with her make-up during the general meeting; about half an hour into it she took out her purse with a flourish, and started doing her face, showing off her fancy lipstick... what *bhel!*’ Ananda’s not-so-subtle marker of class distinction (expensive cosmetics) is thus reduced to merely another form of *bhel* – thus catching the hypocritical disavowal within middle class attempts to discipline *kothi* flamboyance, and re-ascribing *bhel* to leaders.

If this is a minute quotidian event, this dynamic of re-ascription and reversal was played out on a much larger scale during the rebellion of rising transgender-identified activists against the leaders of older NGOs like MANAS Bangla and SAATHII over 2010 and 2011. Amidst various allegations of monetary corruption, hierarchy, lack of transparency, etc., there was a telling attack on how one activist – one of the founders of Kolkata pride – had allegedly indulged in lavish ‘drink parties’ on grant money meant for organizing workshops on transgender/*hijra* issues. Even as the accused activist scoffed at the unidiomatic use of English – ‘I am unable to understand what ‘drink party’ means’ – the imputation of profligate decadence and excess crystallised around ‘drink’ is unmistakable.⁵²⁹ In response, the accused activist made public a rigorous accounting of the expenditures undertaken, as proof of his adherence to due procedure.

⁵²⁹ Correspondence cited from the LGBT-India list, lgbt-india@yahoogroups.com, also circulated on related lists like the INFOSEM list, AIDS-India, etc. Given the unverifiable nature of and ongoing controversy around these accusations, I intentionally omit references to specific accused parties, authors and e-mails.

But beyond merely holding leaders to their ideals of discipline, and subjecting them to the same kind of scrutiny as the lower rungs of the 'community', there also may be the reconfiguration of norms of civic engagement. This becomes evident in the lower class usage of spaces like pride, utilizing the possibilities opened up by a functional contradiction that has characterized the pride walks since their inception. While on one hand it is a protest march claiming equality through the high rhetoric of humanity, human rights, and the constitutional rights to privacy and personal freedom, on the other it is also a celebratory pageant of difference with almost a carnivalesque sense of flamboyance and excess. This double-edged nature is particularly prompted by and reflected in the media coverage, which has typically mixed issue-based reports with lavish photo-features, particularly focusing on flamboyantly dressed participants and people who visibly stand out in terms of their gender/sexual difference. The potential sensationalization and commoditization of difference has prompted some organisations like the lesbian feminist front Sappho for Equality to stay away from participation in pride, citing the media objectification of gender/sexual difference. As one of their senior functionaries told me during an interview: 'we will go only once it is a walk about homosexuality, not homosexuals'. While their discomfort with the display and potential objectification of 'homosexuals', detracting from the issues pertinent to 'homosexuality', is understandable from their ideological stance as feminists, many *kothis* and *hijras* have used this space precisely to foreground their embodied difference that the dominant activist discourse seeks to control by relegating it to the realm of personal gender expression. Going beyond the demand for equality, the fairness of extant gendered norms of civic

participation may be contested. And like the project of disciplining, forms of cultural expression like music and dance become crucial to this contestation.

In the 2009 walk, I noticed a self-identified *hijra*, Sujata, walking among a cluster of people including some senior activists. One of them, Ajit, was mentioned earlier as a good singer of *rabindrasangeet* (Tagore's songs) as well as *adhunik* ('modern', i.e. contemporary) Bengali songs, and has led several performances of songs such as Tagore's *Ekla cholo re* ('Walk alone') during past pride walks. This time, however, Sujata took the microphone and said that she would sing something. She began innocuously enough, with a somewhat lofty *adhunik* song about human dignity and respect. However, even as the others started humming to the song, she broke into dance to the lines: 'Time itself is changing/ I have gotten my rights; You are changing yourself/ I have been given my rights' (my translation). This was sung almost satirically, while executing Bollywood-style dance gestures along with the *hijra* gesture of *thikri* – with swaying hips and seductive hand gestures punctuated by loud claps provocatively directed at fellow walkers and roadside onlookers, all characteristic of typical *bheli* behavior. However differently and ambivalently one may read this performance – seduction, flirtation, resistance, explicit gender performativity, etc. – what at least seemed clear was the provocative imputation on the word 'you', signaling the 'mainstream' audience of Pride as well as the surrounding activists, who are hailed to respond to these forms of performance and communication of difference, combining the discourse of equal rights with the affective, non-verbal 'weapons' of *bhel*. Sujata's bold

interpellation of her audience put the burden of change squarely on the mainstream and the elite sections of the movement – rather than as gendered labor to be performed by feminised *kothis* and *hijras*, as demanded within projects of reform (e.g. Aditya’s injunction to acquire ‘reason, education, skill’). In as much as such a performance may be read as a gendered and sexualised political gesture, it might also be understandable through Laurent Berlant’s concept of ‘diva citizenship’, which ‘does not change the world’, but is ‘a moment of emergence that marks unrealised potentials for subaltern political activity’.⁵³⁰ In this case, it challenges and refigures modes of civility by foregrounding and performing – indeed, making a spectacle of – the realm of the ‘intimate’ or the ‘private’ (Siddhartha’s ‘personal gender choice’) so as to challenge the elisions engendered through the normative constitution of these terms (family-oriented, hetero- and homonormative) within public discourse.

Sujata’s performance also points to of appropriations of pedagogical cultural media such as music and dance to subversive effect, using them break into spaces identified with ‘civil society’, and undermine the normative distinctions that guard access to it. Thus, rather than outright rejection, there may be a reclamation and re-articulation of such cultural forms through *mélanges* with inappropriate civic behavior or ‘low’ culture. Further, such appropriations may also result in the uncomfortable literalization of ideas of equality in ways that work to displace the older leadership. Here, let me describe a particular event to do with the literal and metaphoric displacement of an iconic

⁵³⁰ Berlant, 1997, *The Queen of America*, p. 223.

rabindrasangeet (Tagore song), *Aguner Poroshmoni* – roughly translatable as ‘The Touchstone of Fire’. A rousing call for self-expansion through sacrifice to a higher cause, this popular song has become a staple of Bengali middle class left-liberal circles, and is often interpreted as a revolutionary hymn and sung at public protest events (such as the many rallies that were held in Kolkata in the wake of corporate land-grab and related abuses in Singur and Nandigram, areas of rural West Bengal where peasants’ land was taken over by the state for corporate industrial projects in the late 2000s). The song has also been performed at several Kolkata pride walks that I have attended, either during the walk itself or as a culminating gesture at the end of the walk and the speeches.⁵³¹ But I was surprised when it turned up at a candlelight vigil in 2008 referencing the Transgender Day of Remembrance, organized by the aforementioned CBO Kolkata Rista, which mainly comprises *kothis* and transgender-identified persons from lower class migrant non-Bengali backgrounds, most of them Hindi or Bhojpuri-speaking. The location of the CBO is significant – a worker’s colony in north east Kolkata, which is only slightly better than a slum in terms of living conditions and is yet juxtaposed to a new and glitzy multiplex complex. (The contradictions of post-liberalization India could not be more

⁵³¹ The words to the song are as follows (my translation and transliteration):
Aguner Poroshmoni (The Touchstone of Fire), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Place the touchstone of fire on the spirit	Aguner poroshmoni chhowao praane
Make this life blessed in its sacrifice to light.	E jibon punyo karo dohon daane II
Lift up and hold this body of mine	Amar ei deho khani tule dharo
Make it the lamp of your divine house	Tomar oi dehaloyer prodip karo
Let the flame stay alight day and night in song.	Nishidin alok shikha jwoluk gaane II
Let your touch on the surface of darkness	Adharer gaye gaye porosh tabo
Make stars bloom anew, all through the night	Shararat photak tara nabo nabo
Darkness will melt from the sight of the eye	Noyoner drishti hote ghuchbe kaalo
It will see light wherever it may fall	Jekhanei porbe shethay dekhbe aalo
My suffering will rise as a flame upward.	Byatha mor uthbe jwole urdhopaane II

apparent). The vigil was held in a ‘cruising’ area around a lake called Subhash Sarovar, across the street from the colony. The lake is a disreputable and dangerous area after dark, where several *kothis* had been victims of sexual violence over the years. That summer evening, we arrived at the location – press, CBO members, and senior NGO functionaries – only to be confronted with a power cut, routine in low-income areas of the city. As a result the event had to a slow start, everything being chaotic in the dark. With much shouting of directions and jostling around of people (irrespective of the rank of activists), somehow a semblance of a circle was formed and the candles were distributed. Subsequently, some order and hierarchy was reestablished, and two senior NGO leaders lead the vigil with speeches in English and Bengali against Section 377, and homo- and trans-phobic violence. After these mandatory addresses, there was a hesitant pause, and we wondered what would be coming up next – when Saroj, the CBO leader, called out, ‘hey, what is that song we sing usually on such occasions?’ Someone piped up, ‘Do you mean *Aguner Poroshmoni*?’ ‘Yes, yes,’ replied Saroj – ‘anyone who knows the song, please lead.’ So people who knew the song started singing and the rest joined in to the tune, which seemed to be familiar enough to permit collective singing, though many among the non-Bengali crowd scarcely followed the lyrics and would join in a beat or two after the ones who did. As is typical during such inspirational hymns, we linked hands during the performance – an uncomfortable procedure given that we were also holding on to the candles while standing the muddy ground, slippery after a recent shower. However precarious and tuneless the performance, all the senior functionaries

stayed on until the end, awkwardly holding hands with the motley group of slum-dwellers, junior activists and the press.

As a symbolic event, the vigil signaled the arrival of Saroj – herself a resident of the colony, though better-educated than most of his CBO members – as an important player within the NGO circle of Kolkata (and by extension, West Bengal; she later played an important role in the insurrection against MANAS Bangla, mentioned above). In that context, how do we read her evocation of *Aguner Poroshmoni*? Given the demographics of the group that sang it that night – mostly non-Bengali lower class migrants from UP and Bihar merged with Bengali middle class activists – the choice was both odd and apposite. On one level, Saroj merely indexed a culturally appropriate civic ritual and thus established that he knew how to play by the codes. At the same time, this was done without mentioning the author (the revered Tagore) or the song name, subverting its aura of middle class respectability through the casualness of reference, which moreover made the ritualistic and formal nature of the activity clear. This would indicate a strategic use of a middle class cultural form, subverting its conventional use as a pedagogical device within the movement. However, there could also be another and perhaps more radical reading. Saroj's appropriation of a civic ritual also compelled the leaders to momentarily realise a more equalized form of civic participation. As activists joined hands over the slippery, muddy ground to sing this familiar song, they were momentarily interpellated into an equalized revolutionary community, however fragile, illusory and temporary. This interpellation compelled them to depart from their comfort zones – quite literally, as they

negotiated their way through a familiar song in an entirely defamiliarised and physically uncomfortable setting. The broader implication of such defamiliarisation might well be that the putatively inclusive ideals of civil society may be so only in as much as they can be displaced from their normative universalizing forms and reinvented in new contexts⁵³² – rather than being directed at recalcitrant subjects of disciplinary power as a pedagogical training for citizenship.

The gentrification of pride: The new civic space of social media

However, these moments of potentiality have been short-lived – the refigured possibilities of civic participation as indicated in various moments of reversal, appropriation and rupture within pride walks and related events did not result in the long-term substantive inclusion of the *kothi-dhurani-hijra* spectrum within pride organizing and activism. The increasing challenges to the first wave of NGOs and leaders (particularly MANAS Bangla) escalated into a crisis in the months leading up to the 2010 pride walk. In particular, the identity-based opposition of ‘transgender’ based activists from ATHB (including those we encountered in the third chapter, and others like Saroj) to MANAS Bangla as an ostensibly MSM-restricted network resulted in a stand off between the respective leaders of the two networks, as a result of which the 2010 pride

⁵³² While I agree with this argument in Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism*, it need not necessarily go with an endorsement of his ‘socialist universalism’ in response to the seemingly universalizing logic of capital; rather these concepts may need to be interrogated for their pre-emptive universalizing move, which predicts what form such reinvention may take based on assumed universals such as ‘capital’. Amin, S. 1989. *Eurocentrism*. New York: Monthly Review Press; See also, Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.)

was almost cancelled – during the months leading to pride, it became increasingly clear that whichever side would organize the pride, the other would boycott it along with all its constituent CBOs. I heard reports from both factions that leaders had forbidden lower-tier community and staff members from attending pride in case the other side organized it. CBOs like Sangram and Swikriti, which did not take sides in the putative MSM-TG battle between ATHB and MANAS, also stayed away for the most part, for fear of offending senior leaders on either side and thus potentially harming future prospects for obtaining funds and getting projects. Finally, ATHB stepped up at the last moment and organized the pride walk – resulting in the lowest attendance in years. Whereas the 2008 and 2009 walks had seen at least two or three hundred participants (four or five hundred in some estimations), this walk had about a hundred people or less. ATHB subsequently directed its efforts to organizing its annual ‘transgender day’, held every year on April 30th with a specific focus on a TG identity-based agenda (as detailed in the third chapter), rather than the common space of pride. Thus, the potential disruption in the broad civic space of pride and related events that had been signaled by rising activists like Saroj became relatively contained in the form of TG identity politics, its boundaries restricted in scope through its opposition to MSM.⁵³³

The ‘MSM-TG’ stand off did not improve by 2011, by which time MANAS Bangla was under considerable internal strain and showed signs of breaking up (MANAS effectively ceased functioning in 2012 when all of its MSM projects, and concurrently those run by

⁵³³ See the third chapter.

Swikriti and Sangram, were arbitrarily terminated by the state AIDS control society, on grounds of alleged financial corruption at one zone of MANAS – Sangram and Swikriti were even more unjustly targeted as guilty by association).⁵³⁴ In the scenario, senior activists like Ajit and Pawan Dhall (of SAATHII) contacted the emerging gay circle of Soumen and Anubhav, both of whom we met in the last chapter, to take up the organization of pride. This prompted an ostensible shift from the hierarchical and pedagogical model that marked the first few years of Kolkata pride organizing. Soumen had independently started a Facebook group called ‘LGBT-India’ in 2011. He launched the call for a pride meeting on this forum, and subsequently, established a separate online forum called ‘Kolkata Rainbow Pride Festival’ (KRPF). Much of the pride planning and the related dissemination of information have since shifted to discussions within the LGBT-India and KRPF groups, though physical meetings are still held (whereas previously CBO representatives from within and outside Kolkata would congregate for pride meetings, typically at the old MANAS office). CBOs are nominally informed of meetings by e-mail, but as several mid-rung and low-tier activists do not have consistent Internet access and the requisite fluency in English (the default dominant medium of many Facebook groups), their participation in pride planning and organizing has considerably lessened from 2011 onward. Yet, significantly, the increasing prominence of their online network was perceived as a Soumen and his friends as a move to a more clean, equalized, individualized participatory space, as opposed to the older NGOs and

⁵³⁴ I have written on this defunding process in more detail elsewhere; see Dutta, A. 2012. ‘Indian Sexual Minority Communities Devastated by Funding Cuts’. *World Policy Blog*. Available at <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/23/indian-sexual-minority-communities-devastated-funding-cuts> (accessed 28 March 2013).

CBOs. This marked a refiguration of civic space, in keeping with the wider emergence of a new wave of middle class organizing through social media in India leading to various agitations and protests (such as the 2012 anti-rape protests), which commentators have seen as heralding a new ‘civil society’ and ‘participative democracy’.⁵³⁵ In a conversation in 2012, Soumen explicitly located the changes in pride organizing within this broader shift:

Soumen: After the 2010 *pride* flopped, Pawan and Ajit (senior activists) called me up... because I had started the first (LGBT) Facebook group in India, called LGBT-India... they said, they wanted someone with a *clean image*, at whose call many people will turn up... a lot of people don't want to come seeing these CBO-NGOs... they say, again the NGOs will use embezzle funds in our name...
(*ei CBO NGO gulo dekhe toh oneke ashte chay na! bole abar NGO, abar toh dekhiye taka khabe!*)

Me: well, but that is also because those CBOs actually had *grassroots members* to exploit.

Soumen: Well yes, the CBOs did both good and bad. But see – the huge rally that happened (in response to a gang rape in Delhi in 2012)... did any organization (*shongothon*) have to *organize* it? Everyone came *individually*...

Me: that happened due to *social media*...

Soumen: Yes, that is exactly what I am trying to say! That is why I have thought/decided (*bhebechhi*) that I will circulate an open invite on Facebook ... everyone will share it as much as they have the guts to, people will join in as they want to (*jar jerom shahosh thake share korbe, je jerom ashte chaibe ashbe*). But yes, I have noticed that last time (i.e. in the last pride) there were less people from the *grassroots level!* (*grassroots level-er lok kom chhilo!*)

⁵³⁵ For example, see Barn, R. 2013. ‘Social Media and Protest – the Indian Spring?’. The Huffington Post, January 9, 2013. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/professor-ravinder-barn/india-social-media-and-protest_b_2430194.html (accessed on April 27, 2013).

Facebook and social media are therefore aligned with the ideal of an abstract, universalizable space, indefinitely extensible and openly accessible. As an ideal civic space, social media is seemingly open to all, where anyone who wants to can participate in an equal basis without going through the respective leadership of NGOs and CBOs, who are associated with corruption and nepotism (even though Soumen momentarily noted the loss of ‘grassroots level’ in post-2011 prides, he did not dwell on it, nor did it affect subsequent pride organizing). Soumen’s intervention marks the supersession of NGOs as hierarchized intermediaries by a civil society ostensibly open to everyone, where participation is on an individual basis. The allegations of arbitrary use of power and monetary corruption among NGO/CBO leaders by transgender and *kothi-hijra* activists is thus transmuted into a blanket distancing from NGOs and CBOs and their processes of constructing and population for access to governmental policies. While the older NGOs and NGO leadership sought to directly deal with *kothi/hijra* unruliness and incivility through a nationalist-liberal ethics, even if through a hierarchized pedagogical model, here lower class/caste participation via NGOs and CBOs is simply elided through the illusion of an open individualized space, which is in effect largely dominated by middle class gay men (as recounted in the last chapter, most of Soumen’s friends circle are gay-identified males working the corporate sector, and they have supplied most of the participants in the online forum as well). Moreover, this is accompanied by the shift to an overt participation in consumerist spaces such as ‘gay parties’, which formerly were only organized privately by upper middle class gay men, for the purposes of fundraising. In

this, the Kolkata Pride organizers have followed the lead of other metro cities – Since about 2007-08, LGBT or queer parties for fundraising have been organized in metro cities like Delhi and Bombay. For example, the ‘Pink Rupee Party’ organised by the Delhi-based queer group *Nigah* in the summer of 2009⁵³⁶ raised funds for a week-long ‘QueerFest’ comprising film screenings, performances, workshops etc. Members of the ‘queer’ community were invited to attend a dance party at a prominent city pub for a donation of Rs. 400: ‘The pride of Nigah QueerFest is that it is funded by the Queer Community... The last 2 years have been a great success with your love and support... Yet again, we invite you to the fundraiser party to show your support and dance the night away with us’.⁵³⁷ The Kolkata Rainbow Pride Festival’s parties (KRPF) parties have maintained a lesser fee, but are still inaccessible to a substantial number of people from the *kothi-dhurani-hijra* spectrum. Such events draw from and celebrate the rising economic presence and visibility of the big city gay/lesbian consumer, and their purported ability to contribute to social transformation without necessitating further ethical or political commitment (the ‘pink rupee’; ‘show your support and dance the night away with us’). This may seem to correspond to a shift between ideological positions that have been marked as ‘old’ and ‘new’ modes of middle class citizenship: the post-independence citizen who is oriented towards civil-service, austerity and moral responsibility to the nation, is overtaken by a rising post-liberalization citizen-figure who fulfils the social contract by virtue of being a worker and consumer driving the economy,

⁵³⁶ Nigah, *Nigah Invites you for the Pink Rupee Party*, <http://nigahdelhi.blogspot.com/2009/08/nigah-invites-you-for-pink-rupee-party.html> (Accessed April 29 2012).

⁵³⁷ *Id.*

and thus need not shy away from consumerism.⁵³⁸ (However, as Mazzarella has pointed out, these are more ‘normative positions’ that mark contests in middle class self-definition than accurate descriptors of middle class reality, and one should be wary of overstressing the divide – much of the civic ideals that Soumen avows are in common with older leadership and he demonstrates a continuing sense of responsibility for building social movements; however, the strategies for middle class participation and leadership in such movements may be changing substantially, concurrent with the rise of information technology, the corporate sector, social media, and so on).

Despite this shift to a more metropolitan middle class constituency, the pride walks of 2011 and 2012 continued to rely on CBOs and attendant *kothi* networks for strategic purposes, specifically requesting CBOs like Kolkata Rista and Swikriti to handle issues like police permission, continuing their responsibilities in previous pride walks. This meant that *kothi/hijra* members of these CBOs continued to aid pride organizing, but with even less voice and visibility in pride planning and organizing than before, due to the marked shift to online spaces. Whereas previous prides included the banners of respective CBOs, from 2011, CBO banners were expressly disallowed from the 2011 pride to foster the sense of ‘individuals’ coming together for a ‘common issue’ under the single KRPF banner. Thus, the ideal of an equal civic space fosters newer forms of consensus-building and regulated participation – the figure of the ‘individual’ in itself serves to exclude

⁵³⁸ Mazzarella, W. 2004. ‘Middle Class’, in *Keywords in South Asian Studies* 1 (Rachel Dwyer ed.) (2004), Available at <http://www.soas.ac.uk/southasianstudies/keywords/file24808.pdf> (Accesses March 1, 2012). Baviskar, A. and Ray, R (Eds). 2011. *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

modes of collective visibility and, in effect, bolsters the visibility of the metropolitan middle class. Moreover, despite the ideal of open individualized civic spaces, the older pedagogical models may be *still* resorted to as and when required to regulate the visibility of lower class participants. For example, after observing some *kothis* doing *bila* in the 2011 pride walk, Soumen suggested that there be general behavioral guidelines announced at the beginning of the walk and volunteers assigned to monitor the crowd for the 2012 pride. But there was also a twist to these older patterns of regulation – the KRPF organizers also arranged for a ‘band’ (not by themselves, but through Kolkata Rista) to accompany the walkers for a section of the walk, playing popular Bollywood tunes, which created a certain permitted space for flamboyance within the walk, while providing the media with many photo ops. Here, the older pattern of interdictions against *bhel* and *bila* gives way to a certain contained inclusion of objectified difference, where the walkers may dance licentiously for the benefit of the media (thus containing the rupture represented by Sujata’s takeover of the microphone in the 2009 pride, and other specifically targeted uses of *bhel* or *bila*, with a generalized spectacle of people ‘flashing their true colors’, to go by one media report).⁵³⁹ At the same time, however, constructions of ‘trashiness’ were invoked to circumscribe *kothi/hijra* participation in KRPF events – notably, a 2011 exhibition that included artworks by members of Sangram and Swikriti was targeted by an erstwhile senior activist of MANAS Bangla as ‘rainbow trash’, unworthy of the meritocracy of the market.⁵⁴⁰ ‘Inappropriate location, shoddy display, poor design and craftspersonship... There are better products with better design, pricing

⁵³⁹ Agrawal, S. 2012. ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow’, *Times of India*, July 17, 2012.

⁵⁴⁰ The diatribe was posted in LGBT-India and KRPF groups by the activist in question, whose name I suppress here for reasons of confidentiality.

and execution that are available - some from within the 'holy community' itself, so why this?' There was an accusation of favoritism towards community members rather than an ostensibly equal-opportunity meritocracy as per a market-based model; this eventually prompted KRPF members to put in more rigorous quality control for subsequent events, e.g. requiring the submission of electronic CVs for any artist to be considered in pride events, which immediately excluded a whole range of potential participants without the means of access to requisite technology – thus completing the alignment of activist 'civil society' with a market-based meritocracy.

Apart from the loss, containment and/or exploitation of participation by *kothi-dhurani-hijra* networks, even the putatively open nature of social media groups was soon to be officially circumscribed in terms of permitted language, once again demonstrating a distinctive convergence of nationalist and liberal logics, particularly the idea of a national 'link language', and that of equal and inclusive civic participation. A few months after the establishment of the 'LGBT-India', some members of the Facebook group posted comments to the effect that there should be an administrative policy mandating that English (and Hindi 'by concession') be the compulsory languages of communication so that everyone can understand – in the words of one of the members, 'for the sake of *inclusiveness* and *basic decency*, moderators should ask members to post in India's 2 link languages only – English or Hindi' (my emphasis).⁵⁴¹ Others protested the inclusion of even Hindi as being rude and cutting out people. These comments followed several posts

⁵⁴¹ Cited from the discussion thread on LGBT-India, www.facebook.com. The names of the participants have been suppressed to maintain their confidentiality.

by Sampoorna, a newly-formed support group for lower-middle to lower class lesbian women and trans men, which had been in Bengali. The comments prompted a long debate where several people (including me and Soumen himself) advocated translation and language pluralism as a better mode of civic inclusion than compulsory English/Hindi; eventually Soumen formulated a compromise administrative policy, which encouraged everyone who knew English to post in it, but allowed others who were not comfortable in the medium to post in their chosen ‘regional language’, with the proviso that group members should help translate such posts into English as and when requested to by those who did not understand that regional language. Significantly, as I realized after the debate was over, translation *into* ‘regional languages’ *from* English was never advocated as a mode of increasing the inclusivity and access of these spaces and communities – English remains the default and putatively universal medium for civil communication, in comparison to which communication in the ‘regional’ languages or ‘vernaculars’ appear as exclusivist or parochial, even lacking in ‘basic decency’.

This returns us to the overarching concern of this dissertation with vernacularization. The circumscription of (already constricted) online spaces through logics of civility (basic decency, inclusiveness) and the nation (India’s ‘link languages’) constructs, in Chatterjee’s terms, the imaginary of a national ‘civil society’. Here, the national, transnational and cosmopolitan become defined through inter-ethnic representation rather than inter-class/inter-caste inclusion within and across particular regions. The stipulation of English and Hindi as ‘link languages’ evidences the attempted construction of a public forum where the national subsumes and supersedes the ‘regional’. In this logic, regions

are constructed in culturalist terms as per ethnic identifiers rather than as dynamic, translocal cross-caste, cross-class formations (which also implicitly assumes the upper-middle class/upper caste representation of regional identity). The national, cosmopolitan and the non-parochial then becomes defined in terms of *inter-ethnic* rather than inter-class or inter-caste communication – the Facebook group ‘LGBT-India’ thus perhaps completes the aforementioned vision of a national space that was articulated a decade before with reference to the original LGBT-India mailing list (‘that all LGBT groups and individuals within India start talking the same language, if not the same dialect’).⁵⁴² Once again, the convergence and co-implication of national and liberal logics – here in terms of language and communicative civility – circumscribe access to the imagined ideals and material spaces of ‘civil society’; the national and the civil establish themselves through oppositional hierarchies vis-à-vis the regional and vernacular.

Two Conclusions?

Over this chapter, I have explored the various ways in which nationalist and liberal discourses become co-implicated in the construction of the rights-bearing citizen, simultaneously constructing dichotomies between civility and equal citizenship versus criminality, incivility, indecency, excess, and so on, which are distinct and yet contingently aligned to produce similarly exclusive effects. These alignments produce forms of ‘homonormativity’ and ‘homonationalism’ that are distinctive to the Indian

⁵⁴² Khan, O. 2012/1999. ‘Friendship Walk 1999’. *Gaylaxy*, August 16, 2012. Available at <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/cover-story/friendship-walk-1999/> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

context, to refer back to terms of critique that have emerged in response to normative tendencies within western LGBT activism. If the legal campaign for decriminalization utilizes a public/private divide as its underlying logic and thus potentially re-criminalizes (while strategically exploiting) *hijras* and *kothis*, the trajectory of pride organizing demonstrates how the *kothi* spectrum may be both utilized and regulated through the dichotomies of civil and respectable (*shobhyo*, *shommanjogyo*) behavior vis-à-vis the uncivil, indecent or excessive (*ashobhyo*, *ugra*). These processes sustain themselves – at least in the first phase of Kolkata pride organizing till 2010 – through mutually reinforcing articulations with intra-community hierarchies along lines of respectability, further overdetermined by the hierarchies within MSM (and later TG) projects. However, the shift in pride organizing since 2012 realigns discourses of the nation and equality/civility in distinct and new ways, perpetuating deeper exclusions through the imaginary of an equalized national civic space than the relatively transparent hierarchies of the older leadership. Through all these years and shifts, *kothis-dhuranis-hijras* continue to devise strategies of survival and resistance, demanding rights and establishing safer spaces in ways that may not be entirely recuperable within liberal logics of measurable equality and the public/private divide, even as they may contingently use such logics (e.g. to claim reparations through governmental policy) and also feed into civic activism. Such localized and yet translocally connected negotiations, through which lower class and caste communities must resist various forms of violence and indeed recreate ‘pride’ everyday, undo the progressive teleology of pride activism and the celebration of decriminalization as a decisive and overarching moment of national

progress.

A very early version of this chapter, which I had written about one and a half years back, ended with a different and perhaps more optimistic conclusion than the one I want to write now. Then, I had written,

The *kothis* and *hijras* of West Bengal may not be merely located as adversely affected by or external to trans/national articulations of LGBT equality and rights – rather, in the very process of contesting their exclusion, they become integral to both the critique and the re-constitution of these discourses and political forms. Recognizing this might help us, privileged subjects in the academia, to advance in the difficult and fraught path of engaging a politics more open to difference for the future.

A part of me wants to still hold on to this conclusion – the hope of a refigured trajectory of political universalism, wherein older globalizing norms and formations become both provincialized and simultaneously directed towards a refigured ethics and political futurity that resists vernacularization. However, the combination of both a restrictive identity politics (the MSM-TG divide) to form population groups (‘political society’) on one hand, and the ever more restrictive imagined ideals and material boundaries of civic activism (‘civil society’) on the other, have increasingly restricted possibilities for refiguring the structures of organized activism towards different modes of participation and political legibility. The spaces for collective organizing apart from the MSM-TG and LGBT activist formations seem scant, except of course the *hijra gharanas* with their own hierarchies. Thus, at the moment of this writing, the various contingent negotiations of

lower class and caste gender/sexually variant persons and communities to ensure their day-to-day survival seem to be the only – but not insubstantial – hope that sustains the ethical and political horizon of this project. However, these negotiations are not mutually exclusive with the earlier conclusion – the critique and re-constitution of universalizing discourses and political forms – and thus, there is an additional hope, that the future will open up newer spaces and possibilities for such struggle and contestation.

As hopefully a prelude to the future expansion of such spaces, this project has tried to create epistemic infrastructure, to recall Spivak once again – the conceptual resources for apprehending complex intersectional formations of gender/sexual and class/caste difference that may not be entirely legible within both identitarian rubrics and liberal-nationalist discourses of equality and rights, becoming vernacularized even as they enable their expansion. However, this project itself is actualized within circuits of academic labor and consumption that prevent it from translating itself and ‘speaking to’ the locations that it draws from. This is a problem that I elaborate on in the conclusion.

Conclusion: Ethnography as the Politics of Friendship: Participant Observation and the Space-time of Academia

‘Oh, s/he will take field notes even if s/he’s looking at us having sex... and then sell it for a 5000 dollar grant!’

- Joke cracked at my expense by Aditya, Berhampore, 2010.

‘However much you look into a *kothi*’s brain (*matha*), you’ll never be able to figure us out!’

- Aniket, Berhampore, 2009.

Over the weeks that I worked to finish the dissertation, at various odd times of the day, I would receive abrupt messages from Aniket on Gmail chat. (In 2012, Aniket acquired a laptop after saving for several months, most of it from her earnings as a sex worker, some of it from her salary as the counselor for Sangram’s short-lived MSM project.) ‘*Achho?*’ (Are you there?), she would message, and then if I remained silent or wasn’t online, she would follow it up, in commanding tones - ‘call me NOW’. ‘URGENT’. Knowing that her use of capitals was not necessarily to be taken seriously, I would tarry. But I would usually call back. This or that letter needed to be translated, she would say. Why can’t you simply send it in Bangla (Bengali), I would reply, hoping to shirk the extra work. Well, this is for SAPCS (the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society), she would say – she could write to the district authorities in Bangla, but to the state AIDS control society? Besides, writing an e-mail that could be circulated in various electronic

forums – that necessitated translation. So, somewhat unwillingly, I would comply, translating the brief pointed mails she would send me, Bengali in roman script, into a formal, stilted English. As one of the more active members of Sangram, Aniket had much correspondence to take care of, especially since their MSM project had been closed, and other opportunities needed to be explored.

Aniket at Berhampore, Amit and Subhash in the Kalyani-Ranaghat area, Raina and Bindiya at Kolkata – these are some of the people who adopted me as friends and kin (sister, daughter) over the five or six years of this ethnography among CBOs and communities and networks of *kothis*, *dhuranis*, *hijras* and transgender-identified persons in West Bengal. This is not a story of suspicion being overcome by trust, or differences in position being bridged by intimacy – rather, the friend- and kinship may be precisely a way of turning away from and managing unbridgeable gaps of privilege which may be otherwise *unbearable*, keeping them at bay so that the functional fiction of a mutually beneficial reciprocity and relation may continue. This, of course, does not mean that the emotions involved on both sides are not ‘real’ or ‘true’, but that the affective investment has to be directed away from a square negotiation with materiality, which would render the relation impossible, even as the demands of friendship are squarely material.

Through this conclusion, I will attempt to position the ethnographic project that sustained and enabled the dissertation vis-à-vis the arguments and conceptual implications of the dissertation, and explore possibilities and contradictions of ethnography as a practice that

spans participation in friendship and kinship in non-metropolitan sites with the translation of participant observation into knowledge that is intelligible in the terms of the metropolitan academia. In doing so, I revisit and extend the overarching concerns with scalar hierarchies, translation and vernacularization that have characterized and shaped the broad argument and narrative advanced through the preceding chapters. In the first three chapters of the dissertation, I attempted to show how the aforementioned communities and discursive practices mediate and enable the transregional expansion of funded NGOs and associated discourses of identity- and rights-based activism, and are transformed in the process; in particular, translations between translocal languages of gender/sexual difference and an increasingly trans/national discourse of identity and rights consolidate gender/sexually variant subjects into MSM, TG and *hijra* communities (and the attendant divide between gender and sexual identities) as intelligible and enumerable objects of governmental power. In the process, they are vernacularized, i.e. positioned within material scales and conceptual hierarchies (global/local, cosmopolitan/vernacular) that are (re)produced through modes of articulation and collusion such as institutional-subcultural translations, resulting in a transnationally expansive hegemonic formation, which is however incomplete and ruptured through both unintended slippages and more intentional resistance or critique. As we saw through these chapters, this simultaneously globalizing and vernacularizing formation does create certain ethical and political possibilities (e.g. HIV-prevention work for MSM, the governmental recognition of transgender identity), but also reifies communities and identitarian divisions in ways that elide various practices and subject-positions, bolsters

hierarchies of authenticity, and enables exploitative and extractive hierarchies even while deploying the ideology of community-based organizing. The fourth and fifth chapters moved away from the institutional processes and constraints of the HIV-AIDS industry to focus on emergent forms of metropolitan community building and civic activism that produce particularly gay men, and more broadly GLBT persons, as bearers of a modern transnational identity as well as rights-bearing citizens of the nation; again, the emergence of a nationalist-liberal discourse of equality and rights not only subordinates other discursive sites and practices in scalar terms, but also elides certain *kothi-dhurani-hijra* practices and subject positions and renders them unintelligible except as uncivil or criminal. The conclusion seeks to extend this strain of analysis by positioning ethnography and academic knowledge production as itself a form of institutionally constrained translation that reproduces the very scalar hierarchies that it critiques; however, it too, like the aforementioned globalizing-vernacularizing processes, may also be constitutively fractured and torn away from the spatiality and temporality of metrocentric formations, specifically the Anglo-American academia. I attempt to extend the critique of gendered material and conceptual divides like global/local, universal/particular, cosmopolitan/vernacular (etc.) to examine how the metropolitan academia engages with knowledges and public spheres that are provincialized as ‘regional’ and ‘local’; at the same time, I indicate how this critique is constitutively limited as such scalar hierarchies can never be resolved by academic knowledge production or any amount of self-reflexive praxis on part of the researcher in themselves, which may be all too easily recuperated into the material logics of academic capitalism. I

will rather try to locate tentative and limited resistant possibilities in the disruption of the sovereignty of academic agency and the space-time of academic production in and through participant observation.

As I noted in the introduction, the academic language of ‘theory’ and abstraction is complicit with the logic of vernacularization; English as the hegemonic transnational language of academic discourse stands in relation to relatively vernacularized Bangla/Hindi texts as its material of theorization, just as a ‘high’ Sanskritic and/or Anglicised Bengali or Hindi stands in relation to further-vernacularized dialects, subcultural codes, etc. As a prestige public sphere, the Anglo-American academia works does not easily support or lend itself to any sustained project of translation that could work towards bridging splintered and hierarchized spheres of thought and practice. On one hand, it actively recruits ‘native informants’ and aims for inter-ethnic diversity (as per the same logic of cosmopolitanism and ‘inclusion’ through inter-ethnic representation noted in the last chapter) – which Naomi Scheman locates as the appropriative, assimilative and self-aggrandizing logic of the university.⁵⁴³ On the other hand, as Swarr and Nagar note, it creates hierarchical divides like academia/activism, theory/method and individual/collaborative work, that serve to isolate most of the ‘natives’ from any active and sustained participation in their respective ‘regional’(ized) public spheres.⁵⁴⁴ In their words, even as ‘the system relies on the rhetoric and vitality of intellectual communities’,

⁵⁴³ Cited from classroom discussion during GWSS 8108, Feminist Theories and Methods, Fall 2009.

⁵⁴⁴ Swarr, A. & Nagar, R. (Eds). 2010. *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Albany: SUNY Press.

it privileges ‘a structure of individual merits and rewards that is premised on a denial and dismissal of the collaborative basis of all intellectual work produced within the institution’. Further, the ‘structure of merits and rewards’ recognizes individuals in as much as they can ‘abstract and generalize, frequently in opposition to those who are seen as immersed in “grounded struggles”’, and moreover, this individualized endeavor is recognized in as much as it can lend itself to the creation and circulation of academic value (or more precisely, commodities that have value in Anglo-American scholarly circuits and academic markets). The ‘inherent contradictions’ of academic production, as described by Swarr and Nagar, are all the more accentuated in ‘transnational’ research spanning Anglo-American institutions with marginalized communities and locations in the ‘global south’. As noted by Desai et al, even critical transnational praxis may be complicit in the retrieval of a fetishized and reified ‘third world’ difference that is presumed as being unproblematically present ‘out there’, supplying empirical authenticity and political credibility to academic projects, and thus bolstering extractive and potentially violent modes of knowledge production.

As a method that encompasses the accrual of knowledge and value creation (i.e. value addition to empirical ‘raw data’) for the metropolitan academia, the practice of ethnography is, of course, both critical of and complicit within the aforementioned asymmetric and hierarchical co-implication of the metropolitan and the non-metropolitan, the ‘cosmopolitan’ and the ‘vernacular’. I contend that this complicity cannot be undone through any amount of self-reflexivity or awareness of the ethnographer’s position and

privileges *in itself*, from a position within the academia. This is to say that nothing I can say or do in this dissertation, no amount of critical analysis or persuasion – however astute – will do anything to arrest metrocentric and vernacularizing processes, unless there are broader changes in the circuits of academic value-creation, production and distribution that the dissertation feeds into and works within. Such structural change is not only a long shot, but also foreclosed by the very individualized nature of most dissertation (or book) projects. Thus, rather than look within the space of academic creation itself, I will attempt to describe how ethnography might be brought into crisis and made to work against itself through the paradoxical demands that participant observation places on the ethnographer, pulling her away from both the spatial circuits and linear temporality of academic production, even though s/he usually gets folded back into the metropolitan academia (though some do quit).

Friendship (*bandhutwa*), with its rich affective connotations in Bengali, has often served as an effective point of entry into the life-worlds of the aforementioned lower middle and lower class and caste communities in the course of my fieldwork. Moreover, as I am often read as *meyeli* or ‘effeminate’ enough for interpellation as a community member, friendship is further mediated and substantialized through the terms of *kothi* and *hijra* kinship. As described in the previous chapters, the kinship system of *hijra gharanas* or lineages, organized along the primary relationship between the *guru* and her *chela* or disciples who are sisters to each other, is refracted on more elective and loose terms within non-gharana *hijras*, *kothis* and *dhuranis*, with older *kothis/dhuranis* like Subhash

taking on the position of the mother, and same-aged peers establishing a sisterhood among themselves (albeit a sisterhood always interrupted by the scandalous possibility of incestuous sexual bonding). My interpellation into this kinship meant that I came to be recognized as a daughter of older community members like Subhash and as a sister to those in my age group – indeed, acquiring multiple mothers within different *kothi/dhurani* circles in different parts of southern and central West Bengal. (As a side note, since these kinship networks extend upwards into the upper ranks of NGO structures, the pioneering gay activist Ashok Row Kavi is my great-grandmother through one of my matrilineages, but has too many great-grandchildren scattered around the country to know me.) In a sense, then, this extended kinship network challenges the metrocentric hierarchies of both institutional GLBT activism and academic research by seeking to domesticate potentially powerful figures into its terms, but at the same time, also entrenches the hegemonic leadership of figures like Sarswata (also one of my mothers), and enables the inherently exploitative dynamics of this research project.

Simultaneous to my interpellation into such elective kinship, there was also, of course, a keen awareness of my metropolitan location, class and linguistic privilege among my ‘subjects’. Significantly, this is not just an awareness of the unbridgeability of these material divides through interactions as friends and kin, but also of the fact that the *very substance* of our interactions across these divides will feed into a form of knowledge which has potential economic value far above their income levels, and which will remain structurally inaccessible to them (except for some output in Bengali, discussed later). As

Aditya at Berhampore joked at my expense during a Sangram meeting, ‘Oh s/he’ll take field notes even if s/he’s looking at us having sex... and then sell it for a 5000 dollar grant!’ (Bengali pronouns, as mentioned before, are not gendered). That this was articulated as a joke – everyone, including me, laughed, and Aditya actually went on to do a physical imitation of me taking notes of sex – and not as a formal complaint with an attendant demand, suggests their realization that epistemic-material privilege of the participant observer is not redeemable through any simple act of participatory reciprocity on my part. It rather involves a more foundational, immeasurable and violent asymmetry that can be made bearable for both parties *only by being joked about*. Yet, this does not mean they will give up on the demands of a measurable reciprocity.⁵⁴⁵ Aniket is only one of the mid-rung community activists who are not too fluent in English and thus have often asked me to write proposals for potential funding, send e-mails to senior NGO staff at various odd hours when I am in the US, help them deal with funders and state health officials, and so on – as a strict contractual *return* on their help with my fieldwork. This will be often articulated also as the less calculable demand of a mother on a daughter, or that of an older sister on a younger one. Thus, far more significant than any agential self-reflexivity or collaborative intentionality on my part, which still sustains the sovereignty of the researcher, is *their* participation in my participant-observation, which takes the form of a irresolvable and delicate balancing of intimacy and distance, trust and suspicion, informality and contractual exchange. As the enabling medium of participant observation, kinship thus hardly remains as the stable cultural object to be described by

⁵⁴⁵ Here, I am indebted to Ajay Skaria’s conception of measurable and immeasurable equality; see Skaria, A. 2011. ‘Relinquishing Republican Democracy: Gandhi’s Ramrajya’, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 14 no. 2, p. 203-229.

the ethnographer – the static ‘ethnographic present’ of traditional anthropology, much critiqued by contemporary anthropology – but rather extracts its due by exerting strident moral claims on the time and labor of the ethnographer, transforming and interpellating her into a responsibility that resists the linearity and closure of ethnographic time in academic production.

These practices of friendship and kinship, indeed friendship through kinship, both sustain and complicate the political economy of research, by which I mean the extraction of knowledge from the raw level of the ‘field’ to the value-added product of journal articles, conference presentations and dissertation chapters like this one. While the immeasurable bonds of kinship serve to suture a sense of community between me and my *kothi-hijra* friends despite and through the asymmetries of our relation, it has to be rendered substantive through measured exchanges between their time spent with me, and my labor for their causes, though (as noted above) they may be well aware that a ‘true’ reciprocity is impossible. To rephrase this in Derridean terms, the politics of friendship cannot be sustained as a practice of reciprocity on a foundationally asymmetric social space, or to adapt his words, ‘the heteronomical and asymmetric curvature of (...) sociality’.⁵⁴⁶ The immeasurable bonds of kinship, the language of blood, mothers, daughters and sisters, pushes its demands beyond the pretense of equal exchange and co-independent relations, even as it demands to formalize and actualize just such a measurable equality. Kinship/friendship and contractuality thus continually interrupt each other and push participant observation – which is already a paradoxical formulation – into a kind of

⁵⁴⁶ Derrida, J. 1993. ‘Politics of Friendship’. *American Imago* 50:3 (Fall 1993).

aporia that is not entirely recuperable into the academic and disciplinary function of ethnography, even as it feeds into and sustains it.

I therefore draw a distinction between the destabilizing moment and experience of participant observation and the institutionalized location and function of ethnography as such. My institutional location and academic privilege insulates me sufficiently to be able to participate and yet not partake of stigma, marginalization, and arduous economic and livelihood struggles of lower middle and lower class communities. Moreover, given individualized the system of merits and rewards within the academic system, the institutional placement and recognition of my work entails a suppression of the dialogic and collaborative nature of the knowledge generated at the ‘field’ – however much I might credit people and ideas that enable my own work – simply because beyond an extent its authorship and attendant material benefits cannot be shared (and this goes beyond the singularity of thought and creativity itself, always both distinct and shared, and rather signals the *harnessing* of that singularity in terms of academic property – academia is as far as can be from copyleft.⁵⁴⁷) Thus, even as the process of participant observation militates against knowledge accrual, for institutional ethnography, my friends and kin within these communities remain an object of study for the metropolitan academia, accruing knowledge, prestige and symbolic capital for a US research university, and the ethnographer is rewarded for being an effective conduit for that

⁵⁴⁷ On the copyleft movement, see ‘What is copyleft?’, Available at <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/> (Accessed 15 May 2013).

process (much as Ranajay and Sarswata are rewarded for being effective conduits between the HIV-AIDS industry and target groups).

It may seem here that I am betraying the potential for engaged academics, and reifying the divide between the academia and its outsides. One may ask – but what about academic politics then, the ways in which knowledge production enables and feeds into the broader progressive and/or radical projects that we often associate with our inter/disciplines? This politics often depends on the sense of an ethical and political community and/or communicative continuity established between the academia and its outsides so as to influence policy, activist agendas, and/or the ‘public’, whether this is established specifically through ethnography or not. It may seem that establishing this ethico-political continuity should not such be a structural problem as I have made it out to be. There are certainly many models of engaged academics available, including ‘barefoot anthropology’, ‘participatory action research’, ‘trustworthiness and community-based research’, ‘collaborative praxis’, to mention but a few⁵⁴⁸ —critical theorizations of how academics can produce and communicate ethically committed and politically efficacious knowledge while retaining their locations within the (US) academia, all of which I am inspired by. I certainly do not mean to critique the specific projects indicated by these

⁵⁴⁸ On ‘barefoot anthropology’, see Scheper-Hughes, N. 1995. ‘The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology’. *Current Anthropology*, 36(3), p. 409-440; On Participatory action research (PAR), see Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2008) ‘Introduction’, in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 5–10; On trustworthiness and community-based research, see Jordan, C., Gust, S & Scheman, N. 2005. ‘Trustworthiness and the Paradigm of Community-based Research’, *Metropolitan Universities Journal*, 16(1), p. 39-57; On collaborative research, see Nagar, R. 2008. ‘Languages of Collaboration’, in Moss, P. and Falconer Al-Hindi, K. *Feminisms in Geography*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

concepts, and the various political effect they may have had, in bad faith. However, in as much as such projects remain within the domain of particular (individual or collective) researchers rather than a broader project of structural change destabilizing the hierarchies between the US academia and other spheres and languages of knowledge production and circulation that cannot attain such prestige and power, all such formulations (including my own take on ethnography in this chapter) run the risk of feeding back into the structural hierarchies and divides described by Swarr and Nagar. Even formulations that critique and/or seek to overcome such divides often become copyrighted concepts, feeding into the academic production of knowledge-as-capital and attendant circuits of circulation – circuits that are particularly inaccessible behind paywalls, linguistic and technological barriers from non-metropolitan ‘global south’ locations. Further, in as much as such projects are formulated primarily from the side of the academic, they risk bolstering both the sovereignty of the academic and the self-aggrandizing nature of the US academia, which, it seems, can do it all. Such aggrandizement is bolstered by the double move of institutional ideology within the critical humanities and social sciences – aspiring academics like me are told that we can keep up both our professional careers and our political commitments; we can be engaged with issues of social justice in underprivileged locations in India and at the same time move up the graduate school ladder, get a tenure track job somewhere, and so on. Just like the intimacies of kinship described earlier, these ideological fictions make the gaps between ‘research’ and writing bearable; they keep the too uncomfortable possibilities of epistemic violence at bay; they conceal how the choice of engagement or disengagement is, of course, the academic’s

(my next project could have nothing to do with *kothis-dhuranis-hjiras* or the eastern Indian region).

There is thus the promise of a non-alienated labor, a potential reconciliation between the conditions of academic labor and the directions taken by the labor itself. Rather than dismissing engagement, I am suggesting that one be wary of such a non-alienated reconciliation, suggested in the seeming continuity of phrases such as ‘community-based research’, ‘barefoot anthropology’, and indeed, ‘participant observation’ itself. As Spivak might remind us, the sense of such continuity may be particularly dangerous from the position of the postcolonial academic/intellectual as a ‘native informant’.⁵⁴⁹ One might rather need to extend and stretch out the contradictions and paradoxes of such ethical projects, utilizing the positional ambiguities and contrary pulls of ethnographic labor in ways that may not neatly fold back into the institutional imperatives of academia. In other words, a project such as mine must contradictorily straddle both the privileged space of academic production (the ‘research’, the ‘observation’) to create epistemic infrastructure and conceptual resources, and be torn away from the temporality and spatiality of academic production and circulation through insistent ethical demands from the other side, resulting in forms of labor and knowledge (e.g. grant-writing for CBOs, or articles in community magazines) that can not be neatly translated back into the circuit of academic production. In as much as it is truly disruptive of vernacularizing hierarchies, this process can never be recuperable as the sovereign decision of the academic – a

⁵⁴⁹ Spivak, G. C. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

conceptual formulation or ethical project suggested and mastered by the academic himself – but arises from a constitutive fracture in the ethnographic process and its attendant politics of friendship.

However, even as ethnography cannot be a sovereign process, the responsibility of academic intentionality cannot be disavowed, and must inform labor and knowledge production both within and outside the academia. Accordingly, I will try to briefly indicate how this dissertation project has attempted to address this responsibility, even as it has been pulled into other spheres that need not translate back to the US academia. Through the dissertation, I have tried to register how linguistic and discursive hierarchies are created and sustained through (institutionally-constrained) translations, creating spatial scales that bolster attendant material divides (e.g. how the *kothi* is rendered as ‘local’/‘traditional’ and subsumed under the transnational transgender). Yet, as mentioned above, the project itself is an act of institutionally constrained translation, bringing distant life-worlds into the span of academic terminology, literatures and debates. Referring to Desai et al’s critique of the retrieval and representation of difference, such translation may also be understood as a form of ‘thievery’, potentially both ethical and violent.⁵⁵⁰ In an attempt at ethical ‘thievery’, I have endeavored to resist too easy translations, to problematize epistemic frames, and to indicate whenever possible the material otherness of the ‘original’ words and phrases, as well as the dynamic critical activity going on in these languages and registers of speech (e.g. the

⁵⁵⁰ Desai, J., Bouchard, D. and Detournay, D. 2010. ‘Disavowed Legacies and Honorable Thievery: The Work of the “Transnational” in Feminist and LGBTQ Studies’ in Swarr, A. L. and Nagar, R. (Eds). *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Albany: SUNY Press.

various reconfigurations and challenges to institutional cartographies, such as Srijan, Raina or Amit's critiques), which resist any static or transparent ethnographic snapshot – indeed, Aniket's quote cited at the outset indicates the pointed refusal of such representation. (This is why I have used cumbersome and awkward phrases like gender/sexually variant lower class/caste persons to signal the range of potential positions and the dynamic interpretations of *kothi*, *dhurani*, *hijra* subject positions; this dynamicity may not be neatly 'translated' and folded back into academic or activist Englishes). At the same time, I have not sought to disavow the empirical claims of ethnography and the inevitable authority of the authorial voice; as I suggested in the introduction, such claims may be unavoidable while making a political argument. Rather, I have hoped to use that observational position and authorial privilege to create a certain epistemic infrastructure that may enable a greater legibility of vernacularized discourses and attendant locations as seen from sites of privilege, allowing for an appreciation of their translocal dynamicity (in both complicit and resistant forms) beyond spatial and temporal divides such as rupture/continuity, global/local, vernacular/cosmopolitan (etc.), and attendant forms of supersession or teleology. Like ethnography, translation thus also becomes a fractured act – on one hand, it has to gesture towards distance and irreducible gaps, respecting the alterity of spheres of meaning that cannot be reduced to the space of translation itself (this is perhaps akin to Schleiermacher's injunction to retain the *foreignness* of the text; or Spivak's proposition that the translator must surrender to the 'linguistic rhetoricity of the original text').⁵⁵¹ On the other hand, since no amount of surrender to linguistic alterity

⁵⁵¹ See Schleiermacher, F. 2000/1838. 'On the different methods of translating', trans. S. Bernofsky, In Venuti, L. (Ed). *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge; Spivak, G.C.,

or respect for foreignness can do away with the epistemic privilege of the academic within the space of academic production, the translation between the aforementioned languages and the analytical vocabulary also entails the intentional use of observational authority to take risks and make conceptual and factual claims that are potentially both ethical and violent.

This academic responsibility takes a different shape when knowledge production is pulled away from the spatial circuits of the US academia through the aforementioned politics of friendship and its attendant demands. One specific demand has been that of other (and relatively vernacularized) spheres of circulation and discussion, such as the magazines published by CBOs like *Swikriti* or *Sangram*. Over the last few years, the editors and production staff of these magazines – including Sarswata and Aniket – have often demanded articles based on my research, with attendant expectations of intelligibility, accessibility and relevance to their locations.⁵⁵² Accordingly, through such articles, I have attempted to speak to ongoing controversies within NGO/CBO politics in India, and use stories drawn from the ‘fieldwork’ to illustrate debates on identity and rights-based politics. This shifts the terrain from the negotiation between academic English and ‘regional’ languages to the divide between high Sanskritic Bengali and

1993. *The Politics of Translation*. In Spivak, G.C. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, p. 179-200; Spivak, G.C. (2000). Translation as culture. *Parallax*, 6(1), 13-24.

⁵⁵² Dutta, A. 2012. ‘Shyamoli-mar Kahini: Mahanagarir Baire Prantik Jonogosthi Gothon’, *Swikriti Patrika*, 2012 Boimela Sankhya; Dutta, A. 2013. ‘Kon Ruper Ontor? ‘Transgender’ o ‘Lingantorkami’ Porichoy Borgo o Kichhu Lingo-Prantik Manusher Atmoprokasher Bhasha’, *Swikriti Patrika*, 2013 Boimela Sankhya.

‘dialects’ or subcultural languages; here, perhaps both the possibilities and risks are greater. The grammatical continuity between ‘high’ Bengali and subcultural languages permits a relatively fluid movement between the discursive space of *kothi/hijra* subcultures and academic/activist debates on identity politics (as distinct from the gap between academic English and the foreignness of the ethnographic text). This fluidity and mixage of registers offers a departure from the structure of vernacularization, such that subcultural language need not be positioned as only the material for reflection within ‘high’ Bengali or English prose. However, by the same token, the gap of positionality and the authorial dominance of the researcher may be elided. In the end, the ethics of knowledge production hinges on not just authorial intentionality, but also the reception and interactive monitoring of this output in the spheres inhabited by those represented – which is much easier to ensure for such ‘non-academic’ writing in Bengali, as opposed to academic production in the US.

Ethnography as a research method facilitates the materialization of such an interactive ethics through its immediacy and its promise of participation and collaboration, but also simultaneously obscures structural divides and foundational asymmetries that cannot be made up through any reciprocal exchange or communication between researchers and subjects. Yet, the fiction of reciprocity and measurable exchange is essential not only to make our interactions across abyssal gaps bearable, but also to constantly push them in ethical directions. Without the interactive monitoring of the researcher by hir subjects as happens during participant observation, academic politics (queer, feminist, left) might

serve as an ideology justifying the function of the researcher (especially the postcolonial 'native' ethnographer) as a conduit for the accrual of metropolitan academic capital. In the context of projects such as mine, ethnography is thus positioned simultaneously at the center and on the edges of this political economy of knowledge, both facilitating and interrupting its modes of functioning. Even as it contributes to metropolitan academic privilege, it tears one apart from the space and time of academic production. In other words, the experience of participant observation is not recuperable to the temporality of academic production even as it feeds into products such as this dissertation; even as it is brought and rendered intelligible and available here in this chapter, it will continue to live outside the world of the academia and the boundaries of these pages.

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