

Lifemaking alongside Death: Violence, Care and the Everyday  
in Trans communities in India

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To the Memory of the One who did not wish to be Named.

## **Abstract**

How do transgender communities disrupt and exceed the overdeterminations of their lives by structural oppression and death? My research investigates this question through a granular attention to the everyday of transgender life worlds in India. Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality and state recognition of the right to gender expression, transphobia, medical negligence, murders and suicides are still the daily realities that trans communities are forced to confront. My dissertation project, *Lifemaking alongside Death: Violence, Care and the Everyday in Trans Communities in India*, argues that trans communities devise various improvisatory and innovative strategies to make life in an environment signified by violence. I stage conversations between anthropologies of the everyday, trans and queer literatures on care and anti-caste scholarship to study the efforts needed to reproduce an everyday that can be inhabited. These effortful strategies range from gestures that seek pleasure, negotiations with the nation state on demands of welfare to the performance of care labor for each other and devising dark humour on death that help trans people not only endure violence but also to refuse its overdeterminations of trans life.

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## Introduction

I commenced fieldwork in 2018 when the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized section 377 of the Indian penal code that had earlier criminalized non penovaginal sex, irrespective of consent. This judgment was a culmination of two decades of legal activism against the law in which the petitions against Section 377 repeatedly instrumentalized hate crimes against transgender persons to demonstrate the need for decriminalization.<sup>1</sup> Yet, most forms of violence against transpersons are not related to this law. Mainstream attention to Section 377, however, meant heightened visibilization of transgender communities that rendered them more susceptible to violence.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, once the goal of decriminalization was achieved, sections of the queer movements started articulating demands for legal sanction of same gender marriages, property and inheritance rights as the next frontiers of queer rights.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the Indian State passed the Transgender Persons' (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 that allows individuals to self-identify their genders without any medical intervention and announced various welfare schemes for trans communities.<sup>4</sup> Though most of the

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<sup>1</sup> While law requires the evidence of injury for any redress, legal activists have repeatedly used the material realities of violence faced by working class transpersons and feminine gay men in their demand for decriminalization. Many scholars, including Khanna (2016), Dutta (2020) and Kang and Sahai (2020) have pointed out that though legal petitions for the decriminalization of Section 377 have instrumentalized violence against transpersons, some of those violences are not even connected to the law. In an essay for Economic and Political Weekly, Saptarshi Mandal writes, "Their vulnerability to police abuse not being just on account of Section 377, but due to both the IPC and state police laws concerning public nuisance, sex work, indecent behaviour in public, and so on. In other words, the symbolic harms of Section 377 are distinct from its material harms, and so are the classes of queer people suffering them. (Mandal 2018)" Trans activist and writer Revathi writes pithily after the judgment, "Murders, rapes, thefts, false charges, shootouts and lots of other problems will not allow us to celebrate for 377 tomorrow. We all know who is going to benefit out of it. For me, the basic needs are education, job, family recognition, property rights." Find more from Revathi's thoughts on Section 377 at <https://maktoobmedia.com/2018/09/06/even-without-377-there-are-struggles-ahead-says-revathi/>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see this report on how violences against transpersons increased post the ruling: <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/7/15000/Transgender-Community-Face-Increasing-Violence-Since-377-Ruling>

<sup>3</sup> See this article for more on this teleological nature of the agenda for queer progress: <https://www.arre.co.in/people/lawyers-dr-menaka-guruswamy-arundhati-katju-sec-377-legalising-gay-marriage-project/> and for a succinct critique of the former, see Kang and Sahai (2020).

<sup>4</sup> The Act can be accessed at [https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/13091?sam\\_handle=123456789/1362](https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/13091?sam_handle=123456789/1362)

announcements have not been met in action, even the current law was passed only after ceaseless protests by trans communities. Thus, even as trans deaths and trans precarities are weaponised to achieve queer rights, trans communities are rendered more vulnerable to violence and they must stage protests to secure even the bare minimum from the state. I wondered if there were ways to write accounts of the dead that were not overdetermined by legal wounding and hence, I wanted to study how memories of the dead circulated in trans communities.

One of my first research interlocutors was Nitu Giri, a trans activist who has been involved with the transgender movements in eastern India for almost two decades now.<sup>5</sup> Given her vast experience with the movements, it seemed pertinent to speak with Nitu. After a series of preliminary conversations about my research, Nitu invited me to her one room home for an interview on questions of memory one day. As soon as I entered the room, I was struck by a photograph hanging on the wall over her bed. It was the photo of the dead body of her father surrounded by grieving family members. Nitu pointed out her best friend, her mother, her brother and other relatives in the photo and then casually mentioned that they were dead too. HIV, cancer and so on...her voice trailed off followed by a brief silence. Death felt like a palpable presence in that room. Yet when the interview started, Nitu only gave short one sentence answers with the daily news blaring at the back. She had earlier insisted that she needed the TV to be on.

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<sup>5</sup> The words 'queer' and 'transgender' are regularly used as umbrella categories for those with non-normative sexualities and gender identities respectively in Indian law, academia and activism elsewhere in the world. However, I have used other terms like 'koti' and 'dhurani' in most of my thesis to not only mark how individuals identify themselves but also to signal how these terms continue to widely circulate in communities. Most importantly, all my interviewees and participants in this research identify as *koti* and the elderly amongst them often refer to each other as *dhurani*. Both *koti* and *dhurani* refer to feminine individuals who could identify as transgender, gender non-conforming or simply those who desire men. Some of my research interlocutors also keep switching between *koti* and transgender depending on the context in which the conversation is happening. So, for example, at a friendly gathering, someone could refer to herself as *koti* while at a formal meeting on HIV advocacy or in an interview with the media, the same person would identify as transgender.

I was competing with sensationalist news anchors for Nitu's attention. Suddenly she paused and asked me if I could take her on a holiday to Digha, a seaside holiday destination known for being hospitable to couples of all genders, irrespective of marital status. Nitu said that she had a reputation in Digha and sex work was highly lucrative there. On a different occasion, Nitu tried to seduce me saying that she could also teach me how to find the maximum number of clients. All I needed was to grow my hair. I will not deny that I was initially disappointed that my research was not going as per plan but in retrospect, I can only express my deep gratitude for Nitu. On the surface, one can ask if memory is labor that requires too much effort to perform or if memory is like sex work, to be performed when you are compensated. However, on a deeper level, Nitu reminded me what Kamla Visweswaran had evocatively grappled with in her own research – any attempt at trying to “recover a lost voice” also illuminates the inherent fictions of ethnography (1994). After all, how do we uncritically think of the authenticity of data if your research interlocutor reminds you tantalizingly that the gateway to her trauma is a fully paid for holiday. The more you pay, the more the gate opens to histories of violence, death, abuse. This is not to question the disciplinary foundations of ethnography as a method but the point I wish to make here is that more than the content of field observations, what became important for me was the form in which I accessed those observations. In short, the very politics of knowledge production.

I have been involved in queer activism in West Bengal, a state in eastern India since 2010. Additionally, I am often interpellated as a *koti* sister, daughter in the communities that I work with that affords me relatively easier access to my research interlocutors. However, I do not claim to be an insider because as a Brahmin researcher, with the class privilege of English education, pursuing a PhD in an American university, there

are huge power differentials between myself and my research interlocutors, most of whom are working class. It is this tension between my institutional privileges and the field that becomes home due to my gendered location that informs how the ethnography of this thesis plays out, tensions that I address throughout the dissertation. It was Nitu's gendered affinity with me that allowed her to express intimacy with me by offering me to teach me how to do sex work. Yet, such an intimacy was also transactional that exposed the power differences between us.

As I started carefully attending to the modality of my encounters with my interlocutors, the questions I asked started shifting. What does the encounter teach us if we linger on with the blockage at the access point to one's life experiences instead of focussing on seeking access at any cost? Each of my chapters is structured around refusals of transparency. For example, how do we think of grief when a meeting mourning trans persons who have passed on also doubles up as a cruising zone for potential lovers or when your research interlocutor jokes about cancer in the rectum? Coming back to this particular encounter, Nitu taught me that there was no way that I could write about the dead without accounting for the hustling it takes to make life. And that brings me to the title of my research, "Lifemaking alongside Death: Violence, Care and the Everyday in Trans communities in India." So, then I ask how do transgender communities disrupt and exceed the overdeterminations of their lives by structural oppression and death? I investigate this question through a granular attention to the everyday of transgender life worlds in India. Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality and state recognition of the right to gender expression, transphobia, medical negligence, deaths and suicides are still the daily realities that trans communities are forced to confront. I argue that trans communities devise various improvisatory and innovative strategies to make life in an environment signified by violence. These strategies range from gestures that seek

pleasure to the performance of effortful care labor for each other to devising dark humour on sex and death that help them not only endure the given but also to remake it otherwise. My research methods are interdisciplinary and interweave four years of ethnography in West Bengal, archival readings of letters, fact finding reports, photographs and meeting minutes and discourse analysis of legal judgements and popular media. I study memorial meetings, informal care collectives, protest marches, and everyday conversations to argue for a complex and layered theorization of life enfolded by daily experiences that challenge any pre-given meta theorizations of the state, biopolitics and trans life. I neither fetishize trans resiliency of the global south at the risk of eschewing a material analysis of the economies of violence nor do I provide a grim ethnography of trans precarity. I am arguing that Indian trans life making practices are a series of complex and inventive processes that make an epistemological intervention in their own right and are not simply case studies for North America centered trans and queer studies. In doing so, I link disparate bodies of scholarship: anthropology of the everyday, literatures on gender and sexuality from South Asia, queer theory, transgender studies, and Marxist, feminist, anti-caste and transgender scholarship on care labor.

### **Theoretical Significance**

South Asian scholarship on non-normative genders and sexuality is an ever-expanding field. There has been a lot of research on the career of Section 377 in India and how it spurred queer activism against the law (Narain and Gupta, 2011; Bhan and Narain, 2005). Many scholarly works have critiqued the Indian queer movements' exclusive focus on Section 377 (Khanna, 2016; Puri, 2016 Dave, 2012). South Asian literatures have also demonstrated how concomitant forces of globalization, transnational funding for HIV and legal activism against Section 377 have discursively produced and

calcified sexual identities in the region (Boyce and Khanna 2011, Katyal 2010, Khanna 2009) while another body of literature critiques the lack of attention to questions of gender in this literature (Dutta and Roy 2014). In trying to make communities commensurate with a global regime of rights, modes of articulating gender and sexual desires that were already in circulation prior to the arrival of HIV funding were often termed local and backward that needed to be subsumed under more universal categories. There are material consequences for such hegemonic narratives. Activists and scholars point out how transnational donor bodies and elite NGOs dictated which constituencies needed intervention leading to fierce turf wars between groups (Khanna 2009, Dutta 2013). Divisions that were porous became hardened such that “transgender” became an umbrella category for non-normative genders while MSM was only about sexuality, divested of any potential for gender non-normativity and terms like *koti*, *dhurani* became local variations that could be subsumed by transgender. Svati P Shah has demonstrated the need to connect the analysis of how gender and sexual identities circulate and the privileges they accrue in relation to questions of space, urbanisms and migration flows (2015). Gayatri Reddy’s ethnography with hijras (2005) and Naisargi Dave’s research with lesbian activists (2012) are important anthropological studies that interrogate how trans and queer movements articulate rights claims and the historical processes through which identity terms come into circulation.<sup>6</sup> Navaneetha Mokkal’s work examines how the figures of the sex worker, and the lesbian are discursively produced in the public imagination and how such an

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<sup>6</sup> Hijras could be transfeminine individuals, gender nonconforming folks assigned male at birth or even women who live together in closely knit structures of kinship. Hijras dance at weddings, bless newborns, beg at traffic signals and trains and sometimes perform sex work. Hijras are widely believed to have sacred powers because they have transcended worldly attachments of the family through castration. Hijras use these belief systems to make a living. However, these beliefs do not translate into tangible social capital as hijras are also one of the most marginalized and discriminated communities in South Asia.

imagination is inflected by spatial and temporal politics of the region. (2019) There are also detailed ethnographies of how HIV transformed the relationship between the Indian state and queer, transgender and sex worker communities when these communities became central players in the crisis response (Vijayakumar 2021, Lakkimsetti 2020). Vaibhav Saria's ethnography with hijras in eastern India offers theorizations of kinship, queerness and erotics through the vantage point of the ethical negotiations that hijras stage with the state and its various institutions like the family, law and medicine (2021).

My research, however, is not concerned with the specificity of how identity terms circulate or the political agendas of social movements. I study how trans communities make life in the everyday when that everyday is lived in an environment that is saturated by violence and death. In order to do, I specifically look at how care circulates in these communities. This care could range from looking after the ill and the dying to intentionally and collectively crafting a social that allows one to inhabit the daily and imagine it otherwise. In this otherwise, the state can be forced to distribute emergency cash allowances during a pandemic without demanding identity documents, dominant caste academics can be involved in care circles for the trans elderly and clean shit dismantling hierarchies of cultural capital, non-profits can be hauled up for supplying low quality rations and sexually charged jokes about the dead and the dying can refuse the overwhelming structures of violence and devastation.

Achille Mbembe had famously argued that biopower is no longer sufficient to account for the subjugation of life to the power of death in our contemporary world and hence he forwards the notion of necropower and necropolitics to illuminate what he calls the "death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead." (40,



2003) US-based queer studies scholars have demonstrated the political potential of researching death as critique and resistance against state homophobia in the US (Crimp, 2002; Muñoz, 2009; Freeman, 2010; Woubhset, 2015). However, historian and postcolonial queer studies scholar Anjali Arondekar (2015) warns us that privileging loss within queer historiography might produce loss as a spectacular event whereas the casualness or even the dailyness of loss proves that loss is not exceptional. Queer theorists have used Mbembe's intervention to examine how sexuality, gender, race and desire produce subjectivities, some of whom can get folded within the imperialist logics of the nation state, mostly located in the global north, while others get consigned to varied death-worlds, ranging from refugees of the war on terror to precarious transfeminine workers providing care labor in foreign countries. (Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco, 2014; Kuntsman 2009; Puar 2007) Besides examining the structural conditions that mark certain queer subjectivities for death, this body of literature also investigates the work that trans and queer death are made to perform. For example, in an essay entitled, *Trans Necropolitics*, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn write:

The concept of an afterlife has a particular resonance for transgender studies. It provides a framework for thinking about how trans death opens up political and social life-worlds across various times and places. Whether through the commemorative, community-reinforcing rituals of Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) or an ex post facto justification for hate crime and anti-discrimination policies, trans deaths – and most frequently the deaths of trans women or trans-feminine people of color – act as a resource for the development and dissemination of many different agendas. (Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013, 66)

Later in the essay, Snorton writes about the death of Tyra Hunter, a Black transgender woman to demonstrate how different forms of value were extracted from her death. From monetary compensation given to Tyra's mother due to medical negligence in

Tyra's treatment to gay and lesbian networks using Tyra's death to talk about violence faced by queer people in the US, Tyra's dead body was imbued with value for different institutions, from the family, non-profit organizations to the media. Yet, in such value extraction, Tyra's identity was repeatedly negated. For example, even as the media pointed out that Tyra's death happened for lack of timely treatment, it repeatedly referred to her as a gay man. So, did Tyra's mother. This question of value is pushed further in Aren Aizura's *Transfeminine Value, Racialized Others and the Limits of Necropolitics*. Aizura opens his paper with the death of Salvador Kamatoy, better known as Sally, one of the protagonists of the award-winning Israeli documentary, *Bubot Niyar (Paper Dolls, 2006, directed by Tomer Heymann)*. Sally was a Filipina transfeminine immigrant working as a caregiver for an elderly man by day and a drag diva by night in a troupe called, Paper Dolls. The film ends with the Israeli crackdown on undocumented immigrants that disperses the various members of the troupe. A year later, Sally's dead body is found behind a shopping mall in Sharjah. While Sally's liveness is frozen in the film, the film's website and promotional materials do not mention her death. Even as it is important to note the easy disposability of Sally, Aizura cautions us about the dangers of queer necropolitics fixated entirely around death. After all, Sally's body was found near a mall. She was a worker with purchasing power within the transnational circuits of capital and her labor had value and hence she found employment. Hence, Aizura argues that it is important to study the contradictory forces of the liberal state that produces rightless disposable bodies on one hand and global capitalism that manages to extract surplus value even from bodies that are deemed disposable, on the other. This essay is part of the *Queer Necropolitics* anthology edited by Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco. As important and timely as this collection is, it leaves me with a few questions. The editors conclude their introduction on a hopeful

note citing the growth of international collaborations, such as the anthology itself alongside radical queer and trans activist initiatives like the Sylvia Rivera Project and Decolonize Queer among others that fight oppression, from the banal to the systemic. They admit that sites of activism they mention are located in the US but nevertheless insist:

If this has so far largely remained parochial to the North American context, we hope that projects such as Queer Necropolitics will help us catch up with the moves of capital and ideology, so that resistant knowledges, too, may begin to cross borders and ‘unmap’ (Razack 2002) the geopolitics of violence, abandonment, and death. We hope that this book will be a stepping stone for forging a transnational lens that is adequate to this task. (21, 2014)

This conclusion betrays much that the authors seek to dismantle. Even as they forcefully articulate the deathly projects of US imperialism, the epistemologies they seek to produce come dangerously close to perpetuating those very empires. Not only are the citations of activist projects limited to the US but even when research under the rubric of transnational work is produced, the terms of reference remain rooted in the US and Europe. Hence, knowledges produced elsewhere are monolithically deemed as “resistant” which are tasked to cross borders and undo geopolitical violences, thus reproducing the binary of the north-south. Aizura cautions against such interpellations and hence refrains from using overarching terms like “transwomen of color” for the migrant people he writes about. One could extend this provocation to ask what would it mean to produce research that demands interpretation in its singularity, without attempting to compare it with Euro-American contexts? Perhaps an impossible project, yet a goal worth pursuing if scholarship seeks to challenge any kind of hegemony. Secondly and more importantly, what if we were to disregard the burdens of always already being resistant and resilient global south subjects? In doing so, I am inspired by Kadji Amin’s theorization of deidealization as a deexceptionalization of queerness as

always already disruptive. Deidealization as a mode of analysis acknowledges messiness, damage, the enmeshment of normativity with deviance. To quote Amin, “On the most basic level, it calls for an acknowledgment of the ‘complex personhood’ of queer, racialized, and subaltern persons too often assigned the psychically flat role of righting the ills of an unjust social order and denied the right to be damaged, psychically complex, or merely otherwise occupied. (11, 2017)” My research interlocutors are primarily *kotis* who come from various caste and class positions, differences that often unsettle ideas of gender non normativity as the uniting force for collectivity. These power differentials direct how sociality itself is produced amidst ongoing violences wrought by the state. Such a social is messy, full of antagonisms, rivalries and also, love, joy and pleasure. Resistance is everyday work and non-normativity of gender from an elsewhere geographic location does not automatically entail resistance. Finally, as important as queer necropolitics is to think about how violence structures queer and trans life, it also risks overdetermining the messiness of life and death. Life narratives sometimes disrupt the overdeterminations of biopolitics and necropolitics.

Anthropology has mined the category of the everyday to theorize life itself. Didier Fassin reads Michel Foucault’s corpus on biopolitics to argue that unlike what the etymology of the word suggests, Foucauldian biopolitics is mostly not concerned with the politics of life as its unit of analysis (2009). Instead, population is its object. Hence, biopolitics is about the various technologies through which a population is managed, normalized and governed. However, in *Society Must be Defended* (1976) and *The Will to Know* (1971), Foucault marks the shift from the sovereign right to make die and let live to the biopower of make live and let die. Thus, here the question of life and death become central to biopolitics. Fassin builds on this strand of Foucault to argue that the making live, letting die rests on the question of biolegitimacy, that is what lives are

worth living and hence to be imbued with rights, citizenship and other entitlements and what are the lives that are to become rightless. Relatedly, this legitimation of some lives and not others rest on creating inequalities that is not all lives can be rendered equal. So, what is understood as management or normalization of populations, on the level of life, is about the creation of conditions that allow some lives to thrive while curtailing the longevity of others. How certain lives are considered worth giving asylum while others remain perennially in waiting, how some victims of an industrial gas leak are considered worth protection while other lives wither away in proximity to toxic wastes are all about how meaning and value are calibrated on the scales of equality and legitimacy of life. To make live also implies that explicit and implicit choices are made about what sort of lives should thrive and for how long. From access to clean water, vaccination, quality of healthcare to employment and housing programmes, these are initiatives that have material implications for life. Disparities in longevity, mortality rates do not only have implications on the level of statistics and population but also on the daily of individual lives. Normalization of population is also about differentiation on the level of life. In the context of his ethnography in post-apartheid South Africa where the ongoing impact of racial segregation aggravates the devastating impact of HIV on poor Black communities, Fassin provides a sophisticated analysis of how strategies, discourses, technologies and tactics of population management also have very concrete consequences for everyday realities of life. However, an account of biopolitics on the level of life is perhaps inadequate if it fails to account for the perspectives of individuals, their daily negotiations, the creativity with which they manoeuvre their way through bureaucracy, state institutions and oppressive regimes. This is not to fetishize resilience or resistance because the bodily vulnerability of some do not register as vulnerability at all. The short notice with which the Indian nation state

was shut down as the COVID pandemic hit the country is evidence of the fact that the precarity of migrant workers did not even register with the policymakers even as the middle and upper classes could claim vulnerability and hence guard against the virus by not stepping out of home. However, life is not reducible to only what the state mandates. Fassin himself states, ‘... life is not only a question of politics seen from the outside, through the lenses of the state, of institutions, of immigration policies, of statistics on mortality, but should also be seized from inside, in the flesh of the everyday experience of social agents...(57, 2009)’ In that vein, anthropologist Veena Das immerses herself in an emerging story to offer us layered descriptions of conversations, misgivings, fears, joys that involve a host of characters and troubles pre-given meanings of concepts, actions and behaviours (2020). My ethnographic encounters also probe how actions, gestures and conversations cannot be neatly placed into any fixed templates of vulnerability and marginality. I study the everyday and how it is reproduced as labor that requires intentionality and effort. I offer ethnographic anecdotes and then use them to make sense of the literatures on everyday and care I read and sometimes my ethnography also points to limitations in these literatures.

### **Arguments**

*Lifemaking alongside Death* is divided into three chapters. Each chapter has death in the background but the chapters themselves focus on the labors needed to make life amidst death. The first chapter is set in the first decade of 2000s when the Indian state had just begun to recognize the fact that queer and transgender communities were vulnerable to HIV. Yet the first case of HIV was detected as far back as 1986 in India. Due to long histories of state apathy, there was no awareness on the virus and queer and transgender folks were dying. This chapter explores how we memorialize those deaths and reckon with the ever-expanding inventory of loss in trans and queer communities

because the HIV pandemic is still ongoing. I argue that no such reckoning with HIV is possible without accounting for the grinding actions of care labor that trans and queer communities perform for each other in the face of various institutional violences ranging from stigma due to HIV, medical negligence in public hospitals and transphobia in their everyday worlds. These labors illuminate both the devalued histories of care labor in gender minority communities where care itself is a form of coercion perpetuating histories of caste oppression and the politics of transnational HIV funding in South Asia, but that very same care is also what binds these communities together in bonds of friendship, gender affirmation and dignity in the face of routinized violences. Trans communities wrote and performed plays for generating awareness about the virus and formed informal care collectives to look after the ailing. While the labors performed by them continue to be devalued and not recognized by the state, these labors bind them in friendships and communal attachments such that the hopelessness and exhaustion with the relentlessness of the need for care are not able to cancel out the joys and pleasures of friendships and companionship. From the community of care in the wake of HIV, the second chapter moves to the exploration of how a social is carved amidst the relentlessness of death. A Transgender Day of Remembrance meeting that is supposed to mourn the dead becomes a contested site of multiple affects. From hijras refusing the solemnity of the occasion by disregarding visuals of the faces of the dead to *kotis* ululating their way through a procession mourning the dead as if a marriage is taking place, the finality and hence the almost sacred nature of death is troubled repeatedly. Yet, this is not to argue that death can be undermined. The very fact that such meetings are heavily attended also illuminate the fact that the dead are not forgotten but that they cannot subsume the messiness of life. So memorial meetings that challenge the violent pigeonholing of memory of complex persons into fixed gendered

boxes also end up solidifying other hierarchies. Caste and class differentials devalorize any romantic ideals of community making simply based on gender. Finally, there are other forms of social that violence and death produce. Jokes on sex and death circulate feverishly in communities of friendship and care that sometimes makes violence endurable, sometimes helps resist overarching structures of violence and sometimes become essential lifemaking strategies that help reproduce the everyday. These multiple emotions and affects around death trouble any unilinear theorization of trans necropolitics. The third and final chapter is set during the shutdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and how elderly transpersons rallied around each other for daily sustenance while they negotiated with various state agencies, transnationally funded non-profits and academics for emergency resources. These negotiations were always improvisatory in nature as their outcomes could never be predicted in advance. Failure in negotiations would not come as a surprise but would only necessitate further improvisations and hence I mark these strategic gestures as being on the subjunctive register, that is always animated by an “as if.” This chapter revolves around one elderly transperson, Chhanda Dey and the circle of care that emerged around her. My thesis starts with HIV and ends with the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as during the height of the HIV crisis, the state was nowhere to be seen and trans communities stepped in as caregivers for each other, we have seen that situation mirrored during the three waves of the COVID pandemic as well. The abstract care of the state that designs top-down programs for HIV advocacy by setting targets for testing that had to be fulfilled by underpaid *kotis* and the apathy of medical institutions in caring for the HIV positive necessitated trans kinship networks that operated like webs that is without any hierarchies of indebtedness between the giver and receiver of care. By stepping in as caregivers, trans communities not only vitalized life but also imbued it with dignity by



affirming the gender that is so stigmatized. In the final chapter, however, I concentrate on the durational aspect of care. I ask what happens when kinship networks become so frayed with exhaustion that care becomes impossible. I argue that trans communities forge agonistic attachments with care. Agonisms allow one to verbalize feelings of resentment, anger and bitterness about the relentlessness of care, creating space to sit with negative feelings. Such agonisms wax and wane in intensities depending on the demands of care and thus care becomes sustainable in the long term. This chapter also explores how the way *kotis* relate with each other is shot through caste and class relations. Caste becomes particularly important because it determines how care circulates. If the first chapter was about the weaving of care webs against apathetic institutions that do not care about trans life, this chapter studies how care webs endure despite antagonisms generated by caste within trans communities. Agonistic intimacies allow *kotis* to forge relations of care with each other that are not based on altruistic motives but on canny calculations of how to fuck with power hierarchies. This chapter also demonstrates how other relationalities of care based on shared conditions of economic precarity are forged whereby gender does not remain the only glue that creates community.

Taken together, these chapters argue for a multilayered theorization of life shaped by the daily that trouble the templates of state, biopolitics and trans life. I conclude that trans communities invent new modalities of making life in an environment saturated by violence – these modalities simultaneously involve protests against the state and sometimes negotiations with it, playfulness about life and death and grinding physical and emotional labors of care that defy any singular theorizations of precarity and vulnerability. I draw on João Biehl and Peter Locke’s theorizations of the anthropology of becoming to bring all the protagonists of my thesis together in the conclusion to

argue that life is inexhaustible in all its contradictions, complexities, twists and turns and that the stories we narrate and theorize are always unfinished. Hence, the granular demands attention. They are not simply pebbles that can be thrown away to force fit one's chosen narrative into a grand narrative of theory but the pebbles also undo and remake theory.

### **Some basic facts about the Research**

My research interweaves four years of ethnography in West Bengal, a state in eastern India, archival readings of letters, fact finding reports and pamphlets and discourse analysis of legal judgements and popular media. I commenced field work in the summer of 2018. After three months of preliminary fieldwork, I returned to the US to defend my dissertation prospectus and in August 2019, I came back to India for extensive fieldwork. I conducted participant observation in Pratyay Gender Trust, one of India's oldest transgender led collectives that started operating in the late 1990s. Pratyay has been organizing AIDS memorials, right since its inception and has been conducting the Rituparno Ghosh Memorial Lecture, in the memory of one of South Asia's most well-known gender nonbinary filmmakers, Rituparno Ghosh, since 2014. Given Pratyay's long engagement with questions of memory and death, I interviewed its volunteers and employees, attended their meetings as a participant observer and became a volunteer with the organizing of the lecture. My questions during fieldwork were: How do organizations and those affiliated with them memorialize trans death? How do such deaths inform activist agendas and the everyday of trans life worlds? What forms of labor are necessary to memorialize death and how are such labors allocated among transpersons across hierarchies of caste and class? Besides Pratyay members, I also interviewed former members of three transgender collectives that shut down in the early 2000s – Prantik and Asroy in rural West Bengal, and Plus, in the suburbs of Kolkata. I

also interviewed members of Kolkata Anandam, a collective started by transgender sex workers in 2019 after they broke up with Durbar, a sex worker's collective in West Bengal because they felt that the specificity of gender non-normativity was not being addressed by Durbar. I started with focussed groups with these organizations on questions of memory, their organizing years, how do they look back at the past and their thoughts on the present and then conducted interviews with some of the focussed group participants who volunteered to individually speak with me. All my interviews were semi-structured that allowed my interviewees to speak on a range of issues related to memory, violence and the everyday. Given the sensitive nature of the conversation, this flexibility was important even as a loose structure allowed me to ask my research questions. Interviews ranged from an hour to five hours. Most of these interviews happened over multiple sessions depending on the work schedules of my research participants.

To offer more context to my interviewees, they are all employed in the informal economy. Svati P. Shah defines the informal economy as the “vast segments of national economies that are bureaucratically invisible; this is the untaxed economy, that part of the economy that does not have official governmental oversight but in which everyone participates as producers, consumers, or workers.” (2014, 9) Be it small factories, domestic work, non-brothel-based sex work or beauty parlors—all my research interlocutors, except the elderly and the ill, find livelihood in the informal economy. These are spaces which provide them livelihood options within a severely circumscribed field because most establishments turn them away on account of their gender non-conformity. For example, one of the most important options of income generation for transgender women is sex work, coupled with other forms of labor. Shah's (2014) multi-sited ethnographic exploration of sex work in the city of Mumbai

shows that it is “one of many livelihood strategies that poor migrants engage in” and is embedded within a “complex discursive matrix that includes life and livelihood histories, the production of urban space, the mutually constituted discourses of caste and gender, and the ways in which economically impoverished migrants navigate the idiosyncrasies of state institutions, from the police to systems of health care” (2014, 10). Though Shah conducted their research with female sex workers, such a framework is also relevant for transgender sex workers. In a recent essay for *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Shah shows how the figure of the migrant is imagined as the rational man exercising economic agency. Even when the migrant woman is inserted into this schema, she can only be performing gendered occupations like domestic work and nursing. Either way, sex work is not studied in relation to migrant labor and the cisnormativity of the discourses on sex work are not questioned (2021). Yet, left with almost no option in the formal economy, often turned out of their natal homes, sex work becomes one of the very few modes of income generation available to *kotis*, one that pays for their gender affirmation surgery in the absence of health benefits, pays for housing rent in urban spaces where property prices are soaring and attends to other basic needs. My research, however, is not focused on livelihood practices in trans communities. Except the first chapter, where questions of unpaid care labor in community-based organizations come up while examining memories of death and HIV, this dissertation is mostly focussed on the daily labors required to make life amidst violence.

In March 2020, when a sudden lockdown was imposed on India following the accelerating COVID infections, I started checking in on my interviewees over phone. It was during this time, I ended up calling an elderly transperson, Chhanda Dey, who shared the same name as one of my interviewees. Chhanda lived in my neighborhood,

and I started visiting her regularly. She would often share stories from her youth with me and I approached her for an interview, but this interview led to an intense two-year engagement with her in which I became one of her caregivers besides already being a researcher. She adopted me as her daughter. Meeting her every other day or sometimes everyday became a part of my routine. I also met many of her friends with whom too I spent a lot of time. Gradually, I did away with recorders and my interactions with Chhanda and her friends became field notes that I wrote every night or sometimes the day after I met them. I have changed the names of all my interviewees except the ones who insisted on their real names being used. Real names have been used throughout chapter one. In the second and third chapters, all the names are fictitious except those of Raina, Sudeb, Anindya, Nitu and Bhanu Mama.

I also conducted archival research at the Kolkata office of SATHII (Solidarity and Action Against HIV Infection in India), an organization that works on HIV prevention in eastern India and parts of southern India and at Pratyay's Kolkata office. I studied their organizational archives for fact finding reports, pamphlets, flyers for protests and workshops, newspaper clippings and other forms of reportage around deaths to understand how trans deaths are documented and memorialized. Archival analysis allowed me to understand how India's queer non-profits institutionally respond to death. I also undertook discourse analysis of legal judgments like the ruling on Section 377, on the judgment on transgender citizenship, activist petitions against Section 377 and mainstream media coverage of these issues to understand the ways trans vulnerability was depicted in these documents.

These are only the bare essentials of the research but is that enough? In the previous paragraphs, I have named my research methods and the organizations I have worked

with. Yet there is a lot more to unpack about my orientations to my research. So, bear with me.

### **Stuck – A Reading Orientation**

With two fellowships that would allow me to be in India for two years without any teaching commitments in my university meant that my fieldwork year could not have begun on a more ideal note. As stated earlier, I wished to study how narratives of death circulated in trans and queer communities in India beyond the instrumental use of violence and death for law. I had already established links with a group of hijras in Delhi who were connected to Mona Ahmed, the famous hijra who lived in a graveyard in the last three decades of her life and became famous with Dayanita Singh's photobook on her (2001) and Arundhati Roy's fictional rendering of Mona in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Mona had already died by the time I started fieldwork in 2018, but I wanted to meet her friends to understand how she found life amidst the dead.<sup>7</sup> I was also supposed to spend several months with a queer feminist collective in Vadodra, a city in Gujarat, a state on the western coast of India and study their interventions in cases of lesbian and transmasculine suicides. There were many other plans of travels too. However, I wished to start my research in West Bengal, my home state so that I could also find some time to settle down, complete some family responsibilities before the extensive travels began. Elsewhere I have written about how researching in one's "home" does not necessarily mean that familiarity can be taken for granted. The ever-shifting power relations between the researcher and the research interlocutor on account of caste and class differences can create unexpected dynamics

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<sup>7</sup> Neither the extensive travels to Delhi nor the conversations with the hijras materialized. So, Mona is not in this thesis but I ended up writing an essay about Singh and Roy's renderings of Mona in a special issue of QED that is forthcoming (2022).

that make the home unfamiliar, but that challenge is also why research can be exhilarating (Bhattacharya 2019). To loosely borrow from Stefan Helmreich's idea of immersion (2007), I was gradually becoming all encompassed in my field. Life had other plans, however.

On November 24, 2019, three months after I embarked on extensive fieldwork, one of my closest friends and research interlocutor's father died of lung cancer, exactly three weeks after diagnosis. The day he was cremated, my mother informed me that she had felt a lump on her right breast. After a flurry of scans and biopsy, we found that it was stage III breast cancer. First surgery in December 2019, then a second one in January 2020 and then an infection that required me to rush her to the emergency. Then we started chemotherapy. On the evening after the first chemotherapy, while I was helping her to the toilet because she wanted to vomit, there was a knock on our door. Officers from the Indian government had come to issue us a notice that we needed to vacate our home because a tunnel boring machine would pass under the neighborhood for the metro rail and there was a chance that the houses in the neighborhood could collapse and so for our safety, we had to leave. I refused to leave initially because I was worried about what another infection could do to my mother's body if we were not painstakingly careful about her food, drinks and overall hygiene. How could I take her to a hotel in this fragile condition? But we did have to leave eventually. We lived in a guest house, close to the cancer hospital for two months. The manager of the guest house was extremely cooperative with my demands and allowed me to use his kitchen. Every dish had to be washed with warm water, drinking water had to be boiled and I could not expect the guest house staff to be doing all this extra labor for us. So, I took over. It helped that the kitchen was rarely used by the other boarders in the guest house. The other boarders generally came in the afternoons for sex with partners and left after a

few discreet hours of fun. As I started getting used to the routine, I also resumed fieldwork after a break of three months.

Sudeb Sadhu is a trans activist who has been involved in trans activism in West Bengal since the early 2000s. She has worked with multiple transgender collectives, including Pratyay and Plus. She was also a part of Asroy and Prantik. Plus has shut down and Asroy and Prantik only exist in name. Sudeb wants to revitalize both Asroy and Prantik with new members and grants from transnational donors. She put me in touch with several of my research interlocutors and helped me convene the focussed groups. During my stay at the guest house, I called her one day and informed her that I wished to resume my research and readily she put me in touch with a volunteer of Plus and we decided on a date for a focussed group in Plus's former office that was now the home of one of its former members in the suburbs of eastern Kolkata. I reached the neighborhood on time and was waiting for Sudeb to arrive and take me to the Plus member's home. Half an hour had passed and there was no sign of Sudeb and her phone was unreachable. Almost an hour after I arrived, Sudeb called me and informed me that some boils had erupted on her forehead, and she had fever. I was immediately alarmed and asked her if she thought it was pox. She said she was not sure, but she did not want me to cancel the focussed group. She was already on her way. She hung up. I was certainly concerned for her health but what concerned me even more was if I could afford to meet her now given that I was also my mother's primary caregiver. I called her back and asked her to cancel the meeting. She said that all the interviewees had already arrived, and she was here as well. That is when I saw Sudeb exiting an auto on the opposite side of the road. I was speechless. Sudeb continued speaking into the phone. She waved at me and asked me to cross the street and walk into a narrow lane. She pointed me to a middle aged *koti* who was already waiting for me by a tea stall and



asked me to go with her to our meeting venue. Sudeb waved at the *koti* as well. By the time I had crossed the street and met this *koti*, I saw Sudeb take another auto and go back. She had made all the arrangements for my research without coming near me. I felt immensely relieved but also extremely guilty. How could I conduct long-term research if I had to calibrate all my interactions based on hygiene, touch and perils of contamination? As it is these questions are freighted by the violent histories of caste and here, I was trying to hold onto ideals of hygiene to protect my mother from yet another infection.

A week after we came back from the guest house in March 2020, the COVID-19 lockdown was announced. The onset of the pandemic intensified my concerns around the perils of touch and infection further and it also buried my plans for fieldwork related travel.

Reflexivity and collaboration have been hallmarks of feminist and decolonial ethnography for a long time (Craven and Davis 2016, Dutta and Roy 2014, Nagar 2006, Smith 1999, Visweswaran 1994, Stacey 1988). How our identities shape our research questions, the relationships that we develop on the field or the relationships that we are not able to forge have been explored in great depth by feminist and decolonial ethnographers. In an evocative essay about how sexual assault deeply informed her research questions, Alix Johnson writes, “Our embodiment conditions our capacity for knowledge production...” In her three-part blogpost on fieldwork and knowledge production for *Savage Minds*, she draws connections between Ann Cvetkovich’s theorization of depression as a public feeling and the very embodied perils of conducting fieldwork. To draw on Kathleen Stewart’s work on atmospheric attunements, if ethnography is an attunement, that is an intentional embodied orientation to one’s field site that allows “an intimate, compositional process of

dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds” (2011, 445), then depression is that state of existence that could shut one off from such attunements. What would ethnography look like when you do not have the capacity to care, to follow, to feel? I was not depressed all the time because of my life’s circumstances but I did feel extremely helpless that I had to spend long stretches of time away from the field and even when I conducted research, I had to be mindful about my personal life priorities. Anthropological literatures and the romance they construct about the field had not prepared me for the detachments I felt and sometimes the detachments that I had to cultivate to sustain my caregiving role. The incident with Sudeb was not the only time I felt I could not afford the immersion that ethnography normatively demands. Like Johnson writes, there were many days when I just could not care for fieldwork. I cancelled meetings because cancer and the daily care it demands overwhelmed me. During the first wave, I took some notes during the long waiting hours at the cancer hospital. I am reproducing an extract here:

*On March 24, 2020, Narendra Modi shut down the country in a televised speech and announced the start of an epic war against the virus. I was simply trying to ensure that my mother’s chemotherapy did not stop. Reports were already trickling in that most public hospitals were being turned into COVID speciality centres. Patients needing radiation, dialysis or chemotherapy were being turned back. Outstation patients were stuck in hotels, unable to return home for lack of transport even as their savings dwindled. But my fellowship dollars ensured that my mother did not have to suffer the triage of public hospitals. Her treatment was being undertaken at a private hospital that specialized in cancer treatment. During the first week of lockdown, her second chemotherapy was due and here is a checklist of tasks to be completed:*

- *Download the home ministry circular to see if medical emergencies are exempt from the lockdown.*
- *Go to the local police station with a letter asking them to authorize your travel to the hospital.*
- *Hire a car because there is no public transport.*
- *Take an A3 piece of paper and write in caps “EMERGENCY” and stick it on the windshield of the hired car.*
- *Buy a pack of N95 masks, head gear, gloves and sanitizer*
- *Keep the prescriptions, test reports ready when (not if) the police stop your car on the way*
- *At the hospital, clear the thermal screening, line up for the blood tests, see the oncologist, buy the drugs that will set fire to your mother’s innards, pay for day care admission, sanitize your hands, feed your mother, drink water, give her the Aprepitant, take her to the loo, sanitize your hands, wait for your turn for the chemo to start.*

*As the lockdown kept getting extended, I kept looking around for the friends I had made during the initial tests, surgery and post-operative care. We would exchange notes on symptoms and how best to deal with them, advice that often the medical experts did not give us. The philanthropic businessman, Ratan Tata who is one of the highest donors of Modi’s fascist government also subsidizes the cancer hospital and therefore allows classes to collide and tentatively forge communities of vulnerability, care and pain. But the couple who took three hours by train to reach the hospital went missing. The elderly lady who came to the hospital from the neighboring state of Jharkhand went missing. In short, the ones who could not afford hired cars were missing.*

*Eight rounds of chemotherapy, 8-12 hours of a hired car per hospital trip. And the side effects to be managed between the chemo sessions.*

*We returned from the hospital each time with survivors' guilt until the next time.*

Most of 2020 was spent dealing with chemotherapy, then radiation and some additional surgeries in the mouth before the hormone therapy began. For a long time, I felt I was waiting for some semblance of routine. When would the pandemic end? When would my mother be able to step out of home without my assistance? When could I resume my research? Of course, there were the practical concerns about how “safe” it was for me to step out and attend meetings in crowded settings after the lockdown had been lifted. Many of my research interlocutors did not wear masks. For example, Chhanda and her friends never wore masks. For them the logic of life was simple. If they had survived the peak of the AIDS crisis, COVID could not kill them either. When I met them always masked, my masking was often read as my elitism. I kept waiting to feel secure enough to unmask and completely immerse myself in ethnography.

Ghassan Hage points out that waiting perhaps signals that we have expectations from life and that we are on the lookout for what life will throw our way (2009, 1). Waiting is thus future oriented. John Rundell writes,

We all wait for futures – yet not for the same ones, nor in the same way, nor at the same tempo. Modernity, because of its multiple worlds and their temporal horizons, entails that waiting for the future has multiple, clashing and even overlapping effects, affects and modalities. We wait for the end of the working day, for rest and leisure; we wait for a visa and a place to settle; for money and a chance to purchase... here waiting has been posited as a boundary condition in which the futures to which it gestures is also indeterminate (2009, 51).

Implicit in this wide arc of what waiting entails is not simply the difference between individual forms of waiting but also how central waiting is to our very being. It is an

all-pervasive phenomenon. Waiting is also an intrinsic method for ethnography. We wait on the field for serendipitous encounters, we prepare for and deal with unexpected situations. There is waiting for research funding to materialize, for research interlocutors to show up, arduous engagements with fieldnotes, waiting for patterns to emerge, for patterns to become coherent pieces of writing worth being shared with a larger audience, there is waiting for technology to perfectly work. It is a long list. Then there is the neoliberal demand of academia to speed up that eschews close attention and patience on the field to replace it with a quick turnaround with end results in the form of journal articles, books, fellowship applications, job talks and so on (Janeja and Bandak, 2018, 22-23). I longed to experience these kinds of waitings for a while, but I felt I had gotten stuck in an endless loop between home and the hospital and the meetings with my research interlocutors, meetings which had to be navigated keeping my mother's health in mind. So, an interlocutor's invitation for a meal with her had to be declined or the opportunity to go on a weeklong trip with a group of *kotis* had been missed.

For life to be viable, there must be a sense of movement, that is one is headed somewhere, what Hage refers to as "existential mobility (2009, 97)." Yet not everyone can feel mobile, and the opposite of existential mobility is what Hage refers to as "stuckedness." While everybody feels stuck at some point or the other, with crisis becoming a permanent condition of our present that is a state of permanent exception, Hage argues that stuckedness has only intensified and proliferated and has been normalized. This means that rather than being perceived as something to get out of, it is thought of as a state to be endured. It becomes an individualized endurance test. Hage writes: "... such a mode of confronting the crisis by a celebration of one's capacity to

stick it out rather than calling for change, contains a specific experience of waiting that is referred to in common language as ‘waiting it out’.” (2009, 97-98)

Stuckedness would assume a lack of agency to change one’s circumstances or even if presented with alternatives to change one’s situation, to be not able to grab those opportunities. One becomes a hero when one is resilient enough to not succumb to the stuckedness and endures it and emerges out of it, like in the numerous news stories of individuals surviving earthquakes, landslides and floods. Hage puts it pithily, “In this way, a certain nobility of spirit and an assertion of one’s ‘freedom as a human’ oozes out of the very notion of ‘endurance’, which comes to negate the dehumanization implied by a situation of ‘stuckedness’. (101)” Hage thinks that this heroism of the stuck is a form of governmentality. It valorizes self-control in times of crisis. It is a deep civilizing process to not act during a crisis, to not complain, to be orderly and to silently wait for the crisis to pass over, the implication being that it is the uncivilized who complain, protest and are unruly. While Hage gestures to the importance of collective protests and solidarity in questioning and shaking up the status quo, it is also possible to think more deeply about stuckness without valorising it. Not all protests are waged on the streets. For example, the ongoing COVID pandemic has not only left millions dead, but many more millions are dealing with the long-term consequences of COVID. How do the sick and immune-compromised resist stuckness? Aren Aizura has written in a recent blogpost about the debilitating and unpredictable side effects of long COVID that does not allow a person to leave bed for days. Yet one also finds ways to orient one’s protest ethics according to the rhythms of one’s body. For Aizura, this might mean raising funds for protests, dropping off supplies or offering rides. Aizura asks, “... what if it was possible to sit with the stuckness and imagine stuckness as full of possibility? (2021)” Aizura’s arguments about stuckness resonates with how Johanna

Hedva writes about the political in “Sick Woman Theory”. They write, “If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political – simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street.” (2016) When there was no way to push past the stuckness, I started realizing that how the everyday is reproduced under the permanent conditions of crisis needs attention because it is also political. My ethnography needed to turn away from waiting to fulfil the normative goals of extensive travels. There could be other forms of immersion that did not entail spending long stretches of time on the field.

Ann Cvetkovich characterizes stuckness as an impasse, an inability to decide what to do or even why to do it. For her, this impasse could even be characterized as depression. Things do not move forward due to circumstances, or the world simply does not allow things to move. Cvetkovich argues that it is creativity more than any pill that could be a cure to feeling stuck or depressed (2012, 19-20). She defines creativity as,

Defined in relation to notions of blockage or impasse, creativity can be thought of as a form of movement, movement that manoeuvres the mind inside or around an impasse, even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat. Spatialized in this way, creativity can describe forms of agency that take the form of literal movement and are thus more e- motional or sensational or tactile (21).

Creativity defined this way is embedded in everyday life. It is about various modes of moving, not necessarily on a linear path but sometimes backward, sometimes sideways and sometimes upfront. If depression refers to being stuck, then creative ways of living life must be envisioned to live around or along with that stuckness. Johnson follows Cvetkovich to argue that meditative attempts at crafting an everyday with various habits, routines, creative pursuits might allow one to manoeuvre one’s way around

depression as an ethnographer. Cvetkovich calls this ‘slow living’ in response to Berlant’s ‘slow death’ (2012, 167).<sup>8</sup>

So, then what could ‘slow living’ mean for ethnography? Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe offer us a name – patchwork ethnography. Be it the lack of funds, personal life-work balance or the masculinist assumptions of the always available fieldworker, critiques of the romanticization of prolonged immersive fieldwork were emerging even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, has however, crystallized these critiques further. Günel, Varma and Watanabe write,

Patchwork ethnography begins from the acknowledgement that recombinations of “home” and “field” have now become necessities—more so in the face of the current pandemic. By patchwork ethnography, we refer to ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional... while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production. Patchwork ethnography is not an excuse to be more productive. Instead, it is an effective, but kinder and gentler way to do research because it expands what we consider acceptable materials, tools, and objects of our analyses.

While naming and theorizing how one’s knowledge production is shaped by various blockages, infrastructural constraints and setbacks one faces on the field gives an academic legibility to one’s intellectual labors, it is also an open secret that our intellectual pursuits can only be patchwork. Any claim to an all-encompassing knowingness of one’s field is disingenuous. I have no such claims to make and hence I

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<sup>8</sup> Lauren Berlant writes, “The phrase slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence (754).”



have been dwelling a bit on my life circumstances because they reoriented my research questions and the observations I gleaned from the field.

By the time the second wave of the pandemic hit India in 2021, I had relinquished my travel plans completely. Despite all my precautions, my mother did contract COVID in June 2021. Thankfully she was vaccinated and so I did not have to rush her to the hospital but there were long term impacts on her health. Fatigue, frequent fevers, body ache, immobility were new companions in our life. Eventually, I contracted COVID as well. A friend died of COVID.

When I had started the research, there was a lot of optimism in queer communities around the decriminalization of Section 377. A study of death narratives would allow me to interrupt that queer telos of progress. Now during the pandemic, when I kept waiting for curative time, for illnesses to cure, for the COVID virus to disappear, I realized that in such waiting, my thoughts were getting dogged by the liberal promise of teleological progress. Yet queer theorists and theorists of haunting have repeatedly shown us that neither do pasts disappear nor do times get better. (Puar 2017, Langford 2013, Hong, 2015, Cho 2008, Gordon 1997) Finally, when I stopped waiting for better times through the ceaseless period of mourning and being stuck, some patterns started emerging. Surrounded by death all around, my research stopped being about death. I started exploring how life is made even when death is an every day. The durational aspects of carework in my life and how it directed every decision I took or every move that I could or could not make meant that what interested me most was how we reproduce the everyday amidst varied forms of ongoing violence. So, when some of my research interlocutors refused to recount memories of their dead friend and instead focussed on the care labors they performed for her because the medical institution refused to, I learnt to overcome my discomfort with such refusals to focus on the

complexity of care. That it could both affirm and devalue. They were coerced to care but by caring, they also affirmed each other in their gendered embodiments. One fine evening I felt a startling resonance with this doubling feeling. I was wrestling with resentment having to give up on my desires and my work to center my mother's wellbeing when suddenly she said that she felt fortunate that I was feminine! That I could easily cook, bathe her, perform every household chore was because I was not the 'son' she had desired until now. Care that exhausted me unexpectedly became the reason why the most important person of my life affirmed my gender embodiment. Stuckness also meant that I valued routine, the painstaking process of crafting reasons to go on living further. So, I would regularly call every single person I had interviewed during the long months of the lockdown and even later and our conversations continued even if we were not physically meeting. I visited Chhanda regularly and became her caregiver as well and in the process intimately observed how she made life even as the world around her seemed to be perennially falling apart. There were other affordances too produced by stuckness.

One afternoon, as my mother was going through her three-hour chemo, I felt parched and hungry and the water bottle I carried was already empty. So, I went to the hospital cafeteria and found myself laughing uncontrollably when I found a group of patients and their relatives quarrelling with the attendant at the counter because there were no chicken drumsticks left. Meanwhile, some other family was trying to jump the queue at the food counters for a plate of Biryani that too seemed to be fast vanishing from the buffet spread of the day. I felt a mad hunger in my stomach and got myself coffee and a chicken sandwich. I do not remember the taste of the sandwich anymore, but I distinctly remember how satiated I felt. Who would have imagined that the cafeteria at the cancer hospital would evoke such feelings? That people would scramble for food

not just for hunger— while they waited long hours for their life saving drugs or for some dreadful news— but for their taste buds? Jokes about sex and death shared by *kotis* that seemed crass on first hearing started making complete sense later because humor served multiple purposes. It allowed them to refuse the overwhelming nature of death and violence, to resist power structures that subsumed their subjectivities and most importantly humor helped them carve out a social that they could inhabit with joy and pleasure despite life's denuding circumstances.

Stuckness allowed me to sit with the feelings of resentment, bitterness, anger and sometimes ennui and listlessness and think about the antagonisms that care elicits. This helped me appreciate how *kotis* speaking ill about each other was also a way for them to cope with the coercion of care. The agonisms and antagonisms waxed and waned, and members joined, left and again joined circles of care around the ill. So, one could leave if one felt too overwhelmed by the bitterness and others arrived. I became part of such an ever-shifting circle of care around the ailing Chhanda. These antagonisms also threw into sharp relief our caste relations and how we negotiated power amongst ourselves.

With great pain, as I started carving out a routine for myself, my thesis also started taking shape. This is not at all to claim that I do not mourn the many lost opportunities because mining the possibilities of stuckness does not prevent me from sometimes thinking about what could have been. Mourning need not always be militant.<sup>9</sup> It could descend into laughter too. And there is a lot of laughter in this dissertation.

Let us begin.

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am drawing on Douglas Crimp's passionate essay, *Mourning and Militancy* (1989) written during the peak of the HIV crisis in the US.

## **Chapter 1**

### **An HIV Memorial Otherwise: The Many Registers of Care**

As per the Status of National AIDS Report, second edition, 2020, India is committed to eliminating the AIDS epidemic as a public threat by 2030 (National AIDS Control Organization, 2020). The number of new HIV infections has decreased by 37% between 2010 and 2019 and during the same period, AIDS related deaths decreased by 66%. The first case of HIV in India was reported in 1986. The report states that from HIV being considered a fatal disease to it becoming a manageable chronic health condition, India has come a long way in battling the virus. The report also claims that Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) is easily accessible across the country. The cheerful optimism of these parts of the AIDS report is, however, sobered by a statistic the same report offers - queer and transgender population are 6 to 13 times more vulnerable to the virus than the rest of the population.

This chapter is set in the first decade of 2000s when the Indian state had just begun to recognize that queer and transgender communities were vulnerable to HIV. ART was just being made available in these communities. Due to long histories of state apathy, there was no awareness about the virus and queer and transgender folks were dying. How do we memorialize those deaths given that HIV is not an event in the past but its effects are still unfolding as the National AIDS Report itself suggests? How do we reckon with an ever-expanding inventory of loss? With these questions in mind, I began an archival and ethnographic exploration of HIV activism in queer and transgender communities in India and how memories of death circulated in these communities. However, as the research progressed, the connecting tissue that linked my research interlocutors, my field observations and my archival materials turned out to be care, not

death. The abstract care of the state and transnational donor bodies that configured groups of people as “high risk”, and the grinding physical and emotional labors of communities that enfolded this abstract care every day, labors that were devalued but whose demands were relentless. These labors illuminated the devalued histories of care labor in these communities where care itself is a form of coercion perpetuating caste oppression in South Asia. That very same care, however, is also what binds these communities together in bonds of friendship, gender affirmation and dignity in the face of routinized violences.

South Asian literatures on HIV in queer and transgender communities have mostly investigated the biopolitical configuration of different communities as “high-risk” groups that required medical intervention (Khanna 2016; Puri 2016; Dutta 2013; Dave 2012; Narrain and Gupta 2011; Reddy 2005). However, this scholarship is not in conversation with feminist literatures on care work. Transnational scholarship on HIV-AIDS has illuminated that a pandemic is not just an epidemiological phenomenon but that discourses around virology, public health and hygiene are constructed through concatenations of structures of racism, transphobia, homophobia, neoliberal rationality and capitalism (Hobson and Royles 2021; Cheng, Juhasz and Shahani 2020; Gossett and Hayward 2020). Even as these literatures have illuminated how varied forms of structural violence determine bodily vulnerability to the virus, there has not been much reckoning with the daily realities of communities that are being eviscerated by death. Hence, this chapter is an account of HIV through the everyday histories of care labor in transgender communities combining ethnographic observations with archival readings.

The first section is about a play, *Koti ki Atma* (Soul of the *Koti*) that I found in the archives of a now defunct lesbian and gay support group, Counsel Club.<sup>10</sup> The central protagonist of the play is a *koti* who had died of AIDS and is now back as a ghost cautioning other *kotis* about the risk of sex without condoms. This section describes the play, analyses its plot and most importantly tries to understand the politics of instrumentalizing death as an HIV awareness device. The dead are hailed to come back as figures of care, but did they receive care in their lifetimes? Is care as seamless and poignant as the ghost saving other *kotis* in the play or did my reading of the play based on the conversations with its authors occluded the violence of care and how it is overdetermined by caste? These questions lead to the second section that describes scenes from fieldwork in 2019 where I met a group of *kotis* from various subordinate caste positions, one of whose friends had died by suicide after receiving an HIV diagnosis and encountering transphobia at a hospital. I wished to hear an account of this person not saturated by death and disease, but they chose to speak about their daily labors at helping their ailing friend live, labor that was devalued and not recognized. The final section dwells further on these remembrances through an engagement with Marxist feminist, transgender, disability studies and anti-caste scholarship on care labor to conclude how even as care is exhausting, it is what vitalizes trans life in the wake of an environment saturated by violence.

### ***Koti Ki Atma***

Isn't it nice to become a eunuch

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<sup>10</sup> The term "*koti*" is one of several in India that designates feminine persons assigned male at birth. *Kotis* may identify as transwomen or may even switch between identifying as gay men and as transfeminine. This chapter explores scenes in early years of the queer movements in India. The term "transgender" was yet to officially start circulating in queer communities. The term "transgender" started circulating officially in India from 2007 with the launch of the third phase of the National AIDS Control Programme. For more, see Ani Dutta and Raina Roy (2014). However, even as the term "transgender" has subsumed *koti* in official literatures, the term "koti" continues to circulate in queer communities.

(your hair in womanly tresses)

To be fucked at midnight by a stud?<sup>11</sup>

In 2014, while researching histories of queer organizing in India for my MPhil thesis, I stumbled upon a ghost named Jui in a play, *Koti ki Atma* (The Soul of the *Koti*), in the archives of the now defunct Counsel Club, one of the first lesbian and gay support groups in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal.<sup>12</sup> *Koti ki Atma* was written in 2001 and performed until 2002, when the Counsel Club stopped operating.<sup>13</sup> The play preaches the importance of safe sex for HIV prevention through the figure of Jui, the ghost. The idea of deploying a ghost to preach safe sex kept haunting me. Why a ghost? What was its backstory? How was such an idea even conceived in the first place? So, in 2018 when I started my PhD research on death and memory, I immediately returned to the play.

To summarise the plot of the play, a *koti* named Jui meets a man named Bikash in a park and they have sex. She dies of AIDS. Later she comes back as a ghost when the same man is about to have sex with another *koti* named Mohini. Jui discloses that the man has AIDS and she died because she had unprotected sex with him. In fact, despite her insistence on using protection, he refused. The man is surprised because even he did not know he had AIDS. Jui, the ghost saves Mohini's life and takes the man to the clinic to get treated. The play ends.

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<sup>11</sup> From the poem *Gandu Bagicha* (Ass Fuckers Park) by Namdeo Dhasal, translated by Dilip Chitre.

<sup>12</sup>The Counsel Club archives are now housed in Pawan Dhall's residence in Kolkata.

<sup>13</sup> Following South Asian scholars of sexuality (Bhan and Narrain, 2005, Menon 2007 Dave, 2012 among others), I am using queer as a shorthand for non-normative gender and sexual identities. However, "queer" does not seamlessly map onto South Asian contexts. *Koti Ki Atma* was resurrected one last time in 2012, a performance I had witnessed.

*Koti Ki Atma* was written in 2001, three years before anti-retroviral therapy (ART) was introduced in India and was made available at no cost in government hospitals.<sup>14</sup> The first cases of HIV were detected in 1986 and two years later, the National AIDS Control Programme (NACO) was launched. However, Pawan Dhall, one of the founding members of the Counsel Club, who has been involved in HIV-AIDS activism for more than two decades and one of the co-authors of the play tells me that queer and transgender individuals did not become part of the national HIV public health agenda before the mid-2000s. Journalist and HIV scholar, Siddharth Dube notes, that the Indian state refused to acknowledge the vulnerability of these communities to the virus throughout the 1990s. Although a nationwide study commissioned by NACO in 2001 showed how susceptible these communities were, government funding for HIV was still not directed to queer and transgender communities. (2015, 265) This apathy was aggravated by the fact that homosexuality was criminalized in India, leaving queer and transgender people reluctant to demand state assistance with testing and treatment, lest they risk incarceration.<sup>15</sup> Levels of awareness of HIV were also very low within trans and queer communities. Thus, the play was written against the backdrop of state-sanctioned apathy towards HIV advocacy in India's queer and transgender communities. As a support space, where most of the members were assigned male at birth, Counsel Club could not ignore HIV. Let us note that even so many years later in 2022, there has not been any official accounting of the number of AIDS related deaths

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<sup>14</sup> For a brief history of access to ART in India, see <http://infochangeindia.org/component/content/article/363-hiv-aids/treatment/9133-the-hidden-costs-of-treatment> (accessed on December 12, 2021)

<sup>15</sup> In 2001 when *Koti ki Atma* was written, four staff members of Naz Foundation International and Bharosa Trust, two non-profit groups that worked on HIV prevention in Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of India by population, were arrested on charges of "promoting homosexuality," running a "sex racket," and selling pornography. Even though these groups were working under NACO guidelines and were recognized by the State AIDS Control Society, none of these state institutions refuted these charges. The four individuals were in prison for two months before a higher court squashed the charges. For a harrowing account of their time in jail, read this report at News 18, "The Lucknow Boy." (accessed on December 12, 2021)



in India's queer and transgender communities, leave alone the period between 1986 when the first case was detected and 2004 when ART was launched.

Pawan tells me that *Koti ki Atma* was written as an advocacy tool for safe sex practices. His words are corroborated by a brochure announcing the performance of the play. It states that this play is the prescription one needs if one wants to spread "affection" and not "infection." The play is described in the brochure as, "a comic skit on the need for self-esteem, caring for oneself and one's partner, condom usage and HIV test counselling – by members of Counsel Club." In preaching safe sex, *Koti ki Aatma* attempts to mitigate the risk of death by privatizing risk and making it an individual responsibility to protect oneself against the virus in the absence of any support from the state. However, even as it privatizes risk, the play does not exclusively preach private sex. This detail is important because privacy is a class privilege; whose lack disproportionately affects those from subordinate caste locations (Kang and Sahai, 2020; Mondal, 2018). That is, not everyone can afford the privacy of a room. As in many places around the world, many working-class gay men and transgender women in India work out their desires in the publicness of cruising spaces. In *Koti ki Atma*, Bikash and Jui, and later Bikash and Mohini, meet in parks. The ghost of Jui does not stop Mohini from meeting potential partners in public; she simply stops her from having unprotected sex. Let us track her emergence in Mohini's bedroom where Mohini and Bikash are about to have sex after a flirtatious encounter in the park:

Bikash: Hey, what are you doing?

Mohini: What did I do?

Bikash: What are you doing with my thing? I feel a bit uneasy over there... Why are you laughing?

Mohini: Me? I didn't laugh. What's wrong with you? You are holding my hands even -

What are you saying?

Bikash: Yaa - no - somebody is doing something to my dick!

Mohini: Who's going to touch your thing? It's just you and me here . . .

Bikash: Can you hear? Someone is laughing.

*Laughter in the background*

Mohini: Yaa, you're right! Who... who's there?

*Jui enters covered in a white sheet, holding a lit torch under the sheet, pointed at her face from below.*

Jui: It's me here - remember?

Bikash and Mohini: Juiiiiiiii?!

Jui informs Bikash and Mohini that she had unprotected sex with Bikash only because despite her pleas, Bikash would refuse to wear a condom. She trusted him and now she is dead. In a fit of rage, Jui calls Bikash a “*biswasghatak*” (betrayer). The reader's expectation might build up with Jui's laughter that some dramatic scene of revenge might ensue but in fact, the opposite happens. Jui's ghost is not a menacing figure. She has returned only to prevent Mohini from being exposed to the virus. She even goes on to warn Bikash, “I will keep a close watch on you from now on. Every time you have unprotected sex, you will sense my presence. I will arrive with a condom.” In other words, the ghost is not preaching abstinence but only sex with condoms. Having said that, Jui drags Bikash to the nearest clinic for HIV testing and treatment. Why is the ghost so kind? The obvious answer to that would be that *Koti ki Atma* was written as, in Pawan's words, “an infotainment.” A play that advocates for safe sex but in an entertaining way, involving no value judgment about cruising and sex with multiple partners. This detail becomes particularly significant, given how Indian state bodies such as NACO have configured sex workers and *kotis* as high-risk groups specifically

because of the public nature of their sexual practices. While private sex does not guarantee safety from HIV, it is discursively equated with love and responsibility, while public sex is equated with indiscriminate sex and hence always already risky. As a result, the state undertakes efforts to curb public sex, creating targeted intervention exercises, and sending peer educators to public spaces even as it enacts obscenity laws to purge public spaces of sex.<sup>16</sup>

*Koti Ki Atma* was also written and performed at a time when homosexuality was effectively illegal in India. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, instituted in 1860 in British India, criminalized any sex other than peno-vaginal penetration, irrespective of consent. While heterosexuals could also come within the law's ambit, the law was used in effect to terrorize queer individuals, and not challenged until 1994 and 2001 in postcolonial India. India's Supreme Court finally decriminalized homosexuality in private in 2018 in the judgement *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (henceforth, *Johar*).

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<sup>16</sup>Section 294 of the Indian Penal Code states that whoever does any "obscene act" in a public place or sings, recites, or utters an "obscene song, ballad or words" shall be imprisoned for three months or be fined or both. However, the law does not define the scope of obscenity, which means that anyone from heterosexual lovers in parks to sex workers can come under its purview. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act makes it a criminal offense to solicit sex in public. The placement of the word "immoral" in a law that purports to save women (including transwomen) from coerced sex sufficiently indicates how transactional sex is perceived by the state. Together, both these laws demonstrate how public spaces are to be purged of sexuality. Juana María Rodríguez (2020, 2003), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Sarah Schulman (2012) among many other scholars have specifically written about how racial capitalism has driven out poor immigrant communities including queer and trans folks from US cities due to rapid gentrification that has solidified the whiteness of the US nation state, including the whiteness of sexuality as an identity marker tolerated by the state. Chandan Reddy shows in *Freedom with Violence* (2011) that the tolerance of sexuality as a private choice allows the nation state to shore up its liberalism even as it secures its borders violently with more militarization. It is no coincidence that the tolerance of sexuality in India and the demands for same sex marriage all operate under the ruse of choice and privacy even as the Indian state expands its notions of deviancy – from what counts as impure food to interfaith relationships. The deployment of privacy as a tool to safeguard one's rights have always produced violent foreclosures but under a right-wing fascist state privacy is not sacrosanct for all groups of people. The distinction between the private and public crumbles with state sanctioned vigilante groups entering the homes of Muslim families to examine what kind of meat they are consuming. This dissertation, however, is not focussed on the state form but on the varied playful and strategic mechanisms deployed by trans communities to inhabit it and even subvert it.

It is worth noting that, even following the Johar decision, *Koti ki Atma* still exceeds the boundaries of acceptable sexuality in India. Section 377 criminalized homosexuality, but it mostly operated by criminalizing gender expression; that is, it attributed illicit sex to gender nonconforming bodies, with or without evidence. One of the first arrests under the law took place in 1884, when a person named Khairati was arrested at the scene of a wedding where she was dancing. The case records refer to her as a “man dressed as a woman.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than establishing evidence of Khairati’s sexual practices, the court relied on the putative “evidence” of her gender presentation as the irrevocable clue to her sexual transgression. She might be able to shield her sexual practices from view, but she could not hide her gender presentation or the way her body moved in public spaces.<sup>18</sup> Even though Johar would eventually decriminalize private sex, Section 377 left a legacy of criminalizing public non-conforming gender as evidence of (still-criminal) public sex. Even read today, Jui and Mohini as *kotis* cruising in public remain risky figures because, through their non normative femininity, they exceed the dictates of state-sanctioned private sex. Hence Jui, the ghost, is not simply a dead figure of the past but a seething presence that marks the limits of law as harbinger of queer freedom.

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<sup>17</sup> Queen-Empress vs Khairati 1884 ILR 6 ALL 204

<sup>18</sup> The judgment does not mention where Khairati lived or from where exactly, was she arrested. Given, the case was tried in Moradabad, a city in Uttar Pradesh, a north Indian state, we can assume Khairati lived there. The judge proclaimed about Khairati: “his appearance as a woman, the mis-shapement (of the anus), the venereal disease” irrevocably point to the fact that Khairati had subjected himself to “unnatural lust.” Yet, there is a twist to the tale. Because of a lack of direct evidence, the judge was unable to prosecute Khairati. He noted, “The charge upon which the accused was committed and subsequently tried alleges neither time when, place where, nor points to any known or unknown person with whom, the particular act charged as an offence against s. 377 of the Penal Code was committed...” (Queen-Empress v. Khairati, 1884, 1) Khairati was acquitted because of the absence of a where, when and who. In *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, Anjali Arondekar investigates the Khairati case and asks, “How does a case with merely an individual bodily trace (“subtended anus”), no palpable injurious effect (“no injured party”), no palpable location and witness, and no ostensible threat posed to the public produce such a conceptual stress?” (Arondekar, 2009, 70) Khairati was just dancing with women. The judgment does not mention if any women had any complaints against her. The law is not even sure of Khairati’s gender. There is no temporal specificity to Khairati’s crime. Khairati is a criminal because she is Khairati. In other words, the very indeterminacy of the evidence is replaced by an ontological criminal status. Crime in this case cannot be met with legal punishment. Instead, it is a mark that Khairati has to bear.

The idea of “infotainment” also precludes the possibilities of any scenes of tragedy and horror involving death and revenge. The brochure to the play, mentioned earlier, states on the first page:

This programme is motivated by Counsel Club’s belief that the various forms of artistic expression have the power to bring out the hidden emotions and inner strengths in people. Specially people who have been living in the shadow of fear and prejudice and want to break free!

Indeed, these words and the stated goals of the play mark *Koti ki Atma* as an activist intervention raising awareness about HIV in *koti* communities in the absence of any state support. Such theatre is a site of subaltern voice. (Da Costa 2012, 120) From the authorship of the play to its performance, *Koti Ki Atma* is an exercise in collective representation. The play was jointly written and performed by members of Counsel Club – Pawan Dhall, Aparna Banerjee, Kunal Chowdhury, Anupam Hazra, Rafiqueel Haque Dowjah and Susanta Pramanik. Some of them gay, some *koti*. They did not just share their sexual and gender identities, but they also shared a social space that configured them as a “high risk group” in HIV-AIDS studies alongside sex workers and injecting drug users.<sup>19</sup> This is not to claim that there were no caste and class differentials among our authors. Some of them were English speaking gay activists based in cities while some of them lived in the suburbs and had very little cultural capital. Yet, when was difference so tidy? In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler writes,

... each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies— as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once asserted and exposed. Loss and

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<sup>19</sup> For an outline on how risk groups were defined and surveilled by the Indian state, see <http://infochangeindia.org/hivaids/359-hiv-aids/hiv-in-india/9054-sentinel-surveillance-and-the-2007-hiv-estimates> (accessed on December 13, 2021)

vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (2004, 20)

The shared vulnerability of the body to a virus, at a time when the State was yet to recognize its risks, brings a group of friends together to compose a play, that is simultaneously about the management of risk as it is about friendship, care and relationality. The 'I' is not a self-sufficient compact individual body that loses a 'you' at a distance. The production of the 'I' itself is social. Hence the 'I', the 'you' and the 'we' are implicated in each other. (Butler, 2004, 22-26) The character of Jui could be Kunal or Pawan or Aparna or any of the other authors. The 'I' is also in the 'you'. The virus could be in anyone's body. Hence, the ghost haunts each author, a haunting that produces such a play.

On a chilly January night in 2001, a group of friends, comprised of gay men and *kotis* co-wrote *Koti Ki Atma*. They were having a get together at a friend's place. Suddenly, Kunal took a white blanket and covered himself from head to toe and started walking around. A ghost. He was being the ultimate tragedy queen whose lover had abandoned him, a tragedy from which he could not recover. This sparked an idea. The play, *Koti ki Atma* was born. Pawan's voice oozes warmth and fondness for the night when the play was birthed through laughter and banter. Kunal does not remember why he thought of becoming a ghost. Perhaps, an impulse to haunt and be haunted that defies rational explanations. There is no evidence of these affective and emotional attachments to a past in Counsel Club's archives, but they become palpable in Pawan and Kunal's recollections when I interviewed them in the summer of 2018. This is what Muñoz might call ephemera as evidence, connected to memory and performance, where all that remains after the performance are "the traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things." (1996, 10) This is not to eschew the materiality of the moment but to suggest

an expansion of what materiality could mean. A shared vulnerability to a virus produces not only death and loss but also a community of companionship and joy which then seeps into the pages of a play. However, how do we discuss such a community without accounting for Bikash's apathy and disdain for Jui in the play? What does such an attitude signal?

When Bikash hears over the phone that Jui has died of AIDS, he remarks, "Sigh Jui! This is why I told you not to go to random men." Mark the distance that Bikash creates between himself and Jui. She died because she had voracious sex with any random person. She did not listen to Bikash. Her risky lifestyle was her undoing. What produces this smugness in Bikash? How does it escape him that if Jui died, then he too could be marked for death? Many scholars, activists, and advocates have distinguished sexual identity from behaviour and argued that, especially outside of the West, many men who have sex with men (MSM) do not identify as gay; they may lead heterosexual lives of marriage and fatherhood, and hide their sexual relationships with other men due to criminalizing laws and cultural taboos.<sup>20</sup> What the category of MSM elides, however,

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<sup>20</sup> In the context of male sexual health in Asia, Shivananda Khan, the founder of Naz Foundation International and the Asia Pacific Coalition for Male Sexual Health argued in a 2001 article that the term "gay" flattened out the sexual diversity in the region. To him, this term was a Western imposition that did not speak to the varied sociocultural contexts of the region. According to Khan, when members of the South Asian diasporic gay and lesbian communities traveled to India and other parts of Asia, they brought with them their experiences of organizing around gay and lesbian rights, which elite South Asians living in the region tried to emulate. Hence, it was important to separate sexual behavior from identity to cover the vast populations of people who did not identify as "gay" but had non normative sex. However, the feminist scholar Nivedita Menon (2007) argues that Khan's assertions about MSM are self-contradictory. First, his notions of the West and authentic notions of local culture are essentialist in the sense that he perceives them as compact units without any kind of flows and exchanges between them. Second, if "gay" as an identity marker is solely used in the West, then why is it that not all homosexual men in the West use this term to identify themselves? MSM is also an English term that originated in Western health discourses and that would require translations into several cultural and linguistic contexts, as nobody would automatically identify as MSM. In the context of HIV prevention campaigns in India, Ashok Row Kavi, one of India's first openly gay activists and a founding member of the Humsafar Trust, that works for HIV-AIDS awareness, uses MSM as an umbrella category with various gendered variations as subcategories – transwomen, hijras, *kotis*, *panthis* and so on (Kavi 2007). It would be wrong to assume, however, that these terms are simply benign local variations of MSM. It would also be problematic to assume that MSM is able to subsume all these local variations. What needs to be reiterated here is that the flow between categories is not unidirectional. Yet, critiques of universal categories often assume that the universal colonizes or even produces the local. For example,

is that the strict division between private queer sex and public gender conformity is not available to *kotis* like Jui. As a masculine presenting person, Bikash can afford to distance himself from Jui. Because the shame and perceived risk of sodomy does not stick to his body, the sex he practices can become private and discreet. But this distance cannot make him immune to the virus. As a result, Jui takes him to a clinic. After all, the wellbeing of *kotis* is intimately enmeshed with the health of those like Bikash.

Historically, there are many identity terms which have had negative connotations, but that site of negation becomes a radical site for collectivization as a political identity. The term *koti* is also a negation, in this case the negation of masculinity. However, in claiming a negated manhood or what Nagar and Dasgupta witnessed being referred to as a “defect”, *kotis* assert their agency and power over how they fashion their selves. (2015, 436) In the negation of masculinity, lies a mode of community making. In *View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*, Nguyen Tan Hoang theorizes bottomhood as “a tactic that undermines normative sexual, gender, and racial standards... a sexual position, a social alliance, an affective bond...” (2004, 2) In thinking with bottomhood, I do not wish to reproduce gender normative logics of *kotis* always playing receptive roles during anal sex and that their partners always being exclusively masculine presenting. The medico-legal perceptions of criminality are however, tied to the concatenations of femininity with anal sex as discussed earlier. Hence, be it persecutions under Section 377 or obscenity laws, the configuration of

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Akshay Khanna (2009) argues that the HIV/AIDS industry configures MSM as a high-risk population. So, then its subcategories are eventually produced as epidemiological categories whose movements need to be mapped for surveillance. Khanna claims that transnational HIV-awareness campaigns create identity categories such as *koti* to bring more and more people under their purview. (Khanna 2009). Such arguments, however, have also been refuted on the grounds that they elide how gender operates as an organizing rubric around how sexual behaviors are marked onto bodies. While masculine men can afford some degrees of sexual transgression under the guise of their normative genders, gender-variant bodies are already marked as homosexual (Dutta and Roy 2014). Given that gender performance does not allow some forms of bodies to remain discreet, there have always been forms of collectivizing around shared gender identities that predate HIV interventions or the circulation of MSM in Asia.



vulnerability to HIV or the way the play *Koti ki Atma* itself is framed, the *koti* body is always an excess that needs to be contained by law and medicine. It is this shared gendered vulnerability, shot through with actual or perceived bottomhood, that produces a community of care.

In a 2015 essay on barebacking, Tim Dean argues that the shared substance between sexual partners, in this case semen, is fantasized to bind people together as kin. (2015, 235) While the role of fantasy is crucial to sex and how or who we desire, Bikash refusing to wear a condom and Mohini and Jui giving in to his demands is about the play of gendered power dynamics where the man gets to decide the terms of sex. However, even if we were to suspend our critical lens on the role of gender in sex and instead focus on the kinship that the exchange of semen is supposed to produce, we clearly note that the fluid does not produce any communal attachment between the penetrator and the receiver, as succinctly signalled by Bikash's dialogues in the play. Instead, the community is produced horizontally between the receivers, or to be more specific, those whose genders give them away as receivers. Here, the gendered nature of sexual roleplay produces a relatedness, even in the absence of actual relations. Or else, why would Kunal conjure Jui? Why would Jui become Mohini's saviour? Jui also tries to heal Bikash by confronting him with his callousness and forcing him to seek treatment. However, even that care towards him is because Jui cares for Mohini and many like her who could die because of men like Bikash who refuse to wear condoms despite the *koti*'s insistence.

I asked Pawan who among the authors performed Jui and Mohini's roles and he said that they were played by the *kotis* in the group. I also asked Pawan if he could share any images from the performances of the play. There is only one such image in Counsel Club's archives.



This is an image from the play's performance on June 12, 2001 at the American Center in Kolkata.<sup>21</sup> The props are minimal. Two chairs. The man sitting with his legs wide apart is clearly Bikash, played by Susanta Pramanik. The other character played by Anupam Hazra has her legs crossed. Her curls gently touching her face and the face is coyly turned away from the man's lusty flirtation. Susanta can be easily identified as

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<sup>21</sup> This was the only image of the performance of the play available in the Counsel Club archives. As per the authors of the play, it used to be regularly performed in community gatherings besides major institutional venues like a consulate or an AIDS conference.

Bikash. However, who is Anupam playing? Jui or Mohini? Pawan does not remember. Perhaps it does not matter. Every time a Mohini is in danger, there is a Jui behind her.

I began this PhD research exploring how death circulates in India's queer communities.

Juana María Rodríguez writes evocatively:

Activism is an engagement with the hauntings of history, a dialogue between the memories of the past and the imaginings of the future manifested through the acts of our own present yearnings. AIDS has surrounded us with the living memory of familiar ghosts, faces that haunt our intimate realities of being infected/not yet infected, sick/not yet sick, alive but not yet dead (257, 2020).

The protagonist of *Koti ki Atma* is a ghost. At a time when the Indian state was yet to recognize the devastations wrought by HIV, a group of *kotis* and gay men wrote a ghost who cared in the absence of care. In that sense they were both responding to the hauntings of ever-expanding losses of friends as well as they were orienting their activist writing towards a future where *kotis* could protect themselves through safer sex. Thus, the play was both a work of memory as well as a manifesto for the future. Here memory did not signal any single individual who had died but it was about a community of care that emerged through the interplay of bodily vulnerability to a virus, state apathy, gender, sex and law. However, there were other questions that troubled me, answers to which I could not find in the play. What could Jui's life have been like as an HIV positive *koti*? We only witness her as a caregiver in the play. Jui is described as a ghost in the play but the title of the play mentions "*atma*" which means "soul" instead of the Hindi translation of ghost, "*bhoot*." A soul is associated with the spirit as that which transcends the body. Is Jui then being rendered an abstract figure of care? Jui takes Bikash to the clinic and saves Mohini's life but what care can we imagine Jui receiving in her lifetime? Was she surrounded by care when the virus was denuding her body of its vitality? If this latter question could not be answered in the affirmative, how

do we read Jui's caregiving role after her death? Does it attest to the marginalized figure's resiliency to all forms of structural violence that despite not receiving any care, she keeps caring? How do we not read this resiliency itself as yet another violation of the marginalized figure? Why should she care? What is at stake for the circulation of such care? In short, did my reading of *Koti ki Atma* and my conversations with its authors fail to account for the violence of care and how death is instrumentalized to vitalize life? Thinking about HIV through death and memory seemed to occlude the embodied stakes of forging a community of care. Further field work in 2019 helped clarify these questions when a group of *kotis* centered their care labors and the tolls it took on them when I asked them about their memories of a friend who had died by suicide after an HIV diagnosis. I read about this person, Ashok Mondal in the archives of a non-profit group and then met her friends to learn more about her.

## **Stench**

SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against HIV Infection in India) is a capacity building non-profit that works in various parts of India with a particular focus on eastern and southern India. It was founded in 2000. In this context, capacity building means helping community-based organizations (CBOs) with drafting grant proposals and paperwork for registration. SAATHII also facilitates various partnerships and collaborations between CBOs working on sexual health and state institutions for advocacy in queer and transgender communities and provides CBOs with trainings on gender and sexuality. In 2005, SAATHII won the DFID (Department of International Development) Civil Society Challenge Fund with which it started a project focussed on documenting human rights violations (HRV) faced by vulnerable communities in

eastern India.<sup>22</sup> Vulnerable communities were defined as those marginalized on account of gender, sexuality and HIV status. In the earlier section, we noted how the Indian state refused to recognize the vulnerability of queer and transgender communities to HIV as well as the legal activisms against Section 377 in the 2000s. The HRV project was invested in the evidentiary form to confront the state with realities that it refused to engage with.<sup>23</sup> File after file filled with testimonies and reports of violence, abuse and discrimination were meant as a call to action for apathetic state institutions. The format stuck to the no frills genre of factual reportage. It started with a consent form that noted down the name (chosen or given) of the person who had faced the violation, whether the testimony was being taped or written on paper, the location where the interview took place and the date and time, the signature of the interviewer and the interviewee's signature that certified that evidence was given of free will and that the individual's consent had been sought before filing any additional documents like medical records, photographs and other papers. In case, the person who faced the violence was not available, someone else could narrate the incident citing why the person was not available. Following the consent form, there was a more elaborate form starting with name, educational qualification, age, marital status of the person followed by a detailed

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<sup>22</sup> DFID was the government department through which UK administered aid for the alleviation of poverty and to reduce developmental disparities based on gender, sexuality, health and education in countries in the global south. It was shut down in 2020 and replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The Civil Society Challenge Fund has been one of DFID's longest running programmes that was started in 2000 to help UK based civil society organizations to closely work with civil society organizations in the global south to help with various poverty alleviation programmes. This programme stopped operating in 2015. In India, this fund has worked on child literacy, Dalit empowerment by helping them access State welfare schemes, leprosy and advocacy on HIV. For a detailed evaluation of this programme, see [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/496983/Evaluation-Civil-Society-Challenge-Fund.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496983/Evaluation-Civil-Society-Challenge-Fund.pdf) (accessed on December 20, 2021)

<sup>23</sup> In 2013 when the Supreme Court refused to decriminalize Section 377, it referred to the LGBT population of India as a minuscule fraction of the population, driving home the political and activist stakes of the evidentiary form. In short, the politically reactionary lesson from this judgment was that a seeming lack of evidence of people existing translates to them not having rights and no protection from discrimination. For more on this judgment, see: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/FHDQ9yB2jRJM5OINCQrkgL/Supreme-Court-to-rule-on-legality-of-gay-sex-today.html> (accessed on December 20, 2021)

account of what had happened with supporting documents to supplement the narration and a section on if any action had been taken after the incident had taken place and if any further action was planned. The HRV project ran from 2005 to 2013 after which the funding for the project ended and SAATHII moved on to other projects.

In 2019, SAATHII felt the need to free up space in its office. After all space was limited and every project demanded paperwork and filing. So, the older ones had to make way for the new. Pawan, who co-wrote *Koti ki Atma*, is a former SAATHII employee. He told me about the files being discarded. I had already heard about SAATHII's HRV work and so asked him if he could put in a word with SAATHII to at least keep the HRV records. SAATHII informed us that they were faced with a severe shortage of space and so they could not keep those files. However, if Pawan wished he could take the HRV files with him because he was the person who headed that project. Pawan, a passionate archivist who has painstakingly maintained the Counsel Club materials at his home happily agreed to add the HRV files to his collection. One monsoon afternoon in 2019, I helped Pawan carry eight bulky files bursting with papers to his home. We dusted them and arranged the papers by years, and I started reading them. That is where I read about Ashok Mondal, a 25-year-old *koti*. She died by suicide on December 21, 2005. The report was filed on March 7, 2006.

Ashok was a peer educator for MANAS (MSM Action Network for Social Advocacy) Bangla (henceforth MB), an umbrella group of community-based organizations that operated in West Bengal between 2003 and 2012.<sup>24</sup> MB worked on advocacy and

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<sup>24</sup> The Indian states have their own AIDS prevention organizations. The organization in West Bengal is called West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSACS). All these state organizations are headed by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). In the 2000s, international donor bodies like the World Bank funded NACO to oversee HIV prevention in India. NACO disbursed these funds to WBSACS and other state organizations. WBSACS funded MB to organize HIV advocacy in *koti* and MSM communities in West Bengal. The term "transgender" was still not in circulation then.

research on HIV and employed hundreds of *kotis* across Bengal who worked as peer educators and supporting staff in MB's offices across the state. *Kotis* employed by MB had made a detailed map of cruising sites across the state and each peer educator was entrusted with a particular cluster of cruising sites alongside a railway line or a riverbank, for instance. Peer educators would visit those sites to distribute condoms, lubricants and safe sex informational materials to thousands of *kotis* and men who had sex with men without necessarily identifying with any strict identity categories. The peer educators also encouraged their community counterparts to go for HIV testing and counselling regularly. Thus, MB not only provided employment to *kotis*, which in itself was a vital intervention in the queer and transgender communities against the backdrop of a heteronormative political economy that leaves very little option of livelihood for gender nonconforming people, it also created a network of information and support on sexual health and rights that was entirely generated by the community. Ashok was one such peer educator who worked in Baruipur, a city in South 24 Paraganas, a district in West Bengal. Indeed, it was a tragic irony that Ashok, who spoke of rights, who took so many *kotis* to the nearest testing center died shortly after her HIV diagnosis. Ashok was also a member of Astitva, a CBO in Baruipur. Astitva's meeting space doubled as the Baruipur office of MB where *kotis* dropped in regularly for health check-ups, counselling and seeking resources for information on HIV. Each such office had doctors and counsellors associated with them. Dr. N Ravi Kumar was associated with the Astitva office of MB and the SAATHI HRV files record his report of what happened in the days leading upto Ashok's death.

In September 2005, Ashok complained of anal pain and consulted a homeopathic doctor but a month later, the pain did not improve. She went to a testing center at a public hospital to get tested for HIV. Since her pain worsened, the vice president of MB,

Debasish Mitra, who also lived in Baruipur and was a mentor to Astitva had a meeting with Ashok's friends and colleagues and they admitted her to a private hospital to get her treated for piles. Meanwhile, the HIV report came on November 8, 2005, and it turned out that Ashok was positive. She was asked to undergo further tests like colonoscopy, endoscopy and ultrasonography and CD4 count. So, Ashok moved to the same public hospital where all these tests would be conducted. Her health was rapidly deteriorating. Ashok was kept on fluids for the first three days and had two blood transfusions. Her elder sister, Reba Mondal would stay with her at the hospital all day and MB staff would take turns to stay with Ashok at night. However, Kumar's report notes that Reba was continuously harassed by the nurses and the guards at the hospital who would not allow her to stay with Ashok.

On December 15, it was found that Ashok had adeno carcinoma in her colon tissue. On December 19, the MB staff consulted Dr. Uday Shankar Ghosh, the head of medicine at the hospital who had earlier advised the tests and he informed them that a surgeon would see Ashok the next morning. However, the surgeon did not even enter Ashok's ward. He pronounced from afar that he could do nothing to improve her condition. In fact, apart from Dr. Ghosh, none of the other doctors and nurses treated Ashok with any care during the entire duration of her stay at the hospital. They would not even make a channel in Ashok's vein. I will quote at length the next part of the report that talks of her death by suicide:

On December 21, 2005, when Ms. Reba Mondal went to the hospital as usual in the morning, she did not find her brother (sic) on the bed. The other patients in the ward informed her that Mr. Ashok Mondal was suffering from immense pain at night and spent a long time in the toilet, after which some of the patients and their attendants carried him to his bed. After a while he wrote something on a piece of paper, changed his clothes and left the hospital. In a suicide note, which I read later, Ashok had thanked his mother,



sister, his friends and colleagues for their support and love, and stated that no one was responsible for his death.<sup>25</sup>

Ashok could not bear the pain any longer. She went home. Later her younger sister found her hanging in her room. Ashok's family and neighbors blamed her friends and colleagues for her illness and suicide and demanded that they pay for the post-mortem and funeral, which they did. The local members of the Communist Party which was in power in West Bengal in 2005 also joined this harassment. The MB staff were heckled continuously. The "action taken" section of the HRV report states that Ashok's friends urged her family to go with them to the hospital to file a complaint against the doctors and staff for medical negligence. The family refused because they continued to believe that Ashok's friends were responsible for her death. The report does not mention why the family was so adversarial towards Ashok's friends or the MB staff. As the West Bengal elections were around the corner, the heckling gradually ended. On December 26, the MB staff organized a memorial meeting for Ashok. The HRV papers mention that Ashok's family refused to share her suicide note with her friends. This report is also accompanied by three newspaper clips that reported Ashok's death. While one report attributes her death to unemployment and depression, another report attributes her suicide to an inability to cope with the news that Ashok had "cancer". Only one report mentions HIV; Ashok's activist work on creating awareness on HIV and medical negligence, but the article is accompanied by a salacious headline, "HIV+ chooses noose over wait for death." All three reports misgender Ashok as a "man". Kumar's documentation ends with a few lines on Ashok:

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<sup>25</sup> Dr. Kumar refers to Ashok as a "man" in this report even though in the primary details section of the document, he refers to her as "*koti*." It would be a tad simplistic to call him transphobic because the term *koti* designates feminine persons assigned male at birth, who may or may not identify as transfeminine or as gay. *Koti* was thus more of an umbrella category for those who rejected maleness in their gender presentation. Moreover, during the time when this incident was reported, transgender was yet to come to circulation.

Mr. Ashok Mondal was an empathetic, kind and honest person and had aspirations to become a professional singer. He was taking music lessons from a private tutor in Jadavpur area of Calcutta. He was a dedicated social worker and a champion for the cause of HIV/AIDS.

Just two lines about a deceased person that was not about her ill health or the institutional violences she had endured. Was there more to be said? I interviewed Pawan since he headed the HRV project. I asked him if he knew anything about Ashok. He recalled that he had been to the memorial meeting and though some of Ashok's friends claimed that Pawan had met Ashok, he did not remember meeting her. At the meeting, Pawan spoke about the importance of documenting such violations so that strategies could be devised to ensure that such incidents did not happen again. I found an inherent paradox to Pawan's reasoning for documentation. As important as documentation is, what is the life of the paper? Not only in terms of physical decay but also in terms of who gets to document and who gets to access them. This question is particularly important with regards to Ashok because here were a couple of pages that recorded the conditions that might have led to her death, pages that were archived in a file in the office of a non-profit that must move from one project to the next depending on grant cycles and grant requirements. After HRV's grant period was terminated, the files were simply stacked away, only to later become waste that needed to be thrown away to create space for newer documents for newer grants. So, what happens to memory or the urgency to learn from the past when the potentiality of the written word itself is limited by infrastructural constraints? However, it would be too convenient to merely critique the non-profit and its inability to preserve what it once valued when loss itself is so commonplace and not a spectacular event. To put it vulgarly, Ashok's suicide was not an exceptional narrative. Medical negligence, the stigma of HIV, suicide, and transphobia are everyday realities. Their documentation would create an overflowing

inventory of loss that is undesirable but still an archival plenitude. *Koti ki Atma* had offered another mode of rumination on loss where individual deaths and institutional neglect were distilled into a collaboratively written play about friendship, care, pleasure and loss. Yet, it could not offer me an account of the care that life demands. The HRV files only offered me a story of medical neglect and so I felt the need to probe further. I kept thinking of Jui, the ghost from the play and wondered if Jui were a real person, did she also undergo the medical apathy that Ashok underwent before dying? Was the absence of care the overwhelming reality surrounding Ashok's last days? I decided that I needed to probe further.

In an essay titled, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts," Anjali Arondekar draws on Elizabeth Povinelli to remind us "... any epistemological privileging of loss (past or present) assumes an 'eventfulness' that flounders in the face of the 'ordinary, chronic and cruddy' syncopations of everyday subaltern life." (2015, 99) Later, Arondekar provocatively asks, "What would it mean to let go of our attachments to loss, to unmoor ourselves, as it were, from the stakes of reliable ghosts?" (2015, 99) So, I decided to eschew my ruminations on the loss that was the central narrative of the HRV files in search of unreliable ghosts to perhaps trace a different Ashok. An archive that was entitled "Human Rights Violation" was the ghost that could be relied upon to give a painstaking account of loss, violation and violence and indeed it gave just that. Yet those couple of lines in the report about Ashok's love for music and her activism seemed to run contrary to the evidentiary form the file was committed to. I wanted to follow its lead.

I realized I needed to speak with members of Astitva. This was easier said than done because after MB shut down, Astitva members who were MB staff lost their jobs and dispersed to various places for livelihood opportunities and gradually the CBO

disbanded. However, I knew one of the earliest members of Astitva, Sudeb Sadhu, who had also been employed with MB. I asked her if she could bring a few of the former employees of Astitva together for a conversation and Sudeb readily agreed. A meeting was fixed for a Sunday evening in the same room that housed Astitva's meeting space and MB's office in Baruipur. I took a train from Kolkata to reach the location of our meeting. The room now serves as Sudeb's residence. Six individuals were supposed to come but only three turned up. After all, it was a Sunday evening and a conversation with a researcher is also labor. We started speaking. I did not have any structured questions and I was also wrestling with my discomfort at reigniting what could have been a traumatic memory. So, I just gave a few prompts tentatively – memories of collectivization that led to the formation of Astitva, the experience of working as peer educators for MB and friendships forged over time. Conversation started flowing. The anger could not be separated from the joys from the disappointments from the sense of fulfilment from the exhaustion. An hour had quickly passed. Then HIV came up and my interviewees started talking about accompanying friends for testing. I brought up Ashok and what I had read about her in the HRV files.

Sanjay, also one of the first members of Astitva and an MB peer educator recounted, "*Khub jantrona hoto or. Piles chilo. Bleeding hoto.* (She had piles and it would pain a lot and she would bleed)." She remembered the exact area in which Ashok worked as an educator and told me how she and other folks at Astitva had admitted her in a public hospital after the private hospital expenses became impossible to bear. Ashok's father was ill, and her mother worked as a domestic worker and her elder sister was a home-based teacher. With their meagre income, they could not afford treatment at a private hospital and so Ashok's medical expenses were borne by her friends and colleagues. Given that the hospital staff shunned her, Sanjay and her friends met Debasish Mitra

(who is mentioned in the HRV records) to discuss Ashok's treatment. Mitra advised them that they should each take turns to stay with Ashok at night as her family could not afford to pay for an attendant. So, a *koti* from Astitva would stay with Ashok at night and her sister would stay with her during the day. Sanjay recalls, "*Ki gandho! Amader khub kosto hoto.*" ("What stench! It was very painful for us") Sanjay's vivid and visceral recollection of the stench of blood-soaked shit startled me. She went on to describe how she and her friends would have to keep changing gloves through the night. Early morning, they would leave, go home and quickly bathe and then report for work at MB. Some of them worked as peer educators, some of them as housekeeping staff in the MB office. After more than a month of intense laboring, Sanjay and her friends reconvened with Mitra and told him how this care labor was taking a toll on their health. So, it was decided that each of them would contribute a certain sum of money towards the monthly salary of a caregiver, who could be appointed from amongst them. Ashok died a few weeks after this new arrangement. However, the ordeal did not end for Ashok's friends. When they went to meet her family, neighbors chased them away after forcing them to pay for her cremation and blamed them for her death saying that Ashok had died because she had anal sex and her friends had initiated her into sodomy. This was the detail that the HRV record had missed.

At this point Sudeb interjects and says that when this harassment had become intolerable, Astitva members called for a meeting with neighborhood men as well as officials from MB. They met on the overbridge of the railway station, an appropriate choice for the meeting venue as railway platforms are prominent cruising spots and hence prime workplaces for the peer educators. Sudeb raises the pitch of her voice and beats her chest as if those harassing men and boys are in the room sitting opposite her. "*Hya pod marai! Ki korbe? Nije nije toh pod marte parina! Tomader moto keu toh*

*amader pod maare!* (Yes, we get fucked in the ass. So what? We cannot fuck ourselves! Someone like you only comes and fucks us!) Do you know how painful it is to get fucked? Try inserting a finger into your ass!” Sudeb says that she dared them to shoot her for being fucked in the ass. After this very public showdown, the boys started retreating and after a while, they stopped disturbing the Astitva workers. Some of them even started attending Astitva events and eventually started visiting their office for information on HIV.

I was struck by how scenes from *Koti ki Atma* (2001) would be mirrored in life a few years later in 2005 just as the authors of the play were mirroring similar incidents they had witnessed in the pages of the play. Bikash who thought that Jui died because of indiscriminate fucking seemed to have morphed into the men who blamed Ashok’s friends for her death. Jui, the ghost confronts Bikash with his vulnerability to the virus. Meanwhile, Sudeb owns her abjection as the *koti* who gets fucked and shuts up the men. However, unlike Bikash who had to be dragged to the clinic by Jui, the men started visiting MB’s Baruiipur office for seeking HIV related support out of their own volition. A community of receivers (as discussed in the earlier section vis-a-vis the limitations of Dean) were finally able to create a workplace free of harassment in the wake of a tragic death.

For me, Ashok’s life became the prehistory of *Koti ki Atma* even though chronologically speaking, the play was composed before Ashok’s death. Temporal linearity is of no consequence here because death foreshadows the lives of our protagonists at a time when HIV scare is at its peak. Jui and Mohini could be Ashok, Sanjay or Sudeb. The facticity of fiction. However, a new question emerged for me at this juncture. As I was trying to process the horror, rage, grief, feeling of triumph at countering the heckling neighbors and the exhaustion with care labor that was palpable

in the room that November day in 2019, I could also not help being troubled by all the excruciating details of mortality, death and decay. After I finished reading the HRV files, I wondered if there was a way to write about Ashok such that the institutional violence, she faced at the hospital did not overdetermine her personhood. The few lines about Ashok learning music, being a champion of HIV advocacy seemed to offer such an account. Yet, the conversation in Baruipur did not help me elaborate that account further. Instead, I was left with a sordid account of bodily waste. How could I make sense of how memory flowed? While I realized that I was imposing my own expectations on the dead by trying to write an account not overdetermined by death, I tried to pre-empt such violations by stitching together a narrative based on conversations with Ashok's friends. But I encountered a blockage in their words. I was yet to make sense of it. Most importantly, Sanjay's words on the stench of shit kept haunting me.

## Care

I had begun fieldwork with the questions: What is the role of death in queer and transgender communities in India? What modes of care are deployed to memorialize the dead in our movements? *Koti ki Atma* became for me an exemplar of memorialization in the face of countless and unaccounted for deaths due AIDS in *koti* communities. While on one hand, the death of a *koti* was instrumentalized as a cautionary tale of the stakes of unprotected sex, the return of the same *koti* as a ghost who saves the life of another *koti* signaled the existence of networks of care and support that *koti* communities had forged in the wake of state apathy. The ghost was written by authors who themselves were equally vulnerable to the virus. Their writing built a life world of care and relationality in the midst of death. However, this mode of care could not account for the care that the body demanded when the virus had already entered it.

Ashok's case history in the HRV archives pointed me in that direction. The excruciating details of the violence she endured at the hospital and the care that she did not receive made me wonder if the memory of her friends could stitch together an account of her life that exceeded the structures of violence she endured. A few words in the archive about Ashok's passion for music and activism encouraged me to seek more information but the memories that her friends shared with me were the painstaking details of how they looked after Ashok and held onto their dignity post her death when the neighborhood, Ashok's family and the political dispensation blamed them for Ashok's death. Having encountered so many modes of care and its lack thereof, it seems pertinent to focus on the capaciousness of what care means. On the definition of care, political theorist Joan Tronto expands on a definition Berenice Fisher and herself had given on care in 1990 to argue:

“On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (19, 2013)

They lay out four stages in the care giving process – identification of the need for care, allocation of responsibility for the act of care giving, the act itself and the response to the care that helps one gauge how effective the care was and what more is needed. Tronto expands this four-stage process further to include a fifth step, “caring with” which is a political commitment to goals of equality, justice and freedom for all, in short caring is what sustains democracy. (22-23, 2013) However, it is important to note here that the history of care is also a history of devaluation. Marxist feminists (Fortunati 1995; Federici 1975; Dalla Costa and James 1971) have long demonstrated how care work has been naturalized such that women are expected to provide it without



remuneration. It is expected to be a gesture of love even as it reproduces the worker and hence capital.

Care work is not just gendered but also embedded in caste and racial hierarchies. In a searing speech written in 1936 entitled, *Annihilation of Caste*, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and one of the most important leaders of anti-caste movements in India, emphatically stated that caste is not a division of labor but a division of laborers. Hindu scriptures assigned specific labor practices to various castes. This was not a benign division of labor because one could never switch labor practices. Thus, just as one inherited caste at birth, so did one inherit one's labor position. This inheritance of labor also marked bodies as pure and polluted, bodies that could be touched and bodies that should remain beyond the pale of sight. Untouchability as a norm informs every aspect of the caste system. From segregation of living spaces, burial grounds, taboos against sharing food and water, consignment of a particular groups of people to demeaning occupational closures, such as manual scavenging and sanitation work to punishment if these diktats are flouted, untouchability is the violent but the everyday banal infrastructural order of caste.

V. Geetha writes that on the level of labor, untouchability is a form of extreme alienation where the Dalit laborer is dissociated not only from the products of her creation but from her very body. Untouchability demands that the caste oppressed should only labor at menial, hazardous tasks on the dint of being "born impure." Thus, even as the labor is essential to reproduce the healthy social body, neither the laboring body nor the labor itself has any material or symbolic value because they are both impure and should remain beyond the realm of touch. Geetha writes eloquently,

For, according to the stunningly circular logic of the caste order, the untouchable's labor, her vocation, by simply being of her body and being, is doomed to irrelevance. This body in which the untouchable

lives but does not inhabit is her prison-house: even if she changes her vocation – through negotiation and struggle – her corporeal being precedes her. Forced to live out of a body that is its own ruin, the Dalit suffers a state of permanent dissociation. (2011, 97)

Gandhi had famously argued that the work of cleaning is an act of social service, a care for the community. In order to establish his point, he even engaged in manual scavenging in solidarity with Dalit communities. Historian Anupama Rao writes that for Gandhi, this act was a *seva*, or a form of care for the social body. In other words, here labor enters the ambit of sacrifice and social action. (2018, 137) Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi and pointed out that notions of care and sacrifice naturalize the dehumanization of particular classes of people, the Dalit.<sup>26</sup> Gopal Guru points out that Ambedkar's response to caste was political and hence his primary goal was the annihilation of caste, that is the very essence of untouchability. On the other hand, Gandhi's response to untouchability was a moral one. He sought to end untouchability by breaking the hierarchies of labor but such a response was not interested in the structures that produced those hierarchies in the first place.

Panchali Ray traces a different genealogy of *seva* in her research on nursing as a profession in India. As the colonial medical apparatus was grafted on a caste ridden political economy, the success of the medical apparatus depended on the social identity of the service providers. Between trained European nurses on one hand and subordinate caste women who traditionally provided these labors in India on the other, attempts were made to make nursing viable to dominant caste women. Figures like Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nibedita invoked the spirit of *seva* as a feminine virtue that

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<sup>26</sup> Gandhi's tokenistic engagement in picking shit has been emulated in milder forms by Brahmin and dominant caste political leaders in post independent India. Recently the Indian Prime Minister cleaned the feet of a few sanitation workers even as the state refuses to invest in mechanization of sanitation processes. For more on this see, <https://theprint.in/opinion/by-washing-feet-pm-narendra-modi-was-honouring-himself-not-safai-karamcharis/197909/>

healed the corporeal body and hence the very wellbeing of the nation state. *Seva* was reinvented as the essence of the ideal Hindu woman in the ideal Hindu nation. Ray writes,

The notion of *seba*, deeply rooted in spirituality and self-sacrificing femininity, was a useful trope for medical, nursing, and bureaucratic reformers who were trying to reformulate nursing labour as a spiritual task, rather than an occupation, for outcaste and distressed women. (2019, 45)

The dominant caste women, however, did not really displace the Dalit women even as nursing was imbued with the affective charge of *seva*. The nursing labor force simply became differentiated along caste and class lines. At the top of the hierarchy was the doctor, then the trained nurse who would perform basic medical functions and administrative tasks and then the so-called unskilled labor force who would perform the disreputable aspects of nursing. While the notion of *seva* was used to bring respectability to the nursing profession, the menial labors of dealing with blood, shit and bodily fluids were still meant for those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Whether we understand *seva* in the Gandhian sense or in the way it is attributed to nursing, what is common to both approaches is that the task of healing and care is gendered and divided along caste and class lines even as its violent histories of devaluation are invisibilized by the cloak of a moral obligation to heal the body.

One could note the violent histories of care work in the history of race in the United States as well. bell hooks critiqued Betty Friedan's classic text, *The Feminine Mystique* to point out that even as the educated white woman could step out of the household to find work and seek her own identity, the task of reproducing life at home would be for the Black woman or in some cases poor white women (2000). From the plantation colony to the white household of post-world war America, the Black Mammy has sustained the white family (Snorton 2017; Wallace-Sanders 2008; Morgan 2004;

Spillers 2003; Collins 1994). In other words, we cannot simply read “care” as normative to reproductive labor without interrogating how it is always already violently concatenated to gender, race, caste and class.

The caste-based logics of the hierarchical division of laborers is also mirrored in the narratives and archives we have discussed in this chapter. Ashok Mondal was Dalit and her friends who became her caregivers belonged to different caste positions, some Dalit and some from other subordinate castes but they were all working class without any cultural capital like English speaking skills that Dr. Kumar who gives his testimony in the HRV files has. The HRV papers note that Ashok’s suicide was narrated to SAATHII officials by Dr Kumar, the visiting doctor at MB’s office in Baruipur. He gives us a detailed medical history of Ashok. However, why does an account of the care labor of *kotis* go missing? The non-profit documents what the doctor reports as he is expected to give a definitive account of what had happened. His memory is reliable and hence his account of care is legible. It is the venerable labor of the mind. A higher official from MB meets *kotis* and instructs them to attend to Ashok, labor which is initially unpaid because isn’t it a given that *kotis* will clean and wash, that they will look after each other? Think of how naturalized it was that Jui would look after Mohini in *Koti ki Atma* but what toll such a naturalization take? Later, when the unpaid labor becomes too exhausting as there is no break from regular paid work, then a *koti* is appointed as a paid caregiver but her payment is also raised by other *kotis*. Was it taken for granted that *kotis* would look after each other from a sense of *seva*? Is that the reason why the vice president of MB can easily ask them to look after Ashok? Why do written documents fail to register the viscosity of cleaning blood and shit day in, day out? Why do the papers not convey the stigma of sodomy that sticks to a dead person and the friends mourning her? Are their bodily labors involving blood, pus, shit and

other fluids too impure, too soiled to enter the domain of documentation? Or is it that their labor does not count as labor at all, as Geetha reminds us that some labor is so soiled that it cannot have any symbolic or material value? Apart from a couple of sentences in the HRV files that note that the *kotis* stayed with Ashok at night and that they were harassed after her death, there is no account of the toll that the caring of an ailing person took on their bodies and minds.

Care labor is a vast and expansive category that not only includes bodily acts of labor but also affects and emotions. In the context of call centers, surrogacy and organ transplant, Kalinidi Vora argues that it does not suffice to analyse these sites of outsourcing in the global south simply in terms of labor and value extraction. These sites of labor also signal the transfer of vital energies from bodies in the global south to bodies in the global north such that the depletion of life chances in one geography become the conditions of life enrichment elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> While this theorization is too linear and teleological and risks reproducing static binaries like north-south, subject-object and laborer-consumer, I find the conception of vital energy quite useful. The lines between the subject and the work performed dissolve such that the work performed by the body cannot be distinguished from the body itself. In Vora's archive, the labor of making phone calls is not different from the labor of fronting a friendly persona at the call center in the global south or aligning one's bodily rhythms to another time zone in the global north. Bodies are tasked to incite affects and emotions which become care labor as well, given the intentionality with which they are channelled towards vitalizing capital itself. This is what Michael Hardt calls affective labor. The service industry that is tasked with the creation of friendly affects, the caller at the call

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<sup>27</sup> Vora defines vital energy as the substance or activity that (re)produces life in which the human biological and social are inseparable. (3-4, 2015)

center in India who has to acquire the right accent and cadences of speech to sound assuring and friendly to the consumer in the US – all of these are examples of affective labor. Hardt argues that in a post-industrial world, it is service and information that play key roles in capitalist production. The feeling of ease felt by the customer is not a material product, but that ease is what will fuel further production. (1999, 89-100) However, it would be erroneous to assume that affective labor is simply a condition of a post-industrial world. Hardt himself points out that theorizations of affective labor have older genealogies in feminist challenges to Marxist theorizations of value in which they show that reproductive labor is productive (1999). However, in pointing out the centrality of affective labor to capitalist production, Hardt does not fully account for how affective labor is gendered and racialized. Even as the service industries, surrogacy and organ donations are newer forms of dispossession, affective labor has always been intrinsic to care labor. Care labor is simultaneously an account of devaluation of certain bodies that perform the essential labors of reproducing life as well as the stickiness of certain affects to certain bodies only.<sup>28</sup> One only needs to go back to Gandhi's invocation of *seva* and sacrifice in the context of manual scavenging or the comforting affects of the mammy to understand the interconnectedness of physical labors with affects that are extracted from certain bodies – namely, the feminine, the working class, the racialized, the Dalit.

The doctor's account that is archived for documentation by the non-profit is also about care – the non-profit's care makes it freeze Ashok's death as evidence for law, as

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<sup>28</sup> The usage of stickiness draws on Sara Ahmed's work in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. She writes, "Rather than using stickiness to describe an object's surface, we can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs. To relate stickiness with historicity is not to say that some things and objects are not 'sticky' in the present. Rather, it is to say that stickiness is an effect. That is, stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object (90, 2014)." In South Asia, these histories of contact are the histories of how caste and gender not only determine who performs what labors but also whose labors count as labor.

pedagogy for policy makers. Kumar's medicalized care makes him give a detailed account of Ashok's deteriorating condition and the hospital's deathly neglect. However, if the non-profit had perhaps spoken with a *koti*, it would have been a different account of care – stench, blood, shit and the shame of sodomy and how a group of kotis rallied around each other and their dying friend to hold onto a sense of dignity. These different modes of care are not in conflict with each other, but one subsumes the other. One is written and the other circulates in memory even fifteen years later. How do we account for the intensities of such memory? Could we imagine a care economy where the officials would be cleaning Ashok while the *kotis* would be keeping the archive?

Sanjay's words kept haunting me. “*Ki gondho!* (What smell!)” I wondered if Sanjay and her friends resented all the labor they had put in. In a later conversation, that is exactly what I asked Sudeb. She listened to me intently and then asked, “Do you think Ashok was the only one we looked after?” She immediately remembers a gay doctor who used to visit Astitva and who died of AIDS. Sudeb would feed him soup every day and one day he even vomited in her hands. Through MB, funds came for HIV advocacy. If someone was HIV positive, the peer educator would encourage the individual to come to MB's local office and meet a counsellor who would facilitate testing and treatment. This is where the brief of the funded project ended on paper. In a 2013 essay, Ani Dutta notes that lower-tier workers in HIV projects were paid as low as Rupees 2000 (US 34 \$ in 2013) a month that were often delayed due to irregularity in the disbursement of funds from transnational donors routed through various government agencies. Most importantly, these projects would often shut down, leaving these workers unemployed and forcing them to return to sex work, often without access to condoms. A report jointly published by Aneka and Karnataka Sexual Minorities Forum (2011) details not only the meagre salaries of these workers but also notes the emotional

toll these labors took on them. The peer educators and outreach workers were under a lot of pressure to motivate community members to test. This was easier said than done because communities struggled with being open about their health conditions. This lack of openness was not simply about individual sense of privacy. It was also a structural issue about the general quality of the public health system and particularly, HIV care in the country. With the onset of liberalization in the 1990s, public expenditure on health experienced gradual cuts, most affecting the working-class population of the country. There were issues specific to HIV as well. Even though the number of Integrated Counseling and Testing Centres (ICTC) and ART centres gradually grew across the country, privacy was a major issue. Most ICTC centres were located within public hospitals with common waiting areas that compromised confidentiality and hence many folks hesitated to use these services, lest their HIV status was revealed to their known circles. Once somebody tested positive, often, the result would pass from the counsellor to other staff at the centre and then to peer educators. Moreover, ICTC counsellors often asked very intrusive questions that aggravated testing and treatment hesitancy. Even though testing and ART were free, one still had to make multiple trips to the centres to get tested, collect reports and medicines that involved transport costs, loss of wages due to long waiting times at the centres. Medicines would have to be purchased for opportunistic infections. Besides, there was also the stigma of HIV. Thus, peer educators and outreach workers had to continuously grapple with these obstructions to meet the targets for testing set by state agencies and transnational donors. This involved immense emotional labor. There were risks to personal safety, as the threat of police violence and abuse by locals always loomed large as borne out by my conversations with Sudeb and Sanjay. They had to marshal all their contacts through networks of friendships. For all their labors, peer educators were not treated as professionals but



more as volunteers and hence their remuneration was never commensurate with their labors (*seva* as we discussed earlier).

Sanjay remembers how she would have to chase *kotis* across train compartments to sit them down and convince them to get tested. Sudeb remembers seven folks who would come to Baruipur from Haldia, another town in West Bengal each month to collect their ART medicines. Since they had travelled from far away, Sudeb and her colleagues would cook a meal for them so that they could at least eat something before meeting the doctors. Bathrooms had to be cleaned regularly to ensure hygiene for everybody, especially the most immuno-compromised. There were *kotis* who died and whose funeral expenses had to be borne by the MB workers because the deceased's families were so poor that they could not even hire a van to take the body to the crematorium. Cooking, cleaning, washing, nursing, ensuring a dignified farewell – in short various modes of care labor necessary to inhabit the everyday and needless to say, far exceeding the brief of paid work of targeted intervention on HIV. Even though these targeted interventions were planned as top-down models, it was the peer educators who enfolded these hierarchical, abstract models of care with their sweat and grit.

There is exhaustion. There is resentment at the labor being ceaseless. There is anger and even a sense of failure at not being able to do enough. Sanjay's visceral description of Ashok's health and how it impacted other *kotis* is testament to that. Yet, it would be simplistic to argue that the account of HIV and devastations in its wake is only a history of devalued and invisibilized care labor. My interviewees trouble such linear theorizations. They also assert that this is labor that needs to be done because it is work for themselves. Ashok could be Sanjay or Sudeb too. I press further. Does a sense of community suffice? They state that they care out of love for someone like themselves, they care because of their shared sense of vulnerability to the virus. Most importantly,

such labors are also about safeguarding one's dignity in the face of continued negation and devaluation of one's gender and sexuality. As a hospital refuses care, other *kotis* come forward with support. Each act of care that Sudeb and her friends enact is not just about enduring the everyday that is inescapably shaped by varied forms of structural violence. It is also about holding on to some sense of dignity in such endurance. The care cannot wish away the violence but it enables habitation in the everyday and even resistance to the violence. A dignified funeral on a van, healing a severe infection that doctors refuse to treat because one is feminine and therefore always already excessively sexual or feeding soup to bring some vitality back to a body that is being corroded by the virus are all about that sense of dignity.

Most importantly, even as the HRV papers do not recognize or document these labors, the poetic irony of time ensures that even as papers become disposable over time and thus documents get lost amidst many documents, the visceral recollections of the *kotis* about their labors endure over time. This is so much the case that when a dominant caste researcher, such as myself meets them to write an account of HIV and memory, there is no way I can push past the blood, shit and vomit. It is in this poetic twist to the histories of devaluation that the *kotis* refuse alienation from their bodies and their labors and demand that we witness them claiming their time, their exhaustion, their frustrations as well their joys and affirmations. It is also in this witnessing that we can perhaps en flesh the abstract care we witness in *Koti ki Atma* – as Sudeb and Sanjay's recollections teach us that even the travel to the clinic for testing entailed hard labor (an account of which cannot be found in the play) besides all the labor required in nourishing an ailing body.

Disability studies scholar Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha theorizes such forms of care as care webs, that is non-hierarchical modes of receiving care where neither the

giver claims moral superiority for imparting care nor does the receiver get bound in the debilitating structures of indebtedness and gratitude for receiving care (2018). Trans theorist Hil Malatino gives us an evocative imagery of care webs where the threads are woven delicately over years like a filigree; sometimes they get rent apart with trauma and loss and then they are gradually repaired bit by bit by trans people themselves (2020). Even though Marxist feminists have illuminated the role care labor plays in reproducing the worker for the market, such theorizations center the heteronormative home as the primary site of such labor. Care webs, however, do not have any center because the normative institutions that are perceived as the central caretakers of our lives like the family, the state and law have never been hospitable spaces for the non-normative. These care webs cohere around collective disaffections with these very structures of power and the continuous striving for survival, healing, repair and daily maintenance from the wounds these structures inflict.

Before I close this chapter, I offer one last observation from that meeting space in Baruipur. One evening at a later date, my eyes dart to a cardboard box with the word “Nirodh” (meaning condom) written on it in bold which was tucked on a ledge, high up in the room, that serves as Sudeb’s home in Baruipur now. Immediately, I realized that this was a remnant of the MB days. If the box still contained its supplies, then surely it would not have been tucked beyond reach. Just as I was wondering what makeshift elevation Sudeb would need to crank up to reach that ledge every time she needed to clean it, I heard a *koti* who was chatting with her ask, “*Moja dao! Aaj kaj ache.*” (Give me sock! I have a client today.) A sock is a coded word that *kotis* often use to connote condoms. Immediately, Sudeb fished out a small box from a tin trunk and fished out a pair of condoms and handed them to her friend while launching into a lecture about why Vaseline was not a good lubricant! The *koti* laughed and said, “A

barren womb doesn't care for a broken sock!" Sudeb laughed and then chided her, "When was the last time you got tested?" In that moment Sudeb became her old self from the MB days who did not want her friend to become Ashok (or even Jui), which is not to say that if she did, there would not be any care.

## Chapter 2

### Life Meanwhile: On Memory, Laughter and Other Deaths

At a conference on transgender rights and the law, hosted by the Centre for Law and Policy Research in Bengaluru, India, transgender rights activist, Vyjayanti Vasantha Mogli, was speaking at a panel titled, ‘Right to Love: The Use of Criminal Law to Police Trans Couples.’<sup>29</sup> She began her presentation by recalling an incident of trans suicide where a transfeminine person died by suicide after her lover left for his natal home and either did not return or was not allowed to return. Mogli expressed her despair that very little work happens to stop such deaths, or that even if such work happens, it feels like “boiling an ocean on a gas stove.” Given the everyday nature of such violence and the ever-mounting numbers of suicides and murders, any intervention would seem minimal in scale compared to the enormity of the violence. Later in her presentation, Mogli brought up how Section 377’s decriminalization is always attributed to activist efforts, which makes invisible a very important event in its historical timeline. Around 2005-06, Pandiamma, a transfeminine person aged only 18 was booked by the police for some petty crime in Vyasarpadi, a town in the suburbs of the south Indian city of Chennai. Her bail condition involved reporting to the police every morning. Her mother and sister noticed that she would come back from the police station very late every day and would look extremely dejected. On enquiring, they found that she was sexually assaulted every day at the police station. The next day, they accompanied her to the station. This time the police made a pass at her sister. Mogli notes in a matter-of-fact manner that sexual abuse is such a commonplace incident in trans life, like a “mosquito bite” that Pandiamma could have perhaps endured it. But when the police tried to

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<sup>29</sup> Mogli’s full paper and the rest of the panel can be accessed at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08pjZyO\\_Wcs&t=1335s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08pjZyO_Wcs&t=1335s)

assault her loved one, she could not endure the humiliation any longer and doused herself in kerosene. She died after a week. The police tried to hush up the case but doctors at the hospital spoke truth to power. Compensation was awarded to the family and disciplinary action was taken against the police.<sup>30</sup> The judge who delivered the judgment in the Madras High Court was Justice Ajit Prakash Shah in 2007, the same judge who read down Section 377 in 2009 in the Delhi High Court.<sup>31</sup> Mogli exhorted forcefully that perhaps “Shah’s judicial acumen and judicial humanity” in reading down Section 377 was crystallized on the funeral pyre of a transperson as much as by advocacy by queer activists and non-profits.

In *Atmospheres of Violence*, Eric Stanley painstakingly builds an archive of suicide letters, case studies of murders, footage of police violence and other ephemeras of attack to argue that anti-trans/queer violence is foundational to and not an aberration to modernity. Indeed, there can be no debate with such an argument. We are living in the times of LGBT inclusion. The state keeps expanding its ambit with new laws, bureaucratic processes in the name of including hitherto excluded populations but it is those very laws that engender violent foreclosures. For example, in the name of trans protection, the Indian State decides which trans body is legible to be considered for welfare leaving out vast swathes of the population outside the so-called fruits of the law.<sup>32</sup> Even then, the law fails to explicitly spell out what “welfare” consists of. Trans

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<sup>30</sup> Jayalakshmi vs The State of Tamil Nadu. Jayalakshmi was Pandiamma’s sister. The full transcript of the judgment can be accessed at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1373799/> Please note that the verdict uses Pandiamma’s birth name but a feminine version, that is her chosen version of the name circulates in trans communities.

<sup>31</sup> Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was read down by the Delhi High Court in 2009 in the Naz Foundation vs Govt. of NCT of Delhi, only to be overturned by the Indian Supreme Court in 2013 in the Suresh Kumar Kaushal vs Naz Foundation case in 2013.

<sup>32</sup> In April, 2014, the Supreme Court of India, in the National Legal Services Authority v Union of India case, granted Indian citizens the right to self-determination of gender – the right that every person should be able to decide their own gender identity irrespective of their bodies, with or without gender affirmation surgeries. In August 2016, following the Supreme Court verdict, the government of India tabled the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2016 in the Indian Parliament. The Bill removed the self-determination clause of the Supreme Court verdict and advocated for the constitution of screening

murders and suicides happen on such a regular basis that even the law fails to register these incidents as cases worth pursuing. Or perhaps we should ask why it should pursue such cases when the law itself proliferates much of the violence that annihilate trans lives?<sup>33</sup> The narrative of LGBT inclusion in a liberal state, however, is able to individualize incidents of violence as exceptional. Incidents of anti-trans/queer violence are rendered as mere glitches in the teleological narrative of queer progress, thus occluding the very structures that keep perpetuating the violence.

Against such an impulse to individualize or to present anti-trans/queer violence as anachronistic to the time of trans and queer rights, Stanley offers us phenomenological accounts of violence directed mostly at transwomen of color, illuminating the violent

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committees comprised of psychiatrists that would decide if a person was transgender. Only if such committees approved, could transgender individuals access welfare benefits from the state. The ostensible reason for the constitution of such a committee was to prevent people from falsely posing as “transgender”. Transgender communities from across India rejected the Bill. Finally, the Transgender Persons’ (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was passed that laid the grounds for the governmentalization of trans and hijra lives through complex bureaucratic processes that will decide if a person can receive transgender certification which is tied to eligibility for access to welfare. Thanks to widespread protests across the country, a person can now receive transgender certification without medical intervention. However, if a transperson chooses to identify in the binary, they have to show evidence of medical intervention that violates the Supreme Court verdict. Additionally, this law criminalizes hijra kinship networks and equates traditional hijra labor practises like begging as bonded labor and seeks to rescue and rehabilitate the gender non-conforming by placing them in state shelter homes or in the custody of their natal families both of which have been repeatedly proven to be the most oppressive sites of violence for the non-normative. In all these measures, what we witness is containment, capture, the creation of violent borders around what trans is and should be. Additionally, given how the Indian state is headed by a Hindu majoritarian government that keeps going back to Hindu myths to extoll scriptural sanction of gender non-conformity, a rigid version of transness is tethered to a Hindu nationalist ideology.

<sup>33</sup> In recent years, one incident of murder engendered wide outrage in trans communities in India. In November 2016, Tara, a transgender woman, based out of Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, a state in Southern India, was found outside a police station with ninety per cent burn injuries. Earlier in the day, she had gone out to recharge her phone when the police picked her up, accusing her of performing sex work. They confiscated the keys of her scooter and even her mobile phone. Later, they brought her to the police station for interrogation. Tara called some of her friends from the police station, urging them to come to her rescue. By the time her friends reached the police station, they found her with the burn injuries. They took her to a hospital but later in the day, she succumbed to her injuries. The police claimed that Tara had immolated herself. However, from where did she find petrol? Did the police allow her to step out to purchase petrol or was it already there? Why did the police not stop her from committing suicide? Most importantly, when she had already reached out to her friends for help, why would she suddenly attempt suicide? Why had the police confiscated her belongings? Why did they even pick her up for interrogation? Six years later, there are still no answers to these questions. A few protest meetings were held across the country and an online petition was drafted demanding justice for Tara. However, till date there has been no judicial enquiry into Tara’s death. The death of Tara is by no means exceptional. There are many such examples and that is the point Mogli and Stanley are making.

concatenations of racialization, the gender binary and economic precarity that produce a social where the trans body materializes only through its negation. Hence the title, *Atmospheres of Violence* where the atmosphere connotes the engulfing totality of violence, not simply assemblages of gendered and racialized violence and how they are contested but a “thick hang of fog that allows us to know little else (16).” Under the sign of equality in the liberal state, any kind of difference is disappeared even as violence continues to extinguish life in the name of difference. Trans and queer are supposed to be indistinguishable in the liberal social order, but their difference is an excess that the social cannot hold or endure and hence it requires a certain force to annihilate it. This force is simply the atmosphere that negates trans life. Negation is achieved not simply by ending an individual life but by what Stanley calls an “overkill” that is the pushing of body even beyond death. Or else why would the stabbing continue even after life has been extinguished? What explains the long and elaborate modes of burning and decapitation that continues after death?<sup>34</sup> If trans and queer are indeed to be signified through negation, then overkill is what kills the very idea of trans and queer beyond the normative divisions of life and death, time and even history. This is to say that overkill is not an exceptional, spectacular or a pathological exemplar of violence, but it is the very force of violence that allows the state to fortify the borders of its social. Trans and queer negation are what allow the state to cohere around its heteronormative, racial ideal. It is against such a backdrop that Stanley often feverishly narrates how such overkill is achieved to drive home for us the full embodied horror of what it means to push life out of any zone of legibility, the atmosphere of terror and pain that engulfs trans and queer life. Stanley is, however, also intensely aware that representation has a

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<sup>34</sup> Here Stanley cites specific incidents of brutal violence directed at trans women of color in the US and tries to make sense of the excess, that is why the brutalization of the trans body continues even after an individual life has been extinguished.



dimension of aesthetics. Representing violence can also slide into the pornographic consumption of violence, it can shore up the consuming public's libidinal attachments to other people's pain. How else do we explain the currency of videos of lynching, graphic accounts of murders and the speed with which such accounts become viral? Nevertheless, he writes:

... I do anxiously narrate a number of them [violent incidents] in an attempt, however failed, to pay quiet attention to the specificity of not only lives but also deaths. In translating these untranslatable episodes into the written word, of retelling the horrors that consumed and continue to stalk the everyday of many more, any claim to purity must be lost. We are left to ask: How might we enter into these scenes as a praxis of care, as an exercise of solidarity, when the very possibility of ethics has already been destroyed? Pushed further, while we must forcefully resist a pornography of violence where death becomes yet another metaphor for the still living, turning away from the scene ensures its continuation. (15) (content within parenthesis mine)

For Stanley, renarrating the corporeal violence and sometimes refusing reproduction of the incident are both tools to end a world that engenders such structuring violence in the first place (ix). Stanley cautions us that the renarration of violence should not freeze us into inaction. Staying with the harm is not about reviolating survivors but about ending the social that demands such violations. Even as there is no clear roadmap of how such an intention is to be achieved, the commitment is important. However, if the question, how do we resist a pornography of violence does not have any pre-given answers, how are we sure that turning away from the scene of violence necessarily means its continuation?

Trans communities across the world face brutal violence regularly and India is no exception. So, the theme of overkill is not bound by a geographic context. Yet atmospheres also dissolve boundaries and enable flights of freedom. Fanon famously noted how the Vietnamese victory against a colonial regime also sparked thoughts of

rebellions elsewhere (1963, 69).<sup>35</sup> In that sense, violence is also instrumental in engendering action that dismantles it. Perhaps, Mogli's invocation of Justice AP Shah learning about the violence of Section 377 only after the suicide of Pandiamma signals that instrumental role. My fieldwork, however, shows that violence could also be absorbed into the everyday in ways that enabled forms of sociality that could not be easily recuperated as straightforward relationships between rights claims and injury. In the context of her ethnography with women who had suffered the depredations of the partition of India and Pakistan, Veena Das demonstrates that the women who were immensely traumatized by the partition's signature of violence that is widespread rape and abductions, did not necessarily transcend their trauma but incorporated it in their daily lives (1997).

I am inspired by Das locating the political in how the everyday is crafted. I trace the labors and modalities required to make the everyday inhabitable even as the dangers that suffuse the everyday cannot be disappeared always (Das, 2020). Hence in this chapter, I try to develop another mode of speaking about trans life's relation with violence by focussing on the everyday. This is because as I sift through my field notes and interview transcripts, I realize that my research interlocutors are teaching anyone who cares to learn that there cannot be an either or, which is to say that there cannot be any choice between turning away from the scene of violence or not turning away because violence is the everyday. Hence, the question cannot simply be which pathways might offer a break from the violence. While there is no template or a fixed pathway to

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<sup>35</sup> Fanon writes, "A colonized people is not alone. In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there bursts out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime --that same violence which fulfills for the native a role that is not simply informative, but also operative. The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory. Since July, 1954, the question which the colonized peoples have asked themselves has been, 'What must be done to bring about another Dien Bien Phu? How can we manage it?'" (1961, 69)

freedom, my interlocutors are ceaselessly crafting ways to inhabit the violence and, in the process, sometimes even dismantling it. Most of these improvisatory gestures and actions do not necessarily involve formal political protest such as marches or speeches. While the latter are also vital, in focussing on only spectacular modes of protest, the ordinary, the mundane forms of living otherwise become illegible. And yet they are no less brimming with the potential of being revolutionary. Or sometimes, they are simply the tools to endure the unbearable.

Even as death as an event cannot be wished away, its overwhelming presence can be troubled by modes of being that not only help endure the event but also at times rupture its finality. The previous chapter was about the care labors required to vitalize the ailing with not only some life force but also dignity that the state refused. Care helped stitch the community together amidst the devastations wrought by HIV. In this chapter, I am tracking the labors required to reproduce the everyday. This chapter is composed of three sections, each offering such modalities of lifemaking. The first section is about an annual lecture in the memory of a deceased filmmaker who became an idol for generations of *kotis* and trans individuals in West Bengal. Rituparno Ghosh was an award-winning filmmaker who was also relentlessly ridiculed for her femininity and for those feminine individuals growing up in West Bengal in the 1990s and 2000s, Rituparno's name was also hurled at them like a slur. Against such a backdrop of violent significations, the lecture honors the memory of Rituparno by detaching her legacy from the prison house of gender to which the media and activist communities consigned her. However, even as the lecture disrupts the violent hegemony of identity, it also ends up shoring other acute hierarchies of caste and class inherent to *koti* communities, hierarchies that trouble any valorization of marginalized communities as always already resilient and disruptive. The second section describes a meeting in the

memory of the dead and how the template of the event is exceeded by its participants that forces one to rethink how we imagine transgender vulnerability and the final section circulates around humor and the work it performs in producing trans sociality in the wake of violence and death. The reader will repeatedly note how the messiness of life comes in the way of memory, how conversations on collectives, friends long dead seamlessly morph into raunchy jokes about the lightness of fucking, how lamps lit in the memory of dead become selfie zones for *kotis*. Sometimes campy performance of marriages refuses the overwhelming nature of death and sometimes phantom dead babies allow traumatic pasts to become the substance of jokes that make the everyday inhabitable. Death could be assumed to be the starting point of all the three sections but death does not remain central to how the stories unfold.

The labors required to make the everyday are sometimes able to hold vulnerability at bay and sometimes even undermine or disregard them. I conclude this chapter to argue that a close attention to gestures, actions and conversations offer us a lesson on how life is lived and also richly imagined in the wake of death and loss. The simultaneity of hope, hopelessness, rage, obedience, biting sarcasm, and humor not only help my research interlocutors endure the quotidian nature of everyday violences but also allows them to imagine and sometimes even actualize what is conceived impossible. Most importantly, the messiness of life in all its hierarchies and divisions sometimes end up undermining the centrality accorded to death in trans life.

### **Infrastructures of a Memorial**

On 30th May 2013, filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh died of cardiac arrest, three months before her fiftieth birthday at her home in Kolkata.<sup>36</sup> The filmmaker who had won

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<sup>36</sup> Bangla, which is the language in which Ghosh made most of her films does not have pronouns. Conversations on pronouns in English were yet to enter conversations in queer and trans communities

twelve national awards besides many international accolades. When Ghosh emerged in the Bengali film industry, she was relentlessly ridiculed as feminine by Bengali cinema audiences. As her films started receiving national recognition, the same audience claimed her as their cultural icon. Ghosh, however, was not about comforting audience sensibilities. Her kurtas and stoles were soon complemented with saris and flowing dresses, accentuated by lipstick and junky jewellery. The discomfort and ridicule of the audience resurfaced. Ghosh used to edit the Sunday edition of a magazine where she wrote about the heartburn that being a spectacle in every public space produced.<sup>37</sup> Yet, this heartburn only intensified the color of her lipstick and the elaborate nature of the costumes. At the same time, Ghosh refused any gender legibility. She refused to identify as a transgender person. Pronouns were never an issue because Bangla is a gender-neutral language. In other words, she refused any easy recuperation – neither by the Bengali film lovers for whom the respectable filmmaker needed to rein in her femininity nor by the queer and transgender communities in Bengal who thirsted for a role model who would be a public figure and would explicitly identify as queer and transgender. Ghosh was too politically incorrect for both groups.<sup>38</sup>

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during the time Ghosh lived and made films and hence the imposition of “they/them” can only be a retrospective imposition. Throughout, her lifetime, Ghosh refused any attempts to slot her into any identity category even as she was relentlessly ridiculed for her body language. I am using “she” pronouns for her not to recuperate her as a transgender person but out of a gendered affiliation that many feminine persons and *kotis* feel with her. We were always already “*meyechele*” (a derogatory term for “women”), “*boudi*” (literally meaning sister-in-law but connoting a woman readily available for sex) and “*mawga*” (insulting term for women) in public spaces, schools and at workplaces. This is not to claim that this affiliation is able to encompass the complexity of Rituparno’s subjectivity. In the latter half of this section, the reader will note “he” pronouns being used by a transgender activist for Rituparno that also marks the fact that the very term “trans” was not as much in circulation when Ghosh made films. In fact, Ghosh had also played “feminine men” in films directed by other filmmakers.

<sup>37</sup> All the editorials Ghosh wrote for this Sunday magazine were compiled into 2 volumes, entitled “First Person”, after her death: <https://www.amazon.in/First-Person-Vol-Are-Combined/dp/8129519259>. Rituparno edited this Sunday magazine from 2006 until her death.

<sup>38</sup> In 2012, Ghosh directed and acted in a film called *Chitrangada* where she played a male choreographer in love with another man. The former wants to start a family with his lover but Indian law does not allow same gender couples to adopt. So, the choreographer decides to undergo surgical transition to become a woman. However, the lover rejects her new body and marries a person assigned female at birth. Towards the end of the film, the choreographer realizes that her self-worth does not emerge from her body and

Yet, for those of us feminine boys and *kotis*, entering our teens in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we were always already interpellated as the “Rituparno case.” Rituparno had become a gender category. “Rituparno” was a label that stuck to our hand gestures and hip movements and the cadences of our speech, that evoked disgust and erotic feelings in equal measure. So, willy nilly, Ghosh had become part of our lives. Rituparno knew that. In a much-circulated television interview, she severely castigated a stand-up comedian, Mir for mimicking her. She expressly told him that when he mimicked her, he was not merely mimicking her but all those feminine boys who identified with her! So, when Rituparno died, I felt I had lost someone very dear. Back then, I had just begun working as a subeditor in a magazine. My editor asked me rather than anyone else to cover her funeral. Thus, Rituparno haunted me at work too.

Rituparno’s body was kept at Nandan, the state-owned cultural complex in Kolkata that is comprised of parks, a cinema, seminar rooms, auditoriums and theatre halls. The Chief Minister of West Bengal personally supervised the funeral arrangements. There was a long winding queue of people waiting to pay their last respects to the filmmaker. A couple of ministers and artistes stood next to the body as the public were slowly allowed into the lobby of the theatre. On another side of Nandan, Sappho for Equality, an LBT collective, was conducting its own memorial meeting. Earlier in the day, they had sent bulk messages to Kolkata’s queer communities to come to Nandan with red roses as a mark of love for Rituparno. *Kotis*, transwomen and hijras were reciting poetry, singing and giving speeches next to a portrait of Rituparno in make-up. This was a contrast to the portrait kept next to her body, which was a photo from Rituparno’s

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decides to suspend the surgery after an initial set of procedures. Needless to say, the film was widely castigated by transgender communities in Bengal.

earlier, less feminine presenting days. Later, the government gave her a state funeral complete with a gun salute.

One could read both forms of memorialization as a study in contrast. While the state managed memorialization recuperated her body as its cultural icon by evacuating her gender transgression, the activist group created a counter-memory by claiming and celebrating that very gender transgression. Yet as discussed earlier, Rituparno was uneasy with any easy recuperation. In death that unease was ironed out.

Any kind of recovery of Rituparno Ghosh as a “transgender” person congeals her identity even as her life was lived in “beautiful inconsistency.” (Stanley, 2021, 3) A liberal state requires identarian legibility in order to perform its individualized project of inclusion as signalled by the state funeral. On the other hand, imposition of identity is also unavoidable to account for the specificity of life experiences that are rooted in that identity, and which are meaningful beyond that person, as signified by the grieving *kotis*, transpersons and the queers at Sappho’s memorial. Indeed, Rituparno Ghosh has emerged as a transgender filmmaker retrospectively. Any Bengali filmmaker or playwright who composes any text about gender non-normativity makes it a point to dedicate it to Ghosh.<sup>39</sup> Even then, could there be a way to work towards theorizations that trouble such easy forms of intelligibility? How do we write about Rituparno Ghosh that is not a calcified form of memorialization? How do we keep alive her disruptive legacy – the contact point between the “ends of language and the chaos of desiring life experienced as the force of discipline and escape (Stanley 2021, 3).”

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<sup>39</sup> Countless plays have been performed in West Bengal where the central character, a feminine boy idolizes Rituparno. Films like *Nagar Kirtan (The Eunuch and the Flute Player)* made in 2017 by Kaushik Ganguly about a young individual aspiring to medically transition begins with a dedication to Rituparno. Even the recent documentary film, *Hridoy Bosot (A Home for my Heart)* directed by Sankhajit Biswas, about Sudeb’s (who we met in the previous chapter) medical transition and how her relationships transform with her new reality begins with a Rituparno dedication.

A year after her death, Pratyay Gender Trust, a non-profit that works with and for *koti*, transfeminine and hijra communities in West Bengal announced the annual Rituparno Ghosh Memorial Lecture (henceforth RGML) that would take place every year on her birthday, on August 31. In its seven iterations since 2014, RGML has been delivered by a legal scholar talking about marital rape, a feminist academic talking about solidarity across social movements, a journalist talking about farmer suicides, a professor talking about caste oppression in India, another journalist who spoke about the violence of citizenship, and a labor rights activist who spoke about the informal economy. One year, the lecture was in the form of a performance of a play against army oppression. In short, RGML does not seek to recuperate Ghosh as a figure of gender subversion but wants to think capaciously about Ghosh's worldviews. What kind of politics did Ghosh espouse in her cinema? What was her political ideology? There are clues in her writings and films. RGML does not seek to freeze Ghosh's memory in the fixed template of a gender transgressor but its work of memory keeping does what Judith Butler would perhaps frame as not the... "the continuation of the person in the trace; it is, rather, the animating of the name through and by the trace." (292, 2009) This animation is effortful and intentional. From the choice of the speaker to the décor at the venue, to the dinner menu after the lecture, this is hard labor performed by those whose bodies are stuck with a gender named Rituparno.

For obvious reasons, I started attending RGML, right after its inception and eventually became a volunteer with the organizing team from 2016. The organizing team was comprised of Anindya Hajra, a founding member of Pratyay and a transgender activist who has been involved with the trans movements from the late 1990s and her friends and Pratyay's employees. When I embarked on the fieldwork for my PhD thesis, I approached Pratyay with my research theme and my interest in writing about RGML



and its politics of memory keeping. Since I was already volunteering for them, they readily agreed. The following paragraphs are based on my interviews with Anindya, some Pratyay employees and my fieldnotes taken during 2018 and 2020.

I found echoes of Stanley's warning against calcification of memory when he writes about the violence inherent in trans memorialization in *Atmospheres of Violence* in Anindya's rationale for the lecture. Here is a transcript of one of our many conversations:

A memorial lecture is named after a public personality and Rituparno is one such person. Tell me how many such personalities do we have to look up to as gender non-conforming persons. Rituparno, the filmmaker, writer, editor and not just that, her contribution to the fields of trans activism in West Bengal. It is incidental that he (sic) was a friend who also knew of our work at Pratyay... his personality, the way he carried himself, he had and continues to have so much impact on trans and gender non-conforming people. When he did that interview with Mir, I got it recorded and started showing it in workshops. It was still not on YouTube.

*None of the lectures so far have been centered on transness or queerness. Was that a conscious decision?*

We wanted the lecture to be a space where we talk about larger issues of social justice because I don't like this reductionist way of looking at this particular filmmaker that happens... this queer fetishization... I can't take that... because of the last stage of his career, because of those few films and his coming out in public through his shifting appearances, his film and the language. But he directed only one queer film in his career, *Chitrangada*.<sup>40</sup> All the others were not technically directed by him. Yet because of what he was going through or how he chose to represent himself, the association easily happened, that created this myth and also created his death because everything else around him got encapsulated into the corporeality of his body and the vicariousness around his body... Rituparno *sex change korechen ki*

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<sup>40</sup> Rituparno has directed 21 feature films, besides a few documentary films, films for television and a few series for television as well. Out of this massive filmography spread across a short period of time between 1992 and 2013, *Chitrangada* was the only film that she directed and acted in, about queer relationships. Besides *Chitrangada*, she had acted in two other feature films, *Arekti Premer Galpo (Just another Love Story)* by Kaushik Ganguly and *Memories in March* by Sanjoy Nag where she played queer characters. Yet these three films seem to have subsumed the breadth of themes explored in her films.

*korenni, buk baniyecheh na bananni* (did Rituparno undergo surgical transition or not, did he get breast implants or not) and I think, this also limited him as a filmmaker, as an artist, as everything... so how do you shift, push and challenge this?<sup>41</sup> As a friend, I was also reacting from that perspective that how do you not stereotype a person into A or B because I remember when we announced Flavia Agnes as a speaker, we got a lot of queries from the queer circuit as to why Flavia... Nivedita Menon was accepted but not Flavia... why does it seem odd to the queer community?<sup>42</sup> What is this expectation from a lecture that is associated with a name like Rituparno? I wanted to disrupt that expectation deliberately.

*So, you were not so much interested in memorializing as much as thinking expansively what could it mean to keep Rituparno in public memory?*

See, when we do the Rituparno Ghosh Memorial lecture, we were very clear that we were not memorializing him. Yes, it is a memorial lecture and we are remembering him but the lecture is not about him. The kind of memorialization that happens about him does not move beyond certain specific frameworks and that way limits him but we wanted to set him free from those limitations consciously. When you are memorializing, you are also in some ways, killing that person *jetake ami banglay bolbo nasworota* (what I would frame in Bangla as mortality), the limit to the possibility of a conversation. Like with Manik *babu* (Satyajit Ray, the globally renowned filmmaker is often affectionately referred to by his nick name in Bengal, Manik and *babu* is a mode of address for a man and through this mode of address, he is also claimed as Bengal's very own cultural icon), how much can you go on discussing his camera angles? His films have been discussed ad nauseum. There is a memorial lecture in his name and people have come and spoken about his films. Mostly film personalities get invited but why not liberate him? (Contents within parenthesis mine)

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<sup>41</sup> Both the mainstream media and the audiences kept speculating if Rituparno was undergoing surgical transition as she kept playing with her public appearances. Post her death, many celebrities speculated in the media if she died because the transition did not suit her body. Nearly a decade after her death, every year on her death anniversary, many trans activists mourn her death on social media and wish that if there were a next birth, she should be born a woman. Some regret that that Rituparno's desire for transition remained unrequited, making it a given that Rituparno indeed wished to transition!

<sup>42</sup> Flavia Agnes is a renowned feminist legal scholar who has never addressed queer and trans issues in her scholarship unlike Nivedita Menon who has written extensively on queer feminisms. So, when RGML was announced, many progressive groups were surprised that Agnes was chosen as a speaker. The normative expectation would be that a lecture in Rituparno's name would only address explicitly queer and trans issues.

There is nothing more to add to Anindya's eloquent response to Stanley's urgent provocations on the very violence of memory. RGML was not only crafting a counter response to the ceaseless pigeonholing of subjectivity to its corporeal self, but it was facilitating an expansive mode of thinking about memory itself. Yet such a political and creative response to questions of legacy also engenders other questions. Who can access these modes of memory making? What are the labors that go into organizing such counter responses and who performs what kinds of labor? These are questions that were also present in the previous chapter and in their answers, we found how care was coerced.

Sudeb, who we met in the previous chapter and who confronted us with the viscerality of care, worked for Pratyay for a brief period of time and thus participated in the organizing of the lecture. When she eventually stopped working for the organization, she also stopped attending RGML. I wondered why she had stopped attending the lecture even as working to organize the lecture was no longer part of the mandate of her paid work. It struck me as unusual given our shared association with Rituparno discussed earlier. A conversation with me in 2020 illuminated some of Suvana's feelings about the labor of being involved with RGML. She fondly recollected how when the play was performed, the theatre troupe required a tree as a prop. It was Sudeb's responsibility to find a tree that had been already felled, to organize transport and carry the tree all the way to the venue. Her sense of triumph when she arrived with the tree, however, soon gave way to deep resentment. Sudeb and her other colleagues comprised of *kotis* had ushered in the audience. The first bell had been rung to alert the audience to put their phones on the silent mode. Sudeb was just about to enter the auditorium to watch the performance when she was beckoned outside. Anindya asked her to go to a liquor store and purchase alcohol for the members of the theatre troupe. As we talked

about this much later, Sudeb asked me, “*Bolte paro keno amay khiluata kinte jete habe?* (Can you tell me why exactly I was asked to get the drinks?)” She encountered the rush hour traffic of a weekday evening and by the time she returned with the bottles, the first act of the play was already over. Her friends, other employees of Pratyay, who knew about her passion for acting urged her to go back to the auditorium, but Sudeb refused and sat outside. After the play, along with the other *kotis*, she quietly stood with the donation box for voluntary donations, completed her other chores and decided she would not participate in RGML anymore.

Sudeb’s experience was not exceptional. The division of labor has always been very stark at RGML like in many other progressive spaces where too the divisions between intellectual and manual labors are quite self-evident. Given my English-speaking skills and university credentials, I was requested to participate in meetings about shortlisting speakers, I could go to the airport to receive the speakers with Anindya and I could moderate the question-and-answer sessions even as the other *kotis*— all working class, many from subordinate caste positions— would manage crowds, distribute passes, bring rented lights and other necessary equipments from the suppliers, deliver them back. In 2022 when I write this chapter, most of the lectures have been delivered in English, apart from one in Hindi and the play that did not require any particular language skills for comprehension. When I brought up the inherent elitism of the RGML with Anindya, she posed a counter question to me. Why would I expect that the *kotis* would not be able to follow the lectures? She named some Pratyay employees who would make it a point to attend the lectures even if they were delivered in English. Yet, does mere presence indicate active participation? As for the division of labor, she felt that every Pratyay member, be it an employee or someone in a position of authority like her had stakes in the event. A few months before Rituparno’s birthday every year, the

*kotis* ask her about the respective year's speaker. Most importantly, the employees of Pratyay had also been organizing an annual event comprised of dance and music where they would perform with many other volunteers of Pratyay. This was an event that Anindya was not attached to, but she participated in it as a volunteer and performed any task that she was asked to.

Yet, despite Anindya's rebuttals, it may be important to ask when the division of labor was ever benign. It could not be a matter of preference that someone had to bring the alcohol— an invisible labor— while the founding member of the organization introduced the speakers on stage. At best, Anindya's response signalled that there was an attempt to grapple with hierarchies, even if such attempts eventually failed. Here it is important to note that it does not automatically mean that someone from the dominant caste will always perform intellectual labors and someone from the subordinate castes will always perform menial labors. English speaking skills can dismantle such hierarchies as anti-caste scholar Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd points out (2022, 2019). Ironically, he made the same argument in the 2018 edition of the lecture even as the working class *kotis* were managing the registration desks outside the lecture auditorium.

In 2019, RGML witnessed the maximum turnout in terms of the audience. A celebrity journalist who is reputed to critique the Hindu Fascist government was the speaker. After moderating the question and answers, I was tasked to escort the journalist out of the auditorium to a car, which in itself was a Herculean task because the audience was scrambling for photos with him. With help from a few other friends who created a cordon, we quickly moved to the car hired to drop us off at a bar where a table had been reserved. Soon other guests, comprised of academics, journalists and Anindya's friends started arriving. Anindya came as well, and we started ordering food and drinks. I kept wondering about Pratyay's employees. Why were they not at the table? One of them

was dropping off the chair and desk that were used as props on stage to Anindya's home. A few others were dismantling the banners and lights and dropping them off to the suppliers. After almost an hour had passed, they arrived finally and joined the meal. They had barely ordered the drinks when our server informed us that the kitchen had closed for the night. They gulped their drinks and started planning where could they eat dinner while most of us had already eaten. The hierarchies of labor that we had witnessed in how Ashok's death was documented and how her friends narrated it seemed to play out in the infrastructures needed to produce RGML as well. The stark division between the intellectual labor and the invisible menial labor could not be wished away even at an event that disrupted the violence of normative memory making. Against the backdrop of this wide chasm that we had engendered, how do we valorize the idea of counter memory when it too replicates the structures of the center and periphery? Suddenly, Anindya called Bhanu Mama, the eldest employee of Pratyay and handed her a gift package, that was comprised of a selection of teas that she had purchased for our guest. Anindya requested Bhanu Mama to hand it to the journalist. She did. We clapped. And then there was a group photo.

Even as the labor politics of the RGML replicates the caste hierarchies of labor that are intrinsic to the South Asian social as discussed in the previous chapter, I have not stopped wondering if Anindya's gesture of hailing Bhanu Mama to do the honors of felicitating the guest can be simply read as a tokenistic gesture of inclusion. This is in light of the fact that indeed Rituparno is a figure that glues a community together and this is a lecture in her name, which is not to claim that the glue manages to hide the deep cracks that run through that community. The cracks do not vanish at the site of memory.

## **Alongside Death**

The Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) is commemorated globally on November 20 every year to remember and honor the memories of transgender individuals lost to transphobic violence. It was started by transgender activist, Gwendolyn Ann Smith in 1999 in honour of Rita Hester, an African American transwoman who was murdered in 1998. TDOR is marked in several Indian cities and towns as well. This is not to argue that memorialization of death did not happen prior to the founding of TDOR or that all memorialization meetings happen only on November 20. A pride parade or the World AIDS Day could also become sites of memory keeping. However, with the transnational traffic of images and capital, TDOR has become an important event on the annual roster of many Indian NGOs. The following paragraphs describe one such TDOR that I attended in 2019.

Raina, the founding member of Samabhabona (Equality in Thought), a Kolkata based transgender NGO invited me to join their TDOR programme being organized in collaboration with Asroy (Shelter), a non-funded transgender collective, comprised of mostly subordinate caste transpersons, based in Baruipur, an hour by train from Kolkata. Asroy only exists in name and its government registration as a non-profit has expired. Sudeb is one of its founding members and she is trying to resuscitate some life into this dying group by bringing in new volunteers. After Astitva shut down post the dissolution of Manas Bangla, Sudeb, Sanjay and their friends founded Asroy. However, lack of livelihood opportunities in Baruipur and its suburbs forced the founding members to migrate elsewhere. Moreover, a paucity of funds led to Asroy floundering as well. Collaboration meant that Samabhabona, which is funded, financially supported Sudeb to organize the event. On their part, Samabhabona could demonstrate to their donors that their work extended outside the city of Kolkata. The programme was

ironically held at a venue called the *Anima Bibaho Basor* (Anima Wedding House). I was relishing the delicious irony of a property that is rented out for celebration of marriages, the state sanctioned signifier of reproductive futurity being utilized to commemorate death. The theme of marriage kept recurring that evening.

I entered the hall and was greeted at a registration desk where participants had to fill in their names, phone numbers and organizational affiliations. Posters decked up the hall and the themes ranged from the threat of Hindu Fascism to the demand for transgender rights and a call to the larger society for more transgender inclusion. There was a banner which had images of several transwomen who had died and the slogan “Trans Rights are Human Rights” was emblazoned in English, Bengali, Hindi and Urdu across the banner. As the hall filled with people, Sudeb opened the programme with some housekeeping instructions. Phones had to be kept on silent mode, an instruction that was flouted all through the evening. Then she urged the participants, comprised of hijras, *kotis* and transgender women to sit next to someone they did not know and not to sit next to one’s friends. This was to ensure that a sense of collective could emerge across the room. Throughout the event, Sudeb behaved like a stern teacher asking her wards to be quiet in the classroom. The unruly hijras and *kotis* were busy chatting with each other and clicking selfies with friends. Sometimes, Sudeb went to the extent of asking individuals to change seats to stop them from talking. In her speech, she reminded the audience that only protests, slogans and legal petitions do not bring change. While some individuals become the popular faces of the movements, there are many other nameless persons who have dared to live their lives on their own gendered terms in their families and neighborhoods, daily acts of resistance which remain unmarked but are still revolutionary. These folks need to be remembered as well. Repeatedly, the solemnity of the event was interrupted by the boisterous crowd. As I



glanced around the room, I saw activists earnestly explaining the history of TDOR and projecting visuals of transgender individuals who had died in West Bengal over the years on stage while the target audience kept walking around, going to the corridor for a smoke break, coming back, sitting next to friends, exchanging pleasantries and taking photos in complete disregard to the sombre mood on stage. I would argue, however, that it would be erroneous to read this seeming lack of interest in the official programme as apathy. After all, the audience was also equally vulnerable to the violences being talked about on stage. If there is nothing exceptional about vulnerability to untimely death, the hijras, *kotis* and transgender women, who comprised the audience for this event, were teaching me how life was vitalized with every joke, banter and gestures that seeks out pleasure. Their presence at the TDOR was an acknowledgment of trans vulnerability. But how they inhabited that vulnerability exceeded the templates of an event memorializing the dead.

Nevertheless, the organizers kept trying to bring some order into the proceedings. After the audio-visual presentations were over, the lights were switched on and Sudeb asked if anyone had any reactions. It seemed to me that she had anticipated awkward silence and immediately filled it up by inviting an audience member who she had already requested earlier to speak. Sukhi, a middle aged *koti*, stood up and shared her grief with us. One of the individuals who were part of the audio-visual presentation was her friend who was no more. She said she was missing her. The moment was poignant but brief. We quickly moved to the next part of the program – film screenings. Two short films, one about a transmasculine person navigating public transport and another one about a hijra's quest for self-love. The audience continued with their merry making, so much so when the films ended, Sudeb summarized the films for us. After this, she invited Sai, a transfeminine person in her early 20s, undergoing medical transition, to the stage. She

informed the audience that Sai had a driver's licence and had worked as a driver for a while before joining the Kolkata police as a civic volunteer. Sudeb argued that it is important for the community to know that there are models for livelihoods outside of the usual alternatives like sex work and begging at traffic signals. Sudeb used Sai as an exemplar of how *kotis* could find economic opportunities everywhere, even at the institution that is one of the most prominent sights of transphobic violence.<sup>43</sup> It was striking to note how the organizing groups, Samabhabona and Asroy, continuously exceeded the templates of an event memorializing the dead. Someone like Sukhi could share her grief but grief could not overwhelm the evening because Sai's career signalled how life not only moves on but that trans lives also thrive.

It is also important to mark the activist labours of organizing such an event and the impact such an event has on the larger community. The very fact that the entire hall was filled with hijras, *kotis* and transwomen speaks to both their investment in the event and also the reach that Sudeb and her barely surviving collective, Asroy continue to have. Most importantly, TDOR was an opportunity for all these individuals to gather. This gathering enthused Sudeb and she had tears in her eyes when she asked the audience if they felt the urge to revive the group. Immediately, there was loud approval in the form of claps and cheer. As soon as the speeches and presentations were over, rented disco lights were switched on and the hall magically transformed into a dance floor. A dance troupe comprised entirely of young transfeminine persons and *kotis* started dancing to popular Bengali songs and the audience started grooving. The final

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<sup>43</sup> I met Sai at a community gathering in 2021 where she informed me that she had resigned from the police because the police would often deride her. Not because she identified as transgender but because the police station where she worked was now known as the hijra police station. Sheer proximity with her had now made her colleagues trans too. Hijra was simply used as a slur, a placeholder for everybody feminine and this was too much shame for Sai's colleagues to bear. Sai now worked as a tutor. Yet again, a narrative on vulnerability that did not look as it is expected to look when one thinks trans and the police together.

song for the day was an Indian rendition of the wildly popular “Because I am happy” by Pharell Williams. This particular rendition of the song had been performed for the first time by transgender performers based in Mumbai and the video had gotten viral when it was released in 2016.<sup>44</sup> With this song, the dance troupe joined the audience and soon all of us were dancing. As I was soaking in the joyous mood of the *kotis*, I was struck by how Sudeb had succeeded in creating an event memorializing the dead that could involve everybody, irrespective of their class and caste positions unlike RGML. In our 2020 conversation, I shared my observation with her after she recounted to me her disappointment with the lecture. She agreed and added how could there be memory without every member of the community!

Coming back to the TDOR, the Pharrell Williams song ended and Sudeb took the microphone and thanked the band and announced the name of the volunteer who was waiting with our food packets. Once we had eaten the delicious meal of stuffed paratha, fish chop and a sweet, we were asked to take down all the posters from the room and carry them for a short rally from the venue to the playground next to where Asroy’s office used to be. All of us were also given fireproof paper lamps that were perched on clay cups filled with sand. We stood in a queue and a volunteer from Samabhabona started lighting our lamps.

The procession started. At the start of the rally, some of the participants held the banner with the images of the dead. A music box was being carried in an auto that blared songs of revolution including “We shall overcome”. However, at the back of the rally, some of the participants started ululating, as if a wedding was about to take place. After all,

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blvOBnSRfVc>

we had just stepped out of the wedding hall. Just as in the hall, joy, humor and activist earnestness jostled with each other on the streets.

We reached the playground and everyone assembled in a rough circle. The lamps were also placed on the ground in a circle. Samabhabona's employees started taking photos for documentation while other participants started taking selfies with each other against the warm light of lamps glowing on their faces. Someone laughed saying that yellow light brings out the best photos. Raina thanked everyone for coming and said that only collectivization could defeat fascist forces. Sudeb reminded everyone yet again about reviving Asroy. She ended her words with, "See you next year!" Listening to her, some of the transwomen started shouting, "*Asche bochor abar habe!* (We shall meet again next year)" These words are uttered in the context of Hindu festivals where devotees chant that the festivities will happen again next year while immersing clay idols of gods and goddesses, marking an end but only temporarily.

The program ended with Sudeb's affectionate words, "*Sobai sabhdhane phiro!* (Please go home safely!" The participants immediately started clearing the ground. The lamps were extinguished immediately and lumped to a side. The *kotis* started throwing the clay cups to a side as well. As the cups started breaking, a member of Samabhabona, a queer feminist activist who identifies as gender nonbinary shrieked in pain, "Couldn't the lamps remain lit a little longer?" Life would not wait, however. The participants had to return home, some of them had to take trains to destinations, that are hours from Baruipur. Sanjay, that is Ashok's friend, who we met in the previous chapter scolded a *koti* who was about to throw the cup and asked her to keep it on the ground gently. Sanjay started retrieving the cups that had still not broken and started handing them over to the queer feminist who looked at me and said, "We could paint on these and plant saplings."

In an essay entitled, “Trans Necropolitics”, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn warn us that trans deaths “act as a resource for the development and dissemination of many different agendas. (2013,66)” These agendas could range from sensationalist media coverage that grab eyeballs to trans NGOs instrumentalizing death to claim rights and recognition. Indeed, the Baruipur TDOR would be an important event on Samabhabona’s roster of advocacy initiatives that extended beyond the confines of a metropolitan city and would allow it to advocate for continued funding from donor bodies. However, its collaboration with a non-funded collective, Asroy also meant that a trans collective that was dying might just get a new lease of life. Moreover, the activists of both collectives had a keen sense of what the community would most appreciate. From organizing a delicious meal to hiring disco lights for a dance party, they ensured that the TDOR not only mourned death but also nourished life with food, merriment and the promise of collectivization. And not just that, they constantly ruptured the mandate of a TDOR by sometimes speaking about revolutions in the minor key to sometimes talking about alternative career opportunities to sometimes exhorting the audience to rise against Fascist forces.

Queer theorist Sarah Lambie points out that events like TDOR overdetermine transgender lives with the finality of death. Individual deaths are stripped of context and history and what emerges through such remembrance events is the universalized body of a dead transgender subject, such that each death can be interchanged with the other (2008). The hijra, *koti* and transgender participants that day did not refuse such significations. They attended the event, marched the streets, held the banner with the faces of the dead and lit the lamps. If the central conceit of a TDOR is to keep the memory of the dead alive, poet and scholar, Cameron Awkward-Rich pithily asks if death itself is unjust or all that preceded it. He writes, “What is unjust is the terms of

living. There is something deeply unsettling, that is, to the insistence that someone ought to be alive in a world that did little to support that life.” (2019) His critique of TDOR is reflected in the disregard that the participants in the Baruipur TDOR displayed for instructions and protocols of the event itself and their inattention towards the display of dead figures from the past on stage. Even as they succinctly acknowledged the serialization of trans deaths and the environment of structural oppression through chants of “*Asche Bochor Abaar Habe,*” they also shone in the glow of the lamps and danced and ululated their way through streets camping up the most common signification of futurity that is marriage. When it was time to leave, they were brisk in discarding the lamps on the grounds and making a move for their respective destinations. No false sense of romance about the past. Life was vitalized with joy in each other’s company. There was no wishing away loss but such loss could not occlude the visions of renewal. Some cups would break, others would be home to saplings. What was joy one moment could be drowned by the tragedy swirling forth underneath it but there was always the possibility that the joy would transform what tragedy could look and feel like. Even the actuality of loss and utter seriousness with which it is remembered could be borne with a sense of irony and disdain.

### **Death beside Itself**

It was almost midnight. A chilly night in January 2020. I was aimlessly scrolling up and down my social media newsfeed. Suddenly my fingers froze when an abrupt notification arrived on my screen. A text message from a friend, a long time trans activist. “I just got a call. Rumi is no more.” Rumi was also a trans activist with whom I used to have frequent phone conversations about future collaborations, her fund proposals and lovers. In fact, we had just spoken a day back. I immediately dialled Rumi to prove my friend wrong. The phone went unresponded. Then I called one of

Rumi's closest friends, whose phone also remained unanswered. Then a call to this person's partner. No answer. Then I texted Rumi's friend on multiple platforms. After five painful minutes, this person called me and told me that this sounded implausible because she had spoken with Rumi only a couple of hours back but also admitted that Rumi was not taking calls now. Then she managed to reach Rumi's neighbor who worked for her organization and was her closest companion. This person immediately rushed to Rumi's place, knocked hard on her door. Rumi was in deep sleep. I immediately texted my friend admonishing her for sending false alarms, but she told me that she had heard the news from Samrat, one time mentor of Rumi and also a *koti*, with whom she had a bitter fallout.

The next morning, I could not resist dialling Samrat to demand an explanation. Samrat and I shared a friendly rapport. She was supposed to be my research interlocutor at one point but I did not end up interviewing her because our expectations from the research did not align. She wanted me to raise donations for her barely surviving collective and I could not live up to her expectations because I was already trying to raise resources for some other organizations. We were transparent with each other and hence there was no bad blood between us. Samrat exclaimed, "*Ei khaurita Rumi ni jei diyech!* (This cock and bull story was circulated by Rumi herself!)"<sup>45</sup> I found this explanation incredulous and asked her, "Why would she spread a rumour about her own death?" Samrat started laughing and exclaimed, "She just wanted to check how much clout she has and she does have clout! *Nahole tor moto sahorer koti amay call korto?* (Or else would a city based *koti* like you call me to enquire?)" The last bit of the statement was a dig at me. After all I had not become Samrat's collaborator but had called her to

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<sup>45</sup> *Khauri* is a *ulti* word. *Ulti* is a code language that hijra and *koti* communities use. Historically, this language has been used to guard their privacy. *Khauri* signifies an utterly made-up narrative. Not simply a lie but an embellished lie for dramatic effect.

enquire about her rival! Next, I called Rumi. She seemed totally nonchalant about the chaos of the previous night. When I asked her if she was alright and if she had found out who spread this rumour, she simply remarked, “*Janoi toh amar koto shotru. Kotira larai korei sesh. Eder kichu habe na!* (You know the number of enemies I have. *Kotis* will simply die out fighting each other. There is no hope for them!)” In short, Rumi blamed her rivals for circulating the death rumour. She felt that because she had become quite visible in the transnational circuit of donor bodies and activist groups, many from the community resented her. So, “them” were those *kotis* who had failed to succeed, and were now up to all kinds of tricks to rattle her.

This particular incident highlighted the bitter scrambling for scarce resources in a country that has either outsourced most of its welfare responsibilities to non-governmental organizations or abandoned welfare altogether. However, there is a lot more to be said about how death also becomes the substance of humor. While in the first instance, the circulation of rumours on Rumi’s death struck me as distasteful and also extremely violent, when I encountered many other conversations on death that elicited laughter, it gave me a pause.

One evening I was sitting with a group of *kotis* in Mita’s room in Seoraphuli, a small town on the banks of the river Hooghly. Mita is a *koti* in her mid-30s who introduces herself as the transfeminine daughter of a sex worker. Mita is one of my research interlocutors from Kolkata Anandam, one of the transgender collectives with whom I conducted focus groups. I have accompanied Mita for many an advocacy meeting and have interviewed her as well. This particular evening, she had organized a focus group with five *kotis* for me. The main prompt for the conversation was memory of those who had passed on. Ravi, a *koti* in her early 40s started narrating to me how in her youth, she had witnessed *kotis* being murdered after being sexually abused, she had seen *kotis*



die by suicide and all this happened because Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was yet to be read down. While there is no denying the fact of murders and suicides, the direct connection between these deaths and Section 377 seemed akin to the strategic instrumentalization of trans deaths in petitions against the law. Section 377 has hardly ever been the most important arbiter of violence in *koti* lives as activists and academics have pointed out again and again (Mandal, 2018; Khanna, 2016; Puri, 2016; Dave, 2012; Dutta, 2011). While I was wondering why Ravi was making this easy conflation, she herself solved the puzzle for me. She was one of the protagonists of a documentary film that had been made with the grant money of a US based researcher who was studying the impact of law on trans and queer lives. (*Until and Unless* 2017, Sintu Bagui, Nitu Giri, Soma Roy and Amelia Carter) The entire film was focussed on addressing the ills of Section 377. It was shot a year before the Section was finally read down in 2018. Ravi continued playing that character during her interaction with me and even asked me if I had watched her film. I did not wish to interrupt her but soon there were other interruptions. Nitu Giri, the eldest in the group, in her late 50s, was vigorously negotiating rates with a potential client on her hook-up app on her smartphone. The notifications kept puncturing Ravi's death narratives. This is the same Nitu who had asked me to take her to Digha when I met her for an interview at her home. Puja, a *koti* in her early 20s was being repeatedly called by a client and she was half-heartedly rejecting the call as she was at work, work being this focus group. She was sitting, right next to me. After she had disconnected the call a third time, I turned to her and said it was perfectly fine with me if she received the call. She seemed hesitant, however. I reassured her and then she told me that the client was insisting on a video call. The moment Nitu heard the word "video"; her eyes darted from her phone to Puja's face. Basically, the client wanted to jerk off. I could feel the excitement in the

room and asked Puja to go ahead. The client called. Puja was at her professional best and sent her google pay details. Once the amount was credited, she started licking her lips and winking and the client immediately flashed his genitalia. Puja put on her headphones to gain a semblance of privacy from the *kotis* in the room. Magically, Ravi's death narratives now switched over to deathly sex narratives! She started flaunting about her sexual prowess and how nobody in the room had ever broken her record of being fucked by twenty-three men on a single day. Mita retorted saying that she believes in quality over quantity and has rejected many a man because of their unenviable size. Ravi retorted saying that she was so powerful that she could even take beer bottles. By now Puja was vigorously licking her lips and her client was reaching a crescendo. Meanwhile, Mita retorted to Ravi by recounting the death of a *koti*. This was a *koti* who only lived for fucking, so much so that fucking was her undoing. She died of cancer in the rectum. According to Mita, Ravi would also meet the same fate. Everybody was laughing. I was reminded of Ashok Mondal and how her family had accused her friends of initiating her into sodomy that was supposed to have led to her death. However, this time it was the *kotis* who owned their abjection and extracted laughter out of it.

Puja had just finished off her man. Nitu turned to her and asked her, "*Tor parikh ke ei ghore daak na? Sobai mile khai!* (Why don't you ask your lover to come over? We can all share him!)" Meanwhile, Ravi and Mita continued speaking about their sexual prowess punctuated by names of folks who had died of some disease in the rectum!

My experience on the field almost echoed what Donna M. Goldstein writes in the context of her ethnography in Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns. She found that life was extremely hard in these living quarters, comprised of mostly racialized folks but she heard laughter everywhere. So, did I. Not a day passed during my fieldwork when

stories of violence, abuse and poverty were not leavened by bountiful doses of humor about bodies, bodily fluids, genitalia, fucking and dying. This humor was not only a running commentary on the social and moral worlds in which my research interlocutors were embedded but to adapt Goldstein's words, it "offered an intriguingly subtle window onto the forces" that directed their lives (2). Humor can express what can at times be difficult or even impossible to communicate. Or else how could a solemn TDOR morph into a joyous occasion of dance, food and merrymaking without forgetting for once the relentlessness of death? Humor can expose both the cracks in the system as well as show how power can be challenged in subtle ways. How does one survive an environment saturated by violence? It is a given that various institutions of the state – from law, medicine, education to schools – are violent. It is a given that there are perils to sex work. A fuck could end up in murder. The family torture could become so unbearable that death could offer more dignity. In short, there is a matter of factness to the everyday nature of violence. Yet, this violence also enables a form of speech when speech itself fails. If there is nothing more to be said about the tragedy of not receiving care at the hospital, so much so that the cancer in the rectum reaches the terminal stage, the tragedy can be borne lightly because at least in life the person had fucked with abandon. She had lived her desires in the everyday. How could then the tragedy of death be allowed to overwhelm the glorious sex? Goldstein writes, "Humor is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination." (5) It is both oppositional as well as survivalist – that which resists the system as well as helps to endure it.

Goldstein mines literatures from the social sciences and anthropology to show that one set of thinkers theorize humor as an escape valve from social tensions and in doing so they frame humor as status quoist. There are other theorists like James Scott who draw on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and EP Thompson to argue that against the dominating

rituals of the elite, the subordinated use humor, gossip, and rumours as hidden forms of resistance that can be easily dismissed because they are not easily discernible. (Scott 1985) Goldstein issues an important rejoinder that humor could be weaponized by the dominant forces as well and hence, it can be both conservative and liberatory, depending on who is deploying it. (7) Either way, humor exposes the faultlines of power and can be a tool of dissent, even if fleeting and seemingly, inconsequential.

When the rumour circulated about Rumi's death, Rumi and Samrat's rivalry was as much a commentary on power struggles engendered by the paucity of resources as it was about refusing death any spectacular meaning. Here, death descended into the ordinary and generated laughter. On one hand, Rumi noted the rumour of her death and could brush it off as jealousy. But on another level, somebody who had gained some upward mobility could be reminded of the presence of others left behind through a sudden confrontation with the inevitable. I will theorize this as agonistic intimacy in the third chapter whereby relations of antagonism, resentment, agonisms do not disappear even as individuals work out modes of being with each other.

My intention in recounting these incidents is not so much to reflect on if these incidents were funny in the first instance as much as to give an ethnographic context to how and why such conversations were framed as jokes. For Goldstein, an ethnographic context is not simply the system within which actors become agents but also the power relations within which they become restricted (272). For instance, Goldstein recounts how a man who survived rat poison administered by his wife became an absurdist story in Rio de Janeiro's shantytown. The story evokes laughter when the context emerges that his wife's life so far has only been a cascade of disasters whereby more disasters are ushered in each time a path is taken to avoid one disaster, so much so that even an attempt at resistance by killing a philandering, abusive husband who brings nothing

more than stress fails and the husband survives to find out that he was poisoned! Irrespective of the outcome, however, these stories or conversations that circulate as jokes are also testament to the fact that women are not passive victims. They put up a good fight and when all fails, there is always laughter (273). Mita narrated a story of failed poisoning to me once during our many conversations. A *koti* would keep raising false alarms about wishing to die. One day her best friend who was also her neighbor, returned from work exhausted and got extremely irritated when the *koti* claimed yet again that she did not wish to live any longer. So, the friend simply asked her to mix some rat poison with jaggery and gulp it with water not knowing that the *koti* would follow her instructions. The poison was too bitter even after generous doses of jaggery and she started vomiting after swallowing a small portion. She called for help and the friend who had devised the plan for escape was also the friend who came rushing in with water.

There were other deaths, fantastical ones, that elicited laughter. Dead babies, dead husbands and dead fathers-in-law among other deaths. In an essay titled, *The Pregnant Hijra*, Vaibhav Saria demonstrates how the figure of the pregnant hijra keeps surfacing in the everyday, sometimes through multiple renditions of myths, sometimes, in vigorous seduction scenes where prospective lovers are challenged to impregnate the hijra and sometimes through the naïve curiosity of the onlooker if the hijra body can reproduce. Saria argues that hijras share a metonymic relationship with their local moral world and its aspirations for futurity and also their own desires for men in the community. Biological reproduction is not simply the complementarity of the man and the woman but involves a host of actors like the hijra who can bless the couple with fertility or curse them to be infertile. Such interactions draw from several myths that have been detailed in several ethnographic accounts (Saria 2015, Reddy 2005, Nanda

1999). Whatever be the iteration of these myths, the common refrain in all of these myths is that the hijra is blessed by a divine figure like the *khwaja* to become pregnant so that she can prove that she can become a mother and fulfil her role in the household like any other woman. However, once she becomes pregnant, her body starts getting incapacitated with the weight of the fetus. She was blessed to only become pregnant, not to give birth. When she cannot bear the pain anymore, she kills herself. It is this sacrifice of her life that imbues her with divine powers to bless the childless with progeny. Everyday lives, interactions, sexual exchanges are suffused with the power of such stories. The hijras can fuck with as many men as they want – sex that exceeds the social and moral diktats of the heteronormative world. However, the man still has to set up a family, marry a woman and reproduce his family line and the hijras in Saria's ethnography wistfully accept that reality as a way of the world. Saria writes:

With the invitation to participate in a carnal transaction that frees the body from the disciplines of the moral and the social, the hijra must remind the man/boy of the restraints and the risks he runs in renouncing the moral altogether. The hijra must also calibrate the relationship in such a way so as to push the young lad back into the world so that he can become the householder if he is not one already. Calibration refers to the etiquette through which risks and freedoms can be negotiated to sustain not only the social but also those expressions and experiences of the carnal that refuse to stick to the social amicably. The calibration or etiquette allows carnality that might potentially fracture the social to be absorbed while retaining its odd quality. (86)

Saria notes evocatively that this calibration that does not allow the carnal to overwhelm the moral is borne with humor. Laughter about the impossibilities of hijra motherhood and the virility of men make reality bearable in Saria's field site, Bhadrak, one of India's poorest districts. The laughter allows the hijra to inhabit a social where she is simultaneously peripheral and central, that is on the peripheries of the reproductive economy but also at the centre of the same economy by facilitating the man's transition

from the fucking fields of desire to the marital bedroom. My research interlocutors are primarily *kotis* and most of them do not work as hijras. Hence their calibrations of relationships with men are not so strictly tuned as to not allow the carnal to overwhelm the moral. Even as they do not have to necessarily shoulder or endure the burden of pushing the man back into the household, they do not really have the choice or the agency to restrict the man from wandering back into the fold of the household either. So, the logics of failed motherhood, the lightness of fucking suffuse *koti* lifeworlds as well.

On a winter afternoon in 2021, I was sitting in a circle with five *kotis* who lived in the same apartment building in the suburbs of north Kolkata. One *koti* had rented a one-bedroom apartment. When she found that the landlord and caretakers were hassle free and she had no trouble bringing in lovers, no trouble walking the neighborhoods in any kind of clothes, she started passing on the information to her friends. Soon more than half of the apartments in that building were rented by *kotis*. Some of them worked as sex workers, some as nurses in hospitals and some as beauticians. We were supposed to be having our usual focus group on memories, collectivization and friendships. It was a pleasant sunny day. As we were doing introductions, I noticed that one of them was being referred as “*mora bacchar ma* (the dead baby’s mother).” Deepika, in her late 30s, who works as a beautician, was wearing a loose-fitting nightie but even then, her belly was jutting out and I could not help laughing because she did look pregnant indeed. By then I had gotten used to dead babies as the cue for laughter. However, since this was my first meeting with Deepika, she did feel the urge to be serious and earnest with me and told me about her liver infection and high cholesterol but her friends, some of whom I had already met several times before, would have none of the medical woes. Simi, the middle-aged sex worker, held a big tub of lotion in her hand and started mock

complaining how she never had enough lotion to moisturize her dry skin because Deepika would finish off tub after tub every few weeks. None of her lovers brought any lube and Deepika always borrowed Simi's lotion. The joke was that Deepika was perennially pregnant with a dead baby because she never took a day off from fucking! I witnessed dead babies in many other contexts as well.

In the winter of 2020, by when the first wave of the COVID pandemic had passed and West Bengal had resumed regular train services, I attended the birth anniversary of Prantik (meaning marginal), a trans-*koti* led collective in Bongaon, a small city in southern Bengal, very close to the borders of Bangladesh. Bongaon is Sudeb's hometown. Just as she was trying to revive Asroy in Baruipur, she was trying to revive Prantik as well that had almost shut post Manas Bangla. During the pandemic, however, Sudeb and many of her friends had raised resources to supply emergency rations to elderly *kotis* in the region and so that brought a lot of attention to Prantik and so Sudeb wished to take this opportunity to revive Prantik. Earlier in 2019, I had conducted a focus group with members of Prantik and so they knew me. The anniversary event was being hosted in the backyard of Kajal's sprawling house. Kajal, one of the founding members of Prantik used to work as a peer educator has since, become a hijra. After the customary inaugural speeches where all the founding members of the group spoke, we removed the chairs and table to the side and the ground quickly became a stage for a series of performances, reminding me of the Baruipur TDOR meeting where we danced as well after solemn speeches. Suchi, another founding member was invited to do her rendition of Rana Rangini, a rendition of Kali vanquishing the demons. Suchi's performance had become legendary in *koti* circles, particularly because of the way she glared her large eyes and flicked her long tongue in rage during the performance. During an interview earlier, folks at Prantik had recounted to me how this performance



was a constant fixture in every Prantik get together. So, it was but obvious that everyone would hail her to perform again now that Prantik was being revived. Suchi was, however, trying to block off the past. Even as this was a joyous moment as their labor of love was getting a new lease of life, the old days were also about unpaid labors of peer educators, friends dying of AIDS, peer educators losing jobs with the shutting down of MB, communities disintegrating with friends travelling to different places for livelihood, some of which we witnessed in the last chapter. Suchi has since then, become a hijra as well like Kajal. She was hopeful about the renewal of Prantik but also deeply melancholic about its pasts and hence Rana Rangini became the placeholder of that past that she was trying to block. Yet the *kotis* were insistent. Hence, the dead baby was evoked. Suchi remarked coyly, “Don’t you all know I just had a miscarriage, and you are asking me to dance?” The *kotis* were quick to retort. “You keep slipping here and there but you are also quick to become pregnant again! So just dance!” Suchi finally relented and I was able to witness her famous hissing tongue. The dead baby allowed the *kotis* to not only inhabit their trauma but also draw laughter from it and it was the laughter and the lightness of dancing that brought friends together again who had drifted apart for livelihood reasons.

An elderly *koti* who has recently picked up the tricks of online sex work told me that she often uses labor pain as an excuse to avoid sex with men she does not like. She simply tucks a pillow into her tummy and starts gasping for breath and tells the man that the baby will be here anytime soon and goes offline. Dead babies, false labor pains and miscarriages are not only about the lightness of failed reproductive futurity, they are also moments of suspension, a pause to hold onto to the unbearable burdens of making life amidst ongoing loss, economic precarity and the risks of navigating desire with a non-normative body. Deepika and her friends lighten the medical apathy they

witness at the hospital while dealing with her liver ailment on her meagre income as a beautician with stories of relentless fucking. Suchi wants to use the miscarriage to avoid diving into her past but does not want the heaviness of her emotions to dampen the birthday spirits either. Her friends, however, use the same miscarriage, to force her to dance but even that insistence on her performance is made bearable with the lightness of humor. Finally, an elderly *koti* who does not like the look of her client wards off sex by resorting to the gendered role that she is denied.

There were other deaths as well that swirled along with dead babies that lightened tragic moments. I was sitting at the first film screening of the film club that Anindya had initiated for members and friends of Pratyay. The film was being screened at Bhanu Mama's one room apartment. Bhanu Mama's room has been a refuge for countless *kotis* over the years. Her room even served as Pratyay's shelter home in north Kolkata for a while. There were ten of us that day for the screening. A projector and screen had been hired. Some of us sat on the floor of the tiny room and the rest were huddled in chairs in the open space, outside the room. *Garam Hawa*, the classic Hindi film about communally torn India, post partition was being screened.<sup>46</sup> Amina, the daughter of the protagonist, is heartbroken because she cannot unite with her lover because he has left for Pakistan with his family. Finally, she gets over the tragedy of separation by allowing herself to be wooed by another man, Shamsad. They become physically intimate. Sonia, the hijra, exclaims, "*Kotira sob diye day!* (*Kotis* give their entire selves to the man!)" In that moment where Amina allowed herself to be carried away by her desires, she had become a *koti*. I wanted to ask Sonia if *kotis* should refuse sex, but the question had to be deferred because Amina's life was moving ahead. Amina and Shamsad were supposed to get married, but his family also leaves for Pakistan. At some point his

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<sup>46</sup> *Garam Hawa* (Scorching Winds) directed by M.S. Sathyu. 1973.

mother returns and takes Amina to buy a bridal trousseau. Amina is under the impression that this is for her wedding with Shamsad but she is in for a rude shock when the mother discloses that Shamsad's marriage has been fixed with a girl from a politically well-connected family in Pakistan. Amina cannot bear heartbreak twice over and slashes her wrists with a blade and dies.

The *kotis* sighed and two of them started flashing their wrists at me, full of blade marks. Even death would not take them like Mita's friend who did not die because the poison was too bitter. Two heartbreaks become tragedy but serialized heartbreaks? Either way the atmosphere was heavy with melancholia and so Bhanu Mama cut through it like only a veteran of heartbreaks can. She asked a young *koti*, Nimisha to make some tea for all of us. Sonia turned to Nimisha and asked, "Do you even have milk? Your breasts only secrete pus!" Nimisha immediately retorted, "What use do you have of breasts when they are so rock hard?" Sonia had recently gotten breast implants and would not lose a chance to flash her cleavage and thus Nimisha was trying to cut her to size. If Nimisha had to live with the tag of a failed mother who could not nurse her child, so would Sonia have to live with the tag of a fake woman! Everybody was laughing hard. Devika, a Pratyay employee, cut through the back and forth between Sonia and Nimisha and squeezed her padded bra and pointed out her situation was the best because she could take it off and put it back on at will.

Gayatri Reddy in her ethnography with hijras notes how they trouble the differentiation between intentional and innocent significations. While innocent significations remain invisible in the way they merge with what is the norm, intentional significations display the constructedness of norms through their refusal to blend in. Subcultural styles have established their non-normativity through the intentionality of the labors that go into refusing to fit in. Hijras, through their body language, hand movements, intentionally

refuse the gender binary but at the same time also labor towards conforming to gendered conventions, like medical interventions for a feminine body or elaborate sartorial statements to appear as normatively feminine. (2005, 132) Thus, their gendered embodiments are neither purely subversive nor imitations of the gender binary. The playful exchange between Sonia and Nimisha was also about the ideals of femininity. Elsewhere, I have written about how such rivalries often become extremely violent and potentially deadly whereby borders are drawn between fake hijras and original ones but then these wars are not just about gender but also about the intense economic precarity that lead hijras to compete for scarce resources. Hence, the more normatively feminine ones try to elbow out the rest (2019). Our movie night, however, was different. Here, even as Sonia could flaunt her newly acquired breasts, she could be reminded that those breasts were after all only implants! Ultimately, the pointlessness of such a debate and the constructedness of gender was forcefully driven home by Devika who reminded us that she could put on and off her breasts at will!

From infertile organs, we moved back to dead human beings soon. A white saree with a red border had been hung out to dry in the open space where we sat. Anindya was admiring the fabric when Devika pointed out that this was Bhanu Mama's saree that she must have worn at her father-in-law's funeral. We were all laughing. Devika turned to me and fished out her phone from the pocket of her tight jeans and showed me videos of her and other *kotis* dancing in an open field where they had a picnic last winter. They were all smearing each other with *sindoor* (vermillion), the mark of Hindu marriage. Devika exclaimed, "We are all perennial widows anyway but this was our picnic and so we just decided to feel and look married!" Marriage rituals could be performed not only at meetings memorializing the dead, but they could be performed anywhere. Life's telos could be mocked at with laughter – birth, marriage and of course, death.

There was no wishing away the subtext of death, barrenness and failures from any of our conversations but becoming Amina was not the only way ahead in life. Or even if it were, there was still a pause, a moment of suspension that was full of laughter.

### **Pro bono Sex Work and Other Tales in the Interim**

Raina and her peers at Samabhabona document the TDOR event through registration sheets and photographs fulfilling their roles as professional NGO workers who instrumentalize trans vulnerability to gain visibility and continued funding. Yet, these very same workers also plot ways to facilitate the formation of new collectives, put in their care to ensure that their communities can also seek pleasure amidst death and mourning. Hijras and transpersons do not fail to attend TDOR meetings but do not get overawed by the template of grief. They dance and ululate their way through public spaces in boisterous celebration but also imitate an immersion ceremony to signal how death and life, subjection and defiance do not exhaust each other. We know that accounts of death cannot prevent future deaths. More transgender deaths engender more memorial meetings that shore up trans vulnerability but a granular attention to these meetings might also open up innovative modalities of making life in the wake of death.

The RGML has not been held for the last two years. The sheer exhaustion of organizing has been insurmountable for folks at Pratyay, aggravated by the pandemic. If memory making comes in the way of everyday lifemaking, sometimes it must be suspended, which is to say that the past cannot overwhelm the presentness of life. Yet that is not to eschew the possibilities of a capacious sense of the past either. The RGML might happen again with all its cracks and fissures and the silent protests against it. For now, an exchange comes back to me from my field notes. An audience member asked me after the lecture in 2019 that he was surprised that no transwomen danced at the lecture.

The commonplace imaginary of the dancing hijra, the swish hips of Rituparno and many like her were disrupted by a cerebral lecture, the very same lecture that also alienated some on the organizing team. It is in this unruliness of life and its many hierarchies and our ceaseless attempts to undo them that the overwhelming arc of deathly violence recedes to the background, even if briefly. And then there is the laughter through the barren wombs, chests, dead babies, dead husbands and dead in-laws. If one can craft multiple renditions of one's own death and the deaths of many others like oneself, how long can death overwhelm us?

Let us go back to where we began, transgender rights activist Vyjayanti Vasantha Mogli's presentation at a conference. She had spoken about how trans deaths were instrumental in securing the decriminalization of Section 377. Towards the end of her presentation, she spoke about bail conditions imposed on transpersons. A common condition is that they must appear at the police station regularly and often these appearances become an excuse for the police to sexually harass them, like it had happened with Pandiamma. Mogli said that many transpersons who spoke with her told her that they treated these encounters as "pro bono sex work." They did not wish to feel like victims. They wished to feel charitable. How do we talk of freedom from violence without pausing to follow the various manoeuvrings that transpersons work around the state? Can there be anything more radical and revolutionary than the figure – who the state wishes to annihilate – that turns back and offers charity to the state? Even if this mode of framing one's encounter with the state remains only in the realm of thought, the thought demands our close attention. The atmosphere of violence is given but what thought, gestures and actions do in such an atmosphere and the social that such an atmosphere produce are not. So then, could this surprise, this moment of suspension

that troubles the violent temporality of trans negation be our starting point to think with  
and of trans life?

## Chapter 3: Life Goes On

### Prologue

When it finally dawned on Chhanda Dey that she did not have anywhere else to go, she dialled her former partner, Ratul who was now married. Ratul had a workshop for making plywood hoardings and signboards, located in a tiny room in a century old ramshackle building where families, offices, pharmacies and doctors' chambers jostle for space. The workshop was in central Kolkata, in one of the oldest neighborhoods of the city. It had become non-functional as Ratul moved to other more lucrative trades, but the room was still full of the materials used in the workshop. At least it was unoccupied and so he opened it up for Chhanda. One summer afternoon in 2013 or 2014, the *dhurani*— who once had owned a three storey house— sat on a hand pulled rickshaw with a small suitcase, comprised of some clothes, photographs of gods, goddesses, lovers, friends and family, and some identity documents and arrived at this new residence of hers from the guest house where she had lived for three months.<sup>47</sup> At the guest house, she was living with a friend, who was an employee at the guest house. This *dhurani* allowed Chhanda to stay in her room, but when she realized that Chhanda had no plans to leave, she had to firmly ask her to leave. Her one bedroom had just enough space for one person and her meagre salary was only enough for her. So Chhanda moved to Ratul's workshop. This tiny room, filled with saw dust and cardboard frames, was her home till her final visit to the hospital where she breathed her last in February 2022 at the age of 64. This is where I visited her regularly,

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<sup>47</sup> *Dhurani*, is a term used in parts of eastern India to refer to feminine individuals whose identifications could be transwomen, gender non-conforming, feminine persons who desire men or sometimes a mix of all these identities. It is not as widely used as *koti* that we have encountered in the earlier chapters but elderly *kotis* often refer to themselves as *dhurani*. I will be using both terms throughout the chapter because Chhanda used both for herself.



sometimes every day of the week, from March 2020 when the Indian state announced COVID induced lockdowns.

### **First Encounter and the Next**

*Chhanda is a trans activist who is one of the pioneers of the LGBTQ movement in Kolkata. In the past she has been known to lend out her previously owned home to community NGOs which were starting out, the first pride march also started from her rooms. However due to some very difficult years she is now homeless and ill. Recently Chhanda suffered a stroke which paralysed her left side. While she is regaining functionality gradually, she needs a fulltime attendant, regular physiotherapy, medication and food. All of these add up to an exorbitant amount which she cannot afford. She is also temporarily staying at an LGBT space in the city, but eventually will have to be moved to a rented space.<sup>48</sup>*

This appeal for funds was accompanied by a 3-minute video of Chhanda. With bright red lipstick, dark kajal lining her striking eyes, jet black hair with a dash of white at the front, she was no less than any tragedy queen of the Hindi film industry. She said, “*Amar bari theke koto rally beriyeche. Amar bari chilo destination. Kono NGO chilo na. Aaj ami shunyo, ami rikto. Ekta gudam ghore pore achi. Shei ghar e notice diye diyeche* (So many rallies started from my house. My home was everybody’s destination. Back in the day, there was no NGO. Today I am penniless, I have absolutely nothing. I live in a workshop, and I have been asked to leave that as well.)” This funding appeal issued in 2015 was my first encounter with Chhanda. Samabhabona, the collective we encountered in the previous chapter, had issued the fund appeal on her behalf. Three months later, Samabhabona issued an update to all those who had contributed for

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<sup>48</sup> This appeal for funds can be still found online but I am not citing it to protect her privacy. As the reader will note, I have also changed Chhanda’s name and have not given the exact location where she lived.

Chhanda's upkeep, donors not only from India but also abroad because the fundraiser had been circulated widely by many researchers who "study" trans movements in India:

*Thank you so much for your kindness and contributions. While we are far off from our ultimate goal of sustaining Chhanda for a considerable portion of her life, we will manage to clear some of our pending bills taken on credit and with loans from friends... If anyone wishes to speak to Chhanda via Skype, we would be happy to connect and you, and she would love to thank you in person...*

At a community gathering at Samabhabona's temporary shelter, I met Chhanda in person for the first time. After a volunteer from the organization informed her that I had donated to the fundraiser, she blessed me with long life and a handsome husband! Her health had improved. She was able to walk without assistance. Soon she returned to her tiny room. It did not add up. If she had been asked to leave the workshop space, how could she return? With her ailing health, could she live alone? There were rumours in *koti* gossip networks of a bitter fallout between Chhanda and Samabhabona. But like other rumours, this too receded from everyday conversations in a few weeks.

In March 2020, when the whole country was shut down after the first few cases of COVID were detected, I was calling all my research interlocutors to check in on them. I had met a *koti* who lived on the streets and worked as a sex worker and domestic worker. I was particularly worried about her. Her name is also Chhanda. I tried calling her but Chhanda, the *dhurani* picked the phone. It took me a while to realize that I had dialled the "wrong" Chhanda.

Sayan: How are you? Remember me?

Chhanda: Who?

Sayan: We met a few months back at Nitu's place and we had a long conversation about my research.

Chhanda: Yes. So many people have written research papers about me.

Sayan: How are you doing? Do you have enough rations?

Chhanda: I live alone. *Keu ashe na* (Nobody visits me)

That is when it struck me that this was not the Chhanda who owned the streets. I realized that I had somehow not saved her number but now I was back in touch with Chhanda, the *dhurani* after our brief encounter in 2015. Serendipity. She asked me to visit her in the evening.

The market was allowed to open for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening. I bought some biscuits and puffed rice and carried my mother's medical prescription. The police were patrolling the streets to strictly implement the shutdown. So, in case they stopped me, I could use the prescription as excuse. I was out to get medicines. Chhanda's home was a ten-minute walk from my place. I reached the building and saw a middle-aged man and woman sitting on the stairs with large cloth bags full of incense sticks and lighters. They were Robi and Tara, a married couple who were Chhanda's neighbors and lived in a small room next to a pharmacy that sold homeopathic medicines. They looked at me quizzically as I tried to manoeuvre my way up the narrow stairs. They asked me why I was there, and I told them I was visiting Chhanda. They immediately directed me to Chhanda's room and apologized to me for occupying most of the stairs. The police would not allow them to open their makeshift stall on the pavement where they sold incense sticks and so they now worked from the stairs. I passed the pharmacy and then a long corridor at the end of which was the little workshop where Chhanda lived. A drain ran parallel to the rooms along the corridor.

The waters stood still that muggy evening and there were flies hovering over the drain and a cat was scratching itself at Chhanda's door. Chhanda was sitting on a wooden bench. The only other furniture in the room was a single bed. There was a ledge where piles of plywood and saws and other equipments were kept. In the narrow space between the bench and the bed was a gas stove on which was kept a small pot. There were some pans lying on the bench. Portraits of Lakshmi and Kali were hanging above the bench. Chhanda smiled brightly and welcomed me and immediately started complaining about Robi and Tara and how they had encroached upon the stairs. She told me how difficult it was for her to go down the stairs especially since her left hand and leg were still partially immobile after the stroke. I gave her the snacks. She smiled and said, "*Aaj sokalei khub asahay lagchilo. Ki habe amar aar tumi aaj asle* (I was feeling very helpless today morning. How will I survive the lockdown? And now here you are!)" She gave me torn strip package and asked me to get her the sleeping pill mentioned on the package. I told her that no pharmacy would sell me sedatives without a prescription, but she asked me to go to a particular pharmacy and mention her name and they would give me the drug. Unconvinced, I left and started visiting the pharmacies. They did recognize her name but could not give me the drug nevertheless because the lockdown had affected medicine supplies as well. Finally, one store could give me five pills and I returned. Chhanda thanked me. I asked her if she had rations and she said she had. Then she said, "*Eta amar bonobaas. Ami eka. Amar kachhe majhe majhe esho kintu.* (This is my exile. I am completely alone. Do visit me from time to time.)" And that was the start of my many visits to her till her death.

Gradually, Chhanda became my research interlocutor. I told her that I was interested in questions of memory. She would launch into long reminiscences about her past. Chhanda belongs to the *bene* caste, traditionally one of the wealthiest business classes

of Bengal, who mostly dealt trade in gold and silver ornaments. Chhanda, was the youngest of three siblings. She had two elder sisters. Like in most patriarchal upper and middle caste families, the sisters were married off with great pomp and show and were also simultaneously disinherited from the family property. Chhanda was supposed to be the “son” who would inherit it all even though her father knew there was something off about his only “son”. Chhanda used to work at a well-paid insurance company in her 20s and would often emulate Hindi film industry stars and dress flamboyantly. Once she wore a white shirt, specially tailored skin-tight white pants that enhanced her curves and white shoes to work. Some colleague commented, “What kind of business suit is this?” Chhanda replied, “Next time I will wear my birthday suit!” Eventually she resigned after working for a very brief period. She would not tolerate any taunts about her sartorial inclinations or her gait. After her father’s death, the flamboyance became bolder. Chhanda spent the family property she inherited (gold and several bank accounts) on multiple lovers, monthly vacations with them, lavish gifts for them as well as community gatherings, weddings between her *dhurani* friends and their lovers, and parties for both Hindu and Muslim festivities depending on the faith the lover professed. Her generational wealth and how she spent it in the community have now reached a mythic realm. I spent many an evening listening to these stories from her and her friends and with each rendition, the grandeur of the parties and the various gatherings increases. However, the culmination would always be the same – that Chhanda has ended up destitute with no savings, no home of her own, totally dependent on the mercy of others and most importantly, an insistence that the community owes her for all that she has done for it. Over months, I realized there was indeed a wide network of transgender activists, a couple of transgender NGOs and some queer and transgender academics, including myself that were helping her with sustenance. And even the neighbors – Robi

and Tara, who she abused, would often send her hot meals and medicines. She would purchase groceries from many a shopkeeper in the neighborhood on credit; many of them knew that their dues would never be recovered but continued to transact with her. She was quick to adopt me as her *koti* daughter and started giving me life lessons on how to deal with heartbreak and finance. I was completely taken over by her charms.

Even as she referred to her living situation as *bonobaas* (exile) Chhanda was hustling to live a life on her own terms. There was sickness, loneliness, anger, bitterness and perhaps that were the most obvious observations to be gleaned from the life histories of an ageing *dhurani* living alone in a squalid room beside a flowing drain, but there were also many other layers that became visible with closer attention: somewhat like that fictitious notice she mentioned in the 2015 video about being evicted or the neighbors, friends and organizations that cared for her and the former lover who had no desire to evict her. The temporality of a fundraiser needs a particular framing to convert liberal guilt into life sustaining resources, but an ethnographer could perhaps strive to provide a more complex account of how life is made alongside deprivation. Here, I am drawn to anthropologist Bhriyupati Singh's theorization of power as not a stabilizing force. He writes,

...power is an expression of life, composed of waxing and waning intensities. Life force may diminish by degrees, in unpredictable ways, well before death. Or it may regenerate in a shifting field of forces. (2015, 220)

Singh writes about intensities as the “ebb and flow of life even when, *ceteris paribus*, things seem to remain constant....in this sense intensities make every day, every moment diurnal. (282)” Terms like empowerment and vulnerability cannot wholly capture the complexity of Chhanda's life. In keeping with the conception of power as a field of waxing and waning forces, the image of Chhanda, I am trying to draw here is

not necessarily about her subalternity, but composed of variations of helplessness, abandonment, lack as well as plenitude and joy through waxing and waning intensities. To follow such intensities demands a particular attentiveness to life, not only a view from afar but also a nearer view. At stake here, however, is not simple one *dhurani's* life.

While on one level I narrate how Chhanda negotiated with multiple institutions to demand her right to daily sustenance and how a community of care emerged around her that helped her craft a life of dignity, on a deeper level, this chapter is concerned with how care becomes sustainable in the long run. In my first chapter on HIV, I ended with Hil Malatino and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's notions of care webs as non-hierarchical modes of receiving and giving care in which, the receiver and giver of care do not get trapped in gratitude. These care webs are woven against disaffections from various institutions like the family, law and medical establishments that refuse care. Even though caste and class relations determined who performed what modes of care in that chapter, the chapter was not concerned with the caste relations amongst the *kotis* themselves who looked after each other. Yet, my research shows that caste plays an important role in how care is received, given and sometimes even denied even amongst friends. Additionally, even though Malatino writes that care webs can sometimes get frayed with trauma induced by the normative institutions of the state, he does not give us a roadmap of what it takes to restitch those webs.

Before I expand on this limitation in Malatino's theorization of trans care, let us go back to what he writes about the care webs. Malatino writes that when care webs get torn, aftercare is needed to stitch it back. Aftercare is used in various contexts that could range from a scene of intense play in BDSM, medical transition or in the aftermath of

a traumatic event. In other words, the intensification of vulnerability requires caring. Malatino argues:

It (*aftercare*) is what needs to be provided in order to help a subject heal in the wake of massive upheaval and transformation, and it is what facilitates and supports emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of both bodymind and the world it encounters. (3, 2020) (content within parenthesis mine)

However, it is important to underline that aftercare in this sense cannot have a telos. Neither does what Malatino calls a “massive upheaval” have an endpoint. Lauren Berlant distinguishes an event from an environment whereby an event is an intensification of a particular condition and environment operates as a structural repetition of a scene and spatial practices in a most ordinary manner without any dramatic attachments. (2007, 760) Transphobia is not a spectacular event but the daily environment in which trans people make life. The repetitiveness of such violence requires the urgency of aftercare to not only make lives liveable but also for lives to flourish and thrive. It is precisely the resiliency of care webs that allows survival and even flourishing. This resiliency and the enduring capacities of the webs depends on constant reweaving of torn threads. This reweaving is both hard labor but labor that also engenders joy and exhilaration and the active imagining of other worlds. This is not to undermine negative feelings, affects that arise from caregiving. There is indeed exhaustion, resentment and even bitterness. Yet, neither these feelings nor the care work is individualized. When transpersons care for each other or marginalized persons weave care webs, there are deep resonances with the trauma and vulnerability of the recipients, which is to say that the boundedness of the caregiving subject and care receiving subjects are radically challenged. (Malatino, 2020, 3-6) I argue, however, that such a theorization of aftercare imagines trans as a unitary category, as an always already marginalized and hence resilient subject. Hence trauma and violence are always



external conditions that tear apart care webs which are then supposed to be rewoven with aftercare by transpersons themselves. Yet, be it the structures of racialization in the North American context or caste in South Asia, a sense of community can also come apart through other structures of oppression, not limited to gender. My chapters have repeatedly show how caste produces hierarchies that deidealize any idea of community as always already whole. In this chapter, I will show how the community of care that wove around Chhanda was also informed by caste and that determined power relations amongst us and how we negotiated care. Finally, this chapter will also show that the durational aspect of care is sustained by reckoning with all the negative feelings that care evokes, feelings that are not always generated by outside forces as Malatino's conception of aftercare seems to suggest. Sometimes negative feelings are also evoked by those who we care for.

The rest of the chapter is divided into two sections – the first is about Chhanda's negotiations with the state, with non-profits and academics like me that allowed her to build daily infrastructures of care. It is important to remember here that the COVID 19 pandemic forms the backdrop of this chapter. There have been several news reports as well as some scholarly publications on the heightened precarities faced by trans and queer communities in India during the COVID induced shutdown<sup>49</sup>. As urgent as these studies are, my aim here is different. What else is there to be said outside of the immediacy of a certain crisis and all the devastation it produces? How is life still lived?

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<sup>49</sup> Here is only a representative list of coverage of how trans people were affected by the pandemic. This list is not complete as there were many more similar articles: <https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/the-COVID-19-pandemic-has-had-a-debilitating-effect-on-transgender-people>, <https://theconversation.com/during-COVID-19-trans-people-in-india-came-together-to-keep-each-other-alive-173297>, <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/how-the-pandemic-has-exacerbated-troubles-for-the-trans-community-6548957/>, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/panorama/how-the-COVID-19-pandemic-has-affected-trans-people-996092.html>. For a survey of academic work on the same issue, also see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSZc1aJD3vM> and *COVID Assemblages: Queer and Feminist Ethnographies from South Asia*, edited by Niharika Banerjea, Paul Boyce and Rohit K. Dasgupta (2022).

Bhri Gupta Singh argues that because the journalist and anthropologist operate on different temporalities, their approach to research is obviously different. A journalist's timeline is much more orientated by the immediacy of an event, but an anthropologist is afforded the slowness of research, she can look around and stray beyond what stares at one in the face. Singh asks,

“What might it mean to remain true to a world without a fixed point of truth? To put the question differently, to which statements about a world do we attach greater value, if we do not take what people say simply at face value? How do people talk about their world (19, 2015)?”

In the first section, I offer a brief map of the tensions between the Indian state's neoliberal policies and the welfare that it was forced to impart during the COVID induced lockdowns. Such a backdrop is necessary to understand Chhanda's negotiations with the state during the pandemic. I argue that Chhanda's negotiations with various institutions of the state were on the subjunctive register. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, subjunctive relates to or constitutes 'a verb form or set of verb forms that represents a denoted act or state not as fact but as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally (as with doubt or desire).' In other words, subjunctive signals improvisatory, provisional, contingent modes of engaging with the world. I use it as a theoretical framework to make sense of actions and gestures that cannot refuse structural oppression but can at the same time construct and imagine worlds that disrupt these very structures and sometimes even engender an otherwise. I offer an elaboration of this framing in that section with vignettes from fieldwork to illustrate the framing.

In the section following that, I argue that the community of care that wove around Chhanda was based on agonistic intimacies. Singh offers the concept agonistic intimacy as that space of ambivalence that is neither entirely composed of hostilities, animosity and contest nor is it all about trust, community and continuous affirmation. In other

words, agonistics coexists with intimacies (2011). Agonisms allowed care to be sustainable even as a world riven by a pandemic was threatening to fray apart. I will elaborate this further in the second section and argue that agonistic intimacies helped restitch torn care webs, tears that were generated not simply by external apathetic institutions of the state but also by caste and class relations in *koti* communities. Together, both these sections will ultimately reflect what Chhanda taught me. She claimed her rights and desires without entrapments of gratitude and indebtedness teaching me that life is potentially inexhaustible and our reading of what constitutes a good life, precarity and vulnerability can never entirely encompass the surprises that life crafts for us. (Biehl, 2007, 348).

### **Subjunctive**

In the context of how neoliberalism transformed the political economy of India, Aradhana Sharma writes,

... transnational neoliberal ideologies of development articulate and jostle with histories of state and subject formation and of popular movements in India, producing a spatially uneven and ambiguous terrain of changes not easily captured by the rubric of dewelfarized states, depoliticized existence, and disciplined, consuming, individuated civic actors. (2008, pp. xvii-xviii)

Even as the Indian state withdraws itself from its welfare responsibilities, working class people have also fiercely contested this neoliberal orthodoxy through consistent grassroots led movements and have forced the state to commit back to some of its welfare roles. In his ethnography with Manavi Hakk Abhiyan, an NGO that works on a host of issues from violence against Dalits to their land rights in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, Suryakant Waghmore troubles the common perception that neoliberal governmentality in the form of NGOs depoliticizes structural issues that

impact the public. In the case of Dalit movements, Waghmore observes that Dalit politics continues to be autonomous (2012). Funded work through NGOs often lead to unpredictable consequences in the form of collective and aggressive mobilizations against structural oppression. In the case of LGBT NGOs too, even as scholars like Naisargi Dave (2012) and Srila Roy (2015) point out that that funded politics have solidified identity categories and informal support spaces have been subsumed by hierarchical organizations with rigid mandates about what agendas should queer groups pursue, the same NGOs have also spurred activism against discriminatory laws like the Transgender Persons' (Protection of Rights Act) 2019 that have brought these laws closer to the visions of trans and queer communities. Thus, the trajectory of neoliberalism in India, as in many parts of the global south, has been a contentious one.

India's response to the COVID pandemic is an ideal example of the contested terrains of neoliberalism and its impact on the transgender communities. On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a three-week complete nation-wide lockdown that would exempt only essential services to purportedly arrest the spread of the virus. However, the lockdown kept getting extended. As the state manifested itself through ruthless policing of public spaces in the name of care towards its citizens, migrant workers, mostly from the subordinate castes, who lived on daily wages were stranded in the cities without jobs and no money to pay for food and rent.<sup>50</sup> Working class transgender people and hijras mostly work as sex workers, beg at traffic signals and trains (*challa*) and bless new-borns and the newly married (*badhai*). These people were suddenly without work, now that public transport was totally shut down and no public gatherings were allowed. Soon non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started

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<sup>50</sup> For more on India's brutal lockdown and the suffering of migrant workers, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/i-just-want-to-go-home-the-desperate-millions-hit-by-modis-brutal-lockdown>

diverting their regular budgets towards providing immediate emergency rations to transgender communities. Various students' groups and non-funded collectives organized fundraisers to procure rations to distribute among these communities.<sup>51</sup> This did not mean that the transgender movements were getting depoliticized. On the contrary, these same groups were also fiercely vigilant so that the state did not cede its welfare responsibilities. They demanded that the state assist trans communities with cash assistance.

As a result of these demands, The National Institute of Social Defense (NISD), an autonomous body that works under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, announced monetary assistance for transgender people. The monetary assistance, however, was a meagre one-time payment of fifteen hundred rupees (approximately twenty dollars) and the process of receiving the money was cumbersome. A Google form had to be filled in either English or Hindi with copies of an individual's Aadhaar card— a 12-digit unique identification number based on biometric and demographic data— and one's bank details.<sup>52</sup> Activists and NGO workers had to put in the unpaid labour of helping transgender individuals fill in these forms as most individuals do not use English and Hindi as their language of communication. Many community persons pointed out that most working-class transgender persons neither have bank accounts nor the Aadhaar card. Additionally, a lot of transgender activists expressed alarm that they were being asked to submit photo identity cards to receive cash assistance. In personal communication with several activists, they expressed that they would not submit any identity documents to the state.

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<sup>51</sup> To get a sense of how fundraisers became a vital mode of organizing emergency resources for trans communities across India, see this list of fundraisers: <https://www.pinklistindia.com/queerelief>

<sup>52</sup> Aadhaar Card is accorded to Indian citizens, non-resident Indian passport holders and resident foreign national who have spent more than 182 days in the year preceding the application for Aadhaar. This number is now being made mandatory to receive various welfare benefits.

This was because of the massive protests across the country against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2019 and early 2020.<sup>53</sup> Two thousand transgender individuals were excluded from the NRC when it was announced in the state of Assam creating outrage across the country and so there was a lot of justifiable distrust against the government's welfare initiative being tied to Aadhaar and bank details.<sup>54</sup> Finally, the NISD issued two separate forms – one for those with bank accounts where the money would be directly transferred and one for those without bank accounts and identity documents who would receive the amount through the district collector's office. Thus, the activists and NGOs were not only performing individualized labours of bringing emergency sustenance to transgender communities, but they were also exerting pressure on the neoliberal, right-wing state to offer cash assistance to transgender individuals without documents. This meant, however, that transgender individuals not within the circuits of NGOs did not know about these various measures of relief and were left high and dry exemplified by the fact that in the final count, only seven thousand transgender individuals availed the one-time state assistance.<sup>55</sup>

In the previous paragraphs, I have briefly mapped the contestations of transgender activist negotiations with a state that is both neoliberal as well as welfarist. The cash assistance that the state offered was minimal, but it was striking to note that the same

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<sup>53</sup> The CAA is a faith-based law that is supposed to give Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, namely, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians. The law is Islamophobic because it includes all religions for expedited citizenship in India except Muslims from these countries. The Islamophobia of this law has to be read in conjunction with the NRC that will require Indians to show legacy documents to prove their citizenship.

<sup>54</sup> For more on how the NRC impacts transgender individuals, see <https://thewire.in/rights/nrc-exclusions-assam-transgender>

<sup>55</sup> For details on how many transgender individuals were able to access the paltry assistance from NISD see <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/transgenders-from-tamil-nadu-wb-sought-most-aid-during-lockdown/articleshow/80611704.cms> and for a state wide break of the population of transgender individuals as per the last census conducted in 2011, see <https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php>. The NISD assistance was given during the second wave of the pandemic in 2021 as well.

state that wanted to tie citizenship to legacy papers was forced to offer assistance to its most marginalized without the demand for any identity documents. This is how the role of LGBT NGOs becomes complex as Waghmore suggests. However, there were also other daily contestations during the pandemic, not so easily discernible. Let us return to our protagonist, Chhanda. With her organizational connections, Chhanda did receive the cash assistance. However, with markets mostly shut, how would cash assistance alone help? There had to be food on the plate and also one's medicines.

One evening I found Chhanda in a sour mood. Earlier that day, I had seen her photo on social media on a transgender activist's page, who is also a founding member of one of Bengal's many transgender led NGOs. Chhanda's image was part of a gallery comprised of many similar images of transgender persons receiving rations from the activist and her colleagues<sup>56</sup>. Most NGOs and student led groups that distributed rations posted images and videos of individuals receiving rations. The videos follow the same template where the recipient is seen thanking the NGO and individual activists for supplying rations. These images and videos served several purposes. It was evidence for donors that their funds were being utilized for the purposes for which they were issued. Most importantly, it was a further call to action so that potential donors would release funds immediately as needs always surpass supply. These images and videos also helped NGOs consolidate their position within communities to prove that they were active even during a pandemic.

I asked Chhanda why she looked disgruntled. Her eyes glared; she told me that she was taking her afternoon nap and the activist rudely woke her up by knocking hard on her door. Overcoming my initial surprise that what bothered her was not consent violation

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<sup>56</sup> The image is still on the NGO founder's Facebook page but like with the fundraiser earlier, I am not sharing the link to protect Chhanda's confidentiality.

but the interruption of sleep, I tried to interject saying at least she had gotten her rations delivered. This time Chhanda shouted at me saying, “Do you even know what kind of rice she has given me? *Mota chaaler bhaat! Amar gas sesh hoye jabe!* (The rice is so coarse that my gas will end just trying to cook it!)” Chhanda told me that she would give away the rice to anyone who needed it but would not use it herself. After probing a bit, I found out that another rival NGO which was also distributing rations had brought her rice a few days back. That rice was a finer grain. Additionally, through her *dhurani* friendship networks, Chhanda had ensured that the information that the activist was distributing coarse grain would travel far and wide. A few days later, the activist made another trip to Chhanda, this time with some monetary support. The gossip networks had threatened to tarnish the NGO’s reputation and so the damage had to be undone. Chhanda’s anger immediately disappeared, and the thoughtless activist who had brought her rice that was not cookable now morphed into her large-hearted younger sister who made the community proud.

Three weeks had passed since this interaction, and I could not visit Chhanda due to a health emergency. I had even ended up missing her call and could not call back. Finally, when I went to meet her, I was accosted by Tara, who warned me that Chhanda was extremely angry with me and had called me a thief. I had taken her photo and splashed it everywhere and raised money for her daily maintenance but had not bothered to share those funds with her. Tara’s animated voice and gesticulating hands in conveying Chhanda’s allegations was so dramatic that I could not stop laughing. She got annoyed with me and asked me to verify with Chhanda herself. I assured her that I believed her. Tara fixed her gaze on me and asked, “*Ki go koto taka tulle?*” (Tell me how much you finally raised?). I had to explain to her that I am not part of any NGO and that I work



as an academic. Whatever support I give to Chhanda comes from my stipend. She did not seem convinced, and it was my turn to be annoyed.

I went to Chhanda's room. The moment she saw me, her face lit up with a smile. I explained to her why I could not visit her the past few weeks. She listened to me and then broke into tears about how lonely she feels and that she cherishes my company but also reminded me that she had no money left and so she had called me. After a while I asked her about her allegations. She just smiled and said, "*Dhurani ektu bila debe na?* (Shouldn't the *dhurani* create some drama?) You were not coming, so I got was angry.<sup>57</sup>" In the next few days, I heard from a few other *koti* friends as well that Chhanda had called them and complained about me. My relationship with Chhanda deepened with the passage of time and through many more interactions full of *bila*. However, I have kept going back to her allegations. It took me a while to learn the lesson that Chhanda had taught me.

My initial feeling was anger that Chhanda had not differentiated between the transnationally funded NGO that distributed rations and used an elderly *dhurani*'s photograph as evidence of their advocacy outreach and a *koti* brahmin PhD student at a US university whose research is located in the same communities. However, Chhanda taught me that there was no pious distance I could claim from my complicity in the queer-neoliberal nexus. In an essay entitled, *Disavowed Legacies and Honorable Thievery*, the authors Desai, Bouchard and Detournay remind us that knowledge production is always shaped by unequal relations of power (2010). Spivak had of course famously noted the postcolonial scholar's complicity in muting the other (1988). Such an acknowledgement is, however, not meant to argue that epistemic violence can be

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<sup>57</sup> *Bila* is an *ulti* word signifying the creation of a dramatic, troublesome situation.

avoided somehow but a careful consideration of complicity denaturalizes the other as always already knowable and troubles the assumption that the writings of academics are transparent mediums that represent the voice of the oppressed. Desai, Bouchard and Detournay draw on Helen Hoy's work on Native/non-Native collaboration to argue that such collaborations can only be framed as stealing and admission of thievery makes it honorable. Here honor does not mean some exalted status of moral superiority but simply how one's work is honest and principled. Admission of thievery signals the hierarchies of power between research interlocutors and researchers. They write, "... the concept of thievery might allow us to address other issues not encompassed by the recognition of epistemic violence— most importantly, the specific transactional elements involved in particular collaborative projects of knowledge production, and the quite literal economy in which these projects are situated." (2010, 60-61) So for example, I could not simply wish away the power difference between me and Chhanda by offering to write a collaborative essay with her. The essay would bring me more academic capital in terms of recognition. Given the university's fetishistic need to incorporate difference through case studies from elsewhere geographies, such an essay would meet its institutional metrics but how would it serve Chhanda? It is in the incommensurability of our difference that the tension of research emerged where our power dynamics animated our exchange and the least, I can do is to be transparent about such tensions and in that process admit Chhanda's next move could never be predicted in advance. I can only be transparent about the fact that my writing cannot guarantee full transparency to her lifeworld.

The acknowledgment of my complicity in producing scholarship based on her life demands a reorientation of how I read Chhanda's negotiation with activists, NGOs and academics, a shifting of gaze that neither fetishizes agency nor offers a grim

ethnography of precarity. The fact that Chhanda, like many other transpeople, is listed as a recipient of medicines and essential supplies with two NGOs, a detail I discovered eventually. She also receives assistance from various government institutions that implicates her in the wider networks of queer rights, transnational funding and the imaginaries of a liberal nation state. However, through her everyday *bila*, Chhanda creates a different modality of engaging institutions which can sometimes have unexpected consequences. Activists can be hauled up for providing coarse grains and forced to offer compensation and academics can be reminded about their parasitic relationship with communities.

Chhanda's *bila* was an incisive critique of the power differentials between herself and the academic/NGO. However, this critique does not lead to shutting the doors to the institutions that extract value from her. Chhanda cannot refuse NGOs from taking her photos exposing her dependence on the latter. However, she can try to hold onto her sense of self-respect by expressing anger at her sleep being interrupted. Chhanda does not refuse to be written about by researchers like me because of the economy of exchange we are implicated in, but she can also rudely remind us of how she is of value to us. Thus, Chhanda's *bila* is a strategic move that strives to ensure her daily sustenance with her sense of dignity intact. These strategies are on the subjunctive register because of their improvisatory nature and the fact that their consequences remain open-ended.

Subjunctive as a register of inhabiting various institutions is not a novel theorization. Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar, Jigna Desai and historian, Kevin Murphy invoke the subjunctive in the context of what it means to inhabit the American university which deploys equity and diversity as tokenistic tools of representation even as it continually defunds gender, women and sexuality studies and various critical ethnic studies

programmes (2018). One labors hard to nurture such programmes that are tasked with the onerous responsibility of undoing the whiteness of the university through experiential and decolonial epistemologies but the crafting of such spaces within the university also means that such spaces will be perennially dogged by the uncertainty of being defunded and shut down. So, for Desai and Murphy, the subjunctive “expresses an uncertain wish, suggestion, proposal, demand, or insistence.” (2018, 25) Inhabiting the university could involve a host of strategies. Sometimes it involves displaying professional productivity as an emergency strategy to stop collapse, sometimes it involves grinding care labour to nurture spaces of resistance that speaks back to the institution. At other times it could involve gallows humour and not taking one’s labors too seriously because the institution is still trying to sink what one is trying to keep afloat.

We also find the deployment of the subjunctive in anthropologist Vaibhav Saria’s decade long ethnography with hijras in east India. In a 2015 essay, Saria writes that as one enters a hijra household, she must become a *chela* (disciple) to a guru and the guru conducts elaborate rituals to formally induct her into the household. An important part of this ritual is the name that she accords her *chela*. The *chela* gives up her birth name and her new name signifies her new identity and belonging to the hijra household. However, this is by no means the only name that the hijra will inhabit. She might move to another hijra household for a wide range of reasons, from conflicts with the guru to failure to adhere to familial codes. With the new guru in the new household, she acquires a new name. Saria theorizes the change of names as ritualized games that hijras play, rituals signifying all the structures that are in place to formalize the name change and games signifying the register of the subjunctive. They write that the change of name “has an ‘as-if’ character in that it reveals a particular modality – that of playfulness as

the mode in which one engages one's past." (2015, 4) The new names construct an 'as-if' self that gives the impression that it can completely detach from the past self. However, this playful register of reading time often breaks against the actuality of circumstances. The previous name continues to haunt the hijra as the name is also a dense site of significations – the prestige of a particular guru and her household; the *chela's* loyalty towards her and even the very authenticity of her hijra identity. Often, the hijra must return to the previous household and participate in another set of rituals to atone for her abandonment before she can move ahead. The hijra's name also meets its hardest opponent in the labyrinthine state machinery of law and bureaucracy that issue identity documents to make the hijra body commensurable with its technologies of surveillance. The hijra's birth name on identity documents do not match up to her new name and her ever-changing appearance (depending on the hijra's sartorial preferences at a particular time, if she is undergoing surgical transition or taking hormone pills among a host of factors). Through its insistence on alignment between the legal name and the body as an eligibility criterion for rights and welfare, the state finds ways to reinscribe its biological ideas of gender onto the hijra body, which tries to leave such assignments behind. Hence, the subjunctive register is always full of uncertainty even as it also provides tools to imagine different futures while enduring one's present reality.

To return to the dictionary meaning of subjunctive as contingent and improvisatory, it is also important to focus on the words within the parenthesis – "doubt or desire." This is what threads together the specific contexts that Saria and, Desai and Murphy are writing about, be it the subjunctive mood while inhabiting the university or operating life on the subjunctive register. Desire is central here, not only in terms of the desires of hijras who stubbornly wish to move ahead or the academics who want to build

freedom worlds in a severely compromised institution, but also desire in terms of writing itself. The desire to write about doubt, about open-endedness, that the story is yet to be completed or that one closure leads to other ruptures that offer new openings.

Saidiya Hartman famously writes in *Venus in Two Acts*,

By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.

Hartman acknowledges the impossibility of recuperating the figure of the Black girl signified only through objectifying violence but also her desire for such a recuperation that creates a moment of suspension, a pause before the figure is lost in the ledgers of history. Though there is no historical analogy to be found between the project of Black Feminist writing of life and a *koti* ethnographer's desire for a complex account of an elderly's *koti*'s life, it is important to both acknowledge the impossibility of the good life in the face of compounding troubles and to hold onto the impossible struggles of a *koti* imagining wildly that very good life. In that sense, subjunctive is about duration. It temporalizes the gap between the two impossibilities. How else could an economically impoverished elderly transperson demand good quality rice— during a pandemic when getting even the most basic necessities was an uphill task given how the whole economy had been shut down— from the non-profit if she did not wildly desire the good life? Yet her wily negotiations to get what she wanted did not always work as we will soon see and that is why the risk of failure and the uncertainty held in the meaning of the word “subjunctive” is important here as much as the ceaseless desire to break such contingencies.

Chhanda's subjunctive gestures are also somewhat akin to Saria's eloquent theorization of *haq* in the context of *challa* that hijras ask for on trains (Saria, 2019). A secular translation of *challa* would be begging. But Saria demonstrates, *challa* is imbued with a lot of affective and emotional labour and has religious connotations that the word "begging" cannot encompass. Gurus teach *chelas* to ask for *challa* for which the *chela* is bound in gratitude to the guru. The society reads the hijra as an ascetic figure because she has transcended the worldliness of the householder through castration and hence can demand her right, that is her *haq* from passengers on the train. Just as *challa* does not exactly translate as begging, *haq* too is not simply state based recognition. It emerges from the social in which one is implicated. The ascetism of the hijra accords her the *haq* of *challa*. While the complex religiosity of such practises is beyond the scope of this chapter, what is important in this regard is how hijras talk about their helplessness, lament about their fate, fully cognisant of all the ridicule and jibes that are hurled at them. Yet, they cannot think of giving up *challa* because it is their right and obversely, it is the responsibility of the larger society to pay them. To give up on their *haq* is to give up on their very being. Similarly, it is Chhanda's *haq* that she receives her daily sustenance. Hence one affect that she cannot embody is gratitude. This is precisely why even as her photo becomes a part of the gallery of images and videos thanking the non-profits for rations, Chhanda can subvert that narrative of supplication. She troubles the distinction between charitable services and rights by demanding a better quality of rice. Her *haq* emerges from her standing within the community of *dhuranis* and *kotis* as an elderly person who had once been there for the community and continues to have a wide network of friendships.

During the occasion of *Ram Navami*, celebrated across north India as the birth anniversary of Ram, a wealthy businessman wanted to do some good and be blessed by

hijras. Now for a lot of cisgender communities, distinctions between hijras, trans and *kotis* do not matter. Any feminine person is a hijra and therefore can offer blessings. So, this man through some mutual contacts got in touch with Anindya Hajra of Pratyay Gender Trust, about whom I wrote in chapter 2 and informed her about his benevolent plan. Anindya thought that irrespective of the man's faulty interpellations, this charity would mean food on the plates of many *kotis* during a pandemic and so a hundred packets were made, each packet, comprised of rice, some lentils and cooking oil. Anindya had not visited Chhanda before and so I accompanied her with a packet. Chhanda smiled and thanked her profusely. In fact, so profuse was the appreciation that we were embarrassed. Chhanda said, "Sayan came to me as god's messenger when I was feeling so hopeless as the lockdown was announced and today god has sent another messenger!" After a while we left because Anindya had to meet several other *kotis* to distribute the packets. A day later, I was visiting Chhanda. She was craving a spicy egg curry with roti. So, I went to the neighboring market to get her food. A muscular man was kneading the dough. Chhanda had told me to mention her name to him as that would get me a discount on the food. The moment I mentioned her name, the man smiled and told me flirtatiously that he would give me the discount only if I ate the food in front of him. For Chhanda's discount, she would have to come to claim it herself. I was marvelling at Chhanda's erotic reach. As I was coming back to Chhanda with her dinner, Tara accosted me. Tara complained, "Is Chhanda only hungry? Why doesn't your NGO think about us?" By now, I had realized try as I might, there was no way I could avoid the interpellation of being the NGO *koti*. Chhanda had firmly established the NGO narrative about me. So, I did not protest anymore. Indeed, Tara and Robi were struggling as their sales had dropped drastically. Moreover, their younger son— the other earning member in the family— could not visit because he was stranded in



another city. The elder son had married and lived elsewhere. I promised Tara that I would try to connect her with some organization. She was slightly placated and then turned to her favorite topic of conversation, Chhanda, “Just two nights back, I gave her dinner. I made eggs and gave her some and she happily ate it and today she refuses to share her rations with us. She sells them off to the homeless! *Amader dike takay na! Ki beiman!* (She doesn’t even consider us. Ungrateful!)” I was as usual surprised! I went to Chhanda’s room. I asked her about the quality of the food grains delivered this time. She said she had exchanged them for better quality grains! I did not want to ask her about who would accept low quality rice and give better quality rice in return! So, I just laughed, and she laughed as well but she also asked me to give her Anindya’s contact number so that she could thank her for all her help. Like in the previous chapter, laughter allowed us to acknowledge the hopelessness of the situation without getting overawed by it. The businessman needed blessings, but blessings must come cheap and hijras should be fine with blessing him in exchange of grains that are inedible! Yet Chhanda had seen enough of life to know that she could make a situation turn around and so she did manage to sell those rations and buy better quality rice. A transaction that could not be revealed to Anindya because a new channel was being created in her support network.

The concept of charity depends on individual character and is shot through with the connotation of moral obligation. Those who can prove their moral worth deserve help. Most importantly, charity makes rich people and corporations look generous and legitimizes all the systems that lead to the concentration of wealth. It does not need to heed what the receiver actually needs.<sup>58</sup> Chhanda did not explicitly critique or reject

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<sup>58</sup> At a roundtable titled, “COVID-19 and Trans Politics in South Asia”, organized by the UC Santa Barbara Orfalea Center for Global and International studies, convened by Dr. Debanuj Dasgupta, my co-panelist, Santa Khurai, indigenous activist and scholar, who has been involved in transgender and *Nupi*

charity but used it to acquire better resources for her daily upkeep. Her canny calculations of performing gratitude were an attempt to ensure that she continued receiving services. At a later date, I heard from Anindya that Chhanda had complained to her that I was neglecting her even as I was using her to raise resources; but by now a pattern had emerged in our exchanges. If I missed visiting her, she was quick to remind me of value extraction. But frequent visits transformed me back into her daughter and sometimes even god's messenger.

It was Chhanda's *haq* that the academic and the activist community support and care for her because in her youth, she sheltered many in the community. The community should now pay this debt back. If they did not, she would remind them of the transactional relationship that all the players were involved in. These blunt reminders were also supplemented by her lamentations of loneliness, helplessness and the performance of *koti* kinship attachments whereby sisters and daughters transformed into thieves and then seamlessly back again to loving sisters and daughters. These gestures were tinged by our scepticism because all of us had learnt that both accusations of neglect and profuse affections at receiving one's allowance needed to be accepted with a pinch of salt because none of these emotions were constant and each mode of affective labour was meant to keep each player on one's toes. Yet, these shifting affective modes of engagement were also tinged by an 'as-if' because such improvisatory gestures often shattered against the actuality of power differences. The activist could decide to undermine the gossip train and not provide compensation for the quality of grains; the state might find ways to tighten surveillance; and the academic

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*Manbi* movements in north-east India for decades noted how organizations that came with rations refused to bring *Ngari*, a dried and seasoned fish dish that is an essential ingredient of Manipuri diet. Charity meant that they would only bring rice and lentils and the *Nupi Manbi* communities would have to gratefully accept that as dole.

could move to another field for new data. Some researchers who were previously involved with Chhanda already had moved on; some of the non-profits had abandoned her too.

One example of this abandonment was a Kolkata-based non-profit that had received a grant to participate as a care and support center (CSC) under the Vihaan Care and Support Programme of Alliance India, a non-profit that works on providing better health services and safeguarding the rights of HIV positive people in the country. Vihaan is funded by the Global Fund and the Kolkata-based NGO was designated as one of the CSCs of Vihaan to monitor whether transgender people in the city were receiving regular ART and counselling support. Chhanda was listed as one of their beneficiaries<sup>59</sup>. Prior to the COVID lockdown in 2020, an employee from the non-profit would visit Chhanda every few months to take her to the ART center for a check-up and refill her ART bottle. Yet, during the lockdown period, they did not enquire how she was doing. They would have to be repeatedly reminded to check in on her. Chhanda's subjunctive negotiations seemed to fail in this instance. So other channels had to be created. The rub here is that such outcomes are not surprising and hence they keep engendering further improvisations to negotiate and endure structural oppression. Over the months, as I witnessed activists, friends, non-profits offering support to Chhanda and receding as well as newer people and organizations arriving and sometimes the older ones reappearing after a certain gap, I kept wondering about the durational dimension of care and how its ceaseless need also ends up fraying the trans and queer care webs. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I track why care continues to circulate despite all the violence. I argue that even as care is exhausting and often it

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<sup>59</sup> Vihaan means the first light of dawn. For more on the program, see: <https://allianceindia.org/projects/vihaan-care-and-support-2013-2024/>

is coerced based on one's caste and class position, care also affirms one's sense of gender and binds a community together in friendship. But in this chapter, I am interested in the how. How does care still manage to circulate? How are the torn webs restitched? Hil Malatino cautions us that burn-out is an individualized model of perceiving fatigue that is induced by structural oppression (25, 2020). The state can recede from its responsibilities after distributing a one-time payment or after distributing some rations. But the need for care is relentless. Tied to that question is how we must square the need for care with unsavoury past histories. This is where I critiqued Malatino's theorization of aftercare and the restitching of care webs in the previous section because it seems to assume that trans communities are always uniformly marginalized and that there are no internal power differences within gender non-normative communities.

One evening Chhanda was in one of her vitriolic moods. "*Ami toder kachhe sudhui project!* (I am just a fund driven project for you all!)" She claimed that Samabhabona had raised millions of rupees by instrumentalizing her stroke but had not shared the money with her. When I reminded her that she had stayed in their shelter for three months and that Samabhabona had paid for her medical expenses, a care attendant and a physiotherapist all this time, she interrupted me and said, "*Laakh Laakh taka teen mashie khorcha hoye gyalo bolte chaash?*" ("You mean to say that all those millions were spent in three months?") Several members of Samabhabona had confirmed with me that Chhanda was very foul-mouthed to the care attendant. She had demanded alcohol at the shelter and had even kicked a younger *koti* once because she was in an irritable mood. This created a rift between her and the rest and eventually when her health improved, she returned to the workshop. Raina and the other *kotis* at Samabhabona heaved a sigh of relief and in turn, Chhanda won her freedom back. Here

she could fuck whoever she desired and eat and drink what she wished. No one could stop her. Yet every time she was ill or needed something, like a new battery for her mobile phone or some cash, folks from Samabhabona arrived, which did not mean that ill talk ceased at both ends. The simultaneity of care and hostility took me to agonistic intimacies that also helped me address limitations of Malatino's theorizations of care webs.

### **Waxing and Waning**

In the essay, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" Chantal Mouffe argues that there can be no democratic consensus without any exclusion. In that sense, there can never be a fully achievable democracy. What becomes important then is to remember that consensus is contingent, and it is only through continuous contestations between differences that the field of democracy can be constituted, which Mouffe refers to as agonistic pluralism. In other words, antagonisms cannot be ironed out. Mouffe evokes Stanley Cavell's forceful question that how do we think of deliberative consensus when some voices are always already excluded? Mouffe writes, "... the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. (1999, 755-56)" Mouffe concludes that modern democracy's signature lies in its refusal to clamp down on conflict with authoritarian order. It recognizes and legitimizes conflict.

Brian Horton extends the theorizations of agonisms to the study of the relatedness between queerness and kinship. While queer theory has brilliantly elucidated the violent normativities perpetuated through kinship networks (Menon 2007, Edelman 2004,

Weston 1991), Horton argues that queerness and kinship cannot always be understood in terms of hostility. In his ethnography with queer folks in Mumbai, Horton tracks how silence about one's sexuality does not always mean suppression of one's desires. Living out one's desires outside of the family could be an act of care for the family one is attached to. Sometimes, silence is a mode of survival, to ward off violence in the face of disclosure of sexuality. Silence could also be a creative way to continue living one's life under the radar. For Horton, agonistic intimacy is a way to think "about the coexistence of contradiction as part of daily life." (1062, 2018) Here intimacy is not inherently good or bad. Even as silence can afford relative freedom to live one's life, care from the family could very well slide into violence at any moment the silence is breached or seen through.

I would like to add a note of caution here. Studying varying degrees of intimacy should not become an exercise in relativities. Kinship is firmly imbricated in caste. So, silence cannot always be studied as a benevolent form of securing one's safety or care for one's family. It is also about holding onto the caste pride of family surnames, about not willing to give up on the property that the family inheritance entails. In the subsequent paragraphs I will show how caste is one of the central modes of how *kotis* relate with each other and it determines in what form care circulates. This requires a close attention to the everyday.

Bhriqupati Singh takes the idea of agonism to examine how it suffuses everyday encounters among neighbors across various caste groups. How do neighbors or neighboring groups relate with each other? Singh offers the concept of agonistic intimacy as that space of ambivalence that is neither entirely composed of hostilities, animosity and contest nor is it only about trust, community and a space of affirmation (2015, 2011). In other words, agonistics coexists with intimacies. An agon, that is a

field of contestations, could remain playful or could turn violent. Among the many caste groups in Shahabad— a subdistrict in the central Indian state of Rajasthan and Singh’s field site— that live in proximity with each other, a wide range of insults circulate. For Singh, insults are not simply static tools of domination and resistance, given that each caste devices insults for the other caste. So, the oppressed caste, Sahariya’s love for cosmetics is derided as a flashy façade that cloaks the dirt while the highest caste, brahmin’s hunger is framed as never-ending greed. It is important to remember, however, that insults can never be shorn of historically inflected hierarchies that congeal with time. The status of the brahmin as the priest ensures that the insult against him remains simply in the realm of language. Conversely, the insult hurled at the Sahariya exceeds language to hurt her very aspiration for upward mobility, her very subjectivity. Nevertheless, what is generative in this theorization of agonistic intimacy is that it pays careful attention to everyday conversations, encounters and exchanges to note how power circulates. Singh points out that intimacy in itself is not good or bad. A Sahariya woman could become chosen kin, a sister to a man from a caste, higher up the ladder. That is intimacy. To insult someone in a way that deeply cuts through the psyche is also intimacy, but a violent one. Singh cites the very important work of Deepak Mehta on insults hurled by the majoritarian forces, namely the Hindus against Muslims, insults that are shot through and through with sexual imagery, about genitals and potency (2009). This kind of intimacy could remain in the domain of everyday language and life or could intensify into a riot or genocide. Mehta’s work on violent intimacies could remind one about the intimacy of the overkill that Eric Stanley theorizes in *Atmospheres of Violence* that we discussed at length in the second chapter of this dissertation (2021). Singh writes, “An insult may evoke a laugh or a slap in return, depending on the reciprocal intensity it generates. It takes a degree of intimacy

to know how to really injure with words.” (2015, 152) Hence, it is important to track how agonistics and intimacy fluctuate in intensity in the everyday, variations that cannot be fully tracked through static theorizations of domination and resistance. With that in mind, let us return to Chhanda.

After the Kolkata based non-profit started shirking its responsibility towards Chhanda, she convinced a *koti* who lives in the neighborhood to accompany her to the hospital. Kali is in her mid-40s, works as a sex worker and comes from the *dom* caste, a Dalit caste that has been historically confined to performing death rituals at crematoriums. One evening when I was meeting Chhanda, I was shocked by her words. Even as she acknowledged that Kali had helped her climb down the stairs and sit on a rickshaw and that she did not leave her side for once during the long waiting hours at the ART center of the hospital, Chhanda exclaimed, “*ki kutshit dekhte! Tar upor abar lal nightie poreche. Amar lajja lagchilo or pashe boshte!* (She is so ugly, and she wore this red nightie! I felt so embarrassed sitting next to her!)” Here it is important to note that Chhanda rarely dressed up during her stay at the workshop. She mostly wore tee shirts and shorts and sometimes loose trousers at home and at public places. Even though when she spoke, her feminine voice and gestures gave her away, her appearance could pass unlike Kali. Chhanda’s casteist notions of beauty (lower caste doing polluted work and therefore not good to look at) and her internal transphobia filled me with an intense dislike towards her. There were power dimensions to think through between the researcher and the researched, but I could not stop myself from confronting her. How long could the ethnographer remain immune to their milieu? I said, “So much caste pride and look how you need someone who is supposed to be beneath you in status to take you to get your life saving drugs!” Instead of retorting with a snarky statement, she ended up confronting me with my liberal self, trying to individualize casteism. She



claimed class and caste-based affinity with me. Somehow because I had become her daughter, she would keep thinking of me as *bene* as well. She said that I was misunderstanding her. I was an English speaking *koti* with whom she could connect and that is why she had adopted me as her daughter but someone like Kali could only be a service provider and not a friend! I was stunned by her response and left. I was bristling with deep discomfort at this caste network that had emerged. In the waxing and waning of power, however, there were other twists to be followed.

Chhanda was fond of eating junk food from the various eateries in the neighborhood and would often miss taking her ART medication. This was a bad combination. Her frequent stomach infections meant that she was losing a drastic amount of weight and becoming weaker. So, those of us, who regularly checked in on her, decided that Chhanda needed a caregiver who would regularly cook for her so that she would not eat out and make sure that she took her medicines. By us, I mean myself, Samabhabona and a senior academic who had previously interviewed Chhanda extensively for her own research project. I remembered the other Chhanda who I was trying to reach out during the start of the shutdown. Since then, I had managed to contact her, and lockdown had also been lifted. Chhanda's income, however, had severely dipped because a lot of men were still wary of sex with strangers. She had asked me to look out for work opportunities. I immediately went to meet her and informed her that we were looking for someone to work for Chhanda *dhurani*. Chhanda *koti* initially agreed and asked me to take her to meet the elderly one. We were on our way when she said that she would like to visit Kali as Kali's home was on our way. Chhanda was very close to Kali. Kali welcomed us into her room in the sex workers' colony. The moment she heard that I was taking Chhanda to work for the *dhurani*, she was enraged and turned to the younger Chhanda and shouted, "Just because you are a *koti*, you will now

be her servant? Do you even know that she beats up servants?” Clearly, Chhanda’s ill reputation from her Samabhabona days had travelled far and wide. That very afternoon, however, Kali had gone and cut Chhanda’s nails and shaved her and dyed her hair. Yet, there was no contradiction here. By looking after Chhanda without any pay, Kali was exerting her power over the *dhurani* from the upper caste. The lower caste was offering charitable care to the upper caste. But the moment the question of monetary value would come up, then the charity would become a service and the debt would be repaid. Neither would Kali allow Chhanda to repay the debt, nor would she allow her friend to be tied to Chhanda in any kind of exchange. It did not matter that Chhanda *koti*’s salary would be paid by the *koti* researcher. After all, I would be paying it on behalf of Chhanda *dhurani*. No money could be accepted from the upper caste. Later that night I informed the *dhurani* that Kali had discouraged Chhanda *koti* from working at her place. The *dhurani* lamented, “Kali has an air conditioner in her room. She is rich and successful. Why should she care for a lonely *dhurani*? She will not allow any of her friends to work for me!” Chhanda lamented yet again about her *bonobas*. In a matter of a week, her caste pride was cut down in size with the force of agonistic intimacy. The caste hostility between Chhanda and Kali could not be wished away but that hostility also did not prevent Kali from caring for Chhanda. Hence, an agonistic intimacy. Such an intimacy also had a dimension of ethics attached to it.

When Kalli, a Sahariya woman and one of Singh’s closest research interlocutors helped the Nagars, a caste higher than the Sahariyas, in reclaiming some land back from the state, many Sahariyas were shocked and disappointed. This was because the Nagars had actively engineered Kalli’s defeat in the local elections. So then, how could she help a rival? Singh draws on Nietzsche to argue that to help one’s rival is ethics itself. Kalli does not seek revenge on the Nagars but this is not to claim that her ethical stance

emerges from a sense of altruism. To be ethical is not to give up on the aggressive or the agonistic. Singh notes that it was in Kalli's interest to keep the Nagars indebted to her because that would widen her network of influence in the larger community. A sense of indebtedness would also perhaps mean that neither Kalli nor the Nagars could ever forget the hostile pasts even as such pasts did not overdetermine the terms of their exchange in the present. (2015, 220) After all life exceeds the rules, we make for it. Such power relations were also mirrored in the exchange between Kali and Chhanda. Kali knew about Chhanda's casteism but that did not stop her from caring for Chhanda. This care, however, was on Kali's terms. Without pay.

I also found such an ethical exchange between Nitu and Chhanda. We have already met Nitu in the introductory chapter of this dissertation and in the second chapter. She had introduced me to the younger Chhanda. Nitu had known the older Chhanda over decades, but they were never friends. Chhanda, the *bene* of the three-storey house, the lavish parties and Nitu Giri from the potter caste and the low paid sex worker. Nitu had told me over several occasions when Chhanda would come to her neighborhood to visit her best friend, Sunil, another *dhurani*, they would drink expensive alcohol. They would share it with Nitu, Kali and others but would also ask them to leave after a drink or two. Distance had to be maintained. One evening, Nitu fished out her mobile phone from her purse and showed me an image. Chhanda sitting on her narrow bed accepting rations from Nitu. Nitu had managed to mobilize a local political party to organize rations for the *kotis* in the neighborhood and made sure to give some of that charity rice to Chhanda as well. The photo was soon to be uploaded on Facebook and Chhanda would now appear twice in a gallery on doles. I looked at Nitu. There was a bright smile on her face. It was cruel but also a poetic kind of justice. A sense of justice at upsetting a historical hierarchy. This reminded me of witnessing Chhanda's helpless rage earlier

about her photo being flashed on social media. Even as she could not say no then, she complained about her sleep being interrupted and informed her *dhurani* friends that the quality of rice was not good. Through this subjunctive protest, she held her own and even managed to get additional support. In this instance, however, Nitu's rice was of a good quality. Chhanda did not really have anything to protest except helplessly give in to receiving charity from the one she had once distanced.

Sara Ahmed reminds us that thinking of bad feelings as closed and oriented to the past and shut off to the possibilities of the future allows historical injustices to fester, even as they are supposed to disappear with a tide of good feelings that are fixated on moving on (2010). In the context of North American health activism, Michelle Murphy warns us against the conflation of care with positive feelings, affection, happy attachments as political goods because such conflations invisibilize the entanglements of racism, colonialism and class with the performance of care (2015, 719). Unsettling care would then mean,

“... reckoning with the histories and structures that unevenly dispossess, disappear, and disentangle, as much as those that award privilege, include, direct sympathies, and spark intimacies. Such reckoning will require willingness to work through discomfort, worry, anger, pain, disconnection, and living in non-alignment, that is, the unhappy affects of staying in the trouble. (2015, 731)”

Marx taught us that the social relations and the labor that go into producing the commodity are disappeared, so staying with the trouble (Haraway 2010) would perhaps mean to unsettle those very regimes of disappearance. Be it Sudeb and Sanjay in the first chapter or Kali and Nitu here, the *kotis* I encountered in West Bengal, devise a host of strategies to unsettle any romantic notions of care as the fulcrum of minoritized communities. Be it centering the stench of shit that refuses to disappear, the refusal of compensation in exchange for care labor or the photographic documentation of charity,

they exposed how caste permeates our social, where even the non-normativity of gender cannot dismantle its hegemony.

Yet, there was more to be said about agonistic intimacies in the way I witnessed it circulate around Chhanda and eventually how I experienced it myself because not all hostilities emerged from caste. Often foul words and resentment simply vitalized one's capacities to both give and receive care without any entrapments of gratitude. Unlike Malatino's notions of trans resiliency through aftercare, here the hostilities were evoked amongst friends. An open exchange of hostilities allowed one to go on caring but sometimes such hostilities exceeded the intimacies and that led to the suspension of care. However, during such moments of suspension, other relationalities emerged, that were not based on gender but on a shared sense of economic dispossession.

One evening, a week after the first lockdown had been lifted, I went to meet Chhanda but was surprised to find the door open, but Chhanda was not in the room.<sup>60</sup> I asked Tara and she directed me to an adjacent lane. Chhanda was sitting by a shack selling dim sums and noodles. When I met her, she was gorging on noodles and sweating profusely. Another *dhurani* who had dyed her hair brown was sitting next to her eating egg rolls. Chhanda saw me and introduced me as her daughter to Ratna. Ratna smiled at me and said that she had heard a lot about me from Chhanda. Ratna is almost Chhanda's age. Both had known each other for many years. Ratna used to be a famous dancer in a pub in Kolkata and she was renowned for her Helen moves.<sup>61</sup> A lot of event managers would hire her to dance to Helen songs. When she heard about how I was

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<sup>60</sup> The All-India lockdown was initially announced for twenty-one days but it kept getting extended till 31<sup>st</sup> May. It was partially lifted after that. The respective states, however, continued lockdown in specific areas depending on infection rates.

<sup>61</sup> Helen is an iconic dancing star of Hindi cinema. She came to India as a Burmese refugee and eventually rose to fame with her cabaret numbers in films. For more on her iconicity, see *Helen: The Life and Times of a Bollywood H-Bomb* by Jerry Pinto (2006).

getting a PhD in the United States, she told me that a white European was so besotted with her that he wanted to take her with her. But she was so attached to her home city of Kolkata that she could not leave. I took this to be a smooth dig about my supposed lack of attachment to my home city and a signal that she was not averse to drawing me into her inner circle! Very soon we were speaking every other day about who else but Chhanda! I am getting ahead of myself here.

Chhanda wanted to order a plate of noodles for me but it started raining and so we retreated to her room. Very soon, Chhanda launched into recollections about her past. Today's story was about Indira Gandhi. When the first female Prime Minister of India was assassinated, there was curfew around the country and all the markets were shut. But Chhanda craved hilsa and so she went to the market and convinced a wholesaler of fish to sell her some fish! Such was her charisma! Ratna seconded her and told me that she had witnessed the grandeur of Chhanda's life in the three-storey house. Chhanda had installed a fountain on the terrace to give it the look of an open-air bar where lovers would come and go. Then Ratna lamented, "*Aaj aar or kichui nei... ekdom eka!* (Today she has nothing! She is completely alone!)" While I was trying to fathom whether Ratna was trying to rub salt into Chhanda's wounds or she was commiserating with her misfortune, she continued telling me how much she had missed Chhanda during the lockdown and was worried about her. So as soon as the lockdown had been lifted, she visited her. In fact, public transport was still extremely irregular, and Ratna did not want to risk getting into a crowded bus and so she had walked all the way from her home to Chhanda's room. It was an hour long walk on a sweltering day. Ratna and I exchanged numbers.

Very soon Ratna and I were speaking regularly over the phone. She told me that all the money she had saved from her dancing days had been spent on the expensive treatment

she needed after she suffered a brain stroke and now, she was completely dependent on the mercies of her neighbors and a lover who lived in another city. This lover was now becoming reluctant to continuing the relationship. The moot point being if Chhanda could receive monetary help, why couldn't she? This was a fair point. I reported my conversation to folks at Samabhabona and the academic and we mutually decided that we could pay Ratna a salary to live with Chhanda. They could cook together, and Ratna could keep a check on Chhanda's diet and medicines, the job that the younger Chhanda had refused. Ratna immediately agreed.

Chhanda was not so agreeable at the prospect of losing her freedom. She claimed that the moment she saw me giving my number to Ratna, she wanted to warn me. Ratna was a serial thief who would keep stealing cash from Chhanda's ancestral home. I joked with her saying that she was so rich anyway. How did it matter if somebody stole a bit of that wealth? This seemed to please her. But she pressed on about her concern for me. She did not wish Ratna to fleece me, but Chhanda's actual intent was extremely transparent. She was worried about her monthly allowance. If we were going to entrust Ratna with her care, then we would give very little cash to Chhanda and therefore she would have very little autonomy. Among the three entities— two individuals and a collective— we shared most of Chhanda's expenses and there were other activists and organizations who helped her sporadically like the ones I mentioned in the previous paragraphs. Sensing her acute displeasure with this new arrangement, I told her that we would monitor Ratna closely and if Chhanda had any complaints, we would address it. That assurance placated her for the moment, but the hostility escalated in a couple of weeks.

Ratna joined work and the first couple of weeks seemed an idyll of care and chosen family. The two *dhuranis* gossiped for hours and ate healthy meals of rice and fish. In

the evenings, Ratna left for home. One morning I woke up to find several missed calls on my phone. Ratna had called. I called her back and she started screaming at me, “What have you got me into?” Chhanda had shat on her bed and Ratna had to clean the soiled bedsheet and Chhanda’s clothes. I wondered if Chhanda had diarrhoea. I went to see her immediately, but she was thankfully fine and eating her breakfast of *puri* and *sabzi*. I asked her why she could not go to the washroom. Before she could reply, Ratna interjected that Chhanda was simply harassing her. Soon both were bickering. Chhanda complained that she had become ill ever since Ratna came because her food was oily, and it was becoming difficult for her to control her bowel movement. Ratna complained that Chhanda treated her like a maid and not a friend. I realized I had no other role to play than to witness the two of them engaged in a verbal duel. Later I asked Ratna why she allowed Chhanda to have the oily *puri* and *sabzi* for breakfast instead of going for healthier options like fruits and bread or puffed rice. Ratna told me that Chhanda relished her *puris* and so Ratna did not have the heart to disappoint her. This became a pattern.

Ratna would indulge Chhanda from time to time with her favorite food, that were often not good for her health and would later also complain about having to clean her shit. One could wonder if Chhanda’s love for food was the cruel optimism that Berlant theorized as the attachment that impedes our flourishing in the long term even as it keeps us afloat now (2011). However, Dia Da Costa builds on this work to investigate the political economy of affect and asks what the subject’s relation is to affect when “neoliberalism’s ordinary violence is not new, but rather, reworks the ordinary and longstanding violence and inclusion/exclusion of colonial capitalism and nation-state histories (2016, 2).” What would the good life and futurity mean for a *dhurani* who had negotiated the phobias at home, at work and had lived through multiple heartbreaks and



betrayals of lovers on whom she had spent her last penny? Her subjunctive negotiations with various institutions meant that survival was from day to day and that more often than not, failure was a given. So, then her insistence on good food was to make the best out of the limited options that she had in securing a life true to her desires.

In thinking about care, Talia Schaffer draws a distinction between need and want. She writes that the caregiver must be able to figure out what the recipient of care needs as opposed to what she wants. Schaffer gives the example of drugs that an addict may crave but the need of care demands that such a want is refused (2019, 525). Yet, how is the distinction between need and want so neat when sometimes only fulfilling one's desires can capacitate one to keep striving for another day and another? Since the first time we met, I realized that it was not just the non-profit that shirked its responsibility in ensuring that Chhanda had her ART regularly. One afternoon, while I was cleaning her room, I found bottle after bottle, some half full, some with a few tablets left. When I asked her why she was not taking her ART regularly, she replied that the virus had not killed her all these years because she was healthy. Soon I began to understand her illness narrative. The illness narrative, that is the patient's construction of her experience is a powerful tool that contests the expert's power in the clinical encounter (Das and Das, 2007, 66). Illness narratives as they relate to the patient's subjectivity are deeply enmeshed in the material and social spaces of everyday life. For Chhanda, her weak health was not a result of the erratic intake of ART. Instead, it was about the instability of her income which stung all the more as she reminisced about her past, her loneliness and the insecurity that came from the ever-shifting network of individuals and organizations that sustained her. Even though she initially resisted it, Ratna's arrival brought companionship back into her life and she was again taking her medicines regularly. Yet, company was not enough. Some semblance of her lavish and

decadent past had to be replicated in the present. Ratna understood that and indulged her by bringing her choice of breakfast, big cuts of fish and her favorite fruits and sweets. This was not ideal for an elderly person but at least she took her ART regularly.

In an essay titled, *Faithful to the Contemplation of Bones*, Christina Crosby critiques disability narratives that start off with the moment of setback and loss and teleologically moves towards rehabilitation and notions of a full life premised on individual resiliency.

While disability studies as a discipline critiques such individualized models of overcoming by focusing on the social structures that produce experiences of impairment, Crosby evocatively notes that such modes of analysis leave very little room for discussing pain and grief. This is because pain is situated away from the body to the disabling environment that makes one's immediate environment inaccessible and unwelcoming. While it is important to think of pain in these terms, how do we think of the ongoing trauma of pain that is felt in the body and how it impairs our daily? How do we grapple with the chronicity of bodily and psychic pain? Crosby turns to Walter Benjamin's famous exposition on Paul Klee's oil transfer print, *Angelus Novus* who Benjamin interprets as the Angel of History. He writes, ". . . A storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm." This is how Benjamin differentiates between historical materialism and historicism. For Benjamin, historical materialism is not about drawing a causal connection between various moments in time, what Benjamin calls "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary." (Benjamin, 1968, 263) Instead, a historical materialist latches on to certain moments in the past and reads through their traces in the present. In other words, even as one is directed towards the future, one is also oriented towards the past. There is no moving past the pain, be they the wreckage of the body or the mind even as one is hurled towards the future.

Crosby evocatively writes of her life with her partner Janet Jacobsen and how that life was now in the past after her debilitating accident. She notes,

I wish... to be faithful in my own contemplation of brokenness, and to learn from the orientation of Benjamin's allegorically named Angel of History, who can neither turn away nor remain in place. I live on, moving inexorably further away from the life Janet and I made together before I broke my neck, but I continue, in my thinking, to face the past so as to piece together what has been smashed. Not to reassemble myself as unbroken—even stronger—in a narrative of redemption, but to trace the fault lines of the break. For in the break there is an opening (2019, 636).

There was no way Chhanda could turn away from the past in all its glory, messiness, joys and pain. The lovers who left after purchasing apartments and cars with her money, the sisters who refused to keep in touch, the bodily impairment after the stroke were events that were omnipresent in all our conversations. Yet the past also animated her to vigorously negotiate how she lived her present. It was thus Ratna's care and her facilitation of Chhanda's access to good food that brought some of the past back into the present. Such decisions had consequences, however.

Ratna's indulgence meant that the problem of shit kept recurring. At times, I was bringing Chhanda a new set of clothes, sometimes a new bedsheet. Once Ratna complained to the other folks in our care circle and a meeting was convened on a Sunday evening, the agenda being we had to convince Chhanda to not make demands for unhealthy food that could not be met. We tried but also realized this was impossible and instead bought a bedside toilet that would be more manageable than having to clean bedsheets and the floor every day. This seemed like a reasonable solution, but I was wrong. The next time I visited Chhanda, I observed that a heap of clothes was piled on the toilet. She refused to use it. She was uncomfortable. The agonisms kept becoming more intense. Ratna would demand to meet me separately and the topic of every such

meeting was some unsavoury incident from Chhanda's past that she had witnessed. For example, once it was a salacious account of how she threw a lavish party after a mock wedding with a lover even as her bedridden mother had gotten burnt after her attendant had accidentally dropped hot water on her. Another time it was about how her younger sister broke all ties with her because Chhanda's lover developed a sexual relationship with her niece, and she did not prevent it! The same Ratna, however, cleaned the shit, cooked and kept her company day in, day out. The hostile speech absorbed the exhaustion of the hard care labor. Once I asked her, "Why do you not simply leave?" She said that after all she was her childhood friend. Love, care and affection would be immediately supplemented with disparaging comments like Chhanda could never beat Ratna in physical beauty. While men clamoured to have sex with her, Chhanda had to use her wealth to lure men into her bed! Insults made the stench of shit bearable, an insight I gleaned eventually when I started cleaning Chhanda's shit as well.

Ratna did leave eventually, when even the foul gossip could not mitigate the exhaustion. Tara took over her position. Tara would lament at times how she and Robi would use Chhanda's room as an extra storage space for their household until she arrived. Tara would even complain that Chhanda would curse a lot and that often her curses came true. Once during one of their intense altercations, Chhanda had cursed her that she would become a widow and then the next day, Robi had a cardiac arrest. (Robi survived). When Tara took responsibility for Chhanda's meals, it had become a ritual that I would have to sit with her for at least half an hour and mostly longer than that over tea and listen to her vent about Chhanda. She would complain about Chhanda regularly and would continue to serve her meals and fetched her water simultaneously. Tara was not a *dhurani*, however, and so Chhanda had to reluctantly take responsibility for cleaning her own shit literally! This is not to argue that Chhanda had become

entirely helpless. She too continued staking her claim to power. One of her illness narratives was that Tara had spread a rumour in the neighborhood that Chhanda was so ill that she needed to be transferred to some form of hospice care so that she could take back her control on Chhanda's room. This narrative was only strengthened by the fact that Tara would frequently call me to complain about Chhanda's health. She would often get dehydrated and not respond to Tara calling her to wake up early morning and Tara would obviously get alarmed and call me. Once, she was frantically walking around the neighborhood asking for my address. Later I found out from a neighbor that a woman had come looking for a "Sayan whose mother has cancer!" I would go with some glucose, Chhanda would sip it and would immediately launch into dissecting Tara's evil machinations! Such agonisms vitalized her and it also animated us enough to continue caring for her.

When Ratna left, Chhanda ensured that the *koti* gossip networks had been informed that Ratna had stolen her money and left. Munni, another *dhurani*, who sells country liquor and who would come sometimes with hot meals for Chhanda once told me that earlier when Chhanda's friend had asked her to leave the guest house, she had gone to the guest house at a later date. She informed the guest house manager that one of his employees had "unnatural sex." Her friend did not lose her job but became the butt of ridicule of all the other employees and could never forgive Chhanda. Chhanda never forgot to exact her revenge, just that the agonism had escalated into an antagonism that could not be resolved in Chhanda's lifetime. Ratna did not mind the rumours, however. She just needed a break. One evening, I was meeting her just after a session with Chhanda in which she complained that Ratna would often use her room to have sex with younger men. Chhanda would have to pretend she was asleep as Ratna enjoyed on the floor! In the mood for some more banter, I asked Ratna how many men she had

fucked at Chhanda's place. She got annoyed but instead of directing her anger at Chhanda, she turned towards me. Apparently, she had heard from Chhanda that I gave my ailing mother sleeping pills so that I could have mega fuck sessions at home! Agonism cuts all ways.

### **Life Goes On**

In a special issue of *Social Text* titled *Radical Care*, the editors, Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese define radical care as:

a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds. While radical care is often connected to positive political change by providing spaces of hope in dark times... (we) acknowledge the negative affects associated with care. Because radical care is inseparable from systemic inequality and power structures, it can be used to coerce subjects into new forms of surveillance and unpaid labor, to make up for institutional neglect, and even to position some groups against others, determining who is worthy of care and who is not. Even so, in the face of state- sanctioned violence, economic crisis, and impending ecological collapse, collective care offers a way forward. (2020, 2)"

The authors argue that reciprocity and attention to the structural inequalities that characterize our social landscape are the forms of care that can rebuild our presents. Even as the ongoing colonialisms, wars, climatic devastations, increasing economic divides and other disasters make it difficult to believe that any hopeful possibility of a different future could be immanent to our presents, the editors believe the audacity of hope, the ability to effect care despite systemic odds makes it radical. While I am not sure if adding the word "radical" itself can automatically make it an emancipatory practice, my interlocutors in Bengal constantly demonstrated how the circulation of care is shot through many affective, emotional and material registers. Bad feelings, resentment and exhaustion were never far away but speech allowed a space of release that made care sustainable. This speech itself was shot through varied forms of

agonistics, some of which were based on past histories between individuals, histories which were located in historical hierarchies and sometimes the agonistics were devised to simply receive and give care without being beholden. Care was also received through improvisatory negotiations that sometimes worked and sometimes did not and their tentative nature made them subjunctive. I am not sure if these host of practices can be termed radical, but they did produce a life that was collectively sustainable. What was perhaps radical about such a life world was that it did not only cohere around gender. Gender alliances were sometimes undone by caste. At other times, neighbors who did not share sexual and gendered affinities became caregivers because of the commonality of economic precarity, so much so that we had to question our trans exceptionality while distributing rations. For a wealthy businessman, an informal worker who made ends meet by selling incense sticks was not the ideal subject of charity. Yet Tara and Robi also participated in our care circle for Chhanda and so eventually we became stitched to their lives as well, sometimes that meant trying to help them with cash, sometimes with rations. The other radical aspect of our care was perhaps the fact that we ended up performing labors outside the hierarchies of caste we are implicated in. The Dalit woman, Tara could refuse to clean Chhanda's shit on account of their gender difference. The brahmin researcher writing about care could not remain at a remove. When I tried adult diapers on Chhanda, she would venomously tear away the diaper and throw them on the streets leaving me little other option than to clean her with my hands. I do not at all mean to idealize the switching of labor practices that were being actualized in that tiny room. The point I wish to make here is that if care is to be radical, then we absolutely must reckon with our bodily wastes and that reckoning must always rub against caste. In other words, if care is to be radical, Chhanda cannot remain the exception.

In the same *Social Text* issue, Elijah Adiv Edelman in their essay, “Beyond Resilience”, argues that trans necropolitics coexists with trans vitalities. If necropolitics is about how regimes of violence and death attenuate trans livability, trans vitality is all that makes trans life flourish. Edelman cautions that this flourishing cannot happen through individualized models of resiliency that fetishizes individual capacity to overcome systemic oppression as opposed to questioning the very structures that produce trans vulnerability in the first place. Trans vitalities would require coalition building that refuses the boundedness or coherence of community and would be a broad-based and collective response to creating infrastructures of care in the face of violence. Coalition building in this sense perhaps alludes to mutual aid as defined by Dean Spade. Spade writes:

Mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history... Providing for one another through coordinated collective care is radical and generative. Effective social movements always include elements of mutual aid (2020, 136).

In other words, mutual aid builds alternatives to failing systems and cuts through individualism and hopelessness. It is anti-authoritarian and organizes care without coercion. We were perhaps engaged in mutual aid for an ageing *dhurani* with our wide web of individuals and some organisations and in the process widening the web by looking after each other as well. During these three years since my second encounter with Chhanda in March 2020, Ratna has undergone cataract surgery, Tara is undergoing oral chemotherapy for cancer in the jaw, and I have been dealing with death and other life realities and mutual support has allowed us to keep caring. Sometimes care simply means allowing one to leave without demanding for an explanation. Tara refusing to



cook one day because she missed her elder son or Ratna leaving or Raina sending volunteers to purchase medicines for Chhanda because I could not visit her spoke to the durability of our care webs. And when the webs frayed, our foul tongues helped us to stitch them back.

One winter evening Chhanda slipped and became senseless. Tara immediately called me. By the time I reached, she had come back to her senses, but she looked extremely frail. I informed the other members of our care circle and two volunteers from Samabhabona arrived next morning and we took her to the public hospital where her ART center was located. Chhanda was stinking because her clothes were caked in dried shit. She would refuse to use that mobile toilet that I had purchased for her. After admission, we purchased new clothes for her. As I helped her change into her new clothes, I felt I was becoming Ratna. I needed to vent and found myself dialling Raina. After a while, a junior doctor arrived to check on her and started checking her limb movements. Chhanda felt tickled and shrieked and then shrieked again as if she was having an orgasm! The doctor's face turned red with embarrassment, and I could not stop laughing. He told us that he would run some tests and monitor her for a week. After he left, Chhanda winked at me and said, "If only I was younger...!" Chhanda's unabashed sexual energy was not simply about the sheer force of her spirits. It was also about the demands that she made of life. During a long phase of exhaustion and helplessness, we wondered if she could be transferred to an old age home where she would be professionally looked after and where she would be forced into eating healthy. We did look for such places. The Indian state has launched a project called the *Garima Greh* (Pride House) under which shelter homes have been built across many Indian cities for transgender folks who do have any safe space to stay. In these homes, one can

stay up to a year.<sup>62</sup> The expectation of this project is that various kinds of vocational training will be given to the residents of these homes so that they can become financially independent eventually. In the biopolitical schema of productive citizenship, how would an elderly *dhurani* fit? Moreover, the upper age limit to be a resident in these homes was set at 60. Yet, one Garima Greh agreed to host Chhanda. Perhaps they would do something creative with documentation requirements and enrol her, but we realized that we could not send her away after all. Firstly, this shelter only offered vegetarian food which itself would be tortuous for Chhanda. Secondly, a Samabhabona volunteer, Sumita, a *dhurani* herself in her 50s pointed out some important history. Sumita used to be employed in West Bengal's now shut first transgender/*koti/dhurani* shelter home, Prathama (meaning the first woman) in the eastern fringes of Kolkata. Chhanda was a resident there for a few months and had to eventually leave because she would often bring men with her. These men often got drunk and fought and the neighbors protested the noise. Sumita's point was simple. Could a *dhurani* live without sex? Would the state allow her to have sex in its shelter? We realized we were on the wrong track. The incident at the hospital reminded us that we were right in giving up on the search for shelter homes. The want *was* the need and the troubling of distinctions between the two was care too.

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<sup>62</sup> For more on the Garima Greh, see: <https://transgender.dosje.gov.in/docs/GarimaGrehGuidelines.pdf>. The guideline states: "Garima Grehs will not only ensure that the community has access to a safe and secure environment, it will also go a long way in the empowerment of transgenders. Presently, there are many welfare schemes for the vulnerable groups, but a huge section of the community doesn't have access to basic facilities including proper housing facilities. There is an urgent need to start transgender shelter home (Garima Greh) facility with the inbuilt provision of skill development." In a section titled, "Safety and Security," the guideline states that CCTVs would have to be installed in the common room, in the visitors room, there would have to be a watchmen and that there would be a registry where residents would have to document their entry and exit timings. How could we expect Chhanda to live in such a panopticon? This is not at all to assume that rules could not be bent or flouted or that cctv cameras could not be fucked with but even then, the negotiated freedoms at a shelter home could in no way compare with the freedoms of the tiny workshop space gifted to her by Ratul.

Coming back to the hospital trip, the test results were fine but her CD4 count was not looking good predictably. After a week, we brought Chhanda back to her tiny room. Tara was happy to see her back. There was peace for a few days until the fights resumed. One evening Raina from Samabhabona and I visited her to tell her firmly not to quarrel with Tara and eat the food that she cooked. Chhanda was demanding mutton, sweets and shrimps every other day. She was furious with me and said, “*Tui amar jeebone obhishaap hoye esechish. Tor bhalo habe na!* (You are a curse in my life. You will never be well in life!)” The reason of her frustration was not only because I was supporting Tara, but I had also involved Samabhabona in this exchange. What if they stopped helping her, given they already had history?

The next day, however, Chhanda made sure to shift the narrative. She said that because Samabhabona was a big organization, she could not critique them directly and so she directed the abuse at me, but her insults were actually meant for them and not me!

Life continued stuttering and moving through a *dhurani*'s subjunctive negotiations and our agonistic intimacies with her. The care webs tore often but they were restitched as well with affection and bitterness.

## Conclusion

João Biehl and Peter Locke open their anthology, “Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming” with Alice Neel’s oil painting, *James Hunter Black Draftee*. Hunter’s face and left hand on which the face rests are painted with lush colors while the rest of his body is only loosely sketched. Neel would invite passersby into her New York studio to sit for her and that is how she met Hunter. Hunter informed her that he had been drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. He did not return for a second sitting that gives the painting an “unfinished” sheen. We know about the devastating consequences of the Vietnam war and all wars that preceded or followed it. We do not know the whereabouts of Hunter. Biehl and Locke argue that the lack of detailing of the body could signal the struggle for minority rights in the US but what is also striking is the singularity of Hunter’s striking face and his pose. We can strive to know him but cannot claim to completely know him with all the concepts in our theoretical toolkit. Hunter himself perhaps punctuated his representation (2017, ix). Taking off from this haunting incompleteness of the painting, they ask, “So, how can we ethnographically apprehend these worldly fabrications and the lives therein, constituted as they are by that which is unresolved, and bring this unfinishedness into our storytelling? (2017, x)” Hence the anthropology of becoming demands more than the flat realism of historicization or the all-encompassing determinisms of social theory. The micro, the singular and the partial demand granular attention and cannot be necessarily subsumed under templates or fitted into pre-set models. In thinking with becoming, Biehl and Locke are of course drawing on the works of Deleuze who challenges Western philosophical notions of being in favor of attending to shifting relations and the ongoing production and circulation of difference whereby the human subject is not some coherent unit but an unstable assemblage of various structural and social forces that are also shifting. One could argue

that such a mode of viewing the world staunchly relies on the empirical and its potential to undo bounded concepts, subjectivities and our totalizing assumptions.

How does one live alongside or through structural, material forces? How does one draw vitality from an exhausted present? An exposition of such questions requires the crafting of what Biehl and Locke call an “ethnographic sensorium” that offer incomplete views of subjects and their lifeworlds in the process of becoming, views that are multifaceted, affective in that even as they illuminate the worlds of scarcity and violence, they also shed light on how those very worlds are brimming with the potential to become otherwise. They write that becoming is about the plasticity of their ethnographic subjects, their ability to keep shapeshifting according to their milieu which itself keeps becoming other. How do people live through and alongside and despite the debilitating constraints of social, material and political forces? In what ways do they shift shapes? They write:

Instead of viewing people in terms of core principles or as fully bounded by structure or form, the anthropology of becoming attends to people’s transformations and varied agencies, and to the ways in which power itself is shifting and contingent—less a solid, stable entity than a product of manipulation, systematic falsehood, and ongoing struggle, and constantly punctured and put to flight by people’s becomings. In this way, anthropology makes space for unfinishedness, and bodies, power, and things do not remain frozen in place. (2017, 6)

The challenge then is to track desire in the way it fucks with power, to track desire that is not reducible to its structural determinants. This plasticity is unpredictable, it can be both productive as well as destructive, full of potential or full of peril. Ethnographic encounters, however, that attend to worlds in flux can trouble totalizing abstractions and offer complex and unfinished stories about their subjects. Becoming is not reducible to causality and outcomes. Its dynamism means that the past and the future,

the real and the virtual are enmeshed and so becoming is always indeterminate allowing us to keep tracking what is happening in the meantime of human struggle and daily life. It is important to note here that tracking an anthropology of becoming through the refusal of overdetermining theoretical models does not mean that devastating structures of abandonment, violence and precarity are undermined. Death is not far ever. Nor is the force of history which remains folded into the present. Yet, these structures also generate an excess, sometimes a mad hope that defies normative logics, sometimes a new social altogether that defies regimes of violence or sometimes wild imaginings of worlds to come. Even as history constrains how such contingencies play out, it also becomes an unexpected resource for charting new pathways. Biehl and Locke write,

“... attentiveness to becomings helps us see what else is emerging in everyday struggles, foregrounding the microdynamics of people’s lives in a way that illuminates rifts, dangers, and possibilities, however minor, in macrolevel social and political realities. While these openings may ultimately lead nowhere, and futurity always struggles with futility and a sense of the inevitable, people can simultaneously be stuck and do things, and this is not nothing. (2017, 21)”

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was grappling with being stuck on multiple levels – inability to travel, stuckness with care responsibilities, stuckness on the field in which transparency was refused but then remaining stuck opened other possibilities - reorienting of research questions and an intimate appreciation of what embodied care means.

Chhanda passed away on February 25, 2022. Her former lover, Ratul informed me over the phone. I will always regret the fact that I could not be with her in her last days. The year had begun on a difficult note. A dear friend died of COVID as 2021 ended. A few weeks later into the new year, my mother received a diagnosis of Parkinson’s, this barely after a year of surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation for cancer. The

intensification of crisis meant that I could simply not muster the vital forces to even make the ten-minute walk to see my *dhurani* mother. An all-engulfing fatigue. Then India was hit by the third wave of COVID, this time the Omicron and I contracted it. It was during this isolation period that Tara called me frantically one late evening. Chhanda had slipped yet again. That evening, most of the occupants in the building had gone to the crematorium as a resident had died. Tara did not simply have the physical strength to help Chhanda get up and lie on her bed. I could not go either. Chhanda lay on the floor for a full winter night. Early next morning, I called my friends at Samabhabona and found that none of them could come. Most of them were either bed ridden with COVID or outside the city. I informed Tara. The care webs that we had stitched seemed to have come asunder. In sheer desperation, Tara called the police. During the several lockdowns we had under the two waves of the pandemic, the police often organized ration distribution and even served meals to the homeless and the poor. The local police station in our neighborhood was no exception. There is no contradiction here of course. The violent state cares so that it can be violent, or it violates so that it can care. A lot has been written about such violent intimacies<sup>63</sup>. Beat up migrant workers on the streets and then distribute a few meals. Tara would often collect meals at the police station on days she was too fatigued or sick to cook and would bring meals for Chhanda as well. The moot point being the local police knew

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<sup>63</sup> For example, in *The Occupied Clinic* (2020), Saiba Verma shows how care is not always an antidote to violence in the occupied state of Kashmir but that care and violence are related control mechanisms of the state. Of course, there is a deep irony here. A few Kashmiri activists and scholars pointed out that Verma had not named the fact that her father was an official of the investigating agency of the Indian state that occupied Kashmir. So, then occupation also enabled critical scholarship on how care circulates. In a recent article on the book and the debates it generated, Kashmiri scholar Gowhar Fazili questions the quick dismissal of Verma's work immediately after the disclosure even as many of those who dismissed the book had celebrated it before the disclosure. Fazili's essay asks difficult questions on the violence inherent to scholarship on any kind of occupation. See <https://thewire.in/books/ethnography-solidarity-and-outrage-in-kashmir-reflections-on-saiba-varmas-occupied-clinic>. Sameena Mulla's *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses and Sexual Assault* (2014) is another book that demonstrates the imbrications of care and violence.

Chhanda and that she lived alone and did not have any natal family watching out for her. So, when Tara dialled them, they arrived, picked Chhanda up and put her on bed and decided that she needed to be transferred to a shelter home for the elderly. When the state deems fit, such transfers can happen even without identity documents. Chhanda's Aadhaar card was (and is) with me because she tended to misplace papers often. The police did not wait for any papers. They simply transferred her to a home. By the time, Tara called me, Chhanda had been sent off already. I was shocked but too tongue tied to react. I informed the others, but ill health and fatigue seemed to be the atmosphere in which we lived. Somebody in the group commented, "At least, she will have doctors and nurses checking on her. There will be a disciplined diet. She will get better." I was worried about her ART medicines and asked Tara discreetly if the police had picked Chhanda's medicines. Tara replied in the negative. I told her those medicines were essential and wanted to pick them up from Chhanda's room, but the police had locked the room. They would deliver the keys to only Ratul, the owner of the room. I decided that I would meet the police after my isolation ended and would ask Ratul to come with me. I had never met him in person but had spoken with him a few times over the phone. He had a cardiac arrest in 2021 and so because of the pandemic, he would barely meet people and completely stopped keeping in touch with Chhanda. None of my plans obviously worked. Chhanda started running a fever at the shelter and could not control her bowel movement and the doctors recommended that she be transferred to a hospital. The police informed Ratul and Tara and transferred her to the same hospital from where we had brought her back two months back. Chhanda had contracted COVID and her CD4 count had fallen further. Within a day, the *dhurani* was gone. Following COVID protocols, her body was cremated by government health workers. Ratul informed her sisters and me.



What else was left to be said? The singularity of Chhanda and the multiplicity of lives, stories, conversations, encounters that I had witnessed and become a part of seemed to have disappeared as suddenly as they had entered my life. Yet as the weeks progressed, I started realizing that Chhanda's story and our participation in that story was still unfolding. There were acrimonious debates about the form her memorial should take. Someone wanted a ritualized ceremony with priests, someone else wanted a memorial but without the involvement of certain folks who they disliked, there were debates on how much money should be spent, which date should the memorial be held on, what should be the food, should it be an open event or an invitee only. And each such debate was tied to whether a particular decision would have been appreciated by Chhanda. We kept speculating about how the *dhurani* would have reacted to a certain choice we made.

We hired a hall close to where Chhanda lived. Close to fifty people turned up. I had taken an image of a photograph from her album. She was at her resplendent best in it with lip gloss, green contact lens and shiny black kurta. Raina knew a photo studio that enlarged the photo from my mobile phone and then had it framed. The *dhurani* was so precious that we forgot to even remove the cellophane wrapper around the frame. Some folks bought flowers and incense sticks and then we sat in a circle to share our memories of her. It was reassuring to see how freely the bitterness, love, joys, grief overflowed simultaneously. Nitu spoke about how she and Chhanda would spend hours chatting and watching men next to a liquor store and tempered that happy memory with a recollection of how Chhanda never invited her to her now mythical house parties. Kali vociferously agreed and related to us how Chhanda recently tried to lure one of her prospective clients with some cash. Kali was cruising at dawn in our neighborhood and Chhanda had woken up early and was sitting on a bench outside her building. This was

a story that I had not heard before. There were many regrets – of missed chances at reunion, of misunderstandings not resolved, of not being able to meet during her last moments. Ratna started crying and posed the most important question, “*Amader moto dhuranider ki habe?* (What will happen to *dhuranis* like us?)” There were no precise answers to that question. Towards the end of the program, Ratna asked for Chhanda’s portrait, and we happily agreed. In that room that day, she had known her the longest.

We ate Chhanda’s favorite sweets and egg roll and then had tea. Nitu had brought with her a few hijras and *kotis*, none of whom had ever met Chhanda but Nitu wanted them to attend a “community program” and make friends. Sudeb who was the *koti* daughter of one of Chhanda’s many friends was present as well. So were Raina and Munni, the seller of liquor who we briefly met in the previous chapter. The one person we missed was Tara. She was too fatigued to come because she had a chemotherapy session the previous day. However, as we stood sipping tea at a roadside stall, Tara turned up. We were all hugging. Tara’s eyes glistened as she turned to me and said, “You haven’t visited me ever since she left.” I promised to rectify my mistake.

A week later, Munni, called me, inviting me to her place for dinner on Holi. Ratna had been invited as well. After a delicious meal of mutton and rice, Munni began, “Where do I even start...” I had not even asked Munni about Chhanda but she was still thinking of the gathering and wished to speak. Among many stories, one story was about Munni’s handsome nephew who had a brief affair with Chhanda. When the affair was on the verge of ending, Chhanda showed him some video cassettes of Munni dancing at Chhanda’s place. These videos led to a bitter fight at Munni’s home. It did not matter that the nephew fucked a *dhurani* but how could his “uncle” be a *dhurani* too? It was late at night when I left. Munni ended by saying that though we must not speak ill about the dead, Chhanda was very spiteful! Munni kept asking me to come back for more

meals and conversations. Ratna stayed back at her place but on a later day, she asked me to visit her. The first thing she said was Munni's story was one sided. She conveniently forgot to mention that Chhanda used to monetarily support the nephew and some of that support would percolate down to Munni's family as well. Having shown some generosity towards the dead, Ratna resumed sharing her agonistic intimacies now and the evening turned into night.

A *dhurani* named Chhanda had stormed into our lives and her story is still unfolding and through that story, shards of our stories too. Beyond the limits of productive and reproductive lives, our tensions, the drama and the exhaustion of the everyday, the joy, the camaraderie, the hurt, the pain, the wicked fun and delicious manipulations throb – the stuff of stories that vitalize our presents. Death is overwhelming but not for too long. My eyes scanned Ratna's room for Chhanda's portrait but I could not find it. I asked her about it, and she responded that since Chhanda had all that make-up on her in that photograph, she did not want to keep it in the open but had kept it covered in cloth in her closet so that the frame would not get scratched! Ratna's neighbors knew that she used to be a dancer but that was all they knew. Ratna loved that zone of ambiguity that being simply feminine offered. She did not wish to disturb that comfortable confusion by flashing her *dhurani* friend's photo. Life still needed to be made but that is not to say that the dead are not with us We were living Chhanda's hereafter. The photo is well taken care of and so are the memories and their multiple renditions.

I had begun my chapters with a reading of *Koti ki Atma*. Jui, the ghost was watching out for her friend, Mohini. The devastating losses of HIV had been transformed into a collaboratively written play full of sex and care but then the care felt too abstract like the word, "atma" itself. Ashok's friends refused me access to her by confronting me

with the viscerality of their labors and their refusals were about the lives they were making amidst death. As time passed, this was what became the pattern – death always brought me back to life, through hijra refusals to pay attention to dead *kotis* being displayed on screen, through glowing selfies, through loud laughter and a *dhurani*'s wily negotiations to make life through the melancholia of lost glories, failing health and the waxing and waning forces of care and abandonment.

As this thesis draws to a close, Sudeb is feeling restless and wants all of us to meet soon to discuss how are we to build an infrastructure of care for our elderly. Raina is looking for funds here and there even as we have now formed yet another informal care circle for Tara and Ratna's medical needs. Anindya gets extremely agitated when yet another film about gender dysphoria is dedicated to Rituparno and perhaps this agitation will exceed the exhaustion at some point and the lecture will be back and when hierarchies are perpetuated in its organizing, there will be protests. And when nothing adds up, there will be laughter that does not allow death and violence to become the atmosphere. Death becomes the raw material for laughter. Cancer in the rectum, liver infections can be laughed at but there is always care in the laughter. Let us give Chhanda the last word.

One of her favorite stories was about a friend who she also hated, Bula, a *dhurani* who died in her 40s. Bula loved her alcohol and meat. When she saw that Chhanda had become penniless and that no lover was coming to her rescue, she mocked Chhanda saying that now it was time for her to beg at the traffic signal like the other working class *kotis*. Chhanda's pride was hurt and she cursed Bula with painful death. Now obviously with all that alcohol, Bula did develop cirrhosis of the liver and died. Chhanda's description of that death is telling. While she took pride in the thought that her curse worked but she also pointed out that the night Bula died, she had guzzled a

few bottles of whiskey and fucked five men. She had lived a full life before disappearing. Could there be a more apt way to sum up the labors of laughter and in the way it vitalized life in our so-called death worlds?

We may pause here for now.

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