

LGBTQ Activisms and Hindu Nationalism in India: An Ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian society is marked by increasingly violent majoritarianism that is redefining India as a Hindu nation. In recent years, the heightened persecution of religious minorities and an ever-expanding definition of “anti-national” has justified violence against a widening range of people. Paradoxically, in this atmosphere of shrinking public freedoms and increasing state-sanctioned ethnic violence, there has been a simultaneous expansion of LGBTQ representation in mainstream English media and nominal advancements in LGBTQ rights. As a result, a distinct form of LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism has become popular, even as other LGBTQ activists have amplified their efforts to resist Hindu nationalism. Within this context, this dissertation examines how and why LGBTQ activists support and resist Hindu nationalism, and how this reconfigures what it means to be queer in Hindu nationalist times.

I address these questions through a queer feminist digital ethnography of LGBTQ activists in New Delhi and Mumbai, conducted between February and October 2020. My ethnographic findings indicate that LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism is often advanced without Hindu nationalist support for LGBTQ rights. Based on this, I argue that what we see in India is *aspirational homonationalism*, where Hindu nationalist rhetoric is buttressed in the present to accrue LGBTQ rights and inclusion into the nation in the future. Further, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism signals deeper desires for national belonging, especially when juxtaposed against the persistent claim that homosexuality is “alien” to Indian culture. My findings also demonstrate that LGBTQ activists resisting Hindu nationalism are amplifying these efforts despite experiencing the larger atmosphere in contemporary India as dangerous and

stifling. Queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, in particular, resist the underlying narratives of LGBTQ inclusion that support Hindu nationalism, rejecting the violence of Hindu nationalism in the process.

I conclude that LGBTQ complicity with, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism maps onto existing antagonisms between gay rights activisms, queer feminisms, and Dalit queer and trans* activisms. As aspirations for homonationalism become more deeply rooted within LGBTQ activisms, and as its critiques become more stringent, Hindu nationalism deepens pre-existing fissures within these activisms by becoming another axis of difference in larger struggles over what LGBTQ activisms should fight for, and what LGBTQ lives should look like.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On 24 February 2020, I attended a series of talks in which queer and trans* activists spoke about how the Citizenship Amendment Act¹ (CAA), passed in December 2019, impacted their lives. The lecture series took place in Shaheen Bagh, a lower income, Muslim dominated neighbourhood in south-east Delhi that has since become one of the most enduring symbols of the nation-wide protests against the CAA. Amidst the din of the protest, the speakers outlined various ways in which the CAA apprehended LGBTQ and Muslim populations, drawing connections and building solidarities between these communities in Hindu nationalist India. Unknown to us, that same evening, communal riots had broken out at neighbouring CAA protest sites, also in lower income, Muslim dominated areas, where Hindu nationalist mobs had systematically attacked Muslims while looting and burning their shops and homes. In the days that followed, I interacted with many queer and trans* activists, including the ones I had met that evening, as we raised and distributed funds for the victims of these riots. While building these contingent solidarities, we exchanged notes of despair and desperation, which was our response to the violence around us.

¹ The CAA states that, “any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into India on or before the 31st day of December, 2014” would be eligible for citizenship after six years of residence in India. As Jayal (2019) notes, the “silent implication is that Muslims from these countries would continue to be treated as illegal immigrants” (p. 36). The exclusion of Muslims from the amendment is explained through majoritarian logic — since Muslims are majority populations in these three countries, they ostensibly do not need to migrate to India. However, contrary to the same logic, the CAA does not include Rohingya Muslims or Ahmadiya Muslims, who are minorities in Myanmar and Pakistan respectively, within its ambit, thereby revealing its attempt to offer Indian citizenship only to non-Muslim immigrants. The CAA has been interpreted as one (among many) steps taken by the currently incumbent right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to resignify India as a Hindu nation. I analyze this in more detail in Chapter 3.

The CAA protests, which endured for almost 100 days across the country, on the one hand, and the riots on the other, contextualize the communally charged climate and polarized population in contemporary India, where Hindu nationalism has become dangerously ascendant in the past few decades, especially under the aegis of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that formed the national government in 2014 and 2019. Recent years have been marked by the heightened persecution of religious minorities, and an ever-expanding definition of “anti-national” has justified violence against a widening range of people, while simultaneously shoring up the need for Hindu nationalism in order to tackle these imagined “threats” against the nation.

These years have also been conducive for the development of LGBTQ activism. In the past decade, homosexuality, insofar as it pertains to a consensual and private act between two adults, has been decriminalized (2018), some limited legislations on transgender rights have been put into place (2014, 2019), and there has been an increasing awareness of LGBTQ concerns in mainstream media and society. Simply put, in this larger atmosphere of shrinking public freedoms and increasing state-sanctioned ethnic violence, there has been a simultaneous expansion of LGBTQ representation in mainstream media and nominal advancements in LGBTQ rights. This has created the conditions for some LGBTQ activists to correlate the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism with the proliferation of LGBTQ rights and to reason that LGBTQ communities should support Hindu nationalism in return. Other LGBTQ activists, in contrast, resist Hindu nationalism and reject any correlation between its ascendance and the expansion of LGBTQ freedoms. As such, LGBTQ activists stand polarized on the issue of Hindu nationalism, and these divides have sharpened even further during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, we now find that some LGBTQ activists vociferously promote nationalist visions of a Hindu India, in the name of which violence is meted out to many other LGBTQ activists and communities that cannot, or will not, be interpellated into the Hindu nation. Emerging scholarship and activist opinion on this issue has suggested that this signals the arrival of homonationalism in India (Bhattacharya, 2019; Chatterjee, 2019; Das & Bund, 2020; Gawande, 2019; Sircar, 2017; Upadhyay, 2020). Homonationalism, short for ‘homonormative nationalism,’ is a concept that traces how and why LGBTQ inclusion becomes a barometer for a nation’s progress and liberalism (Puar, 2007). As an analytic that comes into being in order to map the life-times of queerness *after* its inclusion into the national body-politic, homonationalism takes, as its condition of possibility, that LGBTQ subjects have been discursively incorporated into the nation through narratives of national progress and, often, advancements in LGBTQ rights. Importantly, as an assemblage, homonationalism “moves in more than one direction: not simply from the state to subjects, but also from subjects toward the state” (Schotten, 2016, p. 357).

However, in India, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism has mostly been advanced by some LGBTQ activists, even in conditions where their rights are not guaranteed, and continues *despite* Hindu nationalist ambivalence towards LGBTQ rights. For example, even though homosexuality among consenting adults in private has been decriminalized in 2018, petitions for same-sex marriage have been repeatedly rejected or postponed by the BJP ruled central government; likewise, the Assisted Reproductive Technology Act, passed in 2021, explicitly excludes same-sex partners from its ambit; and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act passed in 2019 has been widely critiqued by queer and trans* activists for

institutionalizing trans* discrimination through the Act and limiting their right to self-determination. Over the past three decades, the BJP, as well as the larger collective of Hindu nationalist political organizations represented by the Sangh Parivar (the larger collective of Hindu nationalist organizations and political parties), have been hostile towards homosexuality at worst, and quietly tolerant or ambivalent at best. This necessitates deeper engagement with whether homonationalism explains the increasingly vociferous alliances between LGBTQ rights and Hindu nationalism, and if so, to what extent its conceptual framework must be rethought for it to be relevant in the Indian context.

The increasing polarization within LGBTQ activism along the axis of Hindu nationalism also re-animates older questions within feminist and queer theory about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and nationalism. Of particular interest here is how LGBTQ activists negotiate with national belonging, especially when a virulent manifestation of Hindutva becomes the litmus test of being included in an increasingly Hindu majoritarian India. Therefore, much of this dissertation is an attempt at theorizing what it means to be *queer* in Hindu nationalist times, charting the costs of belonging and inclusion into a Hindu nation, and tracing the ways in which contentions around nationalism map onto previously existing and newly developing antagonisms within LGBTQ activism.

As such, the research questions are framed as follows: (1) To what extent does homonationalism explain LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism in India? (2) How does the current majoritarian fantasy of a Hindu nation redistribute violence and vulnerability across LGBTQ populations in India? (3) How does subscribing to or resisting Hindu nationalist

ideologies reconfigure activist solidarities among those who identify and disidentify with these ideologies? (4) How is queerness and queer life defined, imagined, and embodied by those who subscribe to Hindu nationalist imaginations and those who resist them? and, (5) What can we learn about LGBTQ activism by paying attention to the different, and often contradictory, ways in which it responds to majoritarianism?

I address these questions through a queer feminist digital ethnography of LGBTQ activists in New Delhi and Mumbai, conducted between February and October 2020. A queer feminist ethnography, I argue, enables a robust and nuanced engagement with the contradictory, multi-faceted, and everyday ways in which LGBTQ activists make sense of Hindu nationalism, and helps capture how Hindu nationalism frames the daily lives and activism of the research participants. A queer and feminist approach to ethnographic practices is also salient for this research for two additional reasons. First, feminist and queer ethnographies place gender and sexuality as central to the construction of society and culture, and pay special attention to questions of voice, agency, and representation (Visweswaran, 1994; Boellstorff, 2010; Davis & Craven, 2016). This resonates with the values that shape the activism of most research participants. Second, feminist and queer approaches to ethnography are often interdisciplinary and reflexive, and therefore suitable for studying the politics of gender, sexuality, and nationalism in postcolonial, “Third World,” and Global South contexts (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019), within which this research is situated.

The digital turn in this ethnography was necessitated by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, but, as I show in Chapter 2, it offers a vital methodological perspective that goes far

beyond that necessity. Digital ethnographies, like feminist and queer ethnographies, also emerge from scholarship that is attuned to the workings of power and representation in the construction of digital selves and cultures (Pink, 2016). Like feminist and queer ethnographies, digital ethnographies are also interdisciplinary, reflexive, and speculative, and focus on the co-construction of the “field” by the researcher and researched. Importantly, paying attention to the role of digital media, combined with queer and feminist practices of designing and conducting ethnographic research, enabled me to highlight the importance of digital media practices in the increasing popularization of Hindu nationalism in India, as well as in shaping LGBTQ activism in the country, and this is highlighted to varying degrees across the dissertation.

My ethnographic work with LGBTQ activists finds that recent years have seen an increase in LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism. This is evident in the inauguration of groups like the Queer Hindu Alliance and the Kashmiri Youth Movement in 2019 that work, in an organized fashion, to produce LGBTQ narratives of support for Hindu nationalism. The presence of Hindu nationalist rhetoric within LGBTQ activism also becomes discernible in increasingly commonplace discourse on social media about the need to ensure that LGBTQ activism does not demonstrate support for “anti-nationals”. However, analyzing how LGBTQ activism has responded to Hindu nationalism from the late 1980s reveals that such support has been vocalized since long before the ascendancy of the BJP. LGBTQ activists have endorsed Hindu nationalist ideologies at a time when LGBTQ rights were far from being achieved, and done so despite acute resistance from Hindu nationalists regarding the same. This serves to complicate straightforward understandings of homonationalism in the Indian context.

Since LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism is often advanced without Hindu nationalist support for LGBTQ rights, I suggest that what we see in India is an *aspirational homonationalism*, where Hindu nationalist rhetoric is buttressed in the present to accrue LGBTQ rights and belonging into the nation in the future. Such aspirations for homonationalism emerge from a kind of LGBTQ pragmatism, which I define as a homonormative desire for, and investment in, inclusion into mainstream society. LGBTQ pragmatism is also framed by the foreclosed possibility of a queer utopia, such that “there is no future but the here and now of everyday life” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 22). As such, this pragmatism ensures that straightforward, identity-based inclusion becomes the primary agenda for LGBTQ activisms, eventually reinforcing homonationalist logics.

Additionally, in the Indian context, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism also signals deeper desires for national belonging, especially when juxtaposed against the persistent claim that homosexuality is “alien” to Indian culture. Since these claims were made most assiduously by Hindu nationalists in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, some LGBTQ activisms, particularly those working towards gay rights within circuits of HIV/AIDS alleviation, responded by shoring up their Hindu identity to mark their belongingness as legitimate gay subjects of the Indian nation. Lesbian feminist activisms also grappled with this allegation, but negotiated differently with the nationalist question, emerging against Hindu nationalism by claiming their place in a more secular Indian nation. In recent years, Dalit queer and trans* activisms have also critiqued these aspirations for homonationalist inclusion by highlighting the numerous ways in which their existence effaces the narratives of LGBTQ progress that undergird homonationalism.

While this dissertation offers a theorization of aspirational homonationalism, it also centers the perspectives of LGBTQ activists resisting Hindu nationalism, who are amplifying these efforts despite experiencing the larger atmosphere in contemporary India as dangerous, stifling, and threatening. Queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms resist the underlying narratives of LGBTQ inclusion that support Hindu nationalism, and reject the violent majoritarianism of Hindu nationalism in the process. By situating current queer feminist resistance to Hindu nationalism within debates that shaped the emergence of these activisms, I demonstrate that sustained critiques about the “Western” nature of homosexuality framed gay rights activisms and queer feminisms in contrasting ways; while gay rights activisms resorted to metonymizing Hindu nationalist identity *as* authentic Indian queerness, queer feminist activisms emerged *against* Hindu nationalism.

These divergent positions on Hindu nationalism are rooted in different perspectives on gender, which has been a long standing point of contention between gay rights activists and queer feminists. Queer feminist activists have staunchly rejected Hindu nationalism for its patriarchal assumptions, and for its construction of the “Indian woman” as a mother, a martyr, or a warrior in service of the nation (Banerjee, 2006), who is destined to remain subservient to the Hindu man (Mehta, 2015). For queer feminists, LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism articulates not just a failure to be queer, but blindness to the gendered discrimination that is deep-rooted in Hindu nationalism as well. As such, underscoring these antagonistic positions on the question of Hindu nationalism are two competing imaginations of LGBTQ activisms, of what it means to be queer, and how to embody a queer politics.

Adding to these antagonisms, Dalit queer and trans* activisms offer another lens through which the rhetoric of LGBTQ progress and mainstreaming (that undergirds the claims to aspirational homonationalism) can be put into crisis. Having emerged as a distinct political voice in the past decade, Dalit queer and trans* activists critique how the most important issue foregrounded by LGBTQ activisms since the 1990s, namely, the decriminalization of homosexuality, rested upon logics of privacy and respectability, which they argue are defined through caste discrimination. They also demonstrate that, since Hindu nationalism is grounded in the subjugation of Dalit communities, aspirational homonationalism effaces the presence of Dalit queer and trans* people as “legitimate” queer subjects. As such, both, queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, that remain underrepresented in sexuality studies of/from South Asia, importantly argue that queerness is incommensurate with Hindu nationalism. In doing so, they offer alternative imaginations of queer life and activisms at a time when the Hindu nationalist atmosphere is rendering them increasingly precarious.

Summarizing these findings, I argue that, in India, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism can be understood as aspirational homonationalism. These aspirations are also rooted in a desire for national belonging and legitimacy as “authentic” Indian LGBTQ subjects. Situating LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism within the emergence and development of LGBTQ activisms shows that LGBTQ complicity with, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism maps onto existing antagonisms between gay rights activisms, queer feminisms, and Dalit queer and trans* activisms. As aspirations for homonationalism become more deeply rooted within LGBTQ activisms, and as its critiques become more stringent, Hindu nationalism deepens pre-existing fissures within these activisms on not just what it means to be “queer,” but also by

becoming another axis of difference in larger struggles over defining what LGBTQ activists should fight for.

The question of national belonging has always been salient for queer theory. Since the emergence of queer theory as a field of inquiry, scholars have argued for the need to denaturalize the heterosexual assumptions that undergird nationalism and citizenship (Duggan, 1994). Berlant (1997) has analyzed why LGBT sexualities were seen as a disruption of the American national public sphere, and underscored the relationship between heterosexuality, the family, and nationalism. Around the same time, Ferguson (1997) noted that U.S. discourses of citizenship produced racial and ethnic groups as non-heteronormative, thereby pathologizing them. Within this context, it became clear that the task of queer theory, particularly queer of colour critique, would be to think with the various “incommensurabilities of sexuality and national belonging while marking the false equivalences of the nation-state” (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005, p. 8). This focus on nationalism within queer studies continues today. As Eng & Puar (2020) argue, it is vital to “examine what is left of queer outside the political, economic, and cultural mandates of the sovereign nation-state and the liberal individual as its prized citizen-subject” (p. 5).

This dissertation contributes to this body of scholarship and demonstrates that the current atmosphere of Hindu nationalism has forced LGBTQ activists to negotiate with the question of nationalism, in old and new ways, and shifted the terrain of how to think about queer and trans* life and politics in India, at least for the foreseeable future. What is perhaps most troubling is how Hindu nationalism is resignifying LGBTQ activists through its own rhetorics and grammar, such that LGBTQ activists must either stand “for the integrity of the nation,” or be

deemed “anti-national”. While nationalism has always been a contentious issue for LGBTQ activists in India, its new resignification in ways that demand that all LGBTQ activists stand, unavoidably, “for or against the nation²,” shifts the ways in which LGBTQ activists can define and enact a politics of gender and sexuality, tying these activists to the (Hindu) nation and re-codifying these activist imaginaries through nationalist schematics. This shift is important because it signals how deep Hindu nationalism’s rootedness has become in Indian society, and in doing so, it highlights how LGBTQ activists must now navigate with the question of nationalism in new ways.

I. Aspirational Homonationalism in the Indian Context

Furthering the analysis of the relationship between sexual life and national formation, homonationalism is an analytic lens that traces the assemblages and processes through which certain LGBTQ populations get folded into the mythology of the liberal nation. Homonationalism relies on, and advances, the conceptual work done by “homonormativity,” defined as a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). Homonormativity is understood as a kind of LGBTQ identity politics that is rooted in the desire for inclusion and belonging into “mainstream” or normative society. This desire aligns homonormativity with dominant regimes such as capitalism and neoliberalism. Puar (2007) extends this relation, and deploys homonationalism as an analytic

² This phrase intentionally draws parallels with George W. Bush’s famous statement, “Either you are with us, or against us,” which became emblematic of the ‘War on Terror,’ the United States’ response to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001.

framework, or assemblage, that exposes how LGBTQ politics can be complicit with the dominant regimes of imperialism and nationalism, particularly in reference to American empire.

In its broadest sense, Puar defines homonationalism as a “structuring facet of modernity ... [that names] a historical shift in the production of nation-states from the insistence on heteronormativity to the increasing inclusion of homonormativity” (Puar, 2017, pp. 230-231). Through this process the inclusion of certain LGBTQ populations into the nation by bestowing them equal rights constructs LGBTQ inclusion as a signifier of national progress, and this narrative of liberal nationalism is then utilized to erase and/or justify nationalist violence on other populations inside and outside the nation, LGBTQ or otherwise. As such, homonationalism offers a framework that traces how LGBTQ subjects transition “from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families)” (Puar, 2007, p. xx). In doing so, homonationalism demonstrates how “the acceptance of liberal LGBT rights has become a barometer of a nation’s fitness for sovereignty” (Rao, 2020, p. 11).

Therefore, homonationalism highlights how “‘the homosexual question’ comes to supplement ‘the woman question’ of the colonial era to modulate arbitration between modernity and tradition, citizen and terrorist, homonational and queer” (Puar, 2015, p. 328). Here, Puar is referring to how colonialism was justified as a “civilizing mission,” wherein “white men [were] seeking to save brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988, p. 101), and re-writing it as “white queer (men) saving brown homosexuals from brown heterosexuals” (Puar, 2015, p. 329). By drawing this connection between colonial imperialism and American empire in contemporary

life, Puar situates homonationalism as an analytic that documents the conditions in which homosexuality is constructed as a metonym of liberalism and national advancement, inducted into the nation, and thereby used to justify violence and war against cultures and nations that are deemed illiberal, backward, or intolerant. As such, homonationalism signals how “an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity” (Puar, 2007, p. 2). In doing so, it maps the “consequences of the successes of the LGBT liberal rights movement” (ibid., p. 3) and offers a critique of how these successes are conscripted into nationalist discourses in ways that reinforce a nation’s progressiveness and liberalism.

In its original formulation (Puar, 2007), homonationalism predominantly focuses on how American nationalism is advanced by promoting LGBTQ rights, and how LGBTQ populations promote the narrative of American exceptionalism and empire within this relation. As such, within national contexts where LGBTQ inclusion strengthens nationalist exceptionalism, homonationalism moves bi-directionally between the nation and its subjects, requiring both sides to uphold its rhetorics and logics. According to Puar (2007), the analytic work of homonationalism is to critique the processes through which LGBTQ populations are segregated based on their alignment with, and their upholding of, American nationalism. Further, by mapping the field within which some LGBTQ populations are valorized as signs of national progress, homonationalism lays bare how these same processes also produce *other* LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ populations who are positioned as threatening to the nation, as terrorists and outsiders. As such, homonationalism attempts to trace how race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship frame homonormativity within nationalist rhetorics. For Puar, the homonationalist imagination of

the white middle-class queer subject produces the populations of racialized, immigrant, lower-class, people of colour as perversely sexualized, and therefore, as undeserving of rights, freedoms, and sometimes, citizenship. In this way, “homonationalism as assemblage” juxtaposes the power relations between differently sexualized populations, to argue that, in the United States, some LGBTQ populations are included into the national imaginary *because* other racialized and Muslim populations are excluded as “improper” or “illegitimate” LGBTQ subjects.

Since its coinage, homonationalism has travelled widely and has been used to understand the relationship between LGBTQ activisms and nationalisms in numerous contexts. For example, by emphasizing how settler colonialism determines national imaginations of sexuality, Morgensen has extended the analytic utility of homonationalism to redefine it “as an effect of U.S. queer modernities forming amid the conquest of Native peoples and the settling of Native land” (2010, p. 105); Murray (2014) has documented that, within the logic of the Canadian refugee system, the “authenticity” of LGBT refugees promotes Canadian nationalism as “civilized” because of its queerphilic orientations, thereby marking homophobic societies and nations as “uncivilized”; Wahab (2016) has argued that, by framing countries in the global South as homophobic, countries like Canada can reinforce their commitment to human rights, through which structural issues of racism within Canada are then invisibilized; similarly, Upadhyay & Ravecca (2017) and McCaskell (2018) have also analyzed the homonationalist impulse in Canada through the exclusion of Queers against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) from Gay Pride Toronto in 2010. Additionally, homonationalism has been used to describe the integration of queerness within the nationalist discourses of Sweden (Jungar & Peltonen, 2017), Singapore

(Lazar, 2020), Netherlands (Spierings, 2020), Croatia (Moss, 2014), South Africa (Mbasalaki, 2022), Israel (Puar & Mikdashi, 2016), as well as other countries.

Adding to these varied circulations and in response to the concept's viral travels, Puar has also expanded upon her original formulation of homonationalism over the years, broadening its scope in the process (2013; 2015; 2017; 2020; 2022). Most notably, homonationalism has shifted from its focus on the "U.S. formation of the homonational subject of rights and discourses" (Puar, 2007, p. xxxiii) to not being "an attribute of any one state or states" (Puar, 2022, p. 3), such that it is now defined as an analytic that maps the global geopolitics of queer legitimacy. In its expanded form, homonationalism becomes a field in itself, a "facet of modernity" that "can be resisted and re-signified, but not opted out of" (Puar, 2013, p. 336).

The broadening of homonationalism, and its deployment in other contexts, has raised important questions about its analytic and conceptual utility, especially since there has been a tendency to diagnose all forms of LGBTQ inclusion into the nation as homonationalism (Banerjea, 2022; Schotten, 2016). Importantly, Allen (2013) has asked what homonationalism means, given that "the forms of homonormativity attainable by white gay, lesbian, and some transgender subjects [are] simply not available to most black subjects" (p. 554), especially in Caribbean, African, and Global South contexts. Puar herself has been critical of the uniform use of homonationalism as a diagnosis across different contexts, suggesting that "it seems more prudent to note the divergences and differences that create multiple kinds of homonationalisms" (Puar, 2015, p. 326).

Even though these various deployments of “homonationalism” have broadened its framework beyond its original formulation, I suggest that any instantiation of homonationalism requires two basic conditions to be met. First, homonationalism requires the nation-state to be invested in producing a nationalist discourse that situates LGBTQ progress as national progress. This, in turn, involves state patronage of LGBTQ rights, even if such patronage is not uniform or universal. As such, homonationalism does not signal the end of institutionalized homophobia; rather, it apprehends the ways in which LGBTQ rights are tied to discourses of national progress. This may remain true even in contexts where LGBTQ rights are clawed back, or threats are made about doing so. Second, homonationalism needs LGBTQ activists and populations to also uphold this story of LGBTQ progress as national progress, and in doing so, mark their complicity with the nation. Therefore, it is vital that homonationalist logics and rhetorics be upheld in narratives of LGBTQ activists and communities, as well as in the narratives produced by national and state actors. On the one hand, homonationalism illuminates how LGBTQ progress, in the form of rights, comes to be seen as a marker of national progress; and on the other hand, homonationalism documents how LGBTQ activists and populations also uphold this story of LGBTQ progress to mark their inclusion into the nation.

However, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, in India, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism is advanced *despite* Hindu nationalist ambivalence, and more often, antipathy towards LGBTQ rights. Further, this complicity takes shape in an environment in which most LGBTQ communities remain without access to rights, such as same-sex marriage and adoption, which are hallmarks of the homonormative national belonging that undergirds homonationalism. This presents a unique situation that requires us to rethink and extend current definitions of

homonationalism, so that it can explain LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in the absence or ambivalence of Hindu nationalist support for LGBTQ rights.

As such, I argue that we understand LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in India as aspirational homonationalism. Aspirational homonationalism highlights how LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism in the present is oriented towards ensuring LGBTQ belonging and inclusion into the Hindu nation in the future. As a strategy, it is geared towards achieving the rights and inclusion that Puar's conceptualization builds upon as a precondition of homonationalism. By participating in Hindu nationalist violence and vociferously stating that they "stand for the integrity of the (Hindu) nation," aspiring homonationalists demonstrate their utility for the ongoing project of Hindu nationalism. They hope that this utility will guarantee them legitimacy, rights, and a place within the Hindu nation in the future.

Drawing upon Puar's (2015) call to think through "multiple homonationalisms," aspirational homonationalism extends Puar's (2007) original concept by focusing on LGBTQ desires to belong to a nation in which their rights and freedoms are not guaranteed. While Puar's conceptualization of homonationalism outlines what happens *after* LGBTQ populations get the rights they "cannot not want" (Spivak, 1999), aspirational homonationalism demonstrates that similar processes of nationalist belonging can take shape prior to being included in the nation, in order to ensure that LGBTQ populations get what they want *in the future*. Importantly, aspirational homonationalism highlights that state-enshrined LGBTQ rights and the nationalist embrace of its LGBTQ populations are not necessary preconditions for LGBTQ populations to support nationalist projects. Rather, aspirational homonationalism emerges from deeper desires

for national belonging that can thrive in conditions where LGBTQ rights are not guaranteed, and, as this dissertation demonstrates, can even be advanced despite nationalist antipathy towards homosexuality.

My focus on LGBTQ aspirations as central to how homonationalism is taking shape in India is based upon contextualizing this desire to be included in the Hindu nation within the debates that have shaped the emergence and development of LGBTQ activism in the subcontinent. Situating current discourses of LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism within older debates reveals that such support has existed, in some form, since the 1990s. This underscores deeper desires for national belonging that, in certain moments, may transcend the LGBTQ pragmatism that frames demands for LGBTQ rights. As I outline across Chapters 4 and 5, LGBTQ activism developed in India alongside postcolonial anxieties around globalization, leading to a persistent critique that homosexuality was a “Western” import, “alien” to Indian culture, and only limited to a small, “elite” part of the population. In response to these critiques, LGBTQ activists, predominantly those advancing gay rights, argued that homosexuality was intrinsic to Hinduism, and therefore, to Indian history. As early as 2001, some gay rights activists deployed Hindu nationalist rhetoric to discredit other gay rights activists by labelling them “anti-national” (Menon, 2007). In doing so, they emphasized their own legitimacy as gay Hindu national subjects, tying LGBTQ authenticity to Hindu nationalism in the Indian context. Based on this, I suggest that aspirational homonationalism in India is not simply an aspiration for LGBTQ rights, but also reveals a desire to belong to a distinctly Hindu nation.

This theorization of aspirational homonationalism builds upon recent scholarship that has also attempted to think through the current increase in LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism. While an early dialogue between Banerjea & Dasgupta (2013) interrogated whether homonationalism can be applied in the Indian context, it did not reach a conclusive answer. In light of increasingly vehement LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism, however, more recent writings have dispensed with these hesitations. Sircar (2017) and Sircar & Jain (2017) have argued that a certain “elite Indian queer” faction of a larger, more heterogeneous queer movement in India has embraced homonationalism in the past decade. This intimacy, between Hindu nationalism and LGBTQ activism, has been further analyzed by Upadhyay (2020) as “homohindunationalism.” Editorials and articles by scholars and LGBTQ activists alike have also asserted the presence of homonationalism in India on the grounds that there has been, in recent years, an increasing effort by certain LGBTQ activists not only to mark their support for Hindu nationalism, but also to rehabilitate Hinduism as a LGBTQ-friendly religion (Bhattacharya, 2019; Chatterjee, 2019; Das & Bund, 2020; Gawande, 2019).

In their essay, Upadhyay (2020) argues for homohindunationalism in India on multiple grounds: first, Hinduism is rehabilitated as a LGBTQ-friendly religion; second, Christianity and Islam are projected as homophobic religions; third, “dominant-caste Hindu queer, trans, and gender nonconforming folks are welcomed within the Hindutva project” (p. 6); and, fourth, Dalit, Bahujan, Muslim, Adivasi, Kashmiri populations are rendered *other* to the Hindu nation. Upadhyay instantiates homohindunationalism in India through several examples: the BJP support of the prominent transgender activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who infamously said that hijras

should build the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya³; the blatant Islamophobia of Ashok Row Kavi, the founder of Humsafar Trust India, and one of most well known gay rights activists in India; and the support for the abrogation of Article 370⁴ shown by the Queer Hindu Alliance.

While Upadhyay offers concrete examples that demonstrate how some LGBTQ activists and organizations support Hindu nationalism, they also acknowledge the “BJP’s lack of support for queer and trans rights” (p. 8). This leaves us with some ambiguity about how Hindu LGBTQ subjects are “welcomed within the Hindutva project,” especially given the lack of LGBTQ rights and protections in India today. In contrast, I understand these same gestures as manifestations of an aspiration present among LGBTQ activists to belong to the Hindu nation. As LGBTQ activists demonstrate their eagerness to build a Hindu rashtra, these aspirations may well yield results in the form of contingent inclusion into the Indian nation-state, but only in the future.

Like Upadhyay (2020), Sircar (2017) also outlines how, in the past decade, advertisements targeted towards LGBTQ populations have been on the rise, and analyzes this as a signifier of LGBTQ mainstreaming, albeit only of an “urban, anglicized, and elite ... domestic monogamous conjugality” (pp. 10-11). Given that this commercial inclusion is underway in Hindu nationalist India, Sircar argues that: “The rise of the Hindu Right in India, has in fact, seen

³ This comment by Tripathi refers to her support for building a temple honouring Lord Ram, a prominent Hindu god, at the exact site of a now demolished mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. This issue, as I analyze in detail in Chapter 3, is one of the crucial modes through which Hindu nationalism lays claim to the Indian nation.

⁴ Due to its contested history and location at the border of India and Pakistan, Article 370 was established in the Indian Constitution in 1954 to give Jammu & Kashmir partial autonomy, and Jammu & Kashmir had its own Constitution, flag, and legislative autonomy. The BJP has repeatedly sought to politicize the conflict in the region towards its own ends, and where one stands on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir is often seen as the “litmus test of one’s nationalism” (Haq, 2021). One of the BJP’s crucial national election manifesto agendas in 2014 and 2019 had been to dissolve Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, and it achieved its goal on August 5 2019, unilaterally abrogating Article 370.

a simultaneous rise of the neoliberal and Hindu queer subject, who performs, “homonationalist” and “homocapitalist” practices with aplomb in their ostensibly chic queer lifestyles” (p. 21). Here, Sircar is alluding to “homocapitalism,” a concept coined by Rao (2015; 2020) to highlight how, particularly in postcolonial nations, LGBTQ rights are promoted by making a “business case for LGBT inclusion” (Rao, 2022, p. 138). As I write elsewhere: “This produces a context where queer mainstream representation gives queers an opportunity to access more resources that makes lives livable, while also consolidating capitalist queer subjectivities in ways that push non-market driven queer lives into unintelligibility and precarity” (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 553). Thus, homocapitalism threads contemporary discourses of LGBTQ rights and citizenship through the workings of global capital, such that granting LGBTQ rights is posited as “profitable” for many nations.

It is undoubtedly true that recent years have seen an increase in brands and advertisements directing their attention to a certain section of LGBTQ populations in India, particularly in the aftermath of the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018. Further, homocapitalism explains the logics undergirding recent books like *Queeristan* (Shahani, 2020), that center the importance of LGBTQ inclusion in the Indian workforce through the lens of profitability and market economics. However, Sircar’s argument conflates advances in LGBTQ mainstreaming and inclusion in the circuits of the Indian economy with their inclusion into the nation-state. In doing so, it does not pay sufficient attention to the concrete lack of LGBTQ rights in contemporary India, as well as the BJP government’s reticence to situate LGBTQ inclusion as a sign of India’s advancement, tolerance, or progress.

As Banerjea (2022) argues, homonationalism “cannot explain why LGBTQ identities are being mobilized for specific political [or market-driven] projects and yet remain without a livelihood, affirmative action, and anti-discrimination guarantees” (p. 5). This is precisely why it becomes vital to analyze *why* some LGBTQ activists support Hindu nationalism, despite the lack of recognition by the Hindu nationalist government. Banerjea (2022) reads LGBTQ claims directed at the Hindu nationalist government, as well as the inclusion of LGBTQ rights in the election manifestos of different political parties, through the lens of “homopopulism,” which she defines as a socio-political condition in which LGBTQ rights and concerns are invoked without actual LGBTQ inclusion into the national body. In the Indian context, populism has been understood as a mobilization of the masses without the intention to implement reforms or grant rights, but rather to “resort to identity politics to replace social issues with more symbolic ones” (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 33). According to Banerjea (2022), it is the rhetorical frame of homopopulism within which LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism is mobilized — LGBTQ activists, for the most part bereft of equal rights, lay a populist claim to the Hindu nation in order to lobby the governments for legal rights and protections.

While homopopulism offers a unique analysis of LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in contemporary times, it cannot fully explain why, as my research findings indicate, a certain section of LGBTQ activists has supported Hindu nationalism since the 1990s, in political climates when the BJP was not in power. Further, even in our contemporary moment, when the BJP is in power, Banerjea’s own analysis shows that, compared to the 2019 national election manifestoes of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist

(CPI-M), the BJP's manifesto commits to LGBTQ rights and inclusion the least. Yet, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism remains on the rise.

Like Banerjea (2022), I argue that all rights-based claims to the Hindu nationalist government must not be read through the lens of homonationalism, especially at a time when queer and trans* lives remain far from achieving the kinds of rights and protections they need in order to survive, or experience full citizenship in the Indian nation-state. However, I also suggest that homopopulism does not offer an explanation of why LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism have always existed, in some shape or form, since the very emergence of LGBTQ activism in India. Rather, as I argue in this dissertation, persistent LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism can be made sense of through the lens of national belonging and a desire for legitimacy, and therefore, through what I call aspirational homonationalism.

II. Being “Queer” in Hindu Nationalist Times

As I noted above, aspirational homonationalism is dangerous because it alerts us to LGBTQ desires of belonging to violent nationalist projects even in the absence of rights and legal recognitions. While this dissertation maps the increasingly vocal presence of these aspirations within LGBTQ activism, it also focuses on the LGBTQ activism resisting these logics. In doing so, I center the perspectives of queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists in this research. Particularly in Chapters 5 and 6, I document their resistance to Hindu nationalism, and map the ways in which queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activism are impacted by the heightening oppressiveness of a Hindu nationalist atmosphere that forces these activism to negotiate, at every turn, with the question of nationalism. Based on this, it becomes

clear that these activisms are becoming increasingly precarious as a result of Hindu nationalism. And yet, these activisms persist in weaving together an intersectional imagination of queer and trans* life that, even if no longer free of Hindu nationalist violence, continues to oppose it.

In their own way, queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms demonstrate that what they consider “queer” is built upon a rejection of Hindu nationalism and its violent machinations. For queer feminists, whose activisms were catalyzed in response to Hindu nationalist oppositions to the lesbian relationship depicted in the film *Fire*, queerness is simply incommensurate with aspiring for or supporting Hindu nationalism. Similarly, for Dalit queer and trans* activists, “caste is the currency of sexuality” (Borisa, 2020. p. 93), indicating that caste discrimination shapes sexual desires and LGBTQ sociality. As such, for these activisms, supporting Hindu nationalism is akin to contributing to their own subjugation. Both these strands of LGBTQ activisms critique narratives of LGBTQ progress and inclusion that form the basis of aspirational homonationalism by asking *who* the Hindu nation includes, especially given the heightening, often institutional, violence against Muslims, Dalits, and all those deemed “anti-national” in contemporary India. In doing so, they highlight how aspirational homonationalism, and the desire for inclusion into the Hindu nationalist body, comes at the expense of excluding numerous non-Hindu, non-dominant caste LGBTQ populations.

Importantly, Hindu nationalism becomes another axis that cleaves these different strands of LGBTQ activisms apart. While LGBTQ activists complicit with Hindu nationalism routinely situate queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists as “anti-national” in an attempt to delegitimize them, queer feminists and Dalit queer and trans* activists also frame LGBTQ

supporters of Hindu nationalism as “not queer”. Relatedly, while gay rights advocates of Hindu nationalism term intersectionality a “malaise” (Iyer-Mitra, 2018), queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists build their framework of queerness upon it. Further, since LGBTQ activists who support Hindu nationalism mostly advocate for gay rights, they are fondly labelled “Sanghi gays,” and, in this way, are delegitimized as “queer” activists⁵. Meanwhile, “Sanghi gays” attempt to denigrate queer feminists as “The Lesbian mafia”⁶. In how these antagonisms take shape, queerness comes to define a malleable set of practices and politics that is held together by its critique of Hindu nationalism, and the rejection of LGBTQ assimilation into the Hindu nation at the cost of the minoritization of other populations. In this way, queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists attempt to redefine what it means to be “queer” in Hindu nationalist times.

Shah (2019) writes that “the critical space for thinking about national unity, belonging, and un-belonging has been historically and constitutionally generative for feminist, queer and trans* critique” (p. 2). Centering narratives of queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists in this dissertation enables me to highlight not only their robust critiques of Hindu nationalism and LGBTQ aspirations of belonging into the nation, but also their everyday practices of resisting Hindu nationalist encroachment upon their already precarious ways of life. Queer feminists, in particular, extend their established frameworks of crisis intervention to now include all those minoritized by Hindu nationalism’s violent exigencies, stretching themselves thin even

⁵ This is why I use “LGBTQ” as an umbrella term, and use “queer” only to address specific kinds of activism that are in line with queer of colour critique. In Chapters 5 and 6, which focus on queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activism respectively, I discuss how they embody “queer” sexuality as a function of caste, gender, and sometimes, class. Outside of this formulation, I also use “queer” instead of “LGBTQ” in direct citations by participants, who may use “queer” as a generic term to signify LGBTQ activism.

⁶ I explain the series of events that led to this (rather phenomenal) term being coined in Chapter 5.

as Hindu nationalist violence limits their resources even further. Similarly, in their orientation to the co-constituted nature of caste, sexuality, and gender, Dalit queer and trans* activists orient queerness towards the material impact of Hindu nationalist violence on minoritized communities. This produces an understanding of queerness that is concerned with the politics of life and survival beyond sexual identity.

However, even as queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists come together in resisting Hindu nationalism, it is important to qualify that their alliances remain tense, and fraught with problems. As I demonstrate in Chapter 6, Dalit queer and trans* activists critique the general lack of caste consciousness within LGBTQ activisms, including queer feminist spaces, and note that, very often, their inclusion into these spaces and collectives remains performative. This highlights the cautious and hesitant nature of these alliances. Yet, that these solidarities exist, however provisionally, also signals that queer feminist activisms are evolving to reflect on the ways in which their collectives implicitly or explicitly maintain caste hierarchies, even if slowly.

Together, in constructing, and holding on to, expansive imaginations of queerness, queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms offer an important counter-imagination to the divisiveness of nationalism and the pragmatism of LGBTQ inclusion into the nation. Through everyday practices where they extend solidarity to all populations minoritized by Hindu nationalism, these activisms refuse not only the tired framework of sexual identity politics, but also demonstrate their commitment to ensuring the survival of those communities and imaginations that Hindu nationalists want to excise from the (Hindu) nation. This is what is

stake, then, in being queer in Hindu nationalist times — not only a politics that reveals the fault-lines of aspirational homonationalism, but an activism that reshapes what solidarity means in the face of unending nationalist violence.

III. Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2, titled ‘A Patch-worked/Networked Feminist, Queer, and Digital Ethnography,’ lays out the methodological considerations and frameworks that shape this research. In this chapter, I describe the rationale for why I had decided to conduct a queer feminist ethnography and how this methodology shifted to a digital ethnography in light of Covid-19. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first section focuses on queer and feminist ethnography, and outlines the methods and locations I had chosen for this research; the second section describes digital ethnography, and how its principles and methodological practices allowed me to examine my research questions while also fitting well with the tenets of queer and feminist ethnography; and the third section makes sense of some instances of rejections during fieldwork, and thinks through how these rejections shaped the research.

Chapter 3, titled ‘Hindu Nationalism in India,’ provides a context of Hindu nationalism in India under which LGBTQ activism operates and describes the conditions under which LGBTQ complicity with, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism take shape. This chapter is divided into two sections: in the first section, I briefly describe the basic tenets of Hindu nationalism as it developed until the 1990s. In the second section, I focus on analyzing Hindu nationalism since the 1990s, when LGBTQ activism began to emerge in India. My main argument is that Hindu nationalism is a majoritarian fantasy based on a “nationalism of the chosen people”. It is rooted

in majoritarian anxiety and a “wounded attachment” (Brown, 1993) to the Hindu rashtra/nation, which requires the elimination Muslim others and the subjugation of Dalit others. I also demonstrate how this fantasy of the Hindu nation is based on heterosexual and reproductive gender roles, and, therefore, necessarily excludes queer sexualities from its midst.

The desire for a Hindu heterotopia, combined with majoritarian anxiety, necessitates the escalation of violence towards achieving a total annihilation or subjugation of non-Hindu others from the nation-space. In the past decade, in particular, the rise of vigilante publics who work in tandem with the Hindu nationalist government to permeate public space — across digital and physical realms — have contributed to increasing violence in the name of the Hindu nation. The Hindu nationalist schema, in which majoritarian anxieties justify escalating levels of violence, helps contextualize how state-sanctioned vigilante mobs punish those who resist Hindu nationalism with increasing impunity. This produces an atmosphere of Hindu nationalist violence that permeates every facet of Indian society. In this atmosphere, LGBTQ activists find themselves unable to escape the question of nationalism.

Chapter 4, titled ‘Theorizing Aspirational Homonationalism in the Indian Context,’ analyzes the sequence of events that led to a call for some queer and trans* activists to be arrested for chanting “anti-national” slogans during the Mumbai Pride March in 2020. Building on interviews and other ethnographic data, I argue that LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in India must be understood as aspirational homonationalism, which ultimately signals deeper desires for national belonging. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the debates through which HIV/AIDS related gay rights activists emerged. Here, I suggest that

the routing of homosexual populations through life or death due to HIV/AIDS produced a kind of LGBTQ pragmatism that obscured intersectional imaginations of a queer future and produced the aspiration for homonationalism. The second section argues that aspirations for homonationalism, while rooted in pragmatism, also highlight an aspiration to belong to the Hindu nation. I argue that this desire for national belonging emerged as a response to persistent critiques which asserted that homosexuality was a “Western” import, and suggest that this was one way in which HIV/AIDS related gay rights activism reconciled with the question of nationalism in the Indian context. Importantly, I also demonstrate how Hindu nationalist rhetoric was then deployed to discredit other LGBTQ activism, in an effort to control and shape the agendas of LGBTQ activism.

Chapter 5, titled ‘Queer Feminist Negotiations with Hindu Nationalism,’ aims to analyze why and how queer feminists resist homonationalism. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section analyzes the major debates that shaped the emergence of lesbian feminisms and their evolution into queer feminisms. I demonstrate how these activism were established as a response to Hindu nationalism, and argue that their understanding of queerness is grounded in resisting Hindu nationalist ideology. This resistance, I suggest, is another kind of negotiation with the question of Hindu nationalism, one that highlights how Hindu nationalism becomes another axis through which existing fissures between gay rights activism and queer feminist activism are deepened. The second section of this chapter builds on ethnographic data and interviews to argue that queer feminist activism experience Hindu nationalism as a crisis that requires consistent intervention. Here, I build upon queer of color critique and analyze how queer

feminist responses to Hindu nationalism are practices of building solidarity with those marginalized by Hindu nationalism's violent exigencies.

Chapter 6, titled 'Dalit Queer and Trans* Critiques of Hindu Nationalism,' focuses on how Dalit queer and trans* activism offer another mode of resistance to Hindu nationalism and homonationalism. In this chapter, I argue that, by reiterating that caste discrimination is intrinsic to Hindu nationalist ideology, Dalit queer and trans* activists interrupt the narratives of LGBTQ progress and inclusion upon which aspirations for homonationalism are built. This chapter is also divided into two sections. The first section offers a brief explanation of caste, and outlines how caste discrimination shapes LGBTQ activism. Here, I also examine how my own position as a dominant-caste Hindu woman impacted Dalit queer and trans* participation in this research. The second section of this chapter focuses on Dalit queer and trans* critiques of LGBTQ activism. In this section, I highlight how Dalit queer and trans* activists critique the logic of respectability and privacy based on which homosexuality was decriminalized in India. In the third section, I theorize how Dalit queer and trans* assertions of "backwardness," in the form of educational, economic, and socio-political under-development, invade and supplant narratives of LGBTQ progress. Overall, in this chapter, I suggest that Dalit queer and trans* activism offer a more capacious understanding of queer and trans* life, and in this way, resist the constricted terrain of aspirational homonationalism as well as the divisive, caste-based ideologies of Hindu nationalism.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I conclude the dissertation by restating the main arguments of this research and highlighting its limitations. I suggest that aspirational homonationalism has

important implications for our current understandings of the role of LGBTQ subjects play in supporting nationalist and authoritarian projects, and outline some future directions for this research that advance this argument.

Chapter 2

A Patch-worked/Networked Feminist, Queer, and Digital Ethnography

As I noted in the *Introduction*, in its broadest sense, I am interested in analyzing the effects of majoritarian Hindu nationalism on LGBTQ activisms and communities in contemporary India. Given how Hindu nationalist violence has become increasingly ubiquitous in the subcontinent in the past three decades, it has become crucial to ask how Hindu nationalism is impacting and shaping LGBTQ activisms in the country. Therefore, the salient questions for this research can be framed as follows: (1) To what extent does homonationalism explain LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism in India? (2) How does the current majoritarian fantasy of a Hindu nation redistribute violence and vulnerability across LGBTQ populations in India? (3) How does subscribing to or resisting Hindu nationalist ideologies reconfigure activist solidarities among those who identify and disidentify with these ideologies? (4) How is queerness and queer life defined, imagined, and embodied by those who subscribe to Hindu nationalist imaginations and those who resist them? and (5) What can we learn about LGBTQ activism by paying attention to the different, and often contradictory, ways in which it responds to majoritarianism?

Taken together, these questions outline my desire to examine, on discursive, material, and intimate registers, how LGBTQ politics in India is shaped through, and against, Hindu nationalism. Due to the focus of these questions on contemporary LGBTQ life and politics, as well as the weight given to how Hindu nationalism re-shapes the everyday realities of LGBTQ activists, I decided to adopt the ethnographic method for this research. An ethnography would, I reasoned, allow me to engage most expansively with the everyday, banal, contradictory, and

multi-faceted ways in which LGBTQ activists were making meaning of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. In doing so, my aim was also to examine how Hindu nationalism itself was operating, circulating, and materializing as public culture (something I draw attention to in the next chapter). In this chapter, I elaborate on how the ethnographic process was influenced by major arguments in feminist, queer, and digital ethnography; provide details about the fieldwork, the participants, as well as the storing, coding, and analysis of data; reflect on the nature of the “field” in fieldwork, especially in light of the centrality of digital ethnographic strategies in this research; and, finally, offer some insight into some of the ways I was perceived as a researcher, which defined the experience of fieldwork.

In order to highlight how the methodology evolved in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I outline how the considerations central to feminist and queer ethnography — namely, questions of reflexivity, power, and resistance analyzed from a gendered and queered lens — most accurately reflect the overarching concerns governing the lives of most LGBTQ activists I interviewed for this research, and match my own academic training and activist experience. In the second section, I demonstrate how digital ethnographic strategies were most closely able to reflect the research questions and the lives of the participants of this research during Covid-19, when the fieldwork took place. Here, I also delve into the specificities of digital LGBTQ life in India, exploring briefly how social media is used by LGBTQ activists. In doing so, I attempt to situate LGBTQ activists in general, and the participants of this research in particular, within the larger milieu of social media use in the subcontinent. This aspect, of how LGBTQ activists engage with social media, and how social media shapes LGBTQ activism, is also explored across the following chapters.

Since the fieldwork attempted to bring together feminist, queer, and digital ethnographic methods, the third section of this chapter deals with one understanding of the “field” as network, and also briefly engages with the unique frustrations of doing fieldwork during Covid-19. Taken together, the feminist, queer, and digital ethnographic strategies deployed in this research formed a patchwork, or network, that give the fieldwork, and this dissertation, its distinct shape. I rely here on “patchwork” and “network” as defining features of the fieldwork for two reasons. First, it brings to light the provisional (or patchy), messy, and happenstance nature of this fieldwork. While many theorists define ethnography as necessarily messy, irregular, and contradictory (Geertz, 1973; Marcus, 2007; Plows, 2018; Watanabe, Varma & Gunel, 2020), this messiness or provisionality plays a specific role in imagining a queer ethnography (Jackman, 2010; Manalansan IV, 2016). Reworded as network, or assemblage, the same messiness and irregularity is also mobilized in digital ethnography in particular ways. Further, irregularity, or a general state of unpredictability due to Covid-19, hung over the entire duration of the fieldwork like a cloud, marking the life and thought of the research participants, as well as my own. This also made the process of fieldwork “patchy,” starting, stopping, and staggering (much like an internet connection) in ways that characterized our collective experience of time in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, in line with feminist and queer research ethics, to invoke “patchwork” or “network” is to also highlight my role as the researcher in inscribing, interpreting, and structuring this research as it presents itself in its current form. Pandian poetically argues that the ethnography is “a practice of critical observation and imagination, an endeavour to trace the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one” (2019, p. 4). To focus on patch-worked

or networked ethnography, then, is to mark my desire, as a researcher, in *creating* a possible world within this one. Attending to my role in shaping this research leads us to the fourth part of this chapter, where I explore how I was often perceived as a non-resident Indian (or, NRI), and how my perceived position as a diasporic subject impacted the fieldwork.

I. Feminist and Queer Ethnography

Most broadly, feminist ethnography can be understood as an interdisciplinary method that examines concerns about gender and sexuality as indivisible from the stratifications of race, class, caste, and other axes of difference, and produces “knowledge about people and situations in specific contexts with attention to power differentials and inequities [that are analyzed through a feminist lens] ... and reflects upon power relations within the research context” (Davis & Craven, 2016, pp. 9-11). Insofar as ethnographies are methods that describe and interpret culture (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1973), feminist ethnographies are guided by the assumption that gender and sexuality are central to cultural discourse and signification. This ethic that drives feminist ethnography — namely its attunement to gender and sexuality as categories of cultural analysis that coexist with other axes of marginality, dominance, and difference — is resonant with my own commitments as a researcher, and arguably, is consonant with the way in which most of the participants of this research try to understand their lives.

Feminist ethnography also enables a robust engagement with how activism and everyday life interact with, and shape, each other, which is a central analytic that frames this research. It is widely acknowledged that feminist ethnography emerged in conjunction with the women’s movement in North America (Davis & Craven, 2016; Visweswaran, 1994), and as such, is a

dynamic method that has been concerned with questions of representation, voice, identity, positionality, and authorship as determining factors of knowledge production (Behar & Gordon, 1995). These foci also contribute to the value placed on deconstructing power relations in feminist ethnography. All of these are key concerns that remain vital for research with LGBTQ communities in India today, and as we shall see in the next few chapters, these concerns also heavily determine how LGBTQ activism is understood and practiced by the research participants. What it means to be queer (as an identity and political positionality) has been a contested question in the Indian context. Similarly, what constitutes a “queer” issue and who represents it as such, or, who becomes the voice and author of LGBTQ activism, has also been a central debate in the evolution of LGBTQ politics in India. Given this overlap in perspective, a feminist ethnography is well suited to this research.

Even though questions of representation, identity, and authorship have remained central to its theorization and practice, the borders of what constitutes feminist ethnography have continued to shift over time. Visweswaran (1997) outlines a history of feminist ethnography that has been informed by the evolving debates on sex and gender as categories of analysis within feminist theory and activism, and demonstrates how what is considered central to feminist ethnography — namely, how gender and sexuality are understood and theorized — has undergone significant transformation, which has in turn transformed feminist ethnographic work. In doing so, she illuminates how “women are figured as subjects, and what notions of the subject underlie the production of feminist ethnography, in order to explain how a subject of identification is produced by particular understandings of gender” (p. 593).

This evolving relationship, between who or what can be the subject of feminist ethnography and the role of feminist ethnographic practices in producing a “feminist” subject, has been an important focus for scholars undertaking feminist ethnographic work in relation to the uneven processes of transnationalism, racialization, and queerness. For example, writing against universalizing gestures that often center the assumptions of European humanism, Mohanty (2003) argued that, “cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (p. 501). Specifically, arguments that situate “Third world” women as “victim-subjects” (Kapur, 2005) have been critiqued variously for their ethnocentrism, Orientalism, racism, and cultural relativism (Spivak, 1988; Stephens, 1989; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

In light of this, many scholars have called for a serious investigation of ethnographic practices that move beyond the colonial legacies of discovery at the origins of anthropology and asked what it would mean to decolonize ethnography (Harrison, 1997; Bolles, 2013). Such rehabilitative gestures have raised interesting questions about the relationship between citational practices, geopolitics, and epistemology (Arondekar & Patel, 2016), and called for “a kind of nomadic thinking” (Ong, 1999, pp. 244), or a “mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldua, 2012), and other perspectival shifts that more accurately reflect the various ruptured histories and hybrid subjectivities that more accurately define the present moment. As I document in the following chapters, the question of authenticity as a “feminist,” “gay,” “lesbian,” and/or “queer” subject has also been salient for LGBTQ activism in India, where collaborative actions and differences have emerged from prolonged tensions precisely around the boundaries of what is envisioned as a feminist or queer issue. Further, LGBTQ activism has long debated the issue of the

“Indianness” of “queerness,” and these debates have been influenced by the same conceptions of transnationalism, cultural relativism, and geopolitics that have marked the evolution of feminist theory and ethnography. In this way, and others, feminist ethnography as a method enables me to remain attuned to these itineraries as they shape this research.

Similar questions have also emerged in the field of queer theory, and queer theorists have begun to seriously consider what it means “to understand queer work as having a method, or to imagine method itself as queer” (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019, p. 4). Boellstorff (2007) suggests that research in queer anthropology since the 1990s has been determined by the fluidity of what “queer” means and does on one hand, and by critical engagement with an “epistemology of difference” (p. 22) on the other. In light of this, Browne & Nash (2010) have defined queer research, broadly, as “any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (p. 4). Inherent to these definitions of queer methodology and queer anthropology is the provisionality and flexibility of what “queerness” can mean or do. As Jackman (2010) writes, “research carried out in the name of ‘queer’ might hold the possibility of remaining unfixed, fluid, and dynamic, thereby resisting a simple reduction of research findings” (p. 114). This allows queer methods to lend themselves well to capturing the messiness of everyday life in ways that resist being structured into social, cultural, or disciplinary conventions. The attunement to messiness is particularly beneficial to this research, not simply because the participants of this research identify as LGBTQ, but also because it helps me trace the various ways in which queerness circulates in relation to Hindu nationalism in India today. Within this context, as subsequent chapters will show, queerness is often mobilized in contradictory, messy, and knotted ways, and a

queer ethnography illuminates precisely these tensions that exemplify the “entanglements of methods, lives and research” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 14).

Boellstorff (2010) extends this messy potentiality of queer methods and applies it to the question of epistemology, arguing that a queer methodology “steers clear of either the structuralist disinterest in self-understanding, or the intentionalist contention that the revoicing of an ostensibly transparent self-understanding is the endpoint of analysis” (p. 218). He explains that queer methods can transcend the pitfalls of assuming a rational, universal subject, and sidestep the error of essentializing experience as analysis. In other words, just as queer methods can defy disciplinary conventions, they can also be deployed towards understandings of human subjectivity that defy narrow conceptualizations of rationality, individualism, and coherence. This has been helpful in the context of this research as the relationship between queerness and nationalism is not one that can be understood without such a nuanced perspective on subjectivity, and requires that we move beyond unquestioned ossifications of “authenticity” and identity in favour of more complex negotiations with the layered, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory ways in which gendered and sexual subjectivity come into being. As we shall see in Chapter 4, in particular, disingenuousness becomes an important symptom towards understanding how LGBTQ activists can overtly support Hindu nationalist agendas.

In line with this theorization of queer methods, Ghaziani & Brim (2019) also argue that queer methods often resist disciplinary boundaries because of a commitment to the messiness of everyday life, and suggest that their promise lies in “disrupting ideals of stability, rationality, objectivity, and coherence” (p. 15), and moving beyond binaries into multiplicity, pluralism,

assemblages, and other forms of radical networking as worldmaking. This ability to disrupt widely held knowledge conventions has led many queer scholars to deploy queer methods towards decentering the Eurocentrism of queer theory. In doing so, they have expanded upon theorizations of race (Ferguson, 1997; Joseph & Rubin, 2007; Macharia, 2016), transnationalism (Chiang & Wong, 2017; Murray, 2017; Wahab, 2012), citizenship (Puar, 2007), globalization (Altman, 2001; Binnie, 2004; Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002; Povinelli, 2006), and migration. Much of this work has centred queered practices of ethnography (Khubchandani, 2020a; Manalansan, 2006; Muñoz, 1999; Wekker, 2006). This body of scholarship, and the role of queer ethnography in it, has informed how I chose to conduct this ethnography, determining the data collected, as well as the processes of coding and analysis. In the remainder of this section, I first outline how I had planned data collection and fieldwork, and then describe how the fieldwork had to be modified due to the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

a. Notes on Field-Site, Participants, and Methods

Guided by these theoretical and methodological considerations, and informed by the research questions outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I formulated an ethnography for this research that could map the various fractures within LGBTQ activism in India and productively engage with what many have called India's "homonational turn" (Das & Bund, 2020; Gawande, 2019; Sircar & Jain, 2017; Upadhyay, 2020). I planned to conduct an ethnography which would include participant observation of the workings of three LGBTQ rights organizations in New Delhi and Mumbai, along with unstructured in-depth interviews with LGBTQ activists working and consulting with these organizations. Davis & Craven (2016) assert that participant

observation is “the most common method employed in ethnographic fieldwork. It involves intensive involvement with a group of people over an extended period of time” (p. 85) and can be buttressed by open-ended interviews where the questions are generated from participant observation. The participant observation would allow me to observe how LGBTQ support for, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism frames LGBTQ activism and their agendas, as well as document the intimate, everyday ways in which it impacts engagement within LGBTQ activist communities. The open-ended interviews would further help create these nuanced narratives, allowing the participants of the research to offer their own insights and explanations.

Since I had planned to volunteer with three LGBTQ activist organizations in New Delhi and Mumbai, I envisioned that these groups would form the loci or nodal points at the center of the fieldwork. I hoped to conduct participant observation and interviews in both cities for five months each, and had chosen New Delhi and Mumbai because of the importance of both cities in the development and evolution of LGBTQ activism in India. Both, New Delhi and Mumbai, are sprawling metropolises that have been central to LGBTQ activism in India for the past three decades. New Delhi and Mumbai are India’s two most populous cities, and according to the *Indian National Census* conducted in 2011, New Delhi’s population was 16.3 million and Mumbai’s was 18.3 million. According to *World Population Review*, the estimated population of New Delhi in 2022 is 32 million, and that of Mumbai is 20.9 million. In addition to their sheer size, both these cities tend to be overrepresented in imaginations of and about India, given that New Delhi is the national capital and the seat of federal legislature, and Mumbai is widely considered the financial capital and is home to Bollywood, the largest film industry in the world.

Further, there tends to be significant movement and collaboration between LGBTQ rights organizations across India, and New Delhi and Mumbai serve as metropolitan centres of such movement (Dave, 2012). As such, by interviewing activists moving in and out of these organizations, the field would have become a network that would reflect the landscape of LGBTQ activism in India. I wanted to choose organizations or groups that would enable me to document and analyze the varied tapestry of perspectives that characterize LGBTQ activism in India. Mindful of the divide between activists and groups working on HIV/AIDS awareness and queer feminist collectives (Dave, 2012; Shah, 2005), I wanted to choose groups that would enable me to observe and interpret the political alliances and disagreements between them.

Therefore, the first organization I chose was Humsafar Trust⁷ (HST), one of the biggest and oldest non-governmental organizations working on HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ rights in India since 1994, with branches in both New Delhi and Mumbai. As such, HST would have been the organization common to both cities. The second non-governmental organization was to be Nazariya⁸: A Queer Feminist Resource Group (Nazariya QFRG), in New Delhi, and the third, non-formalized, activist collective was to be LABIA: A Queer Feminist LBT Collective (LABIA), in Mumbai. Nazariya QFRG had come into being in 2014 and LABIA had first emerged in 1995, when it had been called Stree Sangam⁹. Both groups were well established in their respective cities, as well as in the national landscape of queer activism in India. Unlike HST, which was an organization that was notorious for its founder Ashok Row Kavi's

⁷ Translated as: Partners in a (Lifelong) Journey Trust.

⁸ Translated as: Viewpoint.

⁹ Translated as: Women's Collective.

Islamophobic views (Singh & Rampal, 2018), and commonly known to have a gay-male-centric approach (something that was repeatedly referenced in interviews with participants), both Nazariya QFRG and LABIA were familiar, friendly spaces for me; in my participation in queer feminist activisms since 2011, I had been to their meetings, parties, and social events before, and many of their members and founders were friends and acquaintances.

As I document in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, much of the historicization of India's LGBTQ movement is predominantly routed through New Delhi and Mumbai as well. It can be argued that both cities are central to a contemporary landscape of LGBTQ mobilizations in India, even if activisms in other cities and regions are no less potent. This is made possible due to the role of both cities in India's political and cultural economy, and also, perhaps, because both cities are geographically more well connected than many others where queer activisms also thrive. Relatedly, literature and research on LGBTQ lives and activisms in India tends to center New Delhi and Mumbai as sites of activism as well, and even though there is no research that makes this explicit so far, based on my previous experience of working alongside LGBTQ activists in Kolkata, there is a general awareness amongst activists in other cities about this disparity. Further, a majority of LGBTQ events and LGBTQ representation in mainstream media continues to be situated within these two cities, and both cities have a significant queer population that has migrated from smaller cities in search of employment, intimacy, and anonymity.

In addition to this, specifically in the context of this research, New Delhi and Mumbai become even more relevant as field-sites as, in both cities, the contradictions and tensions with respect to LGBTQ allegiances with, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism are arguably

heightened. As the national capital, New Delhi is home to the national government, occupies prime place in the symbolic imagination of India, and is unofficially understood as the “seat of power”. Historically marked by numerous political demonstrations and agitations, New Delhi is, I posit, a city that is marked, spatially and psychically, by politics in ways that are simultaneously heightened and banal. As a result, a majority of LGBTQ activism is situated in New Delhi, and the city has seen numerous queer organizations and groups emerge, evolve, and become defunct. As such, its importance in any research on LGBTQ activism and life in India is undeniable.

In Mumbai specifically, the long-standing presence of far-right political parties such as the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and Shiv Sena has ensured that the population is radically polarized in terms of its political affiliations. As Abhilasha, a queer feminist from Mumbai summarized:

I think, culturally Bombay [Mumbai], while it has very strong presence of this sort of Marathi, Gujarati Hindu fervour ... there's also political consciousness due to Ambedkarite groups¹⁰ being here for so very long. Prakash Ambedkar¹¹ works and lives in Bombay, and there are many people who believe in his ideals and follow him over here. Many Buddhists and Dalits live in Bombay. The city has so many varied people

¹⁰ Ambedkarite groups refer, colloquially, to groups, organizations, and political parties that follow B.R. Ambedkar's ideology. B.R. Ambedkar, also known as Babasaheb, was a social reformer who fought for the rights of non-dominant caste communities in India in the early- and mid-1900s. He served as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India. In his most popular book, *Annihilation of Caste*, he argued that caste discrimination is inherent to Hinduism and Hindu society. Chapters 3 and 6 engage with the question of caste in some detail.

¹¹ Prakash Ambedkar is B.R. Ambedkar's grandson, and President of the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (translated as: Deprived Majority Front), a political party based in Maharashtra, Mumbai's home state.

coming together, and living in such different circumstances ... I believe polarization is a part of the larger politics of the city and the fabric of the city itself.

This is perhaps directly related to the presence of numerous LGBTQ figures and organizations in Mumbai who support right-wing Hindu nationalist sentiments, such as the Queer Hindu Alliance, Queer Azaadi Mumbai, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Ashok Row Kavi, and others. At the same time, Mumbai is also home to groups such as LABIA, and Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), that have been at the forefront of resisting Hindu nationalism from a queer and feminist perspective.

Overall, due to their population, popularity, and the increasing rates of migration into both cities, New Delhi and Mumbai arguably offer a perspective that is simultaneously coded by the character of each city while also transcending their boundaries. Both cities are host — hospitably and inhospitably — to a diverse range of communities, languages, and migration histories, and this diversity is mirrored amongst LGBTQ communities as well. For the specific purposes of this research, the heterogeneity offered by New Delhi and Mumbai would have allowed me to map a terrain of LGBTQ politics that traversed most of the nation, whether through the content being referred to by activists in both cities, or through their travels and alliances across these geographies.

Finally, the short timeline of ten months was, in part, dictated by my PhD timeline, and was largely balanced out by my previous involvement in LGBTQ activism in both cities. I had grown up in New Delhi and had begun to participate in LGBTQ life and activism in the city in the early 2010s. Due to the networked nature of such spaces, I had soon become acquainted with

activists in other cities, primarily Kolkata, Mumbai, and to a smaller extent, Bengaluru. My role and identification within these spaces as a young academic-activist had also made national conversations and travels easier, and my previous research work, conducted between 2014-2016, had further deepened connections and friendships with queer feminist groups across those cities. As such, at the time I was designing my research methodology, I did not feel that I would be entering an entirely new field. Rather, I believed I would be returning to largely familiar locations with new questions. This return would also, I imagined, “allow for a better understanding of how individuals creatively shape themselves and their societies through time” (Narayan, 1993, p. 677), and mitigate some ethical dilemmas of being an entirely “foreign” researcher trying to describe and analyze communities that continue to remain marginalized in Indian society.

b. Dislocations

Excited to begin my ethnographic journey, I returned to New Delhi in the last days of November 2019 and waited for the approval of my proposal and ethics review. Within the first few days of my return, the central government, ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), announced its plans to implement faith-based changes to India’s citizenship laws, along with the creation of a National Register of Citizens (NRC). Widespread protests erupted across the country, and amidst immense state sponsored violence against protesters, the Citizenship Amendment Bill became an Act on 11 December 2019. As protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) continued, events began to be organized in support of the CAA, and some prominent queer activists, such as Ashok Row Kavi, publicly

marked their attendance at such events. As I analyze in Chapter 4, on 1 February 2020, Mumbai's annual Pride March saw an ideological tussle between the organizers and a group of protesters who had decided to sloganeer against the CAA and NRC at the Pride march. As this unfolded, even though technically my fieldwork hadn't even begun, it was becoming clear to me that what I had hoped to map as my ethnographic field was already more contentious and unstable than I had anticipated.

I received ethics approval for my fieldwork on 12 February 2020 and scheduled interviews with a few LGBTQ activists in New Delhi in subsequent weeks. Meanwhile, I also sent the approved research brief and consent documents to the Humsafar Trust office in New Delhi, and received only deliberate silence in return. I wrote to them twice before calling their office, when I was told that they had no requirements for volunteers at the moment, but they would get in touch with me if that changed. It was with some surprise that I told a friend, who knew LGBTQ spaces in the city well, about their response; to me, their response felt like an anomaly as such organizations are always in need of volunteers. She pointed out that I had been naive to believe that they would be interested in working with me. She reasoned that if they knew of my previous involvement in queer feminist spaces, they would obviously refuse my request because Humsafar Trust is often antagonistic towards queer feminist activists (something explored in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5). Even though I had considered these risks, I had believed that an organization as large as Humsafar Trust would not be concerned with my previous allegiances, and that I may be able to leverage my new North American university location as social capital within Humsafar Trust's own frameworks of developmentalism, wherein they tend to seek collaborations and funding from "first world" locations.

Before I could find a way to work around this rejection or engage with it productively, as I noted in the *Introduction*, communal riots attacking predominantly Muslim communities, erupted in low-income, Muslim dominated neighbourhoods in North-East Delhi between 23-29 February 2020, only a few kilometres from my home. Soon after the riots dissipated, I volunteered my time at the relief camp set up for the thousands of people who had been displaced in the riots. Meanwhile, the first cases of Covid-19 had begun to be reported in India, and the uncertainty of those early days of the pandemic made me restrict my own travel within the city. By 25 March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was announced, only with four hours of notice. During this chaotic time, I had managed to conduct only three interviews in-person.

Just like other researchers who had the misfortune of scheduling ethnographic work that was spectacularly derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic, I too, desperately thought about how to keep the spirit of feminist and queer ethnography alive when social distancing and isolation were becoming the norm. The crises I, along with so many others, had experienced, in the form of state violence against peaceful protesters and the communal riots, had already disoriented me, and I spent the next many weeks trying to understand what to do with my research — how would I remain true to the research questions and to the principles of feminist and queer ethnography; how would it be possible to operationalize a research project that did not deviate significantly from what I had proposed, potentially invalidating the ethics approval I had received; and, how would complete fieldwork within the limited timeline offered to me as an international student.

Springgay & Truman (2018) write that research methods “become a practice of being *inside* a research event” (p. 204), something that, Miller (2020) argues, an ethnographer must

learn and adapt to in the process of doing the ethnography. Indeed, anthropology is replete with examples that teach us how researchers must remain flexible, respond to emerging needs in the “field,” and that, “giving in” to various unpredictable surroundings is often the most productive for ethnographic research. When the Covid-19 pandemic led to a nation-wide (and global) lockdown, I had to find a way to do the same. Just as I was experiencing these crises, so were LGBTQ activists and communities I had hoped to work with; I had to simply find or piece together a research method that would be able to epistemologically trace the research questions through these crises, and hopefully reveal something about the new ontological realities that were emerging because of them in the process. Therefore, in line with how most of the world was turning to digital spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic, I decided to shift my focus to envisioning a digital ethnography guided by queer and feminist concerns that would follow the same LGBTQ communities I had hoped to work with, and engage with the research questions in light of Covid-19. In the next section, I outline how I deployed digital ethnographic methods to answer the same research questions, and how the change in the nature of fieldwork and data collection allowed me to approach the research questions in new and uniquely important ways.

II. Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography can be broadly defined as “ethnographic research on, through and about digital media ... [that] emphasizes the messiness, ambiguity and materiality of digital mediation” (Abidin & de Seta, 2020, pp. 6-7). Digital ethnographies can focus on websites and mobile applications that emphasize user-generated content and have a participatory culture, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms. They can also trace crypto-

markets (Maddox, 2020), study algorithmic cultures (Seaver, 2017), and map immersive three-dimensional social worlds, such as those created through gaming and virtual reality. Overall, digital ethnographies theorize how “the digital unfolds as part of the world we co-inhabit with the people who participate in our research” (Pink et al., 2016, pp. 1-2), paying attention to the multiplicity and open-endedness that emerges as the ethnographer shifts between meaning-making across digital, material, and sensory registers.

It can be argued that the antecedent of digital ethnography was virtual ethnography, which examined Web 1.0, marking the early years of the internet when there were fewer websites, most of which involved the consumption, rather than creation, of content. Virtual ethnographies are mostly focused on social interactions in cyberspaces such as newsgroups, chat rooms, and web-based discussion forums (Hine, 2000). They are different from “ethnographies of virtual worlds” (Boellstorff et al., 2012), which focus on online virtual worlds where participants can simulate lives and relationships. Digital ethnographies, unlike virtual ethnographies or ethnographies of virtual worlds, map social interaction in a new age of the Internet, where most engagement is driven by users creating content, and when Internet services are widely available and accessible.

Clearly, given the rapidly evolving nature of the Internet, there are a variety of ways in which ethnographers can engage with digital media, and this has led to a proliferation of terms that seek to accurately describe the diverse ethnographic practices that are deployed to understand these different modalities of digital engagement. For example, while Abidin & de Seta (2020) define digital ethnography as anything to do with researching digital media, Postill

& Pink (2012) specify that because “social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online” (p. 125), a more accurate term for ethnographies that center social media, like this research, should be called “internet related ethnography,” or “social media ethnography”. Sidestepping these considerations of naming, I would like to term the methods I utilized in this research as a networked feminist, queer, and digital ethnography, using “digital ethnography” as an umbrella term that encompasses the different methods of data collection related to digital participation and cultures. Below, I focus on how LGBTQ activists and communities, particularly in New Delhi and Mumbai, were using social media in the duration of this fieldwork, which digital ethnographic methods I deployed, and how I attempted to participate, as well as observe, record, and map the data that was being produced as a result.

a. Digital LGBTQ Cultures in India and its Diaspora

Beyond the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which foreclosed the possibility of in-person contact and necessitated a turn to digital ethnography in this research, digital ethnographic methods are also useful in studying LGBTQ lives and cultures in India because of how essential digital media has been to the evolution of LGBTQ activism in the subcontinent. Dasgupta (2017) rightly argues that digital cultures have “permeated and become an integral part of queer social life in India” (p. 1). From e-mail lists like the KhushList and online-offline groups like GayBombay, that began to circulate in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the proliferation of numerous LGBTQ Facebook groups, dating websites like Planet Romeo, and dating applications like Grindr and Her, which characterize LGBTQ sociality today, the digital sphere has always been central to how LGBTQ identities are performed and LGBTQ

communities are formed in the subcontinent (Shahani, 2008). Further, digital spaces, like chat rooms, e-mail lists, Facebook groups, and online dating applications, often offer the safety of anonymity and privacy to LGBTQ people in India (Dasgupta, 2017) and become spaces for building various kinds of intimacies that transcend binary conceptualizations of virtual and physical worlds (McGlotten, 2007). As such, mapping how LGBTQ people engage with one another on social media allows us to document and analyze a richer network of their intimacies, friendships, and relationalities.

In recent years, especially since the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, the presence of LGBTQ people in India in digital spaces has multiplied significantly, with numerous Facebook groups, Instagram accounts, and websites emerging that center solely on various aspects of LGBTQ life. Many trans*, non-binary, and LGBTQ people have also become enormously popular through social media and use their popularity to raise awareness about LGBTQ life and rights amongst their vast audience. Further, online groups, websites, accounts, and e-mail lists are important examples of the way in which digital spaces are entangled in formations of LGBTQ community, and that, “surf the binary” (Boellstorff, 2010) between digital and physical life. For example, GayBombay, established in 1998, has a website and an e-mail list, and also hosts frequent parties and social events in Mumbai, along with a bi-monthly in-person meeting (Shahani, 2008, p. 26). Similarly, Harmless Social Distancing¹² began as a Facebook group, but now also has a website, and has organized more than 100 events, including film festivals, across five cities.

¹² Previously called ‘Harmless Hugs’. The name was changed on 21 March 2020 to reflect newer realities of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The increasing role of digital technologies in shaping LGBTQ life and subjectivity in contemporary India must be contextualized within the general increase in Internet use in the country. According to the *Telecom Regulatory Authority of India*, 825.3 million people, or approximately 60% of India's total population, had an Internet connection as of 31st March 2021. Based on Castells' (2010) definition of the same, Tufekci (2017) defines a "digitally networked society" as a society that "has been reconfigured by digital technologies" (p. 6) to the extent that what happens online can impact what happens offline. Here, it is not important that everybody have access to, or participate in, shaping digital culture, but that, "digital connectivity alters the architecture of connectivity across an entire society even when much of it is not yet connected" (ibid., p. 18). As such, despite class and region-based inequalities in access to Internet use, and significant barriers in terms of digital literacy, I would argue that India is a "digitally networked society". In this larger atmosphere where digital and social media is ingrained in, and a defining feature of, life and culture, the turn to digital ethnography in this research could capture the nuance and richness of the everyday life of LGBTQ activists, as the research questions had hoped to do.

Further, as I show in the next chapter, the Internet has been consistently and systematically utilized by the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar to promote their ideological agendas, build strong relationships with the Hindu diaspora, and create an atmosphere of violence against its perceived enemies in ways that blur the boundaries between digital and physical society. Recent research (Chopra, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021) cogently outlines how well-structured and well-funded these mechanisms are, and demonstrates how misinformation is spread on social media, leading to the incitement of religious violence across India.

Simultaneously, social media is also used by activists to spread awareness, organize protests, and mobilize large audiences. Dasgupta (2017), for example, analyzes how LGBTQ activists organized a systematic international campaign in 2013 that coalesced under the hashtag “NoGoingBack” in response to the recriminalization of homosexuality in India. More recent mobilizations around “#MeToo” or “#NotInMyName”¹³ are also examples of how social media has been used by activists and networked publics to articulate resistance and refusal to ongoing and everyday violence, often transcending national borders as they do so.

Clearly, digital spaces, especially social media, had already become essential to lives and public cultures in India, and is being used by LGBTQ activists to form solidarities and attachments, organize protests, and clarify differences in ideology. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, digital media served as a tool that helped protesters gather quickly at certain locations, document the protests in real time, and spread information about the protests as well. Tufekci (2017) identifies such movements that “rely heavily on online platforms and digital tools for organizing and publicity, and proclaim that they are leaderless although their practice is almost always muddier” (p. xxiii) as “networked protests”. She outlines that these protests are often counterbalanced by “mobilizing armies of supporters of paid employees who muddy the online waters with misinformation ... making it hard for ordinary people to navigate the networked public sphere, and sort facts from fiction, truth from hoaxes” (ibid., p. xxviii). Indeed, the problem of digital misinformation is widespread in the subcontinent (Al-Zaman, 2021; Bali & Desai, 2019), and it is well known that the BJP government and its allied parties have massive

¹³ The ‘#NotInMyName’ campaign was a response to the increasing lynching of Muslims and Dalits in India in 2017. The hashtag was used to state that such violence could not be condoned, and protests were organized across major cities in India, as well as in London, Toronto, and Boston.

infrastructure that churns out fake news, often leading to riots and mob violence, besides creating a general fugue of misinformation (Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Poonam & Bansal, 2019; The Wire Staff, 2020a). Further, state and central governments also use Internet shutdowns ahead of and during scheduled protests as one of its strategies to disrupt gatherings (FP Staff, 2019).

As such, with respect to this research, social media forms a rich platform where LGBTQ activist responses in support of, and against, Hindu nationalism are created, performed, and archived, and provides a useful resource to map the same. As the Covid-19 pandemic set in, and a national lockdown was hastily enforced, the reliance on digital media only increased. For example, in Chapter 5, I analyze how queer feminist activists used the internet to build and mobilize mutual aid networks during Covid-19. The central questions driving this research focus on how Hindu nationalism impacts LGBTQ populations in India, how they respond to Hindu nationalism in turn, and how LGBTQ solidarities are restructured or impacted in the process. Given the centrality of digital media, specifically social media, in determining these processes, digital ethnographic methods became a vital tool through which I could gather this data. In the remainder of this section, I first outline the specific methods I used in this process, and then analyze the nature of the “field” in digital ethnography.

b. Note on Participants and Methods

Mindful of the emerging and rapidly evolving safety considerations brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as their effects on LGBTQ communities in India, the patchwork methodological practices I put in place coalesced together as a digital ethnography that was informed by feminist and queer considerations. As I have outlined in previous sections, feminist,

queer, and digital ethnographic practices all focus on the dynamic, messy, and contradictory ways in which data is collected and knowledge is produced, stemming from a fractured and contradictory view of human life and culture. Such methodological orientations fit well with queer of colour scholarship that features “resistant, mobile, and intimate practices by which knowledge is constructed” (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019, p. 6), and decenters the rational Cartesian subject in favour of tracing the contradictions inherent within contemporary modernities. Therefore, feminist, queer, and digital ethnographic practices favour networked epistemologies (Burrell, 2009; Abidin & de Seta, 2020) and assemblage as method (Puar, 2012), which allows the researcher to remain attuned to the complexity of multiple identities, enabling theorizations of queerness as intersectional practice, while moving away from queerness as identity.

The commonalities between feminist, queer, and digital methods, as well as the robust participation of LGBTQ activists on digital platforms, enabled me to formulate how I would conduct digital participant observation and virtual interviews in lieu of the participant observation and in-person interviews I had hoped to undertake in New Delhi and Mumbai. I shifted away from grounding myself in activist organizations like Humsafar Trust, Nazariya QFRG, and LABIA — first, they had all shut down their offices or meetings during Covid-19; and, second, mapping an organization’s presence on social media would divert from the questions informing this research. This is primarily because many queer feminist groups are not active on social media, and organizations resisting Hindu nationalism often do not post publicly for fear of being harassed online. With respect to the interviews, I chose to only speak to LGBTQ activists who were living and engaged in activist work in New Delhi and Mumbai on a semi-permanent or permanent basis at the time of the interview. This was done in order to circumscribe the field of

the research, and also in order to ensure that, by interviewing LGBTQ activists in these two cities, a terrain of how different LGBTQ activisms interact and differ from one another would emerge more clearly.

In total, I conducted 30 interviews with self-identified LGBTQ activists between February 2020 and October 2020, 15 from New Delhi and 15 from Mumbai. The interviews ranged from approximately 50 minutes to 110 minutes in length, with the average interview being between 60-80 minutes. Three of these interviews took place in-person, in February 2020, and the rest were conducted virtually. Participants identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, and queer, and came from dominant-caste and non-dominant caste backgrounds. They also belonged to a wide range of activist organizations such as Ambedkar University Queer Collective (AUDQC), Nazariya QFRG, The Youth Parliament Foundation (YP Foundation), Queer Muslim Project, Dalit Queer Project, Hasratein¹⁴, and others in New Delhi, and Queer Azaadi Mumbai (QAM), Thane Queer Collective, LABIA, Tata Institute of Social Sciences Queer Collective (TISSQC), and others in Mumbai. While most participants I interviewed were queer feminists and trans* activists resisting Hindu nationalism, three participants were staunch supporters of Hindu nationalism, and were members of the Queer Hindu Alliance and the Kashmiri Youth Movement. Further, only two of the research participants were LGBTQ Muslims, and the lack of LGBTQ Muslim perspectives is an important limitation of this research. Most participants were in their 20s and 30s, with one participant in their 40s. I chose to transcribe and code these interviews manually, since most of them were bilingual, as participants switched between speaking in English and Hindi.

¹⁴ Translated as: Desires.

From March 2020, I conducted all the interviews with participants online, using my university Zoom account to schedule the meetings. I used social media websites and applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter to get in touch with participants I already knew, and asked them to recommend other potential participants as well, using the snowball technique. While soliciting interviews, I sent every potential participant the cover letter and consent form that had been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University, and informed them that I would be amenable to answering any questions or concerns before they decided to agree to an interview. In response to this prompt, a few participants asked me to outline my own understanding of my caste, gender, and religious position before accepting my request, primarily because they wanted to assess whether I could create a safe space for them and engage with our differences productively during the interview. This repeatedly made it clear to me that questions of “multiplex identity” (Narayan, 1993) and how identities are mobilized would remain crucial to this research.

Most participants chose to give verbal consent or consented to the interview over email or text, instead of signing the consent form. To me, this was not a sign of hesitation, but rather, in part, signalled a sense of informality, and, in part, remained congruent with a larger culture where signed documents perhaps represent a formalized transaction that hinders sociality. Therefore, once the interview began, I asked participants if I could record and save the audio file of our interview, and once the recording began, I established verbal consent on the record. Some participants found this process of recording their consent so rigorously quite amusing, and others used the many questions on the consent form to outline their anxieties about anonymity and confidentiality. However varied their reactions, the conversation around seeking consent always

helped establish rapport and allowed the interview to begin with a note of lightheartedness and/or reassurance.

In an attempt to allay any anxieties and help participants feel in control of the interview process, I also let them know that they could ask to pause or stop the interview at any time, could choose to speak off the record, and could ask me any questions or choose to not answer any questions I asked. Some participants chose to speak off the record for brief periods, and I have not recorded those conversations formally or informally in the transcripts I prepared later, choosing instead to make small notes in my diary about the topics covered during that time. Mostly, participants did not want their criticisms of other LGBTQ activists recorded, especially if they were identifying those activists to me. I understood this to be indicative of a sentiment in many LGBTQ spaces that any critiques must remain within LGBTQ spaces, and not be revealed for general consumption. As such, them bringing me into the critique was perhaps a gesture that suggested they believed I was “one of them”. However, these identifications and feelings of belonging were often fleeting, and I shed light on this in later sections of this chapter.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured and relied upon the interview guide approved by York University’s Office of Research Ethics. According to Blee & Taylor (2002), semi-structured interviews are useful for understanding activism because they allow for contextually diversified and broad conversations to occur, and let researchers analyze how activists “regard their participation and how they understand their social world” (p. 95), in their own words. This is precisely what occurred when I began by asking participants to briefly reflect upon their gendered and sexual identifications and how that may or may not inform their

LGBTQ activism. I then asked them to give a brief history of their LGBTQ activist work, which allowed the interview to become more tailored to their trajectories as LGBTQ activists. Questions about their support systems, how their activism has evolved and what their major concerns and worries are with respect to LGBTQ life India were also asked. I also asked questions about how their activism had evolved over time; their worries and hopes about the future of LGBTQ activists in India; how Covid-19 pandemic has changed their practice of LGBTQ activists; and, always ended the interview by asking how they were coping with the pandemic, and whether I could offer any kind of support.

Participants were informed that they would be emailed the transcript of their interview when it was ready, and they could edit the transcript, adding, subtracting, or changing what they had said. This is an established practice amongst feminist ethnographers (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 93), and was an ethically necessary step for me, as I was aware that many LGBTQ activists felt taken advantage of when researchers, especially from “foreign” locations, like me, did not maintain any contact with them after the data collection was over. For example, about her own experience as a research participant, Vidya writes:

I never got anything from any of these research projects. They get funding and support, travel from various cities in India, even across the world and use my life experiences, but give me nothing in return. Neither payment, nor even the finished work (Vidya & Semmalar, 2018, p. 59).

As such, questions of authorship and representation remain relevant for LGBTQ communities and activists who are often left out of the research process and sometimes denied a subjectivity as a result. Consequently, many LGBTQ people, including participants in this research, choose

not to engage with researchers who do not identify as LGBTQ, and/or have no prior connections to their LGBTQ communities.

The process of sending transcribed interviews back to participants was a productive one. Even though many selected to not make any edits or modifications, some participants used this invitation to reflect on their interviews and edited them, using track changes so as to preserve the original text and its modification. The nature of these palimpsestic edits was varied — some participants simply corrected details and spellings, others flagged their own comments and asked if they came across as “too critical,” and yet others made significant changes to represent changes in their own thought process and opinions over the time of the interview and its transcription (which ranged from six to nine months). Throughout this dissertation, all participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and LGBTQ activists are mentioned by their real names only when referring to something they said publicly. Real names and usernames are also hidden in the screenshots of social media posts and comments provided in the Appendices, except when activists have shared a post meant to be circulated as a public statement.

I supplemented the content of the interviews through digital participant observation, deploying several methods. First, I searched for any articles, opinion essays, blog entries, and Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook posts that referenced any events or incidents participants mentioned during their interviews. For example, almost all the participants referred to the events that occurred at the Mumbai Pride March in 2020, and these events become a central focus of Chapter 4. As such, my search included some keywords related to the event, and I also did a

targeted search of the social media accounts of key figures mentioned in those events to document what they were posting about that event. By following specific events that the participants of this research alerted me to, I was able to track a network of people, LGBTQ activists or otherwise, who contributed to the discourse framing that event, across various websites and web applications.

Second, I followed the social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram of the participants of this research from February 2020 to October 2020, in order to understand how they engage across social media, and what kinds of opinions they share. This helped offer a rich background against which I could juxtapose their interviews. Mostly, the social media presence of the participants helped me reference their interviews in a robust manner. However, as I document in Chapter 4, in the case of one participant affiliated with the Queer Hindu Alliance, their posts on social media highlighted numerous contradictions in their interviews.

Third, between February 2020 and October 2020, I decided to observe the posts and comments on two Facebook closed-user LGBTQ groups of which I was already a member — Harmless Social Distancing (over 8,000 members) and Yaariyan¹⁵ (a Humsafar Trust affiliated online group also with over 8,000 members) — paying special attention to comments or topics on events that had been referenced in the interviews, or that related to concerns about citizenship, protests, and government support or critique. On both these groups, I engaged in “lurking,” a method where “the observer deliberately situates himself at the periphery of a social setting in such a way that he [sic] is ‘present’ but is not required by the situation to interact extensively

¹⁵ Translated as: Friendships.

with others” (Strickland & Schlesinger, 1969, pp. 248-249). Since “lurking” was my usual mode of engagement on both these groups, it did not in any way disrupt or challenge the interpersonal dynamic of these groups.

Fourth, in the duration of the fieldwork, I documented and actively participated in a closed-user WhatsApp group that had been created to coordinate national LGBTQ activist involvement in the protests against the recent changes to citizenship that had been instituted by the BJP in 2019. With approximately 60 participants, the group was exclusively designed to share news about the protests and offer help to those unlawfully arrested for protesting. I had been included in the group by friends who I had worked with in the early 2010s. During Covid-19, the group became a rich resource to arrange mutual aid for those who needed support in terms of rations, money, or other utilities.

I recorded screenshots of all relevant posts and comments on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter between February 2020 and October 2020, choosing to finish “fieldwork” in eight months — instead of the originally planned ten months — because of the scale and pace at which digital data is produced. I stored all the files, including transcripts, audio recordings of the interviews, and the screenshots, on Microsoft OneDrive, which I accessed only through my university account. Since I was recording the screenshots mostly on my phone, I made sure to erase it from any other online data storage spaces, such as iCloud, and password protect my phone and laptop. While the Appendix of this dissertation carries images of some posts and comments relevant to this dissertation, none of them belong to users whose accounts were private at the time of their posting. This is done to protect the privacy settings of the intended

user at the time at which they posted on social media. Further, throughout the dissertation, all the research participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. In sections where I refer to LGBTQ activists by their name, I am referencing their interviews, news articles, blog posts, or articles, that are easily available in the public domain.

c. The “Field” in Digital Ethnography

A significant rethinking of the “field” was required because of the shift to a predominantly digital method in this research. However, concerns about how to define a field are not new, and perhaps as old as anthropology itself. What constitutes the “field” has evolved in relation to developments in our understanding of culture, as well as how ethnography can be constituted as method, praxis, and worldmaking. Moving from the rigid boundaries that defined the field as an enclosed physical or spatial location, multi-sited at best, recent scholarship in anthropology has come to the “realization that the field site is in certain ways constructed rather than discovered” (Burrell, 2009, p. 182). According to Burrell, within “this newer conception, the movement of objects, of individuals, of ideas, of media, and of the fieldworker is attended to, uncovering insights and objects of inquiry that were not visible in studies that assumed culture was spatially fixed” (ibid., p. 183). An orientation to the field site as a dynamic, mobile, and heterogeneous space, not restricted by location but rather defined by context has been central to the shifts in methods that frame this research.

As I mention above, I had planned a multi-sited ethnography where I would be situated in New Delhi and Mumbai for five months each, and when the research methods were redesigned as a digital ethnography, I had decided to collect interviews from LGBTQ activists from New

Delhi and Mumbai only. However, it was impossible to hold on to geographical boundaries beyond limiting my interviewees to New Delhi and Mumbai. When it came to mapping content on social media, it was impossible to record data based on whether the authors of the various posts, comments, and articles I documented were located in New Delhi or Mumbai only — first, because it was impossible to follow and check the accuracy of each author’s self-reported location; and, second, because eliminating any authors of social media posts or comments would take away from mapping the conversation in its fullness. Since their conception, digital ethnographies have “demonstrated the possibility of awareness and analysis of spaces beyond what can be physically inhabited” (Burrell, 2009, p. 185), and recent developments in mobile technologies and the popularization of smartphones in India have further expanded these possibilities. Therefore, an orientation to the field as a provisional, messy, or patch-worked network is particularly helpful, where the heterogeneity and contradictions of social phenomenon are highlighted, and the task of the ethnographer becomes that of tracing the ways in which networks are connected and disconnected, not unlike an assemblage or rhizome, in a Deleuzian sense. This orientation to fieldwork-as-network is also representative of a queer ethnography, which also holds “the possibility of remaining unfixed, fluid, and dynamic” (Jackman, 2010, p. 114).

Within this framework of digital ethnography, a hashtag can become a point of entry into the field site, and the ethnographer must remain deliberately with the content produced through one hashtag even as that hashtag connects to so many others in a multi-sited way, making provisional cuts to an endless network of social media posts in order to circumscribe a field. This makes apparent the role of the ethnographer in the continuous process that marks the

construction and depiction of the field-site in any ethnography; the “problem of cutting networks that would otherwise proliferate uncontrollably” (de Seta, 2020, p. 83) is simply compounded in digital ethnography. Indeed, during fieldwork, there were many moments when I had to decide whether to record a post or let it go, and each small decision built the final archive upon which this research is built.

In line with what other digital ethnographers experience (Burrell, 2009; de Seta, 2020; Kraemer, 2016), I too simultaneously found myself overwhelmed by the data while also experiencing the anxiety of “clutching at straws” as I tried to follow hashtags, comments, and online conversations across user profiles and social media sites. Facebook and Instagram posts, tweets, and comments across these websites often felt decontextualized because they were based in images (like on Instagram) or had a character limit (like on Twitter). Out of the sites I mapped, only Facebook allowed the lengthy posts and comments that offered authors an option to give some context to their thoughts — not that most chose to do so. Often, if I didn’t already know what a post was referring to, it would be hard to ascertain its reference. Therefore, I decided to make the interviews a focal point from which I would build and/or trace the networks of data available in these digital spaces. This also helped retain some specificity as I was able to follow how queer activists in New Delhi and Mumbai were relating and responding to one another.

However, given the rate at which data is generated in digital spaces, the feeling that I was always lagging behind or trying to futilely capture something changing very rapidly did not leave me. This feeling was also shaped by the experience of the pandemic, where new data, findings, and recommendations about what it meant to be protected from Covid-19 emerged rapidly.

During the months of fieldwork, the interminable nature of mapping a mercurial space like social media telescoped with the unpredictable nature of the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, creating what Saxena & Johnson (2020) call a “revelatory crisis,” where it often felt that it was simply, “too early to identify patterns of discourse or behaviour that will [later] prove enduring and significant” (p. 2). How could I predict, for example, which comments or posts to document and which ones to let go, given how rapidly they could gain or lose meaning based on others’ engagement? Added to this was the possibility that a user could delete their post or comment at any time.

Another concern that emerges with digital ethnography is the way in which the “field” seamlessly blends into what is “not the field”. Unlike conventional anthropological accounts where travel acts as a demarcation between “here” and “there,” neatly circumscribing the field, digital ethnography offers no such distance. Kraemer (2016) analyzes the provisionality of the field in the context of digital ethnography by closely describing how social media facilitates a multiplicity of connections simultaneously, such that, as researchers, we surf the binary between being a researcher online, and not. For example, I was using the same social media applications where I was gathering my data for “personal” communication, and I was also using the same phone to record the data and pictures of my personal life. As such, it was difficult to mark a clear boundary between my experiences as a researcher and as an everyday user of social media, even as it has been difficult to bring those “disparate worlds into close proximity” (ibid., p. 123) at the time of writing.

Further, while conducting interviews out of the space of the home, sometimes interruptions like the doorbell or the sound of our family dog (Cleo) barking disallowed an easy separation of my role as an ethnographer and as a family member. This was true for my participants as well, who also had to deal with sometimes offering me a deeper look into their lives than they had control over — when their family members wandered into their frame, or when they realized during the interview that I could see their laundry drying on a clothes rack. These liminalities between field-work and home-work, between our roles as researcher, participant, and as family members brought about some comfort and laughter at times, but felt awkward and uneasy at others.

Similarly, it was often difficult to demarcate the boundaries of what constituted the digital archive and data for this research, given how swiftly content can change on the Internet. For example, if I searched for a hashtag on Twitter or Facebook on two consecutive days (let alone weeks or months), those searches would yield different results. Further, I was unsure how I would be able to record the affective or discursive charge of an emoji, meme, or GIF image, or analyze it for the purposes of this research. And yet, emojis, GIFs, memes, and pictures form an important contextualization that cannot be separated from the discussions, disagreements, and exchanges I was attempting to map digitally. In the end, I often ended up recording posts, comments, and tweets that I saw as representative of the different arguments being made, but the nature of digital spaces makes it difficult to see these processes I deployed as exhaustive, even if they might be so.

III. Uneasy Positionalities and the Making of an Ethnography

In these ways, I sometimes attempted to, and was sometimes pushed to, imagine the methods of this research as “moving frictionally across all aspects of a research event, from its inception, its execution, and its dissemination” (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 211). The instability experienced by the participants of this research and myself — attributed variously to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the riots in North-East Delhi, and the Covid-19 pandemic — was also compounded by the unstable, interminable, and uncertain process of doing a digital ethnography, as I write above. Further, given that there were no clear temporal boundaries between my presence on social media as a researcher and as an everyday user, I would often engage with people I had asked to be research participants across various social media platforms at the same time, especially if I knew them in other contexts, as I often did. This meant that, many times, I would see them posting, commenting, or even directly engaging with me on a social media platform or group chat while they continued to ignore my request to participate in this research. As a result, it quickly became a frustrating experience for me to make sense of the silence I received when I asked LGBTQ activists I was well acquainted with to grant me an interview, or talk about my research.

Throughout the fieldwork, I repeatedly wondered whether the silent rejections I was receiving from LGBTQ activist allies and acquaintances was simply due to the extenuating circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, or whether it was a signifier of something else as well. In the early days of fieldwork, I had approached, on Instagram, a LGBTQ activist who I had only spoken to sporadically before. When I shared with them a few lines about my research,

they immediately wrote back, “Absolutely, let’s meet and chat. I think I know you ... You’re that NRI queer who wrote some book right?”. I had viscerally flinched at this comment, and was quite surprised at how much it had bothered me, how strongly it remained with me.

NRI stands for Non-Resident Indian, and for many middle and upper class communities, the NRI remains an aspirational figure, embodying a dream of upward mobility in a postcolonial landscape with dwindling freedoms and worsening quality of life. At the same time, as I elaborate in Chapter 3, the NRI is a figure fraught with negative charge and affect, given the Sangh Parivar’s close ties with the Hindu diaspora. As Visvanathan (2019) puts it, rather distastefully, in an online essay:

The NRI does not quite fit the colonial categories of the Anglophile and the Orientalist ... He is an aspirational, upwardly-mobile creature who leaves home to seek a more affluent and opportunistic world ... There is an economic power to the NRI which is obvious ... Our current prime minister, Narendra Modi, dotes on their support ... The NRI loved Modi for decisiveness, his passion, his celebration of their success, his masculinity ... the NRI loves India, it is Indians he finds obtuse and intolerable ... The NRI is a happy composite of the Gujarati in Rutgers, the Silicon Valley technocrat ... the NRI academic who has internalized the rituals of the American university, who has mastered its academic table manners if not its intellectual ideals, the Sikh in Canada creating bits of Chandigarh at Montreal and Ottawa. The political emergence of the NRI is twofold. He is an influence on the regime here as he struggles to make his presence felt abroad.

Having grown up in a dominant-caste, upper-middle-class family in metropolitan New Delhi, where the NRI was, indeed, an aspirational figure, I had moved into other social communities

through student politics and LGBTQ activism in my twenties where the NRI affiliation was seen with disdain, at worst, and suspicion, at best. Therefore, being called an NRI was upsetting to me. What was even worse was learning that, despite my international student status in Canada (a status I experienced as relatively precarious), I could be considered an NRI in any given year based on whether I had spent a certain number of days outside India. The irony was that, based on that arbitrary metric of days spent abroad versus in India, while I had briefly been an NRI the previous year, returning for fieldwork had disqualified me as one that year.

The increasingly popular presence of the NRI in the mainstream Indian imaginary can be attributed to almost three decades of economic liberalization and corresponding socio-cultural discourses that facilitated an invested desire in India's upwardly mobile classes to work towards a life "abroad," most often in countries like USA, Canada, UK, and Australia (Amrute, 2012). In the span of these last three decades, the NRI has emerged as a predominantly Hindu, family oriented, economically rich figure who embodies the "virtues of consumerism and devotion and of cosmopolitanism and roots" (Therwath, 2010: 3). The NRI is deeply imbricated in the cultural politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the massive success of events such as the "Howdy Modi" rally in Houston in 2019 are proof that the Indian diaspora is culturally and materially invested in the kind of Hindu revivalism that is in line with the Sangh Parivar's vision. Therefore, the NRI is consequently viewed unfavourably by a significant portion of the Indian population who bear the brunt of the government's repressive policies within the borders of the subcontinent. As such, it was difficult to read being called an NRI as anything but a hostile gesture, primarily because of the overdetermined relationship between the NRI and Hindu nationalist politics, and also because the NRI figure embodied a sense of cultural purity,

economic wealth, and stability, all of which I decidedly lacked (and most of which I fundamentally despised).

Even though I was conducting fieldwork mediated by my affiliation with a Canadian university, I had expected to be treated by my participants as an “insider” at best, and a “returnee” at worst. There were many reasons for this expectation — New Delhi was my childhood home, and I had indeed “returned” there for fieldwork; I wanted to believe that my past experience with LGBTQ spaces and politics in the city qualified me as an “insider” to those life-worlds, and; I did not want to feel like an “outsider” to the landscapes and people among whom I had spent most of my life. In other words, I did not want to believe that my “leaving” for a PhD had changed anything about my belongingness in the communities and geographies I had grown up in and with. In this way, perhaps the ethnography itself was a way for me to “return home”.

Within the range of ethnographies written on LGBTQ communities in India, Dave’s research (2012) has been foundational. When Dave had conducted fieldwork with lesbian communities in New Delhi in the early 2000s, of their experience they had written:

Queerness and gender were shown to matter infinitely more than nationality or social race in matters of access and trust. I was out in the field as a queer woman—the semiotics were such that this was never in any doubt. This minimum level of commonality was critical for the quality of relationships I could forge. While lesbians and gay men sometimes queried the motivations for and necessity of my research, they never doubted my solidarity and sympathy. The importance of identity in the queer landscape seemed to

prequalify me for trust and often brought me close to people before I even had the chance to try (ibid., p. 25).

Why, then, did I have a different experience when I set out on this ethnographic project in early 2020? What had made me an outsider, or at best, an untrustworthy returnee, whereas Dave had been welcomed in with so much trust? It was strange to me that, often, despite having met me or known me in contexts of LGBTQ activism in the past, potential participants would ignore my request for an interview, or worse, call me an NRI in response.

Staying with this question threw into sharp relief the ways in which LGBTQ activism have changed in India, generally, and in New Delhi, in particular, since the early 2000s — a change that I address and analyze across the chapters in this dissertation. The proliferation of social media (Dasgupta, 2017), neoliberal and global cultural influences (Roy, 2014, 2022; Roy & Dasgupta, 2020), and the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2013 and 2018 have all made enormous differences to queer life and activism in the past two decades. I was no longer returning to the emergent field of LGBTQ activism that Dave (2012) had described; in fact, I was not even returning to the landscape I had left behind when I moved to Toronto in 2017.

It was quite clear that the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018 had caused a significant shift in how LGBTQ activism are being organized and oriented in the last two years, and there has been a proliferation of groups, collectives, and organizations working on various LGBTQ issues in this time. There has been a definite increase in LGBTQ visibility and representation, however problematic, since 2018. LGBTQ mainstreaming in the form of inclusion and diversity initiatives in workplaces have also become popular (Shahani, 2020), even

though they are strongly critiqued by a section of LGBTQ activists and by scholars (Sircar, 2021). Critiques of LGBTQ activism that were previously withheld in public spaces due to an implicit understanding of a shared vision for decriminalization are now being spoken of freely (Kang & Sahai, 2020; Pragya, 2020). While the battle to decriminalize homosexuality in India had, for the most part, unified the diverse strands of LGBTQ activism — albeit, not without critique — the reading down of Section 377 marked a shift in these solidarities. Once the threat of living a criminalized life had dissipated, old disagreements amongst LGBTQ activism emerged again, sharpened by Hindu nationalism, and new critiques began to crystallize as well. This dissertation is about mapping these shifts.

As such, the loosely knit community I had left in 2017, the one that I was so eager to “belong” to again, was simply no longer there, and had morphed into a sprawling, fractured terrain. Even though I had known these shifts were taking place while I was “away,” I had been unable to experience the fullness of these changes from another location. My own psychic investments in “returning home” had also led me to minimize the shifts in queer activism that I had been aware of, as well as to disregard, at least affectively, the large body of anthropological research that has problematized notions of “return”, of the “homeland”, of static cultures, of the role of “native anthropologists” (Geertz, 2000; Narayan, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994). In this way, my ethnographic sensibilities were overridden by the affective charge of homecoming, and was only put into question when I was referred to as an NRI. Similar negotiations are experienced by ethnographers across different contexts, and remaining attuned to these complex grids and often contradictory moments can produce more robust ethnographies. I have attempted to mobilize these negotiations as one orientation through which I try to theorize how LGBTQ activism have

transformed over the past three decades, and how these transformations can be seen in conjunction with the popularization of Hindu nationalisms in India.

Pandian (2019) argues that these contradictions during fieldwork can be experienced as “unease” or “rupture” precisely because anthropology has a disciplinary legacy of “colonial relations of power and knowledge in the formal structures of the discipline” (p. 1) that demand seamless representations of cultures and communities. Relatedly, Boyce, Engbretsen & Posocco (2018) argue that these negotiations are central to anthropology’s queer sensibilities. They write:

A key problematic in the sub-field of queer anthropology, institutionalized by now in the US, and a fractured special interest network at dispersed locations elsewhere, is [what] to do with these connections – and inevitable ruptures. These (dis-)connections evoke tensions between empiricism and theory, concept and reality, activist and academic sensibilities. Such tensions are productive and necessary, albeit oftentimes they do create feelings of discomfort, negative vibes, or even disdain and anger (p. 844).

The comment situating me as an NRI had forced me to become an “outsider,” and once I attempted to situate that gesture within a larger grid of cultural semiotics, it enabled me to better understand the changes that had occurred not only with respect to my position and affiliations, but also with respect to the queer landscape and the research field.

Another possible explanation for my interpellation as an NRI could be that my departure had made me *untrustworthy* — in moving away from LGBTQ communities and choosing academic advancement, I had demonstrated a lack of commitment to those LGBTQ communities, and instead, become affiliated with the Hindu diaspora that supported Hindu

nationalism in India. As such, rather than being perceived as someone researching LGBTQ life from “within the LGBTQ community,” my departure and return had coded me as an “outsider” — as a researcher no longer invested in LGBTQ lives, or worse, as a Hindu nationalist.

While it is not unusual that hitherto marginalized communities remain suspicious of researchers and their intentions, this suspicion and untrustworthiness, signalled by the numerous instances of silent refusal I received in the course of the fieldwork, became an important gesture through which I came to terms with my “foreign” location and “outsider” status. Many times in the course of fieldwork, potential participants disappeared after promising interviews, or left my requests for interviews unanswered even as we continued to talk on the same email thread, text message chain, or social media chat service about other things. These were uniquely frustrating and productive moments — they were not disappearing from my life completely, but only refusing, in a rather persistent way, the request I was making as an ethnographer. I interpret these moments to mean that they were refusing to trust me as a researcher, but my previous experience amongst those activist communities remained grounds for forays into friendship, camaraderie, and solidarity, however hesitant they may have been.

Before I delve into analyzing this fieldwork, I offer a brief historical and cultural contextualization of Hindu nationalism in India. In the next chapter, I show in some detail how Hindu nationalism pervades Indian society in intimate, everyday ways, and also produces ecosystems of Hindu nationalist violence that transcend the binary between digital and physical worlds. This forms the backdrop against which the fractures and solidarities of contemporary LGBTQ activism are then foregrounded.

Chapter 3

Hindu Nationalism in India

In order to understand how Hindu nationalism shapes LGBTQ activism in India, it is important to understand what Hindu nationalism is, and how it manifests in contemporary Indian society and culture. Therefore, in this chapter, I will outline the fundamental tenets of Hindu nationalism, provide some historical and cultural context to its evolution and popularization in the subcontinent, and describe how Hindu nationalism shapes contemporary life in India. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate that violence is endemic to Hindu nationalism, and has become a structuring principle of contemporary Indian society. I will show how Hindu nationalism creates ubiquitous conditions of ethnic and religious violence that infiltrate everyday life, across physical and digital spheres. The resulting polarization of Indian society along nationalist lines is furthered as state machinery and vigilante mobs come together to redefine the Indian nation-space, producing an atmosphere of Hindu nationalist violence. This argument is important in the context of this dissertation because this environment of pervasive Hindu nationalist violence marks the background against which LGBTQ support for, and resistance to, Hindu nationalism can be foregrounded across the next three chapters. In other words, this chapter highlights what is at stake for LGBTQ activists as they lay their own claims on the side of, or against, the Hindu nation.

The central argument of this chapter is that Hindu nationalism, based on the belief that India is the “chosen land” of Hindus, situates the presence of the Muslim Other as evidence of the incompleteness of the Hindu nationalist project (Appadurai, 2006), producing “wounded

attachments” (Brown, 1993) to Hindu identity. In this context, the nationalist project remains incomplete until all Muslim Others are excised from the national body, constructing an idea of India as a Hindu heterotopia (Foucault, 1984), and giving rise to a predatory nationalism that is built upon the degradation and removal of religious and ethnic Others from within the nation. Since these affective attachments to the nation-space are rooted in woundedness, Hindu nationalism is further entrenched in times of social, cultural, or economic instability, as uncertainties resulting from various instabilities are redirected as majoritarian anxieties (Appadurai, 2006). In this way, over time, Hindu nationalism creates a violent ecosystem that marks digital and physical life in ways that make this escalating nationalism increasingly widespread, banal, and ordinary.

To elaborate upon this argument, I divide the chapter in two parts. In the first section, I briefly outline the defining features of Hindu nationalism from the 1920s until the 1990s. I do so for primarily two reasons: first, to document how entrenched Hindu nationalism has been in Indian society and demonstrate how it slowly evolved from a socio-cultural ideology towards a populist, electoral politics, and; second, to outline how central majoritarian violence is to Hindu nationalism. In the second section, I specifically focus on how Hindu nationalism has evolved and become popularized in India since the early 1990s, the decade in which LGBTQ activism first began to emerge in Indian public consciousness. This chapter does not attempt an in-depth historicization of the rise and evolution of Hindu nationalism in India; rather, my goal is to familiarize the reader with the broad tenets of Hindu nationalism, especially since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it begins to transform in response to a globalizing Indian society. This is important for two reasons — first, because Hindu nationalism has gained significant ground in

India since the 1980s, and; second, because the past three decades in India have also been very fruitful for the progress of LGBTQ rights and freedoms. Specifically focusing on how Hindu nationalism has shaped Indian society since the late 1980s and 1990s contextualizes the larger atmosphere within which LGBTQ activism in India have evolved. Finally, I conclude the chapter by outlining how Hindu nationalism forms the very *atmosphere* of Indian society today.

I: Hindu Nationalism in India until the 1990s: Some Defining Tenets

Hindu nationalism, as an ideology that consolidates numerous social and reformist movements that are designed to construct an ethnic idea of India, has existed in some form since the late 1800s. Its evolution, as an ideology, political strategy, and socio-cultural discourse, is therefore enmeshed in India's history of colonization, its partition and independence, and its developments as a postcolonial nation. It can be defined as an ethno-religious nationalism based on majoritarian anxieties and the violent expulsion of the religious — predominantly Muslim — Other towards the goal of building a unified India, interchangeable in this imagination with the Hindu *rashtra* (nation). Over time, Hindu nationalist ideology has undergone many changes, but its roots lie in the writings of V.D. Savarkar, who defined “Hindutva” as the essential characteristics or qualities of being a Hindu. In his 1923 pamphlet, titled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar envisioned Hindutva as an expansive, all-encompassing term, writing, “Hindutva is not a word but a history ... Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva ... Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race” (pp. 3-4). In other words, Savarkar defined Hinduness, or Hindutva, as the

socio-cultural beliefs and practices of a *race* of Aryans, the Hindus who had settled on the Indian subcontinent.

As Van der Veer (1999) argues, this “racial division between Aryans and non-Aryans” (p. 424) is at the heart of Hindu nationalist ideology. According to Savarkar (1923), the Hindu is connected to the holy “motherland,” India, through blood (a racial logic) and through a shared culture (an ideological logic). As such, legitimate inheritors of the Hindu *rashtra* are *only* those who are marked with the racial, territorial, and cultural markers of Hindutva. Defining Hindutva through such a racial, ethnic, and territorial claim situates populations of non-Hindu religions, such as Muslims and Christians, as Other to the Indian nation. Further, it also excludes non-dominant caste populations, such as Dalits¹⁶, as non-Aryan, who are therefore destined to remain subservient to dominant-caste Hindus, who are seen as the original descendants of the Aryan race.

Therefore, Hindu nationalism is structured through caste oppression, on the one hand, and in an opposition to Islam, Christianity, and the presence of religious Others within India, on the other. At its core, Hindu nationalism is based in the territorial and ethnic belief that India is the “chosen land” for Hindus, making Hindu nationalism a “nationalism of the chosen people” (Jaffrelot, 2021). A central feature of Hindu nationalism is that it merges religious and ethnic identities with territorial ideology, making an ethnic and racialized claim to the Indian land and

¹⁶ Dalits (literal translation: ground down) are non-dominant caste populations in India. I elaborate on caste in more detail in Chapter 6.

nation¹⁷. What follows from the merging of ethnicity with territoriality, based on the anxiety caused by the ever-present threat of “illegitimate encroachment” on the “motherland,” is a sustained reliance on militancy and violence towards the goal of forming a *unified* Hindutva, linked inextricably with the nationalist and territorial imagination of the Hindu rashtra. As such, given India’s history, within the Hindutva imagination, it is predominantly the presence of the Muslim Other in the Indian nation that is seen as proof that the Hindu rashtra remains an unfinished dream, thereby producing an “anxiety of incompleteness” (Appadurai, 2006) that becomes the driving force for Hindu nationalism.

Importantly, Appadurai (2006) writes:

Numerical majorities can become predatory and ethnocidal with regard to small numbers precisely when some minorities (and their small numbers) remind these majorities of the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethos (p. 8).

Corresponding with this theorization of the “anxiety of incompleteness,” many scholars have argued that Hindutva is rooted in an originary lack in the Hindu imagination and have demonstrated that an “imagined community” of Hindus is constructed against the demonized and phantasmagoric Muslim Other (Bacchetta, 1993, 2004, 2014; Basu et al., 1993; Blom Hansen,

¹⁷ It is widely acknowledged that Savarkar was a supporter of Hitler and the treatment of Jewish populations in Nazi Germany. For example, in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar writes that Hindus were Aryans who had settled on Indian soil, drawing common links with Nazi discourse about the supremacy of the Aryan race. Prominent historians like Sumit Sarkar have drawn parallels between Hindutva and fascism (1993), and Casolari (2000) documents, through archival evidence, the interest of Hindu nationalist leaders in the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler. In turn, Nazi propaganda also drew upon Hindu nationalist ideology. This connection between these two ethnic nationalisms also foregrounds the importance of reading Hindu nationalism through the lens of eugenics and race, even if I do not do so, in detail, in this dissertation. For more on the racial logic of Hindu nationalism, see: Ashutosh’s essay, ‘*The Transnational Routes of White and Hindu Nationalisms*’ (2022) and Bhatt’s chapter, ‘*The Lore of the Homeland: Hindu Nationalism and Indigenist “Neoracism”*’ (2007).

1999; Jaffrelot, 2005, 2021; Nandy, 1983, 2003). As such, Hindutva is opposed to any non-Hindu presence in India, because its founding myth defines Hindus as the original settlers on Indian soil. Therefore, it takes as its impetus any challenge, real or perceived, to the caste-hierarchized Hindu identity.

Further, given that Hindutva is defined as an overarching schema for a Hindu way of life and being — in other words, as *Hinduness* — the challenges to Hindutva can emerge from multiple locations. Hindutva, therefore, constructs, and is simultaneously constructed against, its numerous enemies; as a result, despite being an absolute majority in India, the Hindu population is framed as being constantly under threat. Within this schema, Hindutva offers a militant solution to reclaiming the primordial supremacy of Hindus in the Hindu rashtra, as well as their rightful dominance on Indian soil. As such, the popularization of Hindutva gains velocity in times of precarity and uncertainty, which Hindu nationalists work to resignify as a threat to Hindu identity. In this way, the escalating use of violence and militancy towards the goal of constructing a Hindu rashtra becomes another defining feature of Hindu nationalism.

Dedicated towards this goal of building a unified Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist culture, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh¹⁸ (RSS) was formed in 1925. Conceived as a volunteer organization that promotes the values of Hindutva, the first branch, or shakha, of the RSS was founded in Maharashtra by K.B. Hedgewar. In addition to the anti-colonial agitations in India that were seeking Hindu-Muslim unity against British rule (which were already triggering Hindu insecurities about the presence of the Muslim Other in India), Bhatt & Mukta (2000)

¹⁸ Translated as: National Association of Volunteers.

contextualize the emergence of the RSS within the rising influence of the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar, who demanded the dismantling of Hinduism, as it was the root cause of caste discrimination. Within this context, the priority of the RSS was to “reform the Hindus to reframe Hindu society from below” (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 2), and the shakha was envisioned as the primordial unit through which this reorganization would take place. It was framed as “both a place and a social group” (ibid., p. 2), where men would be given physical training in calisthenics and military combat, along with intellectual training in the cultural and spiritual values of Hindutva, all towards the aim of “strengthening,” mentally and physically, the Hindu nationalist volunteer.

According to Blom Hansen (1999), the purpose of the shakha was, for Hedgewar, to “create a ‘new man’ — patriotic [and] selfless ... loyal to the Hindu nation and the RSS — physically well trained, ‘manly,’ courageous, self-disciplined, and capable of organization” (p. 93). This focus on reconfiguring Hindu masculinity as highly regimented and militant was, in part, a response to the effeminacy and disorderliness assigned to the Hindu man by the British to justify colonial rule (Nandy, 1983), and, in part, a felt necessity against the symbolic excess represented by the Muslim Other within the Hindu nationalist psyche. As Bacchetta (2004) writes, RSS literature “portrays Muslims as anti-national, sexually overactive, lusting after and raping Hindu women and [the] symbolic femininity [of the Indian nation]” (p. 38). This seamless merging of majoritarian anxieties with sexual anxieties, metonymizing gender and nation, led to the inauguration of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the women’s wing of the RSS. It was founded in 1936 by Hedgewar and Laxmibai Kelkar in Maharashtra, out of a perceived need for Hindu women to defend themselves against Muslim men. The goals of the Samiti were to make women

conscious of their “divine identity,” and to prepare them for the Hindu nationalist cause (Bacchetta, 2004). Like the RSS, the Samiti is organized through shakhas, and also mirrors the deeply hierarchical organization of the RSS.

Overall, “the main aim of the RSS has been to expand the shakhas’ network” (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 3), and according to the RSS annual report of 2019, there are currently more than 84,000 shakhas across India, with a membership of more than 6 million swayamsevakas, or volunteers. Towards their aim of forming a Hindu nationalist society “from below,” shakhas were framed as spaces where community and civic engagement would coalesce, and where volunteers would be encouraged to participate in the upliftment of their local communities. Since the beginning, RSS shakhas have aimed towards becoming useful socio-cultural nodes for their surrounding neighbourhoods, and RSS volunteers are active in mediating the everyday problems facing families and local communities. As Ram, a queer activist who volunteered with the RSS in his childhood and teenage years clarified to me, their interventions can be varied, and range from raising funds to buy an economically struggling family a vehicle and arranging for a child’s admission into a local school, to advocating for roads to be built in the locality and organizing social events for the neighbourhood during Hindu festivals.

The presence of RSS volunteers in the daily fabric of many localities and communities therefore endows Hindu nationalism with an embodied, everyday feeling of rootedness, and allows for the feeling of Hindutva to become fully integrated into people’s lives. This is important because the enmeshment of Hindutva ideology in the everyday lives of Indian people enables its majoritarian anxieties to become normalized and ingrained in the ordinary fabric of

Indian society. This produces Hindu nationalism as banal, normalizing its virulence through daily behaviours, practices, and discourses. It is crucial to note that the structuring of Indian society through the banality of Hindu nationalism also enables the inherently violent logic of Hindutva to become normalized, and seep into the everyday lives of Indian populations as an unremarkable, justifiable part of life.

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti further complements this everyday work of the RSS, of restructuring Indian society through “Hindu nationalism from below,” by organizing cultural programs for women, including cooking classes, prayer functions, etc., and also helps support women financially. However, even though both, the RSS and the Samiti, are organized along the same lines, Bacchetta (2004) demonstrates how the Samiti constructs a *specifically* feminine Hindu nationalism, and much of the literature of the RSS is modified by the Samiti to place women more centrally in the history of the RSS, as well as in RSS’s version of Indian mythology and history. She writes that the “Samiti’s temporal framework and categories are modelled after the RSS’s, but it adds selected elements to each period to render women visible and central” (p. 22). For instance, while the RSS frames Hindu women only as mothers and sisters, dealing with femininity only through chastity and celibacy, the Samiti expands this model of femininity by including militant Hindu goddesses as idealized figures within their ideology. As such, Bacchetta argues that while “the Sangh proposes a model for domesticated, motherly or sisterly femininity as the overwhelming ideal, both at the symbolic and material levels” (p. 37), the Samiti exceeds these boundaries of femininity to situate the role of women more centrally within the project of Hindu nationalism.

The Samiti promotes both, a domesticated femininity *and* an aggressive and militant womanhood, and Samiti women often participate in riots, pogroms, and other violent Hindu nationalist projects (Bacchetta, 1993; Basu, 1993; Sarkar, 1993). Importantly, despite being coded through overwhelmingly heteronormative ideals of femininity, scholarship on how the Samiti is organized elucidates that Samiti women find space for freedom and friendship within this domain that seeks to govern their femininity in service of the Hindu nation (Bacchetta, 1993). For some women, becoming active in the Samiti involves increased freedom to access to public space, and even reject marriage and motherhood. As Bacchetta (1993) argues, this involves “the skillful manipulation of the language of Hindu nationalism” (p. 39) in ways that nonetheless remain comprehensible within the heteropatriarchal framework of Hindu nationalism. Therefore, as Mehta (2015) writes: “right-wing women find themselves in the uncertain and tense ‘in-between’ spaces of embracing exclusionary, violent, and often patriarchal ideologies while at the same time contesting ‘everyday’ patriarchy” (p. 418).

Despite these differences in constructing an ideal womanhood in service of the Hindu *rashtra*, both the RSS and the Samiti imagine the ideal woman as heterosexual, and devoted to the nation through her roles as a daughter, sister, and eventually, mother. Further, Hindu nationalist men and women politicize their Hindu identity in similar ways — through threat, perceived marginalization, and majoritarian anxiety. Such relations to Hindu nationalist identity can be understood as “wounded attachments” that are marked by an invested desire in defining one’s identity through suffering (Brown, 1993). Even though Brown (1993) argues that “wounded attachments” to identity are formed when *minority* populations attempt to politicize their identities, I use this concept to analyze *majoritarian* attachments to Hindu identity precisely

because they are so strongly rooted in victimization, anxiety and threat. As I argue above, Hindu nationalism acquires its driving force precisely because it situates the Hindu as constantly under threat due to the presence of the Muslim Other within the Hindu *rashtra*. Brown (1993) writes that wounded attachments to identity produce “an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt, ... [construct] a culprit responsible for the hurt, and ... [produce] a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)” (p. 401). As such, Hindu nationalism foregrounds the perceived violation caused by the Muslim Other, and subsequently responds by violently *retaliating* against this Other, reinstating the need for Hindu nationalism and absolving Hindu nationalist violence in the process.

This can be clearly seen in the role of the RSS during the years around the Partition of India. Even though the RSS began as a cultural organization, in the 1940s, the communal atmosphere around the Partition of India fuelled majoritarian anxieties and furthered the RSS cause. For the RSS, the failure of their vision of a unified India through its partition became grounds to further entrench Hindu nationalism. The Partition of India now provided a territorial wound that reinforced the psychic woundedness around which Hindu identity was mobilized. Importantly, while the RSS was active in the communal violence against Muslims during this period, it also organized large-scale relief work, like distributing rations and setting up refugee camps, continuing to popularize Hindu nationalism from below (Blom Hansen, 1999). The role of the RSS during the Partition helped them entrench the mythology of *Hindutva* even more deeply in Indian society. The Partition of India, and the creation of a Muslim-dominated Pakistan on what Hindu nationalists considered to be their “motherland,” fueled their commitment towards building a unified Hindu *rashtra*, and incited their desire for retribution against the

Muslim Other for “stealing” parts of the Indian “motherland” that rightfully belonged to the Aryan-descended Hindu.

Building upon their presence in the communally charged aftermath of the Partition, the RSS expanded into the Sangh Parivar (RSS Family), by forming numerous affiliated and subsidiary organizations and political parties. In 1948, the student wing of the RSS, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad¹⁹ (ABVP) was inaugurated. In 1951, the RSS formed a political party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh²⁰. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh continued to work towards increasing its electoral base, and deployed numerous populist strategies in the 1950s and 1960s. These efforts were aided by the formation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad²¹ (VHP) in 1964, a religious and militant organization that would act as “a common ground for a national Hinduism” (Blom Hansen, 1999, p. 102) and serve to bridge the gap between the RSS’s cultural mission and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh’s political one.

In general, the decades between the 1950s and 1970s, were a time of expansion for the Sangh Parivar. Continuing their grassroots mobilization, the RSS expanded into the field of education with the hope of training young Hindus in the principles of Hindutva. Towards this end, they opened numerous RSS schools, beginning in 1952, and by the early 2000s, they had inaugurated more than 14,000 schools (Jaffrelot, 2005). In the electoral field too, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh sought to expand by bringing non-dominant caste populations into its fold and simultaneously worked to situate the Indian National Congress (INC), as a corrupt, dynastic

¹⁹ Translated as: All India Student Organization.

²⁰ Translated as: Indian People’s Party.

²¹ Translated as: World Hindu Organization.

political organization that only sought to “appease” Indian Muslims. This rhetoric of “Muslim appeasement” helped them further underscore the woundedness of Hindu identity and fuel Hindu nationalist anxieties. Further, the incumbent Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, affiliated with the INC, was accused of election fraud in the 1971 national elections, and fearing her impeachment, instituted a national Emergency between June 25 1975 and March 21 1977. Many civil liberties were suspended, and numerous parties and organizations, including the RSS, were banned. In the elections held immediately after the Emergency, in 1977, the INC understandably experienced significant defeat. These elections saw a coalition named the Janata Party²² come to power, which included the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the Socialist Party, a defecting faction of the INC, and the Bharatiya Kranti Dal²³. However, this amalgam of divergent ideological positions led to an early split, triggering premature national elections in 1980, where the INC returned with a full majority.

Despite electoral defeat, through this turmoil, the RSS and its affiliates emerged stronger than ever, and Blom Hansen (1999) terms the period from the 1980s onwards as “the saffron wave,” referring here to the official colour of the RSS — bhagwa, or saffron. Importantly, through their consistent mobilization of Hindu nationalism at a grassroots level, the RSS was:

able to expand and change the political common sense in India because it drew on already existing discursive registers, because it voiced broad-based if imprecise disgruntlements and anxieties, and because in large parts of India it could occupy the political space that opened up as the Congress party gradually disintegrated (p. 134).

²² Translated as: People’s Party.

²³ Translated as: Indian Revolutionary Party.

Two things are of note here — first, that “the saffron wave” was not the result of an unwavering, well thought out strategy, and therefore, the popularity of Hindu nationalism in India today is not an inevitable occurrence; and, second, that by consistently popularizing Hindu nationalism at a grassroots level, the Sangh Parivar had managed to embed Hindutva ideology into the very grammar of Indian society.

As such, it is clear that social, cultural, and economic instabilities are particularly conducive to the politics of the Sangh Parivar, and the ideology of Hindutva. Specifically during the 1970s and 1980s, many social, political, cultural, and technological changes took place within a short period of time, contributing to precisely such a generalized sense of disgruntlement and anxiety that the Sangh Parivar then exploited. During this time, the Sangh Parivar worked with renewed interest towards its goal of building a unified Hindutva. After the disintegration of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party²⁴ (BJP) was formed in 1980. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) also began to focus on the prevention of cow slaughter²⁵, setting up new temples, and the conversion of people of other faiths (particularly Islam and Christianity) to Hinduism. Consistent with Hindutva ideology, this conversion was explained as a *re-conversion* of those who had been “tricked” by the proselytizing religions of Islam or Christianity, especially since, in the Hindu nationalist schema, all who resided in India were erstwhile Hindus, or “outsiders” to be expelled from the Hindu rashtra (Bacchetta, 2004; Basu et al., 1993).

²⁴ Translated as: Indian People’s Party.

²⁵ Cows are considered sacred in many Hindu religions, and are sometimes worshipped in the form of the *Gaumata*, or “Mother Goddess”. As Bacchetta (2000) writes, for “Hindu nationalists, cow slaughter primarily signifies Muslim male self assertion through the violation of the sacred Hindu female body (as cow-mother-goddess)” (p. 264).

Besides the national Emergency in the 1970s, another kind of instability was brought on by India's economy being slowly liberalized in the 1980s and 1990s, heralding the advent of globalization in the subcontinent, along with the expansion of a consumer goods economy. These economic reforms "coupled with a growing consumer market [expanded and] brought the middle classes visibly to the fore" (Oza, 2006, p. 12). Within this context, a direct connection formed between the instabilities produced by liberalization and Hindu nationalism, wherein "the anxiety of incompleteness and unacceptable levels of uncertainty combine[d] in ways that spark[ed] large-scale ethnocidal mobilization" (Appadurai, 2006, p. 9), as I document below. In general, these decades generated numerous anxieties about the erosion of an "Indian" way of life, and these anxieties were utilized by Hindu nationalists, who opposed the encroachment of "Western" culture on Indian society, and displaced many of these anxieties onto the prevalent and inaccurate myth of an increasing Muslim population in India. In Chapters 4 and 5, I analyze how these debates about the "Westernization" of Indian society also shaped Hindu nationalist antipathy towards LGBTQ activisms, and this, in turn, caused LGBTQ activisms to contend with the question of Indianness in different ways.

A third factor that contributed to the insecurities and rising anxieties of Hindu nationalists in the 1970s and 1980s was a dramatic rise in populist politics in large parts of India. Around this time, populist movements "revealed that a language of rights and entitlements — the right to articulate protest, the right to assert oneself, but also the entitlement to be heard and to be accommodated by government schemes — had become naturalized" (Blom Hansen, 1999, p. 141). This period saw numerous farmers' protests, the strengthening of anti-caste politics, and

the emergence of ‘Other Backward Castes’ (OBC) as a political category²⁶. As OBC agitations grew stronger, there was a concomitant rise in resentment among dominant-caste Hindus, who, already attached to their Hindu-ness in such fragile and anxious ways, felt threatened by the potential disruption of the ubiquitous norms of the caste-hierarchy. Interestingly, one reason for dominant-caste resentment in this context was that, as Deshpande (2013) argues, in the post-independence India of the 1950s and 1960s, “[c]onstitutionally and legally, caste was to be recognized only as a source of disadvantage or vulnerability, not as a source of privilege or advantage” (p. 37). Therefore, in many ways, the demonstrable and constitutionally institutionalized vulnerability experienced by non-dominant caste communities threatened to delegitimize the affective conditions of woundedness and persecution upon which Hindu nationalism was based.

Fourth, the 1980s also witnessed significant Muslim agitation around the Shah Bano case²⁷. In this prolonged case about a Muslim woman’s right to monetary maintenance after divorce, Muslim Personal Law was pitted against the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in India. Shah Bano was entitled to a monthly maintenance after her divorce based on the provisions of the UCC, but her ex-husband was entitled to revoke any maintenance under the provisions of Muslim Personal Law. The case was politicized because it highlighted a longstanding debate in India about whether different civil codes should exist for different religions. In India, Religious

²⁶ I contextualize this in more detail in Chapter 6.

²⁷ In 1975, Shah Bano, a 62 year old Muslim woman, was disowned by her husband and, along with her 5 children, evicted from her husband’s home. In 1978, she filed a petition in the district court of Indore when he stopped providing her a monthly maintenance. In response to this, her husband divorced her through Triple Talaq (uttering ‘talaq’ thrice), which was a protected practice for Muslims in India through Muslim Personal Law, until 2017. Upon being divorced, Shah Bano appealed to the district court of Indore to ensure she receives her a monthly maintenance from her ex-husband, and appealed to the High Court of Madhya Pradesh to increase her monthly maintenance.

Personal Laws, governing kinship through inheritance, adoption, marriage, etc., exist coterminously with the Uniform Civil Code. In 1985, the Supreme Court of India delivered a verdict in favour of Shah Bano, limiting the reach of Muslim Personal Law, and this led to numerous agitations by conservative Muslim populations across the country.

In 1986, the INC, the incumbent national party at the time, passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, which nullified the Supreme Court verdict. The passing of this Act was severely criticized by Hindu nationalists, and politicized by the BJP as blatant “appeasement” of Muslim populations, which served to inflame Hindu nationalism even further, resignifying the issue of Muslim Personal Law as, yet again, a threat to the Hindu majority, and therefore, as grounds for a recommitment to Hindutva. Eventually, this strategy yielded an electoral victory — as a result of these cumulative instabilities, the INC was defeated by a coalition between the BJP and the Janata Dal²⁸ in the national elections in 1989.

Overall, in this section I have outlined some essential tenets of Hindu nationalism, which explain how and why Hindu nationalism gains popularity in times of uncertainty and crisis. As a racial, ethnic, and territorial claim to the Indian nation, Hindutva is centred on the belief that India is the “chosen land” of Hindus, making Hindu nationalism a “nationalism of the chosen people” (Jaffrelot, 2021). This righteous claim to the “motherland” produces a militant and violent response to the “encroachment” of religious Others on Indian soil, grounded in an “anxiety of incompleteness,” (Appadurai, 2006) triggered by this very presence of non-Hindus in the Hindu *rashtra*. Given that Hindu nationalism is rooted in a rarified and ethnically “pure”

²⁸ Translated as: People’s Party.

vision of the Indian “motherland,” its ideology produces numerous enemies, which reinforces the imagination of threats to the Hindu rashtra and the Hindu way of life. Such a “wounded attachment” (Brown, 1993) to Hindu identity, in turn, requires escalating violence and militancy in its defence, which is understood as retaliation for the imagined threat, or encroachment. As such, Hindu nationalism thrives under conditions of uncertainty and insecurity, which it resignifies as perceived threats, in response to which it works towards producing an escalating cycle of violent retaliations and militancy. In the next section, I shall outline how these essential characteristics of Hindu nationalist ideology frame contemporary Indian society and culture.

II. Hindu Nationalism in India since the 1990s

In the previous section, I outlined how Hindu nationalism emerged as a religious, ethnic, and territorial ideology that attempts to produce a monolithic version of Hinduism and weaponize it against religious minorities in India, primarily Muslims. The RSS is central to these processes and creates a mythology that involves the unification of India as the “holy land” or “motherland” for Hindus, who are then seen as its “chosen people”. At the heart of Hindu nationalism lies majoritarian anxieties that are inflamed by the presence of religious Others in India, the ascendance of anti-caste movements that often advocate for the abolition of Hinduism, and the social, economic, and cultural changes wrought by liberalization and globalization. Hindutva, then, is situated as the recovery of the wounded Hindu self from these instabilities and dangers, always juxtaposed against an imaginary threat, and numerous symbolic enemies. Therefore, in retaliation to the woundedness of Hindu identity, violence is not only sanctioned, but can be actively incited.

As such, I posit that majoritarian anxiety, woundedness, and violence are the cornerstones of Hindu nationalism, and that these conditions are inflamed by the Sangh Parivar, especially in uncertain times, in order to increase their popularity and entrench Hindu nationalism more deeply in everyday Indian society. As I outlined in the previous section, one of the major strengths of the Sangh Parivar has been their ability to organize consistently at the grassroots level, and organize volunteer work through shakhas in a way that ensures that Hindutva seeps into the everyday, embodied lives of each Indian citizen. In this way, they have worked to construct Hindu nationalism as a lived reality, and a social and cultural discourse that shapes the very atmosphere of the Indian nation.

In this section, I focus on key arguments and processes that demonstrate how these same strategies, affects, and ideological schemas frame Indian society even more pervasively today. Especially since the early 1990s, the Sangh Parivar has benefited from socio-cultural and national insecurities caused by economic liberalization and globalization, and has also become more militant in order to produce a communally divisive atmosphere in Indian society. Specifically, in the first sub-section, I highlight how the Sangh Parivar constructs India as a Hindu nationalist heterotopia, advocating for escalating levels of violence towards making this heterotopia a reality. In the second sub-section, I focus on the rise of Hindu nationalist vigilantism in recent years. Finally, in the third sub-section, I show how the use of digital media enables Hindu nationalist violence to frame digital life, within India and its diaspora. Together, this demonstrates that Hindu nationalism creates increasing religious polarization and communal violence in contemporary Indian society, and that systematic efforts by the Sangh Parivar produce organized ecosystems of Hindu nationalism across digital and physical worlds. This

produces an *atmosphere of ethnic violence* across digital, physical, and diasporic registers, and offers the context in which LGBTQ activists now live their lives, enact their politics, and imagine their futures.

a. Constructing a Hindu Nationalist Heterotopia

Building upon the socio-cultural and economic turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s, Hindutva experienced a resurgence and was resignified as an extreme form of Hindu nationalism, marked by exaggerated, and often violent, manifestations of the principles underlining Hindu nationalist ideology — namely, the homogenization of Hindu identity and practices of Hinduism, the belief that India is the land of Hindus, mandating Islamophobia and cultural conservatism. Basu et al. (1993) term the period of the late 1980s and 1990s as the “VHP phase of Hindutva,” arguing that the vigilantism of the Sangh Parivar was becoming integral to their vision of Hindutva during this time. They write that this phase of Hindutva “constitutes a major departure from previous phases of Hindu communal mobilization ... [and] is inseparably identified with a concrete organizational complex [of which the VHP is an intrinsic part]” (p. 56). As such, the cultural project of Hindu nationalism of the previous decades was now being redefined through an increasingly militant and violent Hindutva ideology.

The Ramjanmabhoomi²⁹ issue became emblematic of the renewal of Hindutva in this period and signified, as Deshpande (1995) and Jaffrelot (2014) importantly argue, a re-orientation of the Indian nation as a Hindu nationalist heterotopia. Juxtaposed against utopias, which are entirely unreal, Foucault (1984) suggests that heterotopias are a “simultaneously mythic *and* real contestation of the space in which we live” (p. 4). He explains that every society has its own heterotopias, which are spaces where time and meaning coalesce in ways that serve the function of *mirroring* society, such that heterotopias are embodied with real and imagined characteristics. Using the example of the cemetery, Foucault theorizes that heterotopias are given

²⁹ Translated as: The birth place of Lord Ram. Based on the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, written by Valmiki, the mythical Lord Ram was the king of Ayodhya. *Ramayana* tells the story of Lord Ram’s fourteen year exile, during which time his wife, Sita, is kidnapped by Rāvan, the king of Lanka (presumably, present day Sri Lanka). In order to rescue Sita, Ram wages war on Rāvan, and kills him. The tale concludes with Ram and Sita’s return to Ayodhya, his coronation as king, and stories of his just and moral rule over Ayodhya. However, upon return to Ayodhya, swayed by gossip among his populace about Sita’s chastity (given her long years trapped in Lanka), Ram banishes her, and frustrated/ashamed by repeatedly having to prove her virtue to him, Sita chooses to be swallowed by “Mother Earth”. This is why many queer feminist activists currently protest Hindu nationalism carrying posters that state, “Ram Rajya was bad for Sita”. In Hinduism, it is believed that Ram is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and Sita is an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. Diwali, a major festival amongst Hindus across most parts of India, is celebrated to mark Ram’s return to Ayodhya, and Dussehra is celebrated to rejoice in Ram’s defeat of Rāvan, seen as a symbolic victory of good over evil. Ramrajya, or the period or era of Ram’s rule, is believed to be the most just and peaceful in Hindu mythology, and Hindu nationalists believe that during Ramrajya the superiority of Hindus is established and unchallenged.

The iconography and significance of the *Ramayana* in Hindu nationalism is unparalleled. For example, Savarkar (1923) wrote that Hindus came together for the first time as a nation when Lord Ram “brought the whole land from the Himalayas to the seas under one sovereign sway” (pp. 7-8). As such, according to Savarkar, Lord Ram is the founder of the Hindu nationalist nation. Additionally, the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti asks that women volunteers model themselves after Sita. Further, even though scholars have long known that there are many tellings of the *Ramayana*, in 2011, after protests by Hindu nationalist groups, an essay by A.K. Ramanujan, ‘*Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*’ was removed from history syllabi across colleges in the University of Delhi. As the story goes, in 1859-1860, Hindus began claiming that the site where a sixteenth century mosque, the Babri Masjid, stood was the birth place of Lord Ram, some even stating that a temple had been demolished to erect the Babri Masjid in 1528, during Mughal rule. However, as Noorani (1989) states, “the co-existence of a mosque and a shrine within one compound was adhered to in actual practice till December 22-23, 1949” (p. 2461), as Hindus and Muslims both continued to offer prayers at the site of the Babri Masjid. In 1949, in an environment thick with communal tension, a group of Hindus broke into the Babri Masjid and placed idols of a young Lord Ram (Ram Lalla) inside. This led to the mosque being shut and becoming a disputed site. After this, as Noorani (ibid.) reminds us, while Muslims were forbidden from entering the mosque, Hindus were allowed to offer prayers through a side entrance to the site.

specific meanings based on cultural norms of a given time; he shows how, when there was a belief in the “resurrection of bodies” (p. 5), cemeteries did not have individualized tombs, but when this belief dissipated, tombs began to be given more importance. Whatever the veracity of this historical account might be, it is important to remember that the physical geography of heterotopias changes based on cultural norms of a given time. Foucault also suggests that heterotopias are “linked to slices in time” (p. 6). For instance, the cemetery comes to hold meaning as a place that signifies the episodic temporality of death on the one hand, and the perpetual condition of loss on the other.

Overall, heterotopias acquire meaning through ideological practices that attempt to attach utopian and imaginary significance to real spaces, and are therefore both mythical and real. As Deshpande (1995) writes, due to its significance as the birthplace of Lord Ram, “Ayodhya, the small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh ... [became] among the most potent heterotopias in our recent history” (p. 3221). In being constructed as such, the Ramjanmabhoomi became *the* signifier of the disintegrating position of Hindus in India, amplifying the popularity of Hindu nationalist rhetoric even further.

The agitations around the Ramjanmabhoomi issue reconfigured the Indian nation-space through Hindutva’s vision of India as a “sacred geography” (Deshpande, 1995), and majoritarian anxieties, woundedness, and violence — in the form of “retribution” — were central to these processes. Here, the Ramjanmabhoomi in particular, and arguably India at large, became as if a mirror for Hindu nationalist identity and ideology. In his essay, Foucault (1984) notes that the mirror functions as a heterotopia, and explains:

[The mirror] makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (p. 4).

Ramjanmabhoomi, as heterotopia, then, remains suspended between fantasy and reality — it is a *real* place in Ayodhya, and simultaneously caught in the *fantasy* of India as the “chosen land” for Hindus (Jaffrelot, 2014), where a Ramrajya becomes possible, with its only impediment being the encroaching presence of the Muslim, symbolized here through the Babri Masjid.

Building upon Foucault’s (1984) conceptualization of heterotopias as mirrors, I wish to alert us to another important theorization of how the psyche is shaped through the act of seeing oneself in the mirror. Lacan (2006/1949) has influentially argued that the ego (that which allows us to refer to ourselves as ‘I’), is founded on a two step process — first, a fundamental misrecognition takes place that allows us to recognize ourselves in our mirror image, despite the image being our *inverse*, and, second, the work of *gestalt* is essential in identifying ourselves in the mirror because it is optically impossible to see our full selves in the mirror at any given time. Terming this “the mirror stage,” Lacan notes that our identifications of ourselves are based in misrecognition and fragmentation, but it is the ego, and language, that offer the illusion of fullness and coherence. This relates to the belief in Lacanian psychoanalysis that the subject who speaks — who identifies as “I” and occupies an identity position — does so to assert its wholeness in the face of a crippling fragmentation at the root of subjectivity. If fragmentation and the anxiety of inadequacy are indeed at the root of identity, then we are able to more deeply understand the cycle of violence that marks Hindutva identity formation and its assertion. This is

important because it demonstrates the deep psychic investments in Hindu nationalism, and explains why the fullness and coherence of Hindu nationalist ideology, however phantasmagoric, becomes a crucial component in the construction of a Hindu nationalist public.

Lacan's theorization of identity as inherently fragmented allows us to more fully examine "wounded attachments" to Hindu identity — within a Lacanian framework, all attachments to identity are necessarily wounded, and the fragility of identity is precisely what makes difference an intolerable condition, fuelling the fantasy of revenge (Brown, 1993). As Appadurai (2006) notes, the presence of the minority, embodied by the Muslim Other, "is the symptom, but *difference itself is the underlying problem*" (p. 11). As majorities are engulfed in an "anxiety of incompleteness," they become fixated on eliminating this difference embodied by the Other. Indeed, the rigidity and fanaticism of majoritarian anxiety can be understood as symptomatic of an inherently fragile ego, a wounded sense of self and identity that seeks wholeness, coherence, and domination in order to make up for its internal lack. Therefore, as fragmentation is increasingly mirrored in society — for example, through the liberalization of the economy, flows of globalization, increasing anti-caste agitations, or perceived Muslim "appeasement" — the Hindu majoritarian subject resorts increasingly to violence. Within this context, the heterotopia of the Ramjanmabhoomi or the Hindu rashtra, functions to compensate for the woundedness and fragmentation of the Hindu nationalist identity, such that the heterotopia is produced as a space where the Muslim Other simply ceases to exist. This fantasy, where the Muslim no longer exists within the Hindu nationalist heterotopia, motivates Hindu nationalists for real, physical violence towards their expulsion or elimination from within the Hindu rashtra.

Indeed, as a clear sign of the intolerance of religious Others (particularly the Muslim) within the Hindu rashtra, after a crescendo of increasing communal violence, the Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindutva mobs on December 6 1992, when BJP, RSS, and VHP members gathered in front of the mosque to offer prayers in order to *reclaim* the Ramjanmabhoomi. Through this process, Hindu nationalists became even more invested in, and attached to, their own woundedness, and as I show below, have come to not simply desire revenge on the Other, but to also *enjoy* it. As Bacchetta (2000) writes:

In the Hindu nationalist project, there is no room for those who differ; indeed, Hindu nationalists would like to either assimilate or eliminate Indian minorities such as Muslims (12% of the population), Christians (2.5%), Sikhs (2%), Buddhists (0.78%), Jains (0.48%) ... as well as those Hindus who do not agree with the Hindu nationalist version of Hinduism (p. 260).

Therefore, Hindu nationalist desire, in terms of its popularity and velocity, is caught in a whirlpool of ever increasing threat and violence.

The Ramjanmabhoomi conflict signifies the metonymization of nation, religion, and the gendered body within what Deshpande (1995) has called the heterotopia of Ramrajya. By focusing on the sexual nature of communal rhetoric and violence surrounding the Babri Masjid during the 1980s and 1990s, Bacchetta (2000) demonstrates how central beliefs about Muslim presence-as-violation are in the Hindutva imagination. She writes:

for Hindu nationalists, their demolition of the mosque comes to represent the castration of the sexually aggressive Muslim male, and thus the restoration of Hindu male honour. The symbolism of this act is further reinforced through the alleged real castration of Muslim

men in the riots in the demolition's aftermath. The alleged rape of Muslim women in the same riots constitutes the reversal of the supposed sexual violation of the Hindu Mother(land) (p. 279).

Through this rhetoric, then, the Muslim figure is produced as a psychic excess that threatens the intimate investments of Hindu nationalism in building a Hindu rashtra, and also embodies a material threat to the purity of the Hindu woman/nation. In this way, the image of the Muslim Other as someone whose only agenda is to displace Hindus from India by any means possible set deep roots within Indian society. This pushed more people towards a Hindu nationalist rhetoric that claimed that Hindus were tolerant, but could become militant in order to protect their religion and their holy land, depicted as Mother India, justifying Hindu nationalist violence as retaliation or revenge. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Sangh Parivar worked in a concerted way to politicize the Ramjanmabhoomi issue, increasing the "propensity for violent assaults on local Muslims ... [and the] indirect transformation of the entire "public atmosphere"" (ibid., p. 161). In the next sub-section, I examine how this violent public atmosphere is created through the ever expanding myth that "Hindus are in danger" in the Hindu rashtra.

b. "*Hindu Khatre Mein Hai*"³⁰: Vigilantism and Violence in the Hindu Rashtra

Appadurai (2006) writes that "Terror is the rightful name for any effort to replace peace with violence as the guaranteed anchor of everyday life" (p. 32). As I have demonstrated so far in this chapter, this is precisely what the Sangh Parivar sought to do, especially since the 1980s, when it began to systematically utilize vigilantism as a strategy to shape India's social and

³⁰ Translated as: "Hindus are in danger". This is a phrase used commonly, often as an axiomatic, by Hindu nationalists in India today.

cultural atmosphere through Hindu nationalism. In his latest book, Blom Hansen (2021) argues that “violence has been of foundational importance in Indian politics and practical governance and policing for many decades” (p. 4). In this sub-section, I show how the violence endemic to the Hindu nationalist imagination has produced vigilante mobs who seek to mete out “justice” in the name of protecting Hinduism. In line with Basu et al. (1993), who stated that the decades since the 1980s were the “VHP phase of Hindutva,” Jaffrelot (2021) notes that the systematic expansion of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, and other organizations created primarily to act as vigilante mobs has ensured that Indian public space is increasingly organized through Hindutva violence. Simply put, Hindu nationalist violence has restructured Indian society in the last few decades.

This escalating violence in the name of Hindu nationalism can be understood when theorized in line with the framework of “wounded attachment” (Brown, 1993) to Hindu identity, and resultant “majoritarian anxiety” (Appadurai, 2006), that I have built upon throughout this chapter. Within this schema, escalating violence is a result of *sustained* Hindu nationalist mobilization, which is also incited through conditions of instability. As I argue above, Hindu nationalism is predicated upon, and is mobilized on the basis of, the presence of Muslim and religious Others within the Hindu rashtra. The goal of Hindu nationalism is to eliminate these religious Others, due to whom the heterotopia of the Hindu rashtra remains frustratingly out of reach. Caught in this dialectic, Hindu identity remains intimately attached to its own suffering, as well as harbouring desires of retaliation against those it situates as the cause of this woundedness. The anxiety of failing to build the absolute majority it hopes for drives Hindu nationalists towards ever escalating levels of violence and retribution against its symbolic

enemies, who become repositories of the frustrations that mark the incompleteness of the Hindu nationalist project. Appadurai (2006) explains that, over time, majoritarian anxieties produce “predatory identities,” that are:

products of situations in which the idea of national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole (p. 53).

In the Indian context, the discourse around the Ramjanmabhoomi issue in the 1990s amplified this heterotopian imagination of India as the legitimate nation-space of Hindus alone, and led to communal violence against Muslim populations and the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

However, in the aftermath of this violence, Hindu nationalist anxieties about the nation were incited once again as globalization threatened to redefine national culture. Globalization, in particular, brought on increasing anxieties about national decline due to global and transnational flows of labour, capital, and especially, culture (Fernandes, 2000). Yet, the generalized sense of chaos in Indian society, compounded by the socio-cultural changes caused by processes of economic liberalization, globalization, and development, was fruitful for the production of predatory nationalism. The increase in urbanization, expanding avenues of social mobility, and the resultant loss of socio-economic and cultural capital for some dominant-caste Hindu communities increased the predisposition to identify with a rigid, clearly defined Hindutva identity, which acted as a defence mechanism against these instabilities. Therefore, while globalization’s deterritorializing tendencies offered a challenge to Hindutva’s heterotopia

grounded in the Indian motherland, the reterritorialization that accompanied the globalizing impulse renewed an investment in Hindutva's parochialism (Chatterjee, 2010; Deshpande, 1995).

Building upon the atmosphere of communal violence, the increasing polarization of public consciousness on ethno-religious grounds, the majoritarian turn of electoral politics from the 1970s, and the anxieties accompanying globalization in India, Narendra Modi (India's Prime Minister since 2014) "gave the BJP a new dimension in the first decade of the 2000s: populism, and even more precisely, *national* populism" (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 31). Broadly understood as a strategy of political mobilization, wherein "leaders appeal to the power of the common people to challenge the legitimacy of the current political establishment" (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407), populism relies upon a charismatic leader who deploys a particular style of communication to "offer simplistic solutions to complex political problems in a very direct language" (ibid., p. 407). Importantly, as Jaffrelot (2021) argues, through such strategies, populists like Narendra Modi construct themselves as an "ego ideal" for the populace, promising to defend the populace and nation against its internal Others, namely, "those who pose a threat to the ethnic majority" (p. 33). Particularly in light of the woundedness and anxiety that is rooted in Hindu nationalist identity formation, Modi as the ego ideal becomes *the* idolized figure for the Hindu nationalist subject, signified as the metonym for Hindu nationalism at large.

Under Narendra Modi, majoritarian and populist strategies overlap, and are used with great efficacy. For example, in order to channel the escalating Hindu nationalist violence towards their own electoral goals, by the first decade of the 2000s, the BJP began to organize and systematize the mythology of "*Hindu khatre mein hain*" (Hindus are in danger), a populist

clarion call that has only intensified since the BJP has come into power in the national government. This broad, vague statement is ingenious because it acts like a master signifier, incorporating a range of grievances and threats that have nothing to do with religion or ethnicity, and displacing them onto the pre-existing Hindu majoritarian anxiety the Sangh Parivar has so assiduously cultivated. In the past two decades, the Sangh Parivar has continued to incubate Hindu majoritarian anxieties, reorganizing the increasing anger created through its own populist rhetoric into a militant Hindu nationalism. Especially since 2014, when the BJP formed the national government with an absolute majority, Hindu nationalist violence against Muslim and Dalit minority communities has exponentially increased across India, predominantly through increasingly organized ecosystems of Hindutva mobs, who work in tandem with state machinery in order to structure Indian society through Hindu nationalist violence.

Hindutva mobs can be understood as symptoms of a predatory Hindu nationalism that endorses increasing levels of violence against its symbolic enemies in order to become an absolute majority — a purely Hindu *rashtra*. These mobs organize and carry out exceptional violence, such as during riots, but also increasingly police Indian society through cow vigilantism³¹, or by forming ‘Anti-Romeo Squads’ that focus on “rescuing” Hindu women from the bogey of ‘Love Jihad,’ which is a Hindutva theory that Muslims in India commit ‘Love Jihad’ by “tricking” Hindu women into marrying them, with the goal of converting them to Islam to

³¹ Cow slaughter for purposes of consumption is currently banned in most parts of India, and only buffalo meat and leather are allowed to be exported. These exports have declined since 2014. Given the sacral nature of the cow within Hinduism, debates on enforcing cow protectionism through legal provisions have occurred since the formation of the Indian Constitution. However, since the rise of Hindutva vigilante organizations affiliated with the *Sangh Parivar*, like the VHP and the *Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal* (trans: Indian Cow Protection Group), Muslim and Dalit men and women, have increasingly been attacked by mobs of Hindutva ‘*gau rakshaks*’ (trans: cow protectors), often being beaten and lynched for supposedly consuming or selling cow meat.

increase India's Muslim population (Rao, 2011). The relationship between heteronormative femininity and the production of the Hindu *rashtra* underscores the persistence of this mythical threat; as the Hindu woman becomes a signifier of the Hindu "motherland," the "usurping" of Hindu women through love and marriage by Muslim men becomes synonymous with Muslim "encroachment" of the Hindu nation.

Importantly, Hindutva vigilante mobs rely on state actors for administrative support, as well as immunity from any consequences for their nationalist violence. Administrators and politicians affiliated with the Sangh Parivar have also become more brazen in their persecution of religious minorities, and have worked towards legally legitimizing Hindutva mobs and their agendas. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a member of BJP, has helped pass the Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance in 2020, which makes religious conversion through "fraudulent" means a non-bailable offence, with up to 10 years of imprisonment. Colloquially, the law is known as the 'Love Jihad Law,' and it corresponds with the Hindutva campaign for 'Ghar Wapsi'³², that implores those who have converted to other religions to "return back" to their Hindu roots. Nielsen & Nilsen (2021) argue that laws such as this one offer a route through which to "merge the nation-state with the Hindu people-nation, a merger that is central to Hindutva ideology" (p. 13). Further, they write that the "enshrinement of Hindu nationalist *claims* to the nation in state law not only solidifies it as a *right* to the nation, it also marginalizes competing claims" (ibid., p. 14) to a more secular nationhood.

³² Translated as: Re-homing, or Returning Home.

The phantasmagoric threat of ‘Love Jihad’ is extremely potent within the Hindutva imagination, as it ties to multiple inter-connected and deep-rooted anxieties, namely: the encroachment of Muslims on Indian soil; the hyper-sexualized figure of the Muslim; and the fear that the artificial opposition between Hindu and Muslim will become untenable in the context of inter-faith kinships (Gupta, 2009). These anxieties are based in the metonymization of the Hindu woman with the Hindu nation, and unsurprisingly, in recent years, these fears have led to increased vigilante surveillance of public spaces like schools, parks, local shops, etc., where Hindu women may be “tricked” by Muslim men into falling in love with them (Gupta, 2021). As such, within the gendered and sexual schema of ‘Love Jihad,’ Hindu women are assumed to be heterosexual. Further, they are seen as innocent bystanders easily tricked by wily Muslim men, at best, and at worst, they are framed as “anti-national” for choosing Muslim men over their religious and reproductive duty to the Hindu nation.

Particularly through the enmeshment of mob vigilantism and state machinery in the production of ‘Love Jihad,’ we see the coming together of the bureaucracy and administration of Hindu nationalism with the intimate violence enacted by the Hindutva mob. This helps to produce Indian Muslims and Hindu nationalist Others as sub-human, facilitating:

the work of large scale murder by creating distance between killers and killed and by providing a self-fulfilling proof of the ideological argument that the victims are sub-human, vermin, insects, scum, garbage, and yet a part of the valued national body (Appadurai, 2006, p. 56).

This produces Hindu nationalist violence as a defining condition of Indian society. The production of Indian Muslims as sub-human also explains why they have become targets of

increasingly humiliating and intimate forms of Hindutva violence in recent years. It is not simply that victims are murdered, but that they are assaulted with sticks, knives, and machetes (Jain, 2019), force-fed cow dung and urine (Express Web Desk, 2016), hacked into pieces (Ellis-Peterson, 2020), looted (Kumar, 2020), forced to beg for mercy, and more often than not, asked to chant, “Jai Shri Ram”³³. The popularization of this slogan is also a significant factor in reproducing public space in India as dominated by Hindutva ideologies, as well as escalating the threat against India’s perceived internal Others.

Perhaps, nowhere is the codification of Indian Muslims as sub-human more prominent than in their discursive production as bio-terrorists during the Covid-19 pandemic. As early as April 2020, during the haphazard messaging and management of Covid-19 and its lockdown procedures, Indian authorities announced that a large number of Muslims who had attended a religious event in Delhi organized by the Tablighi Jamaat had tested positive for Covid-19. Even though the gathering had dissipated days before the lockdown, this soon led to widespread Islamophobia on social media, and fuelled by mainstream Indian news broadcasting, popularized the phrase ‘Corona Jihad,’ leading to increased violence against Muslims, even under lockdown conditions (Bajoria, 2020). In a report by Equality Labs, conducted in 2020, researchers found that a social media campaign had been launched to create a narrative that Muslims were

³³ Translated as: All Hail Lord Ram. This is a clarion call for most Hindutva vigilante groups. Muslim victims of Hindutva mobs across the country have been forced to chant ‘Jai Shri Ram’ while being beaten or otherwise tortured. The slogan was chanted numerous times during the demolition of the Babri Masjid, in the Gujarat riots in 2002, and are widely heard across India today. For example, only between April 1 and April 9 2022, reports have emerged that audiences chanted ‘Jai Shri Ram’ in the movie theatres after watching a film demonizing Muslims for their alleged role in the displacement of Hindu Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu & Kashmir in the 1990s (Ayyub, 2022); in Uttar Pradesh, young men climbed atop a mosque and chanted the slogan on April 2 (Scroll Staff, 2022), and; Hindutva activists in Karnataka protested outside a police station on April 3, chanting ‘Jai Shri Ram’, demanding that the police arrest a local Muslim man for marrying a Hindu woman (The Hindu, 2022).

deliberately spreading Covid-19 in India. Various messages and posts circulating on WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook sought to depict Muslims as the virus, and to paint the entire community as bio-terrorists³⁴. In the next sub-section I engage with how these incidents of violence and humiliation become simultaneously specular and ordinary through the use of digital media, that allows for their recording, rapid dispersal, and immediate consumption.

c. Digital Vigilantism and the Virtual Hindu Nation-Space

Mirroring and fuelling the increasing Hindutva vigilantism of the past two decades, Hindu nationalist rhetoric is extremely popular on digital platforms, especially through social media. The digital sphere, in general, has come to play a vital role in how Hindu nationalism is currently deployed to polarize Indian society, within national borders as well as in its diaspora. Numerous instances of communal violence are recorded as videos and photos and circulated widely, perpetuating the threat for Muslim and other minority communities on the one hand, and normalizing Hindutva vigilantism on the other. Since its inception, the use of digital media has become an intrinsic part of the popularization of Hindutva ideology. The Sangh Parivar in general, and the BJP, in particular, have always used various media formats, new and old, to their advantage. As I outline in this sub-section, the utilization of digital and social media works to produce Hindu nationalist violence as banal and ordinary while also giving it a totalizing character. Further, the organized use of digital media by the Sangh Parivar expands its reach into the Hindu diaspora, underscoring the transnational nature of Hindutva. This alerts us to how Hindu nationalism and accompanying violence are inescapable conditions that exist across

³⁴ For examples of such posts, see Appendix A, figures 1 and 2.

physical and digital registers. This is particularly important in the context of this dissertation because it illuminates the background in which LGBTQ activism operates in contemporary India.

Since the popularization of social media, the BJP has relied heavily on targeted advertising and systematically spreading misinformation to win elections and shape public perception (Frenkel & Alba, 2021; Jaffrelot, 2021). According to Chopra (2019), the Sangh Parivar “began to materialize as a distinct presence on the internet in the 1990s” (p. 63), and eventually, the BJP “worked to build and organize an army of social media volunteers and employees” (ibid., p. 81). Towards this goal, since 2001, the Sangh Parivar and the BJP have established numerous “IT shakhas” (Information Technology branches). Through these IT shakhas, Hindu nationalist volunteers take concerted and organized steps towards the following related goals: first, the creation and dissemination of pro-Hindutva propaganda; and, second, the identification and targeting of Hindutva’s critics online in order to harass and intimidate them.

Here, pro-Hindutva propaganda includes the creation of fake news and misinformation through posts, memes, photos, and videos that glorify Hindutva’s icons and heroes (such as Savarkar, Golwalkar, and Narendra Modi) and demonize its enemies (such as Muslims and past and present political leaders affiliated with the INC, like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi). A significant component of this propaganda is the re-writing of the past to closely align with Hindutva’s version of Indian history (Sarkar, 2002). Additionally, social media is heavily utilized to harass Hindutva’s and BJP’s critics into silence, and if the critics are public figures, like journalists, writers, or notable academics, fake news about them is also created and

spread. Faced with such harassment online, combined with increasing arrests of journalists and activists for being critical of the government, many, including numerous participants of this research, have begun to censor themselves on social media, and sometimes, in other avenues of public life.

The BJP uses Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp in unique and interconnected ways to create a digital ecosystem of Hindutva and determine the stakes of virtual public discourse in India. As Chopra points out, the Sangh Parivar at large:

uses Twitter to silence, wear down, and intimidate opponents. Facebook is part of the programme of developing a counter-archive that consolidates, legitimizes, and reinforces Hindutva claims and tenets ... [and] WhatsApp offers a structure that links the larger political frame of the nation through the party to caste, interest-based, or neighbourhood groups and then down to the level of the family (ibid., pp. 84-85).

The interconnected utilization these three social media spaces, along with the creation of pro-Hindutva media channels, newspapers, and websites creates expansive circuits of misinformation that make religious and ethnic violence in the name of Hindu nationalism quotidian realities that shape public life in India. As a result, a complex web of communalism and Hindu nationalist violence is constructed such that Hindutva propaganda across digital ecosystems has violent and material consequences for many, blurring the boundaries of the virtual and the “real” (Mukherjee, 2020).

The communal riots that erupted in North-East Delhi between February 23 and February 29 2020 offer an important case study of how Hindu nationalist violence forms an ecosystem that

traverses and structures digital and physical spaces. Its importance also lies in demonstrating that, across the digital and physical life of most Indians, there is no escape from the violence of Hindu nationalism, which functions as the very grammar that makes contemporary Indian society legible. To offer a very brief background, in response to the passing of the CAA in December 2019, protests had immediately erupted across India. One of the protest sites was situated in Jaffrabad, a Muslim majority district in North-East Delhi, where a makeshift encampment had been set up in order to peacefully protest the CAA. Kapil Mishra, a BJP member based in New Delhi, had organized a pro-CAA demonstration at the protest site on February 23 2020, and was recorded giving a speech where he incited violence against the protesters. Short videos of his speech had circulated to wide audiences via social media, and mobs systematically rioted, looted, burned, and murdered predominantly Muslim residents in Jaffrabad and neighbouring districts over the next few days.

Videos of this violence, depicting the murder of Muslim men, attacks on mosques in the neighbourhoods of North-East Delhi, and the looting and burning of homes, shops, and madrasas (Islamic religious schools) had been circulated relentlessly in order to incite Hindu nationalist supporters. The videos also allowed Hindu nationalists to participate virtually in the rioting by sharing the videos, which were circulated on WhatsApp group chats alongside memes of “Good Morning,” reached audiences’ Facebook timelines along with selfies and travel photos, and were shared on Instagram, where they were consumed simultaneously with targeted advertisements and photos of pets. In this way, the consumption and circulation of such videos helped disperse the extreme violence of the riots as quotidian and banal, and also simultaneously desensitized the audience to the violence while allowing them to participate in it (Miles-Novelo & Anderson,

2020). As I have suggested in this chapter, one of the most important effects of such sustained and organized Hindu nationalist violence is the shaping of a violent public culture in India across virtual and physical space. The way in which the North-East Delhi riot was incited, produced, and consumed shows that this public culture is increasingly marked through quotidian and routinized violence, and demonstrates the central role of digital media in how this nationalist violence is normalized.

Sharma (2020; 2022) has argued that the role of digital media in promoting a violent and vitriolic Hindutva public culture goes beyond making such violence commonplace through easy consumption; it contributes to the violence being *enjoyed*. Building upon Lacan's theorization of *jouissance*³⁵, she argues that state support of Hindutva violence, combined with its rampant circulation on social media, creates conditions for such violence to be easily enjoyed by an audience that may have previously felt that such responses were prohibited due to morality. In fact, it is precisely the prohibition, or moral sanction, being lifted that makes the violence enjoyable. As I have shown in this chapter, Hindutva has gained ground in India since the 1920s through mobilizing the destabilizing effects of socio-cultural, political, and economic changes and projecting the perceived or real loss of status onto the presence of the Muslim, as well as other minority communities. Within this schema, the Muslim Other becomes marked by an excess and perversity that originates in one's own sense of woundedness (Brown, 1993), anxiety (Appadurai, 2006), or fragmentation (Lacan, 2006). This is why, as Sharma (2020; 2022) shows, Hindutva rhetoric on social media revolves around deriving pleasure from "teaching Muslims a lesson". However, for the violence to remain enjoyable, it must escalate, eventually becoming a

³⁵ Translated as: Enjoyment.

crescendo. Given the role desensitization plays in our psyches, more and more violence must be meted out to arrive at the same levels of enjoyment. Udupa (2021) extends this argument and analyzes that IT shakha volunteers also derive enjoyment from satisfying their goal of making a Hindu nationalist hashtag trend, or go viral. Since these results are fairly immediate, the enjoyment is also temporally limited, and here too, more propaganda must be spread, at an increasing pace, to repeat the sense of enjoyment.

This analysis of Hindu nationalist violence as enjoyment is vital in extending Brown's (1993) analysis of how "wounded attachments" to identity produce the desire for retribution, by offering a more troubling understanding of how this violent retribution comes to be *enjoyed*. Brown (1993) writes:

In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past, as a past of injury, a past as a hurt will, and locating a "reason" for the "unendurable pain" of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it (p. 406).

Demonstrating how retribution and revenge comes to be enjoyed enables us to understand the shift from negative affect (punishment/retribution) to positive attachment (enjoyment/jouissance) within the affective schema of Hindu nationalist identity formation. This positive relation to violence, then, adds another dimension to the "affective economies" (Ahmed, 2004) of Hindu nationalism, and explains why Hindu nationalism has become so deeply rooted and pervasive in Indian society.

Another important focus for the digital ecosystem of Hindutva has been to strengthen ties with Hindus across the diaspora. This demonstrates, in yet another way, how pervasively Hindu nationalism contributes to the formation of Indian society. While the RSS had begun to set its roots in the Hindu diaspora in Kenya, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and other countries as early as the 1940s, the advent of the internet allowed the RSS to create its first cyber-shakha (virtual branch) in 1999 (Jaffrelot, 2017) and further expand its connections with the Hindu diaspora. Therwath (2012) notes that, “from the 1970s till the 2010s, the Sangh multiplied its branches outside India and duplicated in most countries the dense network it had already built in India” (p. 557), and the internet facilitated the production of this network. For example, in Scandinavia, where the weather did not permit regular meetings, Therwath (2012) states that Skype-shakhas became immensely popular. Across the Hindu diaspora, digital propaganda works in tandem with the creation of community spaces (Zavos, 2015).

In tracing the virtual life of the Hindu rashtra, Chopra (2019) documents how, since the early days of internet use in India, Hindu nationalist posts and websites, that were widely read in the diaspora, qualitatively determined the broad nature of virtual engagement through digital media. Jaffrelot (2017) also explains that, under Narendra Modi’s rule, the BJP has deepened its connections with the diaspora, and at present, “Hindutva politics is decentered, and the Hindu diaspora plays a major role in its production from outside India” (ibid., p. 162). According to Chopra (2019), the Hindu diaspora continues to support Hindu nationalism because Hindutva ideologues continue to claim diasporic Hindus as their own. In other words, despite being “away from the motherland,” they are embraced as legitimate Hindu subjects of the Indian nation. What is at work here is the Hindutva desire to merge the territorial idea of India with the ethnic and

racial claim of belonging to India. Somewhat akin to Anderson's (1983) "imagined community," this creates the conditions for an intimate political and affective community that unifies Hindus across the globe, enabling those in the diaspora to also perform a banal kind of nationalism and reinforce their ties to the "homeland".

As Basu et al. (1993) argue, the unification of Hindus in India and in the diaspora as one homogeneous collective has important implications. By claiming diasporic Hindus as one of their own, and then asserting that India belongs to Hindus alone, Hindu nationalists can globalize Hindutva's aspirations, as well as its inherent Islamophobia and caste discrimination. Within this context, in alignment with Brown's conceptualization of the woundedness of identity, Chopra (2019) also observes that the "vocabularies of identity politics that continue to productively energize several ... radical activist groups today are also used by ... ethno-cultural chauvinists" (p. 66), bridging the gap between minority identity attachments and majoritarian identity formation. Focusing on the universalizing tendencies of the rhetoric of wounded identities allows us to engage more deeply with the psychic and political investments of the Hindu diaspora in supporting Hindutva in their "homeland," as well as shoring up right-wing politics in North America (Ashutosh, 2021). As the globalized networks of the Sangh Parivar make evident, this kind of "long-distance nationalism" that binds the Hindu diaspora to the "homeland" "is at least as much the product of a reverse flow of political entrepreneurs from the mainland generating nationalist aspirations among the diaspora" (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2007, p. 279). In this way, the matrix of Hindu nationalist violence that frames Indian society today also finds its way into the diaspora. Therefore, besides promoting an atmosphere of violence, the popularity of digital

media and increasing access to the internet in India also had another important effect — namely, the production and consolidation of a “global Hindutva”.

III. Conclusion: The Atmosphere of Hindu Nationalist Violence in India

In this chapter, I have offered a narrative of the rise of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva in India, and analyzed how Hindu nationalism’s ethno-religious mythology is used to promote majoritarian anxieties and violence against minorities in the country across virtual and physical spaces. It is evident that Hindutva thrives in conditions of instability, and the practices of the Sangh Parivar, grounded in volunteer work at the grassroots level, mediate people’s perceptions of instability in order to direct resulting affects into upholding the mythology of “Hindu khatre mein hai” (Hindus are in danger). The expanding reach of this myth, in turn, produces the many enemies of Hindutva, and metonymically, the Hindu nation — Muslims, Christians, Dalits, student activists, journalists, and various “anti-nationals,” are marked as threats to the Indian “motherland,” strengthening support for Hindutva and justifying violence in the name of the Hindu rashtra. The framing of the Hindu rashtra as the “motherland” (Bhārat Mātā) is rooted in the production of Hindu women as heteronormative figures that are framed as mothers, sisters, and daughters, who must then be “protected” from Muslim “encroachment”.

I have also outlined how the major tenets of Hindu nationalism in India have evolved over time, and shown that, particularly since the late 1980s and 1990s, Hindu nationalism has become more violent and increasingly rooted in vigilantism. Here, I have analyzed how digital media plays a key role in the ascending popularity of Hindu nationalism. My main focus in this chapter has been to elucidate that escalating violence is indispensable to Hindu nationalism and

Hindutva politics in India, and to show that Hindutva violence has become a structuring principle that determines how we understand and inhabit the Indian nation-space today, across virtual and physical registers.

Based on this, I argue that Hindu nationalist violence shapes the *atmosphere* of Indian society today. Here, “atmosphere” refers to the ubiquitous, totalizing, palpable, and overwhelming quality of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. In this chapter, we see that the schemata of Hindu nationalism and its ideological apparatus is rooted in the escalation of ethnic violence towards the unrealistic goal of a purely Hindu India. When Hindu nationalism is embedded in Indian society “from below” through the efforts of the Sangh Parivar, and more recently, through organized misinformation on social media and increased state support available to vigilante groups, it produces an *atmosphere of violence* — Hindu nationalist ideology becomes increasingly deeply rooted, while the violence it necessitates continues to propagate and magnify in intensity, generating a kind of atmospheric pressure that must be released through a violent discharge, including riots and other acts of ethnocide. The affective economies of Hindu extend its psychic hold even further, through hate, anxiety, and woundedness on the one hand, and an enjoyment of “retaliatory” violence on the other.

It is difficult to give words to the dangerous atmospheric impact Hindu nationalist violence is causing in India today. It frames interpersonal relationships, and the use of digital media to propagate its ideology ensures that its effects are atomic, intricately reshaping social relations through the grammar of Hindu nationalism, while also redefining relationships within a single household, between neighbours, amongst colleagues, and long standing friends. This

grammar of Hindu nationalist violence also seeps into public policy, state administration, institutional decision making, and as a result, the impacts it has as it controls a “shadow state” (Jaffrelot, 2021) are atmospheric, large scale, and long lasting. To theorize Hindu nationalism as an atmospheric condition is to highlight the ways in which it restructures the minutiae of everyday life while simultaneously influencing large-scale state policies and administration. As a result, Hindu nationalism now feels inescapable, and is simultaneously unremarkable, like the air we breathe, while also being exceptional in its intensity and damage.

This forms an important backdrop against which LGBTQ activism in India emerges, evolves, and takes shape today. This atmosphere of Hindu nationalism, that extends across material, digital, and psychic life, and that moves across different scales and dimensions of society, culture, and political-economy, is what LGBTQ activism in India must now function in and live through. Therefore, as this research shows, for LGBTQ activism in India, Hindu nationalism is now an inescapable question. The toxic air of Hindu nationalist violence is what these activists must breathe, and, across the next three chapters, I analyze how various LGBTQ activists respond differently to these atmospheric pressures.

Chapter 4

Theorizing Aspirational Homonationalism in the Indian Context

On 1 February 2020, Mumbai held its 12th annual Pride March, also known as the Queer Azādi³⁶ March, where a number of queer and trans* activists chanted slogans against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Photos and videos of the Pride March were widely shared on social media, and by the next day, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) minister had filed a police complaint against 51 protesters for their “anti-national slogans”. Soon afterwards, it became public knowledge that the organizers of the Pride March, known as the Queer Azādi Mumbai (QAM) committee, had helped the police identify these protesters. The evidence for this lay in a Facebook post by Pallav Patankar, a QAM committee member, that was shared by the BJP minister on Twitter alongside his police complaint³⁷. In the Facebook post, Patankar had made a statement singling out a trans* activist, Kris Chudawala, dead-naming³⁸ them, and condemning the sloganeering. As a result, Kris Chudawala was threatened and doxxed³⁹ by Hindutva mobs and had to go into hiding.

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, attacks like the one carried out against Kris Chudawala are not unusual in contemporary India, and police cases against activists and their arrest under sedition and terrorism laws have become commonplace during the BJP’s

³⁶ Translated as: “Freedom”.

³⁷ For a copy of Patankar’s statement, see Appendix B, figure 1, and for a copy of the BJP minister’s tweet, see figure 2.

³⁸ Dead-naming is the process of identifying a trans or gender non-binary person using the name given to them at birth, rather than their chosen name.

³⁹ Doxxing refers to the act of revealing someone’s personal information, like phone number and home address, on the internet without their consent, with the intention of causing harm.

incumbency. However, what is atypical, and particularly dangerous, about this series of events is that it highlights how some LGBTQ activists have begun to play an important role in perpetuating this state-sanctioned violence against other LGBTQ activists. In the aftermath of the FIR against Kris Chudawala and the death threats they received, many queer and trans* collectives across the country issued solidarity statements with the protesters and condemned the QAM committee for cooperating with the police⁴⁰. The hashtag “#standwithKris” was used to mobilize solidarities and organize critiques of the “Sanghi gays”⁴¹ through social media. Meanwhile, the QAM committee issued its own statement denying any wrongdoing, and said it condemned “the abrupt sloganeering ‘against the integrity of India’”⁴² (QAM, 2020).

What transpired at the Mumbai Pride March 2020 speaks directly to the questions I ask in this research, where I seek to examine how Hindu nationalism reconfigures LGBTQ activisms and how LGBTQ activists respond to these shifts. It highlights how LGBTQ activisms in contemporary India coalesce and contradict each other and how these solidarities and antagonisms are shaped seamlessly across social media and physical life. My aim in this chapter is to analyze the events of the Mumbai Pride March 2020 through the lens of aspirational homonationalism and to situate these contemporary fractures among LGBTQ activists along Hindu nationalist lines within longer histories of LGBTQ activisms. In doing so, I seek to shed

⁴⁰ For a copy of one such solidarity statement, see Appendix B, figure 3.

⁴¹ A neologism coined by many of the research participants — predominantly queer feminist and trans* activists — to refer to the gay rights activists vociferously advocating for Hindu nationalism. “Sanghi,” in particular, refers to those who belong to, or subscribe to the ideology of, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent organization of the BJP.

⁴² For the QAM statement, see Appendix B, figure 4.

some light on how HIV/AIDS related gay rights activisms have resolved complex negotiations with questions of national belonging, authenticity, and Hindu nationalism in India.

In order to do so, this chapter is divided into two parts. In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrate that the HIV/AIDS crisis produced a set of discourses in India that situated gay male homosexuality within registers of risk, epidemiology, and legality. The sudden influx of enormous amounts of transnational funding gave rise to expansive, hierarchized circuits of HIV/AIDS prevention which eventually became spaces of gay rights activism. The spectre of risk and HIV/AIDS related death, combined with norms of sexual respectability, marked these activisms with a kind of LGBTQ pragmatism, which I define as a desire for rights and inclusion into mainstream society. I argue that LGBTQ pragmatism leads to aspirational homonationalism, which marks LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in the present driven by a hope of being included into the (Hindu) nation in the future. This aspiration for belonging to the Hindu nation explains why the QAM committee positions itself as working for “the integrity of India”.

While the first section of this chapter analyzes how aspirational homonationalism emerges, the second section situates this aspiration to belong to a Hindu nation within older debates about national belonging and the “authenticity” of homosexuality in India’s postcolonial context. Here, I demonstrate how gay rights activisms have been invested in shoring up their Hindu identity as a defence against the persistent critique that homosexuality is “alien” to Indian culture (ironically, this critique has come most often from Hindu nationalists). Further, I show how gay rights activists, particularly those interested in belonging to the Hindu nation, use the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism to discredit other LGBTQ activists in order to advance their own

agendas and visions of LGBTQ activists. Overall, this chapter analyzes how and why LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism can thrive in contexts lacking Hindu nationalist support for LGBTQ rights. This highlights how LGBTQ activists can participate in violent processes of national formation without pre-existing guarantees of equal rights or inclusion, even working against other LGBTQ activists to do so. It also demonstrates that Hindu nationalism is deepening pre-existing antagonisms within LGBTQ activists, rather than simply creating new fissures between these activists.

I. HIV/AIDS Discourses, LGBTQ Pragmatism, and Aspirational Homonationalism

Discourses of HIV/AIDS have shaped how homosexuality is understood and how LGBTQ activists have developed in India. Narrain & Chandran (2005) contend that, in the Indian postcolony, “three systems of knowledge — law, religion, and medicine — deeply impact our understanding of homosexuality” (p. 49). khanna (2016) elaborates on this, and argues that LGBTQ activists in India have been dominated by the “entry of the queer body into the juridical register ... [which is] predicated on its entry into an epidemiological register” (p. 6). In making this claim, khanna draws a link between how HIV/AIDS discourses and processes have shaped LGBTQ activists in India, and simultaneously framed how LGBTQ subjects have been understood within legislative processes surrounding Section 377.

According to Karnik (2001), “after the first case reports of AIDS in Pakistan were reported, India decided to organize a national task force to produce recommendations on how to prevent AIDS from entering India” (p. 325). In 1985, the Indian Council of Medical Research set up a task force, with the aim of keeping “tabs on vulnerable groups including haemophiliacs,

homosexuals, and a significantly large number of eunuchs besides prostitutes” (Jayaraman, 1986, p. 201). However, after cases of HIV/AIDS were detected amongst women engaged in sex work in southern India, sex workers, hijras, and transwomen were one of the first groups to be surveilled and tested by this task force (Karnik, 2001).

In 1986, a National AIDS Committee was established under the aegis of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Karnik’s (2001) survey of early medical literature on HIV/AIDS in India from 1985 to 1995 clearly demonstrates that, from their inception, HIV/AIDS discourses were framed through existing biases along the lines of gender, class, and caste. Doctors advised the increased surveillance and testing of people engaged in sex work, as well as their lower-class clients, and relied on pre-existing notions of “untouchability,” which then mingled with socio-cultural discourses of purity, pollution, and respectability to mark sex workers as the primary carriers of the disease. Importantly, the belief that HIV/AIDS was a disease that came from “the West” undergirded this literature, which also underscored homosexuals as an “at risk” category due to their “Western” sexual and lifestyle practices.

As HIV/AIDS began to be framed as a global epidemic, it brought the acknowledgment of male homosexuality into the Indian public sphere in a new way, albeit in relation to disease and stigmatization. Given India’s newly liberalizing economy, homosexuality also became a metonym for the perils of “Westernization” and globalization. Through the late 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, HIV/AIDS discourses in India continued to identify gay men, men who have sex with men (MSM), hijras, and transwomen as “at risk” populations. Situating India at the heart of the global crisis of HIV/AIDS, funding poured in to mitigate the incidence of the

disease. As Vijayakumar (2021) has compiled, the National AIDS Control Programme (NACO) had a budget of USD \$113 million in its first phase (1992-1999), USD \$460 million in its second phase (1999-2006), USD \$2.5 billion in its third phase (2007-2012), and USD \$2.1 billion in its fourth phase (2012-2017). This funding far outstrips the expenditure on any other epidemic in India, including malaria and tuberculosis, which have consistently had higher incidence rates than HIV/AIDS, suggesting that the money that poured into the country for HIV/AIDS alleviation was symptomatic of global AIDS exceptionalism. Underscoring this argument, Cazdyn (2012) writes that the HIV/AIDS global pandemic “is not only the perfect metaphor of globalization; it *is* globalization” itself (p. 117).

Within this context of a “global epidemic,” the identification of gay men and transwomen, men who have sex with men (MSM), kothis (effeminate men), hijras, and sex workers as “at risk” communities for HIV/AIDS brought in funding and “spurred the development of sexuality minority networks” (Narain, 2007, p. 54). Given the globalized and transnational scale of the HIV/AIDS crisis, based on ethnographic research and their own experiences as a LGBTQ rights activist, khanna has stated that the “HIV/AIDS industry is a sprawling phenomenon that involves a wide range of players, a translocal network of governments, multinational corporations, international development agencies and institutions, NGOs, support groups, [and] community-based organizations or CBOs” (2016, p. 53). Vijayakumar (2021) situates this expansive network within a transnational frame, and notes that India’s approach to HIV/AIDs “unfolded within a global set of AIDS institutions made up of donors, UN agencies, other governments, research institutions, and international non-governmental organizations” (p. ix). Crucially, she writes that, “the response to India’s AIDS

crisis transformed, temporarily, the terrain on which sex workers, sexual minorities, and transgender people engaged [with] the state” (ibid., p. ix).

Indeed, the massive influx of HIV/AIDS related funding enabled a politics of sexual rights to take shape in ways that would have been impossible before. During this period, Ashok Row Kavi, who was widely regarded as “India’s first out gay man” in the late 1980s, created India’s first LGBTQ magazine, *Bombay Dost*⁴³, in 1990, and also founded Humsafar Trust⁴⁴, a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on HIV/AIDS outreach and prevention, in 1994. Numerous support groups began to emerge across metropolitan locations in the country — the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan⁴⁵ (ABVA), a group working towards ending HIV/AIDS related discrimination, was formed by Siddhartha Gautam in New Delhi in 1988; Sakhi⁴⁶, a support group for lesbian women, was founded by Giti Thadani in New Delhi in 1991; Counsel Club, a support group for LGBT people, was established in Kolkata in 1993; Naz Foundation (India) Trust⁴⁷, an NGO focused on addressing HIV/AIDS related issues, was founded by Anjali Gopalan in New Delhi in 1994.

As such, in this section, I show how HIV/AIDS, and its framing as a global epidemic, produced a set of discourses that marked the emergence of gay male homosexuality in Indian public consciousness through risk and stigmatization, and reframed transgender communities

⁴³ Translated as: Bombay (currently, Mumbai) Friend.

⁴⁴ Translated as: Companion Trust.

⁴⁵ Translated as: Movement Against AIDS Discrimination.

⁴⁶ Translated as: Friend.

⁴⁷ Translated as: Pride Foundation (India) Trust.

through the same. The funding for HIV/AIDS alleviation gave rise to numerous networks of NGOs, CBOs, and Drop-In Centres (DICs), which functioned as locations where the epidemiological and transnational management of HIV/AIDS could take place. These networks also became spaces where “at risk” communities could learn new modes of governmentality and, at different moments, adopt and resist sexual rights and sexual identity based discourses. The resulting discourses of HIV/AIDS management and alleviation produced a positivist codification of “at risk” communities and their sexual practices, and gave rise to a burgeoning LGBTQ activism that, I argue, remains marked by a deep-rooted LGBTQ pragmatism, and emerged from the imbrication of gay male homosexuality with “risk” and death. This pragmatism also helped to frame LGBTQ activism as a distinct sexual politics, divisible from issues such as gender, class, and caste. These activisms focused their primary attention on the decriminalization of homosexuality, which was seen as the first step on the path of inclusion and homonormative belonging within the nation. Therefore, when homosexuality was decriminalized in 2018, a section of people involved in, or influenced by, these LGBTQ activisms were able to claim that Hindu nationalism, and the BJP, were supportive of LGBTQ rights. This, in turn, bolstered the aspirational homonationalist claim that, as the QAM statement makes clear, it was the responsibility of LGBTQ activisms to not work against “the integrity of the nation.”

a. HIV/AIDS and the Development of a Gay Identity

As I briefly outlined above, when monetary aid became available for HIV/AIDS outreach and alleviation, a complex network of NGOs, CBOs, and DICs, often specifically targeted at “at risk” populations, came into being. This network created a vertical hierarchy through which HIV/

AIDS monies were mobilized, and various NGOs and CBOs were placed within its structure (khanna, 2016). These emergent frameworks and influx of capital created employment and offered routes of upward mobility for “at risk” populations like transgender communities and those engaged in sex work (Vijayakumar, 2021). Many NGOs, CBOs, and DICs, that were established across the country, employed people engaged in sex work and transwomen to work as peer educators and outreach workers. Within this sprawling framework of HIV/AIDS alleviation, and in line with Vijayakumar’s (2021) argument about AIDS exceptionalism, khanna (2016) also notes that the HIV/AIDS industry in India functions independently from other public health programmes, creating a closed loop within which the hierarchical processes of HIV/AIDS alleviation, and the workers involved in it, often circulate.

The global nature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the transnational flow of capital that mostly moved from the global North to the global South, created an interesting and nebulous mesh of “global” and “local” sexual identifications and practices. khanna alludes to this when they state that people “who work in the [HIV/AIDS] industry speak a particular language that they alone understand” (p. 76). Here, they are referring to the creation and codification of new taxonomies of sexual behaviours that accompanied the formation and expansion of the HIV/AIDS alleviation industry in India. For example, Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) emerged as an “at risk” category in HIV/AIDS related work and literature. Similarly, kothi/koti (the “effeminate” partner who enjoys being penetrated), panthi (the traditionally masculine partner who penetrates), and other “indigenous” identities also emerged in relation to HIV/AIDS discourse for the first time. As Cohen (2005) writes about their fieldwork mapping male

homosexuality in northern India: “no one in my memory ever uttered the words kothi or panthi until the mid-1990s” (p. 272).

Within this classificatory system, which hinges on fixed assumptions of traditional masculinity, the subjects interpellated by these emerging nomenclatures demonstrate, paradoxically, sexual and gendered ephemerality. For example, there is significant overlap between kothis and hijras, who also refer to their existing and potential sexual partners as panthis (Boyce, 2007; Reddy, 2006). Further, there are existing class, caste, and geographical determinants at play, depending on which someone may identify as kothi, hijra, or gay, sometimes identifying with more than one of these sexual identifications, or switching between them depending on the context. Some people *learn* to identify as kothi after being inducted into HIV/AIDS related NGOs, while others decide to *transition* from kothi to hijra by virtue of belonging to these spaces (Boyce, 2007). My previous fieldwork showed that this was in part because one identity can feel more urgent than others, but in lower class contexts in particular, people transition in and out of identities also because adopting one over another may offer them access to more economic opportunities, or allow them to pass as belonging to a dominant-caste. Similar negotiations occur when occupying hijra and/or transgender identity categories as well (Chatterjee, 2018b).

Therefore, I argue that these codifications, based on organizing malleable sexual behaviours and mobile sexual subjects, create gaps between nomenclature and experience that continue to be easily apparent in the field. For example, Saria (2021) outlines how these

taxonomies confirm that the codification of sexual practices remains incommensurate with the effervescence of sexual desires. They write:

Categories proliferate as the epidemic grows. MSM has expanded to include, for example, A-MSM (men who penetrate), B-MSM (men who are penetrated), [and] AB-MSM (men who do both). The categories proliferate because they and their classificatory schemes fail to render the sexual field of any given place in time isomorphic with the epidemiological concerns to gauge risk (p. 186).

It is sexual risk, then, that required such stringent biopolitical management — the generation of taxonomies and statistics helped create a measurement, however redundant, of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

The repeated codification of gay and transgender communities “at risk” for HIV/AIDS in these ways had an important effect — it marked the management and alleviation of HIV/AIDS through a discourse of positivism, and constructed the sexual subjects produced through these discourses as epidemiological objects. As Boyce (2007) writes, the “tendency in HIV prevention is to conceive sexual subjects as positivist facts — as if somehow existing outside the cultural practices that engender contemporary sexual subjectivities” (p. 186). This ultimately leads to a significant mismatch between the rigidity of sexual categories, upon which HIV/AIDS prevention is based, and the tractile sexual practices of the subjects such efforts are purportedly interested in helping, thereby ultimately hindering HIV/AIDS outreach and prevention. However misaligned these emergent categories may be with respect to the sexual behaviours of “at risk” communities, it is important to remember that these codifications were produced as a result of

the inherently positivist and epidemiological discourse of sexuality that framed the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and that defined the networks it created.

These networks also inaugurated numerous NGOs, CBOs, and DICs, where many gay, hijra, kothi, and transgender people were increasingly employed, and these organizations became vital spaces where “at risk” communities learned not only a positivist and epidemiological language for codifying their sexual behaviours, but also new kinds of gendered comportment and sexual subjectivities. As Vijayakumar (2021) shows, these transformations involved one’s resignification as a “respectable” sexual subject — to cover one’s breasts, speak softly, give up sex work if possible or to do it in secret, wear lighter makeup, learn to speak in English, and so on. This notion of gendered and sexual respectability emerges from “a middle-class, dominant-caste ideal of modest clothing, modest speech, non-confrontational behaviour, gentleness, and control of bodily desires over roughness, physical excess, and lust” (ibid., p. 94). Within this framework, as Dutta (2013) has shown, “the inclusion of lower class/caste queer subjects into legitimate citizenship becomes contingent upon their legibility within governmental rubrics of identity [which is marked by respectable gendered/sexual comportment]” (p. 499).

In this way, the sprawling circuits of HIV/AIDS alleviation produced novel sexual taxonomies, and inaugurated new modes of sexual and gendered governmentality, marked by an epidemiological positivism on the one hand, and by respectability on the other. These two factors, in turn, constructed new norms of gendered and sexual legibility within these networks — the hierarchical nature of HIV/AIDS alleviation structures was, as if, mirrored in these emerging hierarchies within “at risk” communities, which were rooted in middle-class and

dominant-caste understandings of respectability. These new modes of gendered and sexual governmentality were homonormative, in that they were rooted in a form of respectability and legibility that was shaped through heteronormativity as their referent. In the next sub-section, I show how these discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS alleviation contributed to the emergence of a specific kind of LGBTQ activism marked by pragmatism.

b. “Risk” and the Production of LGBTQ Pragmatism

As khanna’s (2016) and Vijayakumar’s (2021) research shows, the very arbitrations of risk that simultaneously sought to construct *and* mitigate the HIV/AIDS crisis also grossly overestimated the scale of the disease in India. Additionally, they entrenched transwomen, hijras, kothis, various sex worker communities, and those engaged in male homosexual practices within discourses of risk and un-safety. As Sangaramoorthy & Benton (2012) note, the identification and construction of risk justifies techniques of enumeration within these contexts, which can be seen here through the proliferation of sexual taxonomies, but that also occurs in the various records kept by DICs, CBOs, and NGOs. Therefore, fuelled by the biopolitical discourse of a global crisis, the HIV/AIDs epidemic framed these populations as “risky,” forcing their lives to be shaped through quotidian encounters with stigma, violence, and death (Cohen, 2005; khanna, 2016; Saria, 2021; Shahani, 2021; Vijayakumar, 2021).

While the repeated codification of male same-sex practicing subjects, hijras and transwomen, and sex workers through a biopolitical assessment of risk within the globalized circuit of the HIV/AIDS crisis continued, the sprawling network of HIV/AIDS related NGOs also became a crucial ground for burgeoning discourses of LGBTQ rights. The same spaces that

were constructed to manage these “at risk” populations became grounds for gay and trans* activists to begin envisioning and organizing activist imaginaries based on their “right to life⁴⁸” (Foucault, 1978). In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, influenced by the empirical and positivist discourses of HIV/AIDS management, emerging discourses on LGBTQ rights, already being codified through “respectability,” began signifying non-heterosexual practices and populations through narratives of agency, individuation, and human rights. These two frameworks, of sexual health and sexual rights, were sometimes disconnected (khanna, 2016) sometimes synonymous (Saria, 2021), but, as I argue, mostly imbricated with each other. Overall, the juridical and medical schemas framing these communities as “at risk” produced a sexual politics that was similarly focused on defining homosexuality through law and medicine.

Therefore, along with raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, one of the first and most significant issues taken up by LGBTQ activists was that of decriminalizing homosexuality in India. In 1994, ABVA filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court towards the decriminalization of homosexuality, which was a criminal offence under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) at that time. The impetus behind this petition was a series of events that began with a medical report that outlined the frequent practice of sodomy in the male wards of Tihar jail in New Delhi. The medical report recommended that condoms be distributed in the wards to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS. According to Narrain (2007):

⁴⁸ Here, I am drawing attention to Foucault’s theorization of *biopower*, which describes how “The ‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be” (1978, p. 145) is tied to a range of technologies of life that frame sexuality as individualized self-hood. As sexuality becomes tied to identity, a new way of imagining sexual freedom emerges, coded through the language of rights (legality). This is the imagination that is centered in the LGBTQ rights discourses that emerged from HIV/AIDS circuits.

jail authorities refused to do so because they felt that it would: (a) encourage male homosexual behaviour in prisons, which would be encouraging an offence under Section 377 of the IPC, and; (b) amount to a tacit admission that homosexual behaviour exists in prisons (p. 59).

The ABVA petition, however, languished in the Indian judiciary system, and was never heard. This early recognition that the criminalization of homosexuality was hindering access to HIV/AIDS prevention formed an important aspect of legal arguments against Section 377, and added another crucial dimension to the LGBTQ rights activism that were burgeoning at the time.

Given the persistent presence of “risk” in male homosexual life, another petition to decriminalize homosexuality was eventually filed in 2001 by the Naz Foundation (India) Trust. Recounting their fieldwork in New Delhi in 2001, Dave (2012) describes how this petition was not received well by many queer feminist activists, and writes:

[Queer activists] Lesley, Jaya and the others censured Akshay [involved in filing the petition at the time] for a host of related issues: for not consulting with the larger ‘community’ when planning Naz’s legal action; for betraying the majority of queer men by insisting on the designation of a respectable (and mostly impossible) zone of ‘private’ sex, and betraying *all* women by further entrenching the public-private distinction; and, finally, for demonstrating the contemptible hubris of assuming that legal change actually *changes* anything. Akshay, agitated but emboldened, finally spoke as plainly as possible, referencing the AIDS pandemic and Naz’s primary argument about the negative impact of Section 377 on HIV outreach work: ‘People are dying,’ (p. 26).

Despite the inflated numbers of the HIV/AIDS crisis (Vijayakumar, 2021), this simple yet stark response — “People are dying” — reveals the high stakes of HIV/AIDS prevention at the time. These life or death conditions, understandably, also defined the LGBTQ activisms that emerged from within these spaces.

Framed through risk and death on the one hand, and positivist discourses of cure and care on the other, LGBTQ activisms emerging from HIV/AIDS networks mostly focused on mobilizing a pragmatic politics that was rooted in defining sexuality as an identity. On the one hand, framing sexuality as identity situated these activisms within transnational and global discourses of human rights and inclusion. On the other hand, the focus on identity and inclusion deepened the logic of “LGBTQ pragmatism,” that emerged in the dialectic between death and the right to life. In this context, I define “LGBTQ pragmatism” as an approach to life and activism that remains overwhelmingly mired in an idea of LGBTQ rights as a narrow and singular issue, divorced from concerns of gender, class, caste, religion, or nationalism, in order to ensure LGBTQ progress, which is seen as assimilation into mainstream society. As such, it goes hand-in-hand with homonormativity, defined by Duggan (2003) as a LGBTQ politics that upholds the normative visions and values of heterosexuality.

Here, I contend that being framed through positivist and biopolitical narratives of risk and stigma telescoped the imagination of the LGBTQ activisms of this time, such that the “only futurity promised [was] that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 22). As such, activisms driven by LGBTQ pragmatism cannot, or refuse to, imagine a future that

may exist outside the realm of normativity. In other words, LGBTQ pragmatism ties homosexual survival with the ability to be normal, and therefore, to be included in mainstream society. Surfacing in relation to burgeoning networks of HIV/AIDS, these LGBTQ activisms envisioned the decriminalization of homosexuality as the first step of LGBTQ progress and inclusion in the Indian nation (Narain & Gupta, 2011), to be followed by petitions for gay marriage, and eventually, gay adoption. Indeed, since the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, numerous petitions for same-sex marriage have been filed in India, only to be rejected or postponed, at least so far.

Like Muñoz (2009), I too argue that LGBTQ pragmatism is marked by a desire to attend to the singular urgencies of the LGBTQ present — here, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the criminalization of homosexuality — such that the multi-dimensionality of queer life is lost within what has been constructed as urgent, or as a crisis (“People are dying”). LGBTQ pragmatism, as I understand it, is a concept that highlights how the desire for LGBTQ survival in the present transforms into an investment in inclusion into mainstream society in the future through the subscription to homonormativity (Duggan, 2003). As Ferguson (2019) argues, this focus on pragmatism produces a one-dimensional form of activism that, under the guise of “depoliticizing” or “mainstreaming” homosexuality, attempts to regulate and determine the agendas of LGBTQ activisms. He writes that this one-dimensional LGBTQ activism “designates the containment of social change inasmuch as the mainstreaming of gay identity and sexuality (i.e., grooming them for the needs of state and capital) are understood to be signs of social progress” (ibid., p. 5). This kind of activism is rooted in the politics of essentialized sexual identity, and often, is unable to transcend identity towards other forms of coalition or social

justice. The pragmatism and desire for inclusion into mainstream society is reflected in the early LGBTQ activism that emerged in India, that focused almost solely on how homosexuality was “normal,” and needed to be decriminalized because “gay rights are human rights” (ABVA, 1991; Fernandes, 2002). These articulations of homosexuality through the language of human rights were also advanced by the discourses that mark the transnational HIV/AIDS industry, which helped produce a globalized understanding of sexual subjectivity (Altman, 2001; Binnie, 2004).

The LGBTQ pragmatism that framed these early debates on homosexuality within the circuits of HIV/AIDS activism continues today. As I highlight in the next chapter, it is precisely this kind of pragmatist approach to LGBTQ rights that leads “Sanghi” gay rights activists to describe a more multi-dimensional and intersectional queer feminist politics as a “malaise” (Iyer-Mitra, 2018). Importantly, in the next sub-section, I analyze how this LGBTQ pragmatism, that emerges from an invested desire in homonormativity, frames the decriminalization of homosexuality as a sign of inclusion into Indian society, and therefore as a marker of progress, also contributes to a kind of aspirational homonationalism that characterizes LGBTQ activism in contemporary India.

c. Aspirational Homonationalism as LGBTQ Pragmatism

Describing LGBTQ activist strategies in the illiberal climate of Singapore, Chua (2014) and Lazar (2017) both argue that homonationalism can be understood as a pragmatic necessity under authoritarian and right-wing governments. They note that, in these contexts, homonationalism ensures that LGBTQ activism will continue to progress and grow without jeopardizing the movement. Adopting this argument in India’s increasingly Hindu nationalist

atmosphere helps us understand how activism marked by the kind of LGBTQ pragmatism I describe above would hasten to assert their support for a Hindu *rashtra*, and as the QAM statement clearly does, oppose any LGBTQ activism that work “against the integrity of the nation.” Given that, in India, such support for Hindu nationalism hasn’t yet led to the Hindu nationalist government granting positive rights to the LGBTQ community, I argue that any homonationalism produced through these gestures can only be aspirational at best. To understand how LGBTQ pragmatism contributes to the popularization of a kind of aspirational homonationalism in contemporary India, I offer a very brief summary of the Humsafar Trust, an organization situated at the cusp of HIV/AIDS outreach and LGBTQ activism.

Humsafar Trust (HST), is an NGO in Mumbai that began as a Drop-In Centre for gay men wanting to learn about safe sex practices, or find support as individuals living with HIV/AIDS. HST grew rapidly from 1994 into the first decade of the 2000s. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, HST, in addition to a DIC that provided free HIV testing and counselling, also held weekly meetings for LGBTQ people that functioned as a support space, hosted parties for the LGBTQ community, housed *Bombay Dost*, and ran a mailing list called GayBombay which eventually began to host parties and weekly meetings, mostly for gay men. In the first decade of the 2000s, they also began to organize the Mumbai Pride March, organize *Kashish*⁴⁹, the annual LGBTQ film festival, produce films, and conduct sensitization and inclusion workshops with different corporate and government organizations. Today, they remain involved in all these projects and also have numerous support groups and organizations that work under its

⁴⁹ Translated as: Attraction.

wing, like Yaariyaan⁵⁰ (HST's youth initiative), Umang⁵¹ (HST's initiative for lesbian, bisexual, and transmasculine people), Sanjeevani⁵² (HST's support group for MSM and transgender people living with HIV) and many others.

As a result, Humsafar Trust has become indispensable to the LGBTQ activism in Mumbai and, arguably, India. Given their expansive reach and mammoth size (which is due, in large part, to HIV/AIDS related funding), they often become the first point of contact for journalists, researchers, and organizations who want to engage with LGBTQ issues in the country. This, along with their own investment in producing magazines and films, and creating LGBTQ community spaces, has made them a decisive voice about LGBTQ activism and determine the agendas of these activism to a significant extent. This is corroborated by almost all the participants of my research, for whom HST remains an important and unavoidable interlocutor in their activist work. For example, Bhagya, who is involved with queer feminist collectives in Mumbai, simply stated: "It's common knowledge that the 'queer scene' is controlled by Humsafar Trust". Similarly, Amisha, another queer feminist activist from Mumbai, also noted that "HST has had a big presence in Bombay ... [which is why] there has been an overt right-wing [Hindu nationalist] turn to LGBTQ politics in the city".

The size and scale of HST, and their overwhelming presence in the QAM committee, is what makes the antagonisms that occurred during the Mumbai Pride March 2020 of particular importance. On the most fundamental level, it reveals the overlap, in terms of membership and

⁵⁰ Translated as: Friendships.

⁵¹ Translated as: Hope.

⁵² Translated as: Panacea.

ideology, between HST and the QAM committee, and this enables us to draw a clear connection between HST's LGBTQ pragmatism and the QAM committee's support of Hindu nationalism. Humsafar Trust, having emerged through HIV/AIDS networks, frames homosexuality in entirely positivist, identitarian, and pragmatist terms. For them, an intersectional approach to questions of class, caste, or gender is secondary, and the primary goal is to ensure the mainstream acceptance and normalization of homosexuality, first through its decriminalization, and now, through demands for same-sex marriage and adoption. This "pragmatic" understanding of sexuality plays a central role in the events of the Mumbai Pride March, as I analyze below.

Through my interviews, I was able to piece together the administrative processes and organizing structure of the QAM committee. Humsafar Trust's website itself offers this description:

Queer Azādi Mumbai (QAM) is a Collective of Organizations and Individuals that organizes the annual Mumbai Pride March and the Mumbai Pride Week. The event is also known as the Queer Azādi March. QAM works on a self organizing principle and every year goes through a process of setting up volunteer committees that take charge of various activities such as Permissions, Event Organizing, March Planning and Resource Mobilizing. The Humsafar Trust is one of the elements of this collective and provides its administrative and physical infrastructure.

In order to become part of the QAM committee, a LGBTQ organization, group, or collective must register themselves as such, and then elect a representative from their group to become a member of the QAM committee.

I also learned from my research participants that the Humsafar Trust, and its numerous affiliate organizations, form the majority share of members in the QAM committee, therefore controlling the work and agendas of the committee, and through this, the Mumbai Pride March. According to Abhilasha, a queer feminist activist from Mumbai, they do so by “spawning multiple smaller organizations” that register as active members of the QAM, but vote in the interests of the HST. For Abhilasha, this goes beyond the overwhelming presence of HST in the QAM committee, generally making it “tricky to navigate LGBTQ spaces in Bombay, [since] you’ll never know who is a spawn of HST”. As such, every year, the QAM committee, influenced by HST and their vision for LGBTQ activism, decides the agenda items for the Pride March and drafts a pamphlet to be passed around to onlookers and attendees. In addition, they also decide the sequence of events and list of speakers who will occupy the stage that year.

According to my interviews with representatives of non-Humsafar Trust affiliated groups in the QAM committee, a storm was already brewing before the events of the Mumbai Pride March in 2020. A group of QAM committee members, belonging to organizations like the Thane Queer Collective (TQC) and Tata Institute of Social Sciences Queer Collective (TISSQC), had demanded that they be allowed to chant slogans against the CAA from stage. According to Darsh, a trans* activist in their early 20s who is involved with numerous queer and trans* collectives in Mumbai, and also a member of the QAM committee, a fight had broken out during the organizing meetings on this issue. However, given the majority of Humsafar Trust affiliates in the voting process, permissions to raise slogans against the CAA were denied. Additionally, after this denial, the Mumbai police had also refused permissions for the Pride March that year, stating the ongoing CAA protests as a reason, and thereby reinforcing the QAM committee’s

decision. It was only after QAM members had convinced the police that the Mumbai Pride March had nothing to do with the ongoing debates on citizenship that they had been given permission for the March. Consequently, the event had been rebranded as ‘Mumbai Pride Solidarity Gathering,’ and was to be held at Azād Maidan⁵³, as opposed to the usual August Kranti Maidan.

Meanwhile, the TQC and TISSQC members, having been refused permissions to occupy the stage during the March, had decided to chant their slogans from amidst the crowd, and this sloganeering was eventually recorded and disseminated online. Darsh was part of the group that chanted these slogans, and described the events as such:

On that day, there were people giving speeches and sharing sensitive things on stage. We wanted to be courteous about this, and we went and took permission from the people on stage, that [we’re going to chant against the CAA from the audience], and we did it within 10 minutes. The emcee thanked us also, from the stage, for bringing intersectional politics [to the protest space]. We were also satisfied that we had put our point across. In the post-Pride party, we were chilling, everything was fine. The next day, on Sunday, one person [Pallav Patankar] whose name was also on the permission list [for approving slogans and microphone use] ... started posting bullshit on Facebook. Then out of nowhere, on Sunday evening, some politician began talking about this. I believe that people from QAM only went to that politician. Otherwise how would the politician get the video of Pride?

⁵³ Ironically, Azād Maidan (translated as: Freedom Ground), a vast 25 acre ground located in central Mumbai, is where the protests against CAA first began in the city.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, in the Facebook post referred to above, Pallav Patankar deadnames Kris Chudawala and uses their sloganeering to legitimize why the police had initially denied permission for the 2020 Mumbai Pride March, thereby implying that queer and trans* subjects like Chudawala threaten “the queer movement”. Other gay activists affiliated with HST also justified Chudawala’s arrest, commenting on social media that these sloganeers were unnecessarily using “Pride as a platform to play politics,” and politicizing Pride, which was a space to celebrate LGBTQ identities⁵⁴.

A generous reading of this series of events and the actions of the QAM committee can frame their decisions through the lens of LGBTQ pragmatism, where they can be seen pragmatically and strategically negotiating with the nationalist demands of the police in order to ensure that the Mumbai Pride gathering takes place and transpires smoothly. Indeed, according to QAM committee, given the conditions under which police permissions had been given that year, raising slogans against the CAA was “irresponsible and potentially detrimental” to the gathering, and threatened to put the thousands of attendees at risk. This is why, when Kris Chudawala and other protesters sloganeered against the CAA, the QAM committee requested that all attendees only chant slogans “relevant to queer issues,” and later published a statement⁵⁵ distancing themselves from these sloganeers.

However, it is also important to ask — who does this LGBTQ pragmatism help, and which causes does it advance, especially in the deeply violent Hindu nationalist atmosphere of contemporary India? In this instance, it is apparent that, as Ferguson (2019) argues, an

⁵⁴ See Appendix B, figures 5, 6, and 7 for more such comments on social media.

⁵⁵ See Appendix B, figure 4 for the entire statement.

“apolitical” LGBTQ pragmatism that emerged through a desire to survive the HIV/AIDS epidemic now acts as a foil for a deeply political agenda. By staking a claim to a sexual politics that does not contest ongoing Hindu nationalist violence on the grounds of religion or citizenship, QAM and Humsafar Trust reveal that, for them, there is no imagination of queer and trans* populations who belong to religious minorities, nor is there room for queer or trans* undocumented migrants, who would be most detrimentally impacted by the CAA. As Menon (2007) writes, such a position “ensures that while gay/lesbian people can lay claim to the Hindu nation, the Muslim is the eternal outsider, who will always be under pressure to prove his/her loyalty to the Nation” (p. 32).

Additionally, by stating that Pride spaces should remain strictly about “queer issues,” the QAM committee also invisibilizes trans* critiques of the CAA. As many trans* activists rightly pointed out during our interviews, trans* communities often struggle to legitimize their citizenship through government documents because they face structural roadblocks while transitioning, or lose their documents when they have to run away from their biological families, or are thrown out of their natal homes. The Hindu nationalist state’s demand to prove one’s citizenship, therefore, is impossible for many trans* persons, who exist at the institutional, or documented, margins of the nation. As the queer and trans* activists I invoked at the beginning of the Introduction also noted in their speeches at Shaheen Bagh, the CAA was a queer and trans* rights issue.

Thus, in underscoring their support for the government and the “national integrity of India,” the QAM committee demonstrates an understanding of queer and trans* life that is about

a simplified, majoritarian LGBTQ identity politics, and therefore, not really very *queer* at all. In fact, according to Darsh, the QAM committee has had a long history of not taking a stand on trans* rights, and delegitimizing trans* people's concerns. One of the arguments during QAM organizing meetings had also been about the committee's silence on the Trans Persons (Protection of Rights) Act passed in 2019. While it was being critiqued by numerous trans* activists for taking away their right to self-determination, Darsh noted that "there was a whole debate on whether QAM should take a stand on the Trans Act. They [HST members and "Sanghi gays"] said, 'We don't have enough trans* people,' and didn't want to take a position on the Act". Darsh understood this as QAM's lack of concern for trans* rights, but their reticence can also be understood as an investment in not critiquing any bills passed by the Hindu nationalist government.

The repeated articulation by the QAM committee that they "believe in the integrity of the nation" also clearly highlights their intention to situate LGBTQ activism as working not just within the Hindu nation, but in actual and active support of it. In doing so, such LGBTQ activism participates in Hindu nationalist world-building, and hope that, through their participation, they will be granted space within the Hindu nationalist imaginary. As such, by staking a clear position as LGBTQ activists upholding Hindu nationalism, QAM committee members and other "Sanghi gays" participate in an aspirational form of homonationalism that rests upon a "pragmatic" investment in belonging to (increasingly Hindu nationalist) mainstream society at some point in the future. Simply put, given the absence of marriage and adoption rights for LGBTQ populations in India, "Sanghi gays" expect that, by voicing their support for Hindu nationalism, they will be welcomed into the Hindu *rashtra* in the future. Therefore, this

aspirational homonationalism emerges through an investment in silencing Hindu nationalist opposition to LGBTQ rights in the present, and is enacted in the hope of being included into a Hindu India as homonormative subjects in the future. Importantly, this fantasy, where homonormativity overlaps with Hindu nationalism, underscores the ways in which the Hindu nationalist atmosphere structures society and culture in contemporary India. In other words, this kind of aspirational homonationalism foregrounds and reinforces the ways in which Hindu nationalism has become integral to Indian society, and how it now frames the Indian “mainstream”.

This form of aspirational homonationalism is also evident in other instances, where LGBTQ activists seek to ally with the Hindu nation without being guaranteed any rights within it, at least at present. Soon after the contested events of Mumbai Pride March, the organizers of the Pune Pride March posted an image⁵⁶ of a conjoined national flag and pride flag on their Facebook page, where they stated that any “anti-national agenda ... that might disturb national integrity, security and harmony” has no place in any Indian Pride marches, and the organizers of the march reserve the right to file police complaints against “anti-national” sloganeers, in case their “religious sentiments are hurt.” Needless to say, statements such as these shape the space of Pride marches in new, and disturbing ways. As Bhagya, a queer feminist activist from Mumbai told me:

The last thing you imagine is for a queer pride space to be unsafe, and to be *so* unsafe for a queer person that they can be arrested under such draconian charges, be hounded by

⁵⁶ See Appendix B, figure 8.

trolls and other real life villains and online ones ... for a pride to be *this* unsafe has been quite disturbing. I don't know ... in what ways we can even begin to recover.

In saying this, Bhagya is highlighting that, by warning queer and trans* activists that their sloganeering will be monitored during a Pride event, “Sanghi gays” reconfigure LGBTQ activism for the Hindu nationalist cause, and also do the work of policing LGBTQ activism on “national” and “anti-national” grounds. Further, this segregates LGBTQ spaces along Hindu nationalist lines, and in doing so, these activists make the space of a queer commons, like Pride marches, unsafe for those queer and trans* activists who already feel threatened by the violence of Hindu nationalism.

While this form of aspirational homonationalism clearly emerges from the pragmatic investment in belonging to the Hindu nation, it also moves dangerously beyond it. Rather than simply tolerating or remaining silent on the workings of Hindu nationalism in order to reduce the risk of being arrested or destabilized, statements by “Sanghi gays” betray the desire to also reinforce and *advance* the violent exigencies of a Hindu *rashtra*. For example, Terence, a gay rights activist from Mumbai, recalls Ashok Row Kavi saying that “the real nationalism was in the RSS”. This requires us to not limit our analysis of LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism as pragmatism alone. Additionally, as I also argued in the Introduction, while aspirational homonationalism helps us understand why LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism are becoming more popular in contemporary India, it cannot explain why these intimacies have existed since the very emergence of LGBTQ activism in India, especially in periods when Hindu nationalism was not the dominant political ideology. In the next section, I analyze how

these complicities can be understood as sustained negotiation with national belonging in India's postcolonial context.

II. A Homosexual Resolution of the Hindu Nationalist Question

So far, in this chapter I have delineated the connection between HIV/AIDS alleviation, LGBTQ pragmatism, and the production of an aspirational homonationalism. I have demonstrated how the transnational funding frameworks for HIV/AIDS alleviation produced a sprawling network of organizations in India that worked towards the management of the disease in “at risk” communities. These networks and HIV/AIDS discourses constructed new norms that framed the gendered and sexual subjectivity of those considered “at risk,” which were often coded through middle-class and dominant-caste sensibilities, and produced homonormative longings for inclusion into mainstream society. The organizations that functioned as these key nodes for the biopolitical management of HIV/AIDS therefore gave rise to a burgeoning LGBTQ activism that was marked by the same gendered/sexual norms, a language of human rights, and defined by LGBTQ pragmatism. Within a context where Hindu nationalists oppose, or remain ambivalent towards, LGBTQ rights, this pragmatism is what leads to the popularization of an aspirational homonationalism, wherein LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism is enacted in the present in order to garner Hindu nationalist support for LGBTQ rights in the future.

However, LGBTQ pragmatism only partly explains why “Sanghi gays” cooperate with the reconfiguration of India as a Hindu nation, especially when such a project requires their active participation in the expulsion of queer and trans* critics of Hindu nationalism, who have, in many instances, been their allies in the common battle to decriminalize homosexuality. I

contend that LGBTQ pragmatism is a partial, but not wholly sufficient, explanation for why LGBTQ activists supporting Hindu nationalism perpetuate violence against other LGBTQ activists who have been their political companions, and in many cases, their friends. LGBTQ pragmatism may explain the self-censorship or silence of LGBTQ activists on questions of Hindu nationalism, but does not explain the affective and ideological charge that frames “Sanghi gay” fantasies of shaping, and eventually belonging to, a Hindu rashtra, even if it comes at the cost of rendering other LGBTQ populations disposable by labelling them as “anti-national”.

Banerjea (2022) outlines that in recent years, both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Indian National Congress party have included LGBTQ rights — in the form of legalizing same-sex marriage, granting reserved seats in employment and education, and instituting various measures to address LGBTQ discrimination — in their election manifestos. In contrast, the BJP’s manifesto has only offered a brief mention of “transgender empowerment” under one of their existing welfare schemes, called “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas”⁵⁷. If a pragmatic approach to securing LGBTQ rights was the only, or even predominant, explanation for LGBTQ support for particular political ideologies, then wouldn’t LGBTQ activists supporting the BJP’s Hindu nationalist vision prefer to support the other political parties that might offer them the equal citizenship and mainstreaming they seek? It is precisely this support for Hindu nationalism in the face of demonstrated Hindu nationalist apathy and/or opposition for LGBTQ rights that my theorization of aspirational homonationalism seeks to explain.

⁵⁷ Translated as: Everyone Together, Everyone Empowered.

By situating aspirational homonationalism within older debates amongst LGBTQ activists on the issue of national belonging, I interrogate the persistent desire amongst LGBTQ activists to belong to a Hindu nation. In doing so, I work against most analyses of LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism through the lens of homonationalism that suggest that this complicity is a contemporary phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2019; Chatterjee, 2019; Das & Bund, 2020; Gawande, 2022; Upadhyay, 2020). Rather, I suggest that such analyses threaten to efface the much longer history of such complicities, especially during times when Hindu nationalism was not the ideology espoused by a given incumbent government. For example, Ashok Row Kavi, the founder of Humsafar Trust, has been a staunch supporter of Hindu nationalism since the late 1980s. Menon (2007) has outlined how Ashok Row Kavi is most concerned with “inclusion within the Hindu nation for LGBT people” (p. 32).

In fact, Kavi’s Hindu nationalist virulence is well-known within LGBTQ activist spaces, and there are many examples that describe his position against Islam and Christianity. In my interview with Terence, he told me that Kavi had written in a closed LGBTQ e-group that Christianity was “a death cult”. When Terence had responded by saying that there shouldn’t be room within LGBTQ spaces for such bigotry, Kavi had attacked him instead. To Terence, this had felt “just, like, the worst kind of tirade,” and he said he’s avoided Kavi ever since. Similarly, Sania, a queer Muslim activist from Delhi also spoke about Kavi’s Islamophobia, saying that “Ashok Row Kavi and others have started their propaganda [against the Queer Muslim Project], and they troll every post we put up. They’ve been saying we are trying to create some pan-Islamist LGBTQ group and dividing the LGBTQ community”.

Kavi's assiduous commitment to Hindu nationalism shows that the affective charge that marks LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism despite Hindu nationalist apathy, or hostility, for LGBTQ rights, as well as the persistence of such fantasies of a Hindu *rashtra* that will welcome its Hindu LGBTQ citizens, requires an analysis that moves beyond pragmatism. As such, in this section, I will demonstrate how such long-term LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism are rooted in complex negotiations with the question of national belonging, as well as in the desire to control the agendas of the LGBTQ movement. Therefore, reworking Chatterjee's (1989) formulation from his (in)famous essay, titled 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,'⁵⁸ I suggest that LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism emerges as a way to resolve the nationalist anxieties caused by claims that homosexuality is "alien to Indian culture".

a. Legitimizing a Hindu LGBTQ Identity

In order to elaborate on this argument, I now focus on what is perhaps the most well-discussed example of Kavi's Islamophobia — namely, his role in the "Bharosa⁵⁹ Trust affair," which describes the arrest of four men who worked as HIV/AIDS outreach workers for Bharosa Trust in 2001, on the charge that they were conspiring to promote homosexuality and, thereby,

⁵⁸ In this essay, Chatterjee argued that the question of women's place in society disappeared from political discourse in the late 19th Century. This is because, in the struggle between Indian nationalism and Western modernity, the women's question was resolved through the construction of a binary between the home and the world, with women being relegated to the domain of the home, which was seen as a space that would preserve nationalist identity and culture. This formulation has been widely critiqued for suggesting that the women's question was resolved at all (Nair, 2008), and for undervaluing lower-caste and lower-class women, who were never relegated to the internal space of the home (Rege, 2006). Sircar (2017) reworked this formulation in his essay on homonationalism, suggesting that there is now a "nationalist resolution of the homosexual question" (p. 23). He does so in the context of delineating how some LGBTQ attendees of the Mumbai Pride March in 2010 sang the national anthem. This, and the other examples Sircar provides, does not signal a "nationalist resolution of the homosexual question". Rather, it highlights how LGBTQ populations invoke nationalism in different instances, suggesting a "homosexual resolution of the nationalist question" instead.

⁵⁹ Translated as: Trust.

“polluting Indian culture” (Rajalakshmi, 2001). According to Narrain & Gupta (2011), the arrests saw sustained protests for their release, and “represented a new activist zeal. It resulted in the formation of People for the Rights of Indian Sexual Minorities (PRISM) ... which later played a crucial role in the formation of a coalition called Voices Against 377” (p. xviii), and also fuelled renewed public interest litigation to decriminalize homosexuality by Lawyers Collective and Naz Foundation International in 2001 (ibid., p. xxviii). The activists were released after spending six weeks in prison.

However, these arrests are analytically important in the context of this dissertation for another reason — they bring to light the old rivalry between Shivananda Khan and Ashok Row Kavi, and enable an analysis of how these rivalries offer the impetus to legitimize a Hindu gay identity. Khan, a man of British origin and the founder of Naz Foundation International, mobilized transnational HIV/AIDS funding to support Indian NGOs, including the Bharosa Trust, a CBO working on HIV/AIDS prevention affiliated with Naz Foundation India (NFI). Row Kavi, who has nicknamed himself the father of the LGBTQ movement in India, is the founder of Humsafar Trust, the oldest NGO working on HIV/AIDS alleviation, also funded by the same transnational sources as NFI. According to Cohen (2005), Row Kavi was accused by other LGBTQ activists of instigating the arrests. Making the situation murkier, it was also believed that Row Kavi utilized his infamous connections to leaders in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad⁶⁰ (VHP) to accuse Shivananda Khan of being an Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agent, which is an espionage group in Pakistan often associated with threatening India’s national security. Meanwhile, LGBTQ activists also accused Shivananda Khan “of failing to protect local

⁶⁰ Translated as: World Hindu Organization.

activists ... in service of his [own] overextended global ambitions, and of blaming his failures on the easy target of the ever politically incorrect Row Kavi” (p. 270).

In the aftermath of the arrest of the “Bharosa four,” Kavi had written a long essay titled ‘Sex, Lies, and Lucknow’ in *Bombay Dost*, in which he described the transnational alliances of Bharosa Trust and Naz Foundation International as suspicious and strategic. He mentioned NFI’s partner NGO in Chennai, which he alluded was the base of “Dravidian nationalism” with ties to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam⁶¹ (LTTE). He also stressed that the arrests of the “Bharosa four” were condemned by Amnesty International and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, which were headed by a Muslim woman of Bangladeshi origin and a Pakistani Muslim respectively (Menon, 2007). In doing so, Kavi attempted to delegitimize Bharosa Trust and NFI by repeatedly tying both organizations to “anti-Indian” groups or activities. This illuminates the ways in which competition for HIV/AIDS funding manifested in debates and attacks focused on national identity as early as 2001 (Cohen, 2005), and enables us to outline a clear link between the competition for HIV/AIDS funding, activists’ own motivations for power, and the mobilization of a Hindu national identity as a source of legitimacy and authenticity. In the backdrop of a postcolonial and rapidly globalizing context, where homosexuality was routinely dismissed as a “Western lifestyle” or “disease,” the claim to Hinduness was also a way of mitigating this repudiation of LGBTQ existence within the frameworks of the nation.

⁶¹ The LTTE was a militant organization that demanded a separate and independent homeland for Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka. The extended militarism between Sinhala Buddhists and Hindu Tamils forms a crucial backdrop of Sri Lankan history, and has impacted Sri Lanka’s relations with India. While India supported the LTTE in its initial years, it eventually came to oppose the LTTE’s actions. Therefore, when Kavi mentions the LTTE, he does so to suggest that the NFI is engaging in anti-national alliances with the LTTE.

Incidentally, a precursor to the Bharosa Trust affair lay in the fact that Humsafar Trust and NFI had attempted to collaborate on HIV/AIDS prevention in 1994, but had soon had a falling out due to “polarized stances on the utility of gay and kothi subject positions” (Boyce, 2007, p. 182). While Humsafar Trust relied on discourses of “gay” identity, NFI preferred the rubric of “MSM” and “kothi,” leading to bitter disagreements and competition for transnational funding between both organizations. Kavi’s bias towards gay over kothi identity is also discussed in an autobiographical essay by Gupta (2005), in which Gupta reflects on his own involvement in gay male spaces, including Humsafar Trust meetings. He explains how, within HST, class differences determined access to resources, and also created a hierarchy between those who identified as gay and those who identified as kothi. These hierarchies reflect the ways in which HIV/AIDS alleviation networks became spaces for learning new taxonomies of sexual behaviour and new modes of governmentality, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. According to Gupta (2005), the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while creating these hierarchies, also complicated them because, as transgender and kothi populations were employed in high numbers as outreach workers, “kothi became both an affirming indigenous homosexual identity and a threat to the urban conception of ‘gay’” (p. 128).

This hierarchization of gay identity over kothi is also evidenced in Ashok Row Kavi’s own words, where he writes:

Kothi politics had already started with viciousness in Bombay [Mumbai] where kothis were and are the most empowered of the MSM subpopulations ... Many sex sites are exposed or ‘spoilt’ by kothis clapping and attracting attention and are so socially disruptive that non-kothis visiting these sex sites are put off ... by ‘compulsorily’

disempowering themselves — and ridding themselves of ‘some masculinity’ in a hyper-masculine space, they set up erotic charges and attract the attention of males ‘ready to get it off’ (2007, p. 396).

Kavi’s words illuminate the biases Gupta refers to in his text. What counts as “respectable” comportment of sexuality mixes here with a disgust for effeminacy in kothi “men,” who, for Kavi, are synonymous with hijras and transwomen. Kavi also asserts that kothis are themselves responsible for the physical violence they are often subjected to in these hyper-masculine spaces. Therefore, for Kavi, it is not hyper-masculinity that is the problem, but the kothi’s effeminacy and sexualized presence in such spaces that is condemnable.

This devaluation of effeminacy often takes the shape of transphobia within gay male activist spaces — something we also see with Pallav Patankar’s repeated dead-naming of Kris Chudawala. Underscoring this argument, in a heated Facebook debate immediately after Chudawala’s arrest, Kavi also defended Patankar’s dead-naming by stating that since Chudawala had not changed their dead-name in their legal documents, referring to them by their dead-name was not, in fact, dead-naming, and was a marker of respect for the wishes of Chudawala’s parents⁶².

What we find, across the “Bharosa Trust affair” and the arrest of Kris Chudawala, is how Kavi, HST, and a faction of gay rights activists, work towards invoking their own legitimacy as Hindu LGBTQ subjects in order to delegitimize the LGBTQ activists they differ with. Here, it is crucial to understand that Hindu nationalism is invoked in order to justify transphobia, and to

⁶² For other comments instantiating this transphobia, see Appendix B, figure 9.

maintain control of the resources and agendas of LGBTQ activism in general. What is striking is how, in the “Bharosa Trust affair,” Kavi mobilized his own identity as a Hindu to discredit Shivananda Khan, his competitor, for being “foreign,” and most importantly, a Muslim (which, for Kavi, was synonymous with being a Pakistani agent). Thus, within a fraught context of competition over HIV/AIDS resources that is already complicated through the hierarchization of gay identity over kothi or trans* identifications, and therefore marked by a kind of one-dimensional gay identity politics, an “authentic” gay identity emerges through a claim of Hindu-ness, which becomes synonymous with Indian-ness. In other words, as early as 2001, within the transnational economy of HIV/AIDS alleviation, that required the profitable mobilization of an “authentic,” national, gay identity, Kavi relied on legitimizing homosexuality through a recourse to Hindu identity.

Across Kris Chudawala’s arrest and the “Bharosa Trust affair,” Kavi’s, Patankar’s, and QAM’s transphobia and class biases merge seamlessly with the ways in which they mobilize Hindu nationalist rhetoric towards their own goals. Like the “Bharosa Trust affair,” the QAM affair is also similarly rooted in preexisting differences between Humsafar Trust and the activists who were charged with sedition, many of whom had once volunteered with, or belonged to, HST before dissociating with them and starting their own groups and collectives. Here, discourses that have been diagnosed as homonationalist are actually deployed within the context of a largely homo-negative state in order to discredit or threaten queer and trans* activists who diverge from a one-dimensional, identity-based imagination of LGBTQ activism. Thus, it is important to highlight the conditions in which Hindu nationalism is mobilized by gay rights activists like Patankar, Kavi, and others, just as it is vital to focus on *who* they frame as “anti-national,”

“seditious,” and therefore, as “inauthentic” queer and trans* subjects/activists in the Indian context. What remains strikingly similar about the “Bharosa Trust affair” and the events of the Mumbai Pride March of 2020 is how national pride and allegiance is invoked in order to maintain control, influence, and capital in the rightful hands of the “deserving” LGBTQ subject, the “legitimate” gay citizen of the Hindu rashtra.

b. “Who Will Own the LGBTQ Movement?”

These differing imaginations of LGBTQ activism become even more contentious given the focus of gay rights activists on who can control “the LGBTQ movement” in India. This is exemplified best in my interview with Ankur, a member of the QAM committee, and one of the founding members of the Queer Hindu Alliance (QHA). Established in 2019, on its social media pages, QHA claims to be “an advocacy & support group that will promote a more inclusive Hinduism through creating safe space for Queer Hindus and Allies”. In our interview, Ankur told me the story of how he was born into a lower middle-class Gujarati family, and began to participate in LGBTQ life through events organized by GayBombay. Ankur came into his homosexuality by reading Indic and Vedic texts, and when he discovered the Gay & Lesbian Vaishnava Association (GALVA), it was the perfect space for him to come to terms with his spirituality and sexuality as coterminous aspects of his own self-conceptualization.

According to Ankur, who refers to himself as an activist working on LGBT inclusion, the next logical step was for him to help create the Queer Hindu Alliance, a support group which would incorporate all Hindus, not simply those who belong to Vaishnavite traditions. Given the central role of Hinduism in his understanding and imagination of his sexuality, Ankur believes

that homosexuality can find a natural home in Hinduism, which, according to him, is the most tolerant faith when it comes to matters of sexual life. When I asked him about how he perceives LGBTQ activism in general, he stated:

Who will own the queer movement in India? Unfortunately, the Right [Hindu nationalists] in India have missed an opportunity so far. The Right in India had a great opportunity to talk about queer rights, because they had everything possible readily available on their plate, from centuries of civilization in India [that has been queer friendly]. But, for various reasons, they rejected ... or, not rejected, but kept silent over it. And that's why they missed an opportunity. And now, because the Left [Communist political parties] is trying to own queer movements completely, many Right people have woken up suddenly. They are saying, 'Oh my god, what is happening here? We can really own the queer rights movement in India, so let's do that' ... And that's why you will see so much of the Right narrative of queerness happening in India now, *fortunately*.

Much is at play in Ankur's opinion — first, the overlap between Hindu nationalism as a political ideology and Hinduism as a religion (which, as I outline in Chapter 3, has been a goal of the Sangh Parivar); second, the belief that LGBTQ sexualities have been tolerated and celebrated within Hinduism; third, the assertion that Leftist and Communist movements are “trying to own queer movements completely,” built upon the assumption that there is a unified or singular LGBTQ movement; and, fourth, an active participation in producing alliances between Hindu nationalism and LGBTQ activism.

Similar sentiments were also echoed in my interview with Lakshmi, who is a founding member of the Kashmiri Youth Movement. Lakshmi, too, was deeply disgruntled by the existing

solidarities between LGBTQ activists and secular or “Left” politics, which she understood as interchangeable and interpreted as “anti-Hindu”. As a reaction to these solidarities, Lakshmi and a few others had formed the Kashmiri Youth Movement in 2019, a group they describe as a “non-political student network of Kashmiris born post [the] genocide of 1990”. The “genocide” they refer to was the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus from the region after violence by Kashmiri militants of predominantly Islamic faith. Given how much this issue has been politicized by Hindu nationalist groups, including the BJP, the reference to the exodus as a “genocide” is not “non-political”. In fact, the social media pages of the Kashmiri Youth Movement clearly established their support for the Indian army and its occupation of Kashmir, as well as support for the BJP and Hindu nationalism.

In 2020, the Kashmiri Youth Movement had wanted to organize the first Pride March in Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir. Upon their announcement of the same on their social media, they had been met with significant backlash from LGBTQ activists actually working in the region. For example, the Sonzal Welfare Trust, a registered NGO working for the rights of LGBTQ persons in Kashmir since 2017, issued a statement on social media, saying that the Kashmiri Youth Movement was misrepresenting the needs of the LGBTQ community in the region since they had not conferred with any of LGBTQ people in Kashmir before announcing that the Pride March would take place⁶³. Further, they also claimed that none of the members from the Kashmiri Youth Movement lived in Kashmir, which would make it logistically impossible to host a Pride March there.

⁶³ See Appendix B, figure 10.

In the two days following their announcement of the Pride March, Kashmiri Youth Movement released two YouTube videos in which members of the group stated that they were disappointed that LGBTQ activists had not come out in support of them because these activists, and the LGBTQ community at large, were afraid of hurting Muslim sentiments. In one video, a Kashmiri Youth Movement member, responding to a comment that alleged their effort was a clear attempt at pinkwashing⁶⁴, said: “It’s really funny how people keep claiming that the BJP is dividing Kashmir when in the literal sense it has unified Kashmir with the rest of the country [by abrogating Section 370]⁶⁵”. Across both videos, there was an effort to implicitly and explicitly make connections between homophobia, violence, and Islam. Other comments and tweets on social media also conflated the abrogation of Section 370 with the advancement of LGBTQ rights in the region, staging solidarity with the BJP and drawing a clear connection between Hinduism and LGBTQ freedoms on one hand, and Islam and LGBTQ repression on the other.

⁶⁴ ‘Pinkwashing’ is a term popularized by Sarah Schulman (2011) in a *New York Times* article, in which she contextualizes how queer inclusion is used to obscure Israeli violence in Palestine. Schulman describes pinkwashing as “a deliberate strategy [on behalf of the Israeli state] to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians’ human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life”. In the Indian context, according to Pragya, pinkwashing “juxtaposes a blatantly false image of Indian-progressivism against the background of an Islamophobic portrayal of Muslim societies as backwards, repressive, and intolerant”.

⁶⁵ At the time of the Partition of India, the territories that comprised pre-independence Jammu & Kashmir were divided between India and Pakistan. Indian administered Jammu & Kashmir was integrated into India as a partly autonomous state, retaining its ‘special status’ through Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. However, over the years, many Presidential Orders expanded Indian administration over Jammu & Kashmir, diluting Article 370, and in August 2019, the BJP dissolved Article 370 entirely. The Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act was also passed in 2019, making Jammu & Kashmir a federal territory governed almost entirely by the central government of India. Due to its location at the border of India, Pakistan, and China, Jammu & Kashmir has been the reason of numerous wars, and the situation has been further complicated by antagonisms that have emerged in the state along religious lines. Within this context, the *Sangh Parivar* has repeatedly sought to politicize the conflict in the region towards its own ends, and where one stands on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir is often seen as the “litmus test of one’s nationalism” (Haq, 2021). Therefore, we can read the discourse around Pride Kashmir as *Kashmiri Youth Movement’s* participation in Hindu nationalism.

Embedded within the Kashmiri Youth Movement's comment, that the BJP has "unified Kashmir with the rest of the country" by abrogating Article 370, is the flawed assumption that the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018 was not applicable to Jammu & Kashmir due to Article 370, and therefore by dissolving Article 370, the BJP has "liberated" Jammu & Kashmir's LGBTQ populations. However, as the former High Court judge, Justice Hasnain Masoodi, had clarified, the judgment decriminalizing homosexuality was applicable across the country (Outlook Bureau, 2018), ironically, because the Indian government had diluted the scope of Article 370 over the past seven decades.

Despite the vacuousness of this claim, it was precisely this flawed assumption that had also caused some masked protesters to disrupt an event focused on the ongoing violence in Jammu & Kashmir, held at SOAS University of London in October 2019. While obstructing the event, they carried rainbow flags that stated "370 is homophobic," and that they were "Gay 4 J&K". Of course, across the Kashmiri Youth Movement's and the masked protesters' support for the "liberation" of Kashmiri LGBTQ populations, there was a resounding silence about, and tacit support for, the magnified state violence against the citizens of Jammu & Kashmir that immediately followed the dissolution of Article 370⁶⁶. In contrast, the Sonzal Welfare Trust —

⁶⁶ Immediately before Article 370 was abrogated, on August 4 2019, the BJP government had placed approximately 6,000 prominent politicians, journalists, and intellectuals in Jammu & Kashmir under house arrest. The phone and internet services of the region were also shut down and a curfew imposed, shutting down schools, universities, and banning all public gatherings. Simultaneously, the government has deployed approximately 10,000 troops to Jammu & Kashmir, increasing the state's army occupation. The curfew and internet shutdown lasted, intermittently, for 18 months, well into the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting the lives of populations in the region. A recent report by The Forum for Human Rights in Jammu and Kashmir (2021), notes that the army related violence has worsened since 2019, and "a new vigilantism has been introduced by measures such as a Special Task Force (STF), and recruitment of cyber volunteers, to monitor social media accounts, including of public servants, for 'anti-national' content" (p. viii). According to the report, within this environment of heightened securitization, suicide and domestic violence rates have gone up, and local industries have suffered enormously, violating the fundamental right to life of populations in the region.

who opposed the rhetoric of Pride Kashmir, and who were entirely bypassed in the Kashmiri Youth Movement's plan to organize Pride in Kashmir — have been consistently working to situate the difficult conditions within which queer and trans* Kashmiris continue to exist, marked by Indian occupation, heavy army presence and impunity, and long curfews and isolation.

Given the repeated use of Hindu nationalism as a source of legitimacy within the Indian nation, it is important to consider why LGBTQ groups like the Kashmiri Youth Movement and Queer Hindu Alliance, as well as individuals like Ankur, Kavi, Lakshmi, and Patankar, seem deeply invested in portraying Hinduism as a progressive, LGBTQ-friendly religion, thereby situating Hindu nationalism as a “natural ally” of LGBTQ activisms and communities in India. Indeed, insofar as they align themselves with the Hindu nationalist Indian nation-state, performing a kind of virtuous citizenship that calls for and justifies violence in the name of the Hindu *rashtra*, they participate in an aspirational homonationalism that aligns Hinduism with LGBTQ activisms while simultaneously essentializing Islam as homophobic.

Kavi, for example, believes that homosexuality was first criminalized in India under British rule, due to its Victorian and Christian morality. In an interview, Kavi is noted as stating that the fight to decriminalize homosexuality in India “is not against Hinduism at all, but one of repealing a Christian law in an otherwise inclusive Hindu *rashtra*” (2018). In the same interview, he also argues that groups like the Queer Muslim Project, established in 2017, threaten to “dilute the queer movement”:

Now these queer Muslims are creating their groups because they say that their religion doesn't permit homosexuality and Hindus hate them. *Where will the activism go with such belief?* ... If they are so concerned about the queer Muslims, why don't they show interest in opening up space for people in Iran, Saudi [Arabia], Pakistan, and Bangladesh? Needless to say, in making statements such as this one, Kavi mirrors the Hindu nationalist rhetoric that establishes Hinduism as progressive and Islam as intolerant, and situates LGBTQ activism squarely on the side of Hinduism.

While comments such as this situate initiatives like the Queer Muslim Project (QMP) as creating fissures within "the queer movement," my interviews with activists from the QMP clearly highlight that, for them, LGBTQ spaces remain unquestionably inhospitable due to implicit or explicit forms of Islamophobia. Sania, a queer Muslim activist in her mid-twenties from New Delhi, described that making space for the QMP within the larger field of LGBTQ activism in the city has been extremely difficult. Within such spaces, Sania says:

Being queer is not the problem actually, but being a practising Muslim is the problem ... if you go to queer events and you talk about the QMP, people will be like, 'Oh, what is this, why do you need this, you're just dividing the community'. This is very common ... Even if there isn't a rabid support of Hindutva everywhere, there are also these people who will maintain a facade of unity while ignoring other axes of oppression.

Here, Sania troublingly describes how, even among LGBTQ activists who do not actively support Hindu nationalism, there remains a tendency to critique the QMP's efforts to bring Islam and queer sexuality together.

Disturbingly, Sania informed me that the Queer Hindu Alliance had been formed in response to the formation of the QMP, which, according to Kavi and others, was seen as an attempt to rehabilitate LGBTQ activists towards a “pan-Islamic movement”. This sheds light on the disingenuous formation of the QHA, that simultaneously claims to embody the “peaceful syncretism” of Hinduism while also supporting Hindu nationalism, which works *against* a syncretic imagination of Hinduism, as I outlined in the previous chapter. In this context, my argument is that concerns about “ownership of the queer movement” merge seamlessly into an Islamophobic sexual identity politics that is guided by the fantasy of an aspirational homonationalism. What is remarkable is that these processes take shape against ample evidence that Hinduism, and its Hindu nationalist proponents, have opposed homosexuality and discriminated against trans* and hijra communities. For example, Hindu nationalist politicians like Subramanian Swamy have consistently stated that homosexuality “is not a normal thing. It is a danger to our national security ... It's against Hindutva ... We should invest in medical research to see if it can be cured” (Outlook, 2018). Similarly, Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu priest and rising star in the BJP, who is the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has stated that, “Homosexuality is dangerous to social morality. If social norms and boundaries are done away with, then there is not much difference between man and animal” (Singh, 2018).

This reveals the superficiality of the arguments made by Hindu nationalist LGBTQ activists like Kavi, Ankur, and Lakshmi, and others who have come to be known as “Sanghi gays” within many LGBTQ activist circles where critiques of Hindu nationalism run rampant. Importantly, the BJP’s position on LGBTQ rights, marked by silence at best and violence at worst, is reframed by these activists as a commitment to “own the LGBTQ rights movement in

India,” while the commitment of political parties like the CPI(M) or INC is seen as a dangerous move to “own LGBTQ movements completely”. This reveals the desires of “Sanghi gays” to control LGBTQ activisms and determine its agendas. As Darsh said in our interview:

“They care less about the issues, and more about the fact that we, as young trans* people, are questioning their position as savarna [dominant-caste] cisgender gay men, who control the money, the resources, the power. ... all of these people are deeply Hindutva. It’s these same savarna cis gay men who are extremely right wing, pro Hindutva, pro CAA. All these intersections exist.

Just as Hindu nationalism was used as a tool to discredit Bharosa Trust employees and activists like Kris Chudawala, this critique (or fear) that, as Ankur said, “the Left is trying to own queer movements completely” is being used by “Sanghi gays” as a foil, underlying which is their desire to participate in building a Hindu rashtra, and to control the agendas of LGBTQ activisms.

As I showed in Chapter 3, this schema, of producing a minority population as a threat, and using that threat to justify majoritarian violence, is exactly how Hindu nationalism reproduces and propagates in contemporary India. Grounded in similar logics, “Sanghi gays” also produce the bogey of “the Left” trying to “own queer movements completely” to justify the need for groups like the QHA and the Kashmiri Youth Movement, through which LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism are furthered. The goal is to delegitimize the LGBTQ activisms that critique Hindu nationalist violence, while authenticating these “Sanghi gay” activisms as legitimate. Here, Hindu nationalism is deployed as the tool through which control over LGBTQ activisms is sought, even as legitimizing these activisms within the framework of Hindu nationalism is the goal in itself. Thus, Hindu nationalism deepens existing differences and

antagonisms within LGBTQ activism, producing its critics as “anti-national,” and therefore, seditious and disposable.

III. Conclusion

Menon (2007) has argued that the subversive edge of LGBTQ politics in India may lie in its ability to move, in her words, “over” and “under” the nation. By this, she means that LGBTQ politics can be a “politics of refusal” that rejects the nation and its heteronormative pull. For her, this “implies the simultaneous transformation, through practices of everyday life, of the place where you insist on staying” (p. 42). However, what I demonstrate in this chapter is an LGBTQ activism that moves *through* the nation, strengthens the rhetorics of Hindu nationalism, and attempts to recuperate it as “LGBTQ-friendly”.

In this chapter, I’ve offered a theorization of aspirational homonationalism in order to explain how and why LGBTQ complicities with Hindu nationalism are shaped in a context largely marked by Hindu nationalist ambivalence and antipathy towards LGBTQ rights. By drawing connections between HIV/AIDS discourses, LGBTQ pragmatism, and negotiations with national belonging, I’ve shown that aspirational homonationalism marks the need to belong to a distinctly Hindu nation, and is rooted in deeper desires of reinforcing one’s authenticity as an Indian gay subject. Further, this chapter has highlighted how Hindu nationalist rhetoric is used by aspiring homonationalists to discredit other LGBTQ activists, in an effort to dictate the broad agendas of LGBTQ activism.

What is perhaps most crucial about LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism, then, is that it reveals how LGBTQ activism contributes to violent national projects, at the cost of making other

LGBTQ activism more precarious. This shows that Hindu nationalism deepens the pre-existing divides within LGBTQ activism, and in this way, Hindu nationalism becomes an inescapable presence within these activisms, forcing them to negotiate with, and therefore, move *through*, the nation. By forcing LGBTQ activism to stand “for or against the nation,” Hindu nationalism makes the question of nationalism unavoidable for these activisms. In doing so, Hindu nationalism curtails the imaginations of queer life and politics that may exceed, circumvent, or otherwise move above or below the nation. While this chapter centered on HIV/AIDS related gay rights activism that have become burgeoning grounds for aspirations of homonationalism, the next chapter focuses on queer feminist perspectives that resolutely reject Hindu nationalism.

Chapter 5

Queer Feminist Negotiations with Hindu Nationalism

A few months after the Mumbai Pride March, on 6 July 2020, Kashish, the Mumbai International Queer Film Festival affiliated with Humsafar Trust, announced that Pallav Patankar would be their director of marketing. Many queer and trans* activists who had opposed the role Patankar and the QAM committee played in Chudawala's arrest were angered by this. Already in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic and living through a nation-wide lockdown, it was decided that a coordinated "Twitter storm" would be immediately organized in protest. We were to write, like, and share tweets condemning Kashish Film Festival's decision and coordinate them using the same hashtag — "#MumbaiPride"⁶⁷. In light of this outcry on social media, Kashish Film Festival's advisory board announced that they would be looking into the allegations against Patankar, and on 8 July 2020, Pallav Patankar and Kashish Film Festival both announced that he had decided to resign from his position. However, in his statement on Facebook, Patankar noted that he had been forced to resign due to a "systematic orchestrated campaign" of "vicious trolling" by "elements [within Kashish] who were close and sympathetic to" Kris Chudawala, and dead-named Chudawala again⁶⁸. On the same day, Ashok Row Kavi tweeted his support for Patankar, laying the blame for his removal from Kashish Film Festival's management on queer feminists, who he termed "the Lesbian mafia"⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ For some examples of these social media posts, see Appendix C, figures 1 and 2.

⁶⁸ For Patankar's statement, see Appendix C, figure 3.

⁶⁹ See Appendix C, figure 4.

While the previous chapter focused on examining the relationship between HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ pragmatism, aspirational homonationalism, and a predominantly “Sanghi gay” Hindu nationalism, this chapter focuses on analyzing queer feminist negotiations with Hindu nationalism, and their differences with the more well established, gay rights focused LGBTQ activisms. Like the events surrounding Kris’s arrest, what occurred around Patankar’s resignation from Kashish Film Festival’s management also demonstrates that LGBTQ activisms now operate across physical and digital registers, which come together to produce activist solidarities and antagonisms.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate why and how queer feminists resist Hindu nationalism and work against LGBTQ aspirational homonationalism. In order to do so, I will analyze how queer feminisms emerged through their rejection of Hindu nationalism, and argue that they negotiate with the question of nationalism in a way that was starkly different from those of HIV/AIDS related, gay rights focused activisms. The chapter is divided into two sections: the first section outlines the debates that marked the emergence of queer feminist activisms and the second section analyzes how those foundational debates determine contemporary forms of queer feminist resistance to Hindu nationalism. Drawing continuities between how queer feminisms emerged and how they resist Hindu nationalism at present enables me to analyze how their intersectional, underfunded, and contingent trajectory frames their crisis interventionist response to Hindu nationalism.

Crucially, queer feminist activisms and their rejection of Hindu nationalism demonstrates that, even as LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism becomes increasingly popular, LGBTQ

resistance to Hindu nationalism is taking shape with growing urgency. As I analyze in this chapter, queer feminists define “queerness” as a rejection of Hindu nationalism, and in doing so, offer a very different negotiation with the nationalist question compared to what I outlined in the previous chapter. Further, by situating “queerness” against Hindu nationalism, queer feminists exclude “Sanghi gays” from the domain of “queer politics”. This, I argue, is their response to “Sanghi gay” attempts to define the agendas of LGBTQ activisms. As such, queer feminisms offer a different vision of what it means to be “queer” in Hindu nationalist times — a vision that is, at present, becoming increasingly precarious and increasingly urgent in equal measure.

I. Itineraries of Queer Feminisms in India

Like HIV/AIDS related activisms, which led to the establishment of discourses around male homosexuality through the frameworks of sexual health and legal rights, narratives about the emergence of lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives also began in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bacchetta, 2007; Biswas, Beethi & Ghosh, 2019; Chatterjee, 2018a; Dave, 2012; Shah, 2005). Outlining their shared beginnings, Dave (2012) notes that the “emergence of collectivized gay and lesbian politics in India in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided neatly (and not coincidentally) with the liberalization of India’s economy in 1991 and the acceleration of the global fight against HIV/AIDS” (p. 10). However, even though lesbian and bisexual women benefited from the burgeoning NGO industry that brought a wide range of gender and sexuality based issues into Indian public consciousness (as I have outlined in the previous chapter), trajectories of HIV/AIDS funding created a circuit of NGOs, CBOs, and activist groups that often did not include lesbian and bisexual women as beneficiaries or subjects, primarily because

they could not be interpellated through HIV/AIDS discourses. Within this context, lesbian and bisexual women's activisms developed in relation to, and in simultaneous distance from, HIV/AIDS activisms.

In this section, I outline how lesbian and bisexual women's activisms emerged through contentious and hesitant solidarities with the Indian Women's Movement (IWM) on the one hand, and gay rights activisms on the other. While lesbian and bisexual women's activisms struggled with the IWM to include sexuality as a feminist issue, they also struggled with gay rights activisms on the central role of gender in defining non-normative sexual life. In turn, alliances with the IWM gave these activisms an uncompromisingly feminist character, and shaped their investment in remaining unfunded, or "autonomous" from other political organizations. When nascent lesbian and bisexual women's activisms were attacked by Hindu nationalist groups for being "against Indian culture," their rootedness in the IWM led to a "lesbian emergence" (Dave, 2012) that was situated against Hindu nationalism, and they rejected the heteropatriarchal schema that shapes Hindu nationalist ideology. As such, unlike gay rights activisms, lesbian and bisexual women's activisms, and eventually queer feminist activisms, negotiated with national belonging by resisting Hindu nationalism and claiming a more secular "Indian" identity.

a. Lesbian Feminism's Fraught Beginnings

In the late 1980s, lesbian and bisexual women had already begun to vocalize the specificities of lesbian existence within the Indian women's movement (IWM). However, within these spaces, which were yet to acknowledge the primacy of heterosexual women in their

imagination of the normative feminist subject, lesbian and bisexual women encountered protracted resistance. Due to the IWM's reticence to think about sexuality outside the frame of sexual violence, the "point of reference for garnering support [from the IWM also became] ... violence on same-sex loving women" (Biswas, Beethi & Ghosh, 2019, p. 104). This limited understanding of women's sexualities, and resistance to incorporating the range of concerns that marked lesbian and bisexual women's lives beyond the rhetoric of violence, led to uneasy negotiations between emerging lesbian and bisexual women's collectives and the IWM, which many lesbian and bisexual activists had hoped would be their "natural ally".

As Sen (2019) has analyzed, these "uneasy beginnings and hesitant continuities" (p. 46) were rooted in the history of the IWM, which had seen some splitting in the 1970s and 1980s over "disillusionment with (progressive) Leftist organizations" (ibid., p. 46), that had failed to adequately prioritize feminist concerns and often subsumed questions of gender under labour in their political praxis. This had resulted in the creation of the "autonomous women's movement," which refers to a collection of organizations that emerged in the split from Leftist women's organizations, and focused centrally on concerns like rape, bride burning, and dowry (Agnes, 1994). As opposed to large scale labour unions or women's wings affiliated with political parties, autonomous women's groups were established as NGOs or informal collectives, and were mostly characterized by a smaller membership and informal participation.

Further, as Dave (2012) has demonstrated, the autonomous women's movement was also able to develop due to changes brought on by globalization in the late 1980s and 1990s. Just like with HIV/AIDS activisms, the flow of transnational capital enabled the formation of NGOs

focused on women's issues and created a network of autonomous activists who were employed and earning salaries from their activist work. Given the ideological leanings of the IWM in the 1960s and 1970s, these "autonomous" NGOs were critiqued for being "out of touch" with the very women they purported to help. As Dave writes, at a time when "women's poverty was becoming a more visible and urgent concern for the women's movement ... women's activists were becoming more resource rich" (ibid., p. 123). Additionally, autonomous women's collectives were marked by upper-class, dominant-caste membership, which limited their awareness of non-dominant caste and Dalit women's concerns (Rege, 1998). Thus, collectives that had been shaped through struggles to prioritize the question of gender over labour later struggled to re-think their own political praxis in order to highlight issues of lesbian sexuality or caste.

During a period when debates within the women's movement about how removed they were from the realities of the everyday lives of Indian women were already underway, the emergence of a politics focused on same-sex relations among women was severely criticized, especially because lesbianism was seen as an urban, upper-class woman's problem, and bisexuality was received with even more ridicule. Just like male homosexuality was framed as a "Western disease," female homosexuality, too, was situated as a "niche" concern. Often, lesbian women's problems or discussions of homosexuality were simply ignored or sidelined in meetings and conferences, and on the rare occasions that they were referenced, the rhetoric was that of human rights, rather than a critique of the structure of the family or of heteropatriarchy (Menon, 2007).

As a result, the journey of lesbian feminist activism within the IWM was one that shifted from “radical structural disruption to political respectability” (Dave, 2012, p. 123), wherein lesbian women had to continuously find ways to demonstrate their own solidarity with the women’s movement and then prove that lesbian sexuality was also an urgent issue that the Indian women’s movement could no longer ignore. As the founders of Sappho and Sappho for Equality (a lesbian and bisexual rights focused NGO), Akanksha & Malobika (2007) explain: “We are always at the forefront of all movements led by Maitree [a women’s rights NGO]. We believed that if Sappho raised its voice for their causes, they would also support us whenever we needed them” (p. 366). This focus on respectability, as well as reciprocity, eventually came to shape lesbian and queer feminist activism, creating new norms for embodying one’s sexual life within activist spaces, as well as in public (Roy, 2022). As Dutta (2013) has shown, these new norms alienated many hijra and transgender communities, who were marked with an unruly gendered and sexual excessiveness due to the codification of LGBTQ life through “respectability”.

Overall, while lesbian and bisexual women believed that the IWM would be their “natural ally,” and also sought to find common ground with the IWM, in reality, relations between these activism were often fraught and tense. However, it is important to note that, through these tensions and differences, lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives and support groups emerged in conjunction with the autonomous women’s movement. This was partly because mobilizations around feminism enabled early conversations on non-heteronormative sexualities, including single-ness, same-sex desires, non-monogamous relationships, and other intimacies, and partly because emerging lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives needed access to the resources and communities of the autonomous women’s movement in order to assert their

own fledgling and affective politics (Dave, 2012). Autonomous groups, like the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), Saheli⁷⁰, Stree Shakti Sangathan⁷¹, Sachetana⁷², Vimochana⁷³, and Maitree⁷⁴, became important spaces for emerging lesbian and bisexual women's activisms.

Many activists involved in forming collectives and support spaces for lesbian and bisexual women in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s were active members of these autonomous women's movement groups. For example, Stree Sangam (later, LABIA) emerged when a group of activists from FAOW decided to create a separate space for lesbian women. Similarly, since its inception, Sappho and Sappho for Equality members have been a part of Maitree, just like Saheli members went on to form CALERI, and later become involved in PRISM, Voices Against 377, and so on. As such, the cross-pollination between emerging lesbian and bisexual women's activisms and the autonomous women's movement was very common, and many of those alliances continue to exist even today, with numerous activists holding membership within the IWM and queer feminist collectives simultaneously. Thus, these burgeoning collectives also followed "autonomous" processes of political organizing, mostly choosing to form informal voluntary groups over formalized NGOs or politically affiliated organizations. Compared to the formalized and expansive HIV/AIDS related LGBTQ activisms, the "autonomous" and informal nature of these collectives brought into being a very different way of doing LGBTQ activisms. As I analyze later in this chapter, these techniques of doing

⁷⁰ Translated as: Friend.

⁷¹ Translated as: Collective for Women's Empowerment.

⁷² Translated as: Self-Cautious.

⁷³ Translated as: Redemption/Vindication.

⁷⁴ Translated as: Friendship.

LGBTQ activism “autonomously” shapes how queer feminist collectives understand, and respond to, Hindu nationalism in contemporary India.

Due, in large part, to its fraught emergence in relation to the IWM on the one hand, and gay rights activism on the other, another important facet of lesbian and queer feminist organizing is its constant negotiation with questions of difference. As Sen (2019) argues, when alliances between lesbian feminisms and the IWM happened, they occurred by focusing on differences, not similarities. For example, groups and collectives like LABIA, Sappho for Equality, CALERI, Saheli, and many others came together with HIV/AIDS related gay rights activism to fight the legal battle against Section 377, despite reservations against, and critiques of, framing LGBTQ rights through discourses addressed towards legalization and the nation-state. At the heart of this difference between lesbian feminist and gay activist imaginations of LGBTQ rights and lives was that: “To lesbian collectives, the state seemed politically out of reach; to the organizations serving gay men, kothis, and MSM, HIV provided a reason to feel beyond the punitive practices of the state” (Dave, 2012, p. 175).

Dave (2012) has analyzed how the battle against Section 377 remained a politically fraught one for lesbian feminists, primarily because the argument for decriminalizing homosexuality was situated in the:

continual re-entrenchment through legal discourse of a public-private distinction — a construct that, historically, has been used to justify the second-class status of women and to put the violations they face within the space of the home outside the sphere of legal intervention (p. 180).

As such, for lesbian feminists, staking a position on Section 377 was based in inherent contradictions between their feminist and LGBTQ politics. However, in its early years, supporting the legal battle for decriminalization was also a contentious issue because many lesbian feminist activists felt they had not been consulted in the process of drafting the petitions. The symbolic effect of not being consulted encapsulated, for lesbian feminists, the “divisions of political labor between those who are connected and those who are not, between the speakers and the spoken of” (ibid., p. 185).

As I analyzed in the previous chapter, gay rights activism, which emerged through expansive circuits of HIV/AIDS funding, burgeoned and became established quickly. Unlike lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives, gay rights activism was well-funded, and based on this, could shape, for the most part, the broad agendas of LGBTQ activism. Section 377 was precisely such an issue, and, as we see in this section, one that evoked varied hesitations and challenges for lesbian feminists. Already in the unenviable position of having to demonstrate the legitimacy of their politics to the IWM, lesbian feminists also felt disregarded by gay rights activists when they did not consult with lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives before basing the fight against Section 377 in the right to privacy. To make matters worse, their hesitations around the decriminalization of homosexuality made gay rights activists question their commitment to LGBTQ rights. For the “pragmatic” gay rights activists, decriminalizing homosexuality was the first and most natural step towards being included in Indian society as equal citizens and was seen as a marker of LGBTQ progress, and they often could not fathom why lesbian feminists would choose to argue against this.

Further, when lesbian feminists argued that LGBTQ activists should expand their imagination to include other issues besides Section 377, they were often met with derision, disregard, or sexism by gay rights activists. As such, many lesbian feminists found it difficult to ally with gay men, and found themselves repeatedly sidelined in LGBTQ spaces. As one of the founders of Stree Sangam, Chayanika Shah (2005), writes:

The patriarchal behaviour of the gay community sometimes really baffled us. Women were almost completely absent from many of their worlds. The absence of any understanding of ‘gender’ and patriarchy was extremely difficult to deal with, especially since their lives challenged mainstream notions in so many ways (pp. 149-150).

Similarly, Biswas, Beethi & Ghosh (2019) also corroborate that conflicts with gay rights activists occurred because both sides “understood each other but did not find convergences beyond [their common] location [outside heterosexuality]” (p. 105). Yet, over time, even as these struggles over gendered imaginations of homosexual life continued, lesbian and bisexual women’s collectives played a key role in battling against Section 377. Reports emerging from lesbian activist collectives in 1990s, such as *Humjinsi* (1999) and *Lesbian Emergence* (1999) document this as well. For lesbian feminists, who had learned these lessons from their engagement with the IWM, disagreements and negotiations with difference were a key component of political action, and not necessarily grounds for refusal or withdrawing support.

However, for many gay rights activists, as the previous chapter showed, disagreements and differences become reasons to discredit, threaten, or harm the activists they consider antagonistic to their own “pragmatic” visions of LGBTQ progress. This ideological and political divide between gay rights activists and lesbian and queer feminists, that is rooted in different

imaginations of LGBTQ life and activism, as well as in divergent understandings of what it means to *do* LGBTQ politics, continues even today. It is, for example, evidenced in Ashok Row Ravi terming contemporary queer feminists the “Lesbian mafia,” as I noted at the beginning of this chapter. On their part, even though lesbian feminists have not sought to discredit Kavi in the same ways, they have nevertheless been his most consistent and trenchant critics. Importantly, these differences have gone beyond Kavi’s unexamined patriarchal behaviour, and have also solidified around his Islamophobic and Hindu nationalist position. This is because lesbian feminist negotiations with “Indianness” were built around their antipathy towards Hindu nationalism, and I outline this in detail below.

b. Lesbian in the Indian/Hindu Nation

Marked by contentious solidarities with the IWM on the one hand, and emerging gay rights activisms on the other, lesbian and bisexual women activists began to debate if they needed to create separate spaces within which concerns unique to lesbian and bisexual women could be centered, without needing to prove these were “legitimate” feminist or LGBTQ issues. Like male homosexuality, lesbian sexuality was disregarded as a “Western” import, or as a “niche” concern throughout the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s. As I outlined above, this view was held not only by conservative Hindu nationalists, but also by many within the IWM. Since lesbian and bisexual women’s groups emerged through sustained, if tense, relationships with the IWM, one of the most important and persistent debates that framed lesbian feminisms in the 1990s (and that continues to frame conversations about queer feminism in the present) focused on naming and terminology.

In India's postcolonial and globalized context, debates surrounding naming must also be tied to questions of authenticity and national identity. As economic liberalization and globalization were re-framing the Indian economy and the IWM, lesbian feminists carried critiques of globalization into their early imaginations of lesbian and bisexual women's rights (Bacchetta, 1999; CALERI, 1999; Mahajan, 2019; Menon, 2007; Shah, 2005). Therefore, lengthy deliberations ensued about whether to identify as "lesbian" or not, as that term was seen as a signifier of an elite, "Western" understanding of same-sex sexuality, and, therefore, could risk alienating many non-English speaking same-sex loving women. Many other terms and phrases considered more "indigenous" or culturally relevant were used in its stead. These included, but were not limited to, *sakhi*⁷⁵, *mahila jo mahilaon ki taraf aakarshit hoti hai*⁷⁶, *ekal mahila*⁷⁷, *samlaingik*⁷⁸, and others.

At the heart of this debate on naming was the sticky issue of what constituted an "authentic" Indian homosexuality. As Leap & Boellstorff (2004) argue:

Globalizing processes often bring about crises of authenticity because in the dominant Western cultural logic (and in some, but by no means all, other cultural logics) authenticity is founded in locality and immobility ... That is particularly true in many postcolonial states, where globalizing processes lend a new and troubling dimension to the paradox of nation-states that claim autochthonous cultural logics (p. 7).

⁷⁵ Translated as: Friend.

⁷⁶ Translated as: Women who are attracted to women.

⁷⁷ Translated as: Single woman.

⁷⁸ Translated as: Same-sex.

Indeed, in the rejection of terms like “lesbian,” there was an inherent conflation between globalization and “Westernization,” as well as an a priori juxtaposition of globalization against cultural specificity and “Indianness”. This provocation, of whether there is an “authentic Indian queerness” is an important question in and of itself, but becomes significant in the context of this dissertation because it allows us to highlight how LGBTQ sexualities and politics were understood through the logics of nationhood and nationalism from their very emergence, with lesbian feminist activists negotiating with these questions in very different ways compared to gay rights activists (as we see in the previous chapter).

As lesbian feminists debated whether to identify as “lesbian” or not, *Fire*⁷⁹ (dir. Deepa Mehta) acted as the perfect catalyst for staking a definitive position on this subject. When the film was first screened in theatres in India in late 1998, it was immediately subjected to violent backlash by Hindu nationalist political parties and their women’s wings. Theatres were vandalized and burned, audiences were beaten up, and Hindu nationalists claimed that the same-sex longings of women were “against Indian culture” (Swami, 1998). Some even went as far as to claim that *there were no lesbians in India* (Dave, 2014). In response, lesbian women took to the streets, marking their own public emergence and swiftly countering these claims by holding up placards that stated, quite simply, “Indian and Lesbian”.

⁷⁹ *Fire* is a film about two women, Radha and Sita, who are married to two brothers and live in the same household in New Delhi. Frustrated by their husbands, with one practicing celibacy and the other having an affair, Radha and Sita turn to each other in the intimacy and privacy of the household. Their intimacy is fractured by a spying servant who works for the family. The film ends when Radha’s husband stumbles upon Radha and Sita while they are engaged in sex; upon being confronted, Radha tells her husband she desires Sita, and just as she does so, her saree catches fire from an open flame in the kitchen. In the final scene, Radha and Sita reunite in the rain outside a famous Sufi shrine in New Delhi.

In many ways, “the ‘Indian and Lesbian’ sign was crucial in rendering the Indian lesbian a subject of national politics” (Dave, 2012, p. 138) for the first time. Against the absolute invisibility embodied within the claim that “there are no lesbians in India,” the signifier “Indian *and* Lesbian” was a way of making oneself visible, resisting exile from the national imaginary, and of expanding the boundaries of who could belong to the Indian nation. This positioned the lesbian political subject as fundamentally opposed to Hindu nationalism and its cloistered imagination of who could belong within the Indian nation. Importantly, lesbian feminist activism in India emerged by taking a position *against* Hindu nationalism, and in this way, situated lesbian women’s sexuality as incommensurate with Hindutva ideology.

Having emerged from the IWM, lesbian feminism in India was attempting to create space for a politics that was equally rooted in tackling gendered and sexual discrimination, and lesbian feminists had, even prior to the events surrounding *Fire*, strong critiques of Hindu nationalism for its deeply coded patriarchal values and the inferior status of women within Hindu nationalist ideology. As I detailed in Chapter 3, Hindutva ideology is rooted in a violent and patriarchal imagination of the nation. The construction of Hindu India as a “motherland,” and the value-laden focus on “her” chastity and purity, which is sullied by the presence of religious others, suggests a deeply gendered and masculinist framework of nationalism. In addition to this, the simultaneous production of the Muslim male as a figure that rapes and pillages the Indian “motherland” also works to situate Hindu men as its “protectors,” feeding into the wounded attachments that undergird Hindu nationalist majoritarian anxieties and define their relation to the Indian nation. Within this schema of violent Hindutva masculinity, women rely upon feminized roles as the “heroic mother, chaste wife, and celibate masculinized warrior to negotiate

their way in this landscape” (Banerjee, 2006, p. 63). Even when women join organizations like the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (the women’s wing of the RSS) and re-imagine a more agential role in constructing the Hindu nation (Bacchetta, 2004), they nevertheless remain caught between embracing patriarchal nationalism while resisting everyday patriarchal violence (Mehta, 2015).

Contextualizing the protests against the film through BJP’s losses in several regional elections around that time, as Patel (2002) does, helps us further explain how the “virile heteromascularity [exhibited by Shiv Sainiks, members of the BJP, and protesting publics at large] is fully implicated in a right-wing production of proper masculine citizenship in South Asia” (p. 223). As I argued in Chapter 3, Hindu nationalism frames femininity through motherhood, domesticity, and chastity. This complements the virile heteromascularity on display in protests against *Fire*. Further, as Bacchetta (1999; 2007; 2013) has influentially argued, Hindu nationalist imaginations of India most commonly associated with the Sangh Parivar are premised on the erasure of “sexually deviant others” from the historical and cultural imaginations of the nation, alongside their violent exile from the geographical borders of the region. This was made evident when Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena at the time, stated that they would not object to *Fire* if the names of the protagonists would be changed from Radha and Sita to Shabana and Saira, “suggesting that if the film were about Muslim lesbians, it would no longer be obscene or problematic” (Dave, 2012, pp. 146-147). This otherization of the Muslim from the Hindu nation, Bacchetta (1999; 2013) argues, relies on dangerous enmeshments of queerphobia and xenophobia.

Needless to say, lesbian and bisexual women were not interested in performing any of these heterosexually feminized roles in service of the nation, and situated themselves and their politics against the patriarchal violence that shapes Hindu nationalist ideology. In the months that followed the Hindutva resistance to *Fire*, numerous lesbian and bisexual women's collectives were formed. Stree Sangam (later, LABIA) had already come into being in Mumbai in 1995, but Sappho for formed in Kolkata in 1999, Sahayatrika was born in Kerala in 2001, Organized Lesbian Alliance for Visibility and Action (OLAVA) was created in Pune in 2000, and Sangini and CALERI were formed in New Delhi in 1997 and 1998 respectively. CALERI published a report on the *Fire* controversy in 1999, in which they outlined the need for lesbian women's collectives:

The focus on lesbian rights was for a reason — to articulate and nurture the troubled connections of lesbians in/with the women's movement, to talk about the social suppression of women's sexuality in general, and to address the aspects of lesbian lives that make our struggles distinct from the gay men's movements (p. 4).

Here, the inter-related aims of CALERI revolved around marking a distinct space for lesbian concerns in relation to the IWM on the one hand, and larger gay men's (and transwomen's) movements on the other. Other lesbian women's collectives that originated at this time also framed their emergence in the same way (Shah, 2005; Akanksha & Malobika, 2007).

When protests around *Fire* openly alleged that lesbianism was against Indian culture, it not only forced lesbian activists, who were grappling with how authentic lesbian identification could be in the Indian context, to identify themselves as such, but also pushed the IWM to reckon with how urgent lesbian sexuality was. As Akanksha & Malobika (2007) write: "We

realized that somehow our existence should be made visible in order to be recognized” (p. 363). Relatedly, Sharma (2006) notes the contradictions and hesitations in adopting the term “lesbian,” and writes that:

When we use the word ‘lesbian’, we do so consciously ... We are aware that the hegemonic use of one specific word can effectively silence a diverse and shifting range of sexual/social orientations, identities, and practices ... However, the usage of the word ‘lesbian’ represents our continual efforts to build a politicized identity integral to the rhetoric of gay rights and human rights ... even though we live out the political/legal absurdity of having no status in the eyes of Indian law (p. 5).

In this way, lesbian feminists in the 1990s were engaging with the debate around terminology in a robust way, attempting to coalesce around “lesbian” as a political identity category, and importantly, situating the figure of the lesbian as *Indian, but against the logic of Hindu nationalism*. While this can be understood as a desire to lay claim to a more secular form of Indian nationalism, it is important to remember that this public emergence was also a response to the Hindu nationalist exile of lesbian women from the nationalist imaginary. It was, therefore, their attempt at “commensurating queer desire with national belonging” (Dave, 2012, p. 163) in a way that refuted the heteronormativity of the nation.

In many ways, *Fire* was the key “event” that inaugurated an awareness of lesbianism in Indian public consciousness, and has been written about widely as such⁸⁰ (Dave, 2012; Ghosh,

⁸⁰ Inspired by Ismat Chughtai’s infamous short story from 1942 titled ‘Lihalf’ (The Quilt), in *Fire* too, “the signifiers of a properly “lesbian” desire and its triumph are either everywhere or nowhere to be found” (Dave, 2012, pp. 142-143). This is why the film frustrated both feminists and Hindu nationalists simultaneously. While the film was criticized for suggesting that female homosexuality was a result of unmet sexual desires from heterosexual partners, it also caused furor because it inaugurated same-sex practices within the conjugal and convivial space of the domestic household.

2003; Gopinath, 2005; John & Niranjana, 1999; Kapur, 2000; Menon, 2007; Patel, 2002). Vociferous arguments about lesbianism being “against Indian culture” situated *Fire* as a film that caused immense “cultural panic about the moral meaning of the nation” (Dave, 2012, p. 149), fusing together questions of nationalism and lesbianism in irrevocable ways. At a time when the country was redefining itself through the processes of liberalization, the added spark of *Fire* was, quite literally in some cases, incendiary, and this crisis of national identity situated the “lesbian” figure as a politically charged, uniquely “Indian” identity category.

The simple claim of being Indian *and* Lesbian became a powerful signifier whose effects would leave a trace on lesbian and queer activism in India forever⁸¹. As Dave (2012) writes, one result of lesbian emergence at this time, and in this way, was that those who felt interpellated by the sign “Indian and Lesbian”:

recognized themselves affectively as subjects of contradictory potential, between immanence and qualification, thus pushing an existing intensity toward one resolution or another. From that process emerged a certain form of public Indian lesbian, for whom ... anything was at that moment possible, but something definitive had to happen (p. 155).

Through the debates around *Fire*, lesbian feminists resolved, strategically and uneasily, to identify as “Indian and lesbian,” and to do so while rejecting the easy pull of “Westernization” through globalization on the one hand, and to reject defining “Indianness” through Hindu nationalist rhetoric on the other hand. Further, it is also vital to note that while gay men like Ashok Row Kavi were mobilizing Hindu-ness to reinscribe themselves as authentic gay Indian

⁸¹ Lesbian feminists, rejecting Hindu nationalism and its gendered demands on women, also protested using the slogan, “Hum Bhārat ki nāri nahin banengi” (trans. “We will not be women who uphold the Hindu nation”).

subjects, lesbian feminists were laying a claim to authenticity and the nation in a different, but equally forceful way. Their staunch rejection of Hindu nationalism also served to polarize HIV/AIDS related gay rights activisms and lesbian feminist activisms further. As I show in the next sub-section, similar debates also ensued when “queer” began to circulate as a term that offered new possibilities of coalition between different LGBTQ activisms.

c. Queer Feminist Activisms in Contemporary India

The adoption of “lesbian” as a political category working against Hindu nationalism simultaneously began to situate lesbian sexuality within a legal and human rights frame, as the NGOization of the IWM, and the rise of global and transnational networks of sexuality rights activism contributed to this discursive turn. Dave (2012) demonstrates how participation in transnational fora like the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) World Conference, held in 1992, and the Beijing World Conference on Women, held in 1995, contributed to these formulations. This eventually brought “queer” into the lexicon of “gendered and sexual minority” networks.

Like the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970s and 1980s in North America (Jagose, 1997; Rich, 1980), the focus on lesbian feminism in India also led to erasures of other sexual identities. As Biswas, Beethi & Ghosh (2019) write, “bisexual women had the most confusing status in our political and organizational imagination. Their ‘ambiguous’ desire made them non-monogamous by default and caused moral and ethical conflict” (p. 106). Given how hard won these unstable, under-funded spaces of lesbian collectivity were, and influenced by close relationships with the IWM, there was hardly any space made for trans* or non-binary

experiences (Mahajan, 2019). However, this changed in a few short years, and within the first decade of the 2000s, lesbian feminist collectives began to shift from “lesbian identity to lesbian standpoint” (Biswas, Beethi & Ghosh, 2019, p. 108), which led to them collaborating with trans* communities, expanding their own horizons of activist imaginaries and coalitions. Stree Sangam, for example, changed its name to Lesbians & Bisexuals in Action (LABIA) in 2002 to reflect their political praxis and eventually included transmen into the collective. Sappho, a support group for lesbian and bisexual women, similarly branched out to form Sappho for Equality in 2004, a registered NGO meant to bring lesbian, bisexual, and transmasculine (LBT) persons and their allies together, towards collective advocacy on issues of gender and sexuality.

Around this time, the term “queer” also entered the lexicon of LGBTQ activisms. First popularized in the early years of the first decade of the 2000s, “queer” became, at worst, a term used to simply gather the “profusion of identities” (Narain & Bhan, 2005, p. 13) that marked LGBTQ activisms in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and at best an intersectional politics that was built upon the “rejection of the primacy of the heterosexual, patriarchal family” (ibid., pp. 3-4). Within this context, similar debates, about the authenticity and Indian-ness of “queer,” were reanimated, and remain ongoing. As such, conversations about whether “queer” fits within the Indian context, like earlier debates on the efficacy of the term “gay,” or “lesbian” in the subcontinent, have been fruitful in analyzing the role of culture, society, and the nation in queer activisms in India.

If the authenticity and political valence of “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “gay” had been judged against the backdrop of a liberalizing and globalizing India, the merit and applicability of

“queer” has been measured against a rapidly neoliberalizing India⁸². Perhaps the most trenchant critique of the neoliberalization of queer activism in India has been offered by Tellis (2012; 2016), who writes that the term “queer” is “divorced in significant ways from the formations and struggles of sexual minorities on the ground in India, [and] it elides the dense and embodied histories of same-sex subjects in these contexts at its own peril” (2016, p. 57). For Tellis, the dangers of “queer” go beyond the simple exclusion of lower-class and non-dominant caste persons, and they argue that:

even within the constituency that “queer” is said to have emerged from and to whom it apparently applies, there is actually a serious alienation from the term and, more importantly, the term obscures long histories of same-sex subjectivity not easily amenable not just to the term “queer” but to identity politics as commonly understood in general (Ibid., p. 58).

Tellis’ argument is a redeployment of the same questions that marked hesitancy around the use of the political category of “lesbian” a few years earlier. They suggest that the term “queer” flattens the multiple specificities and complexities that variously positioned “gendered and sexual minorities” offer, just like Indian feminists and lesbian activists in the 1990s had argued that the term “lesbian” would be alienating and obscure longer histories of same-sex intimacies among women in India (Bacchetta, 2007).

⁸² Within this context, I define neoliberalism broadly as a set of conditions and practices under which the state reduces its role in public welfare, democracy becomes difficult due to corporatization of political space, and “all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when these spheres are not directly monetized” (Brown, 2015, p. 10). Broadly, neoliberalism entrenched poverty (Patnaik, 2007) and Hindutva in India (Jaffrelot, 2021), and led to a significant increase in violence against women, particularly in Indian cities (Bannerji, 2016).

Tellis' arguments can be made sense of within a larger field of queer scholarship that has debated the effects of globalization and neoliberalism on queer sexualities (Altman, 2001; Binnie, 2004; Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan IV, 2002). While “global” nomenclatures of sexuality offer new possibilities of transnational organizing, they also threaten to efface “local” practices of sexual life. So, on the one hand, mobilizing around identity categories like “gay,” “lesbian,” and “transgender,” despite their limitations, enables activists to stake their claim as gendered and sexual minorities, using frameworks of sexual health and human rights to their advantage. In India, this led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018. It also enabled various hijra, kothi, thirunangai, aravani, and trans* communities to coalesce under the broad rubric of “transgender,” and led to the passing of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) vs. Union of India judgment in 2014. The NALSA judgment recognized transgender persons as a “third gender,” eventually leading to advances in accessing national identity documents and furthering various human rights claims by transgender communities. On the other hand, it is precisely these discourses of human rights that Tellis (2012) critiques, linking them to the NGOization of queer activisms, and noting that this has been a “voluntarist, bourgeois, entrepreneurial project” (2012, p. 145) in the Indian context. As I documented in the previous chapter, the NGOization of LGBTQ activisms has led to the disciplining of queer and trans* subjects through frameworks of legitimacy and middle-class, dominant-caste caste morality (Dutta, 2013; Roy, 2022; Vijayakumar, 2021).

While this dialectic between the promise and pitfalls of adopting sexual and gendered identity categories that emerge through transnational human rights frameworks is vital, I contend that the critiques of such identity categories, as outlined by Tellis (2012; 2016) above, for

example, are dangerous because they risk essentializing culture by constructing a false dichotomy between the global and the local, the inauthentic and the authentic. As I argue elsewhere regarding the use of the term “transgender”, we need to make sense of how terms like “queer,” “lesbian,” and “transgender” come to circulate in their *various* circuits and specificities, and how they offer possibilities of alienation as well as coalition, however strategic and temporary these may be (Chatterjee, 2018b).

Dutta & Roy (2014) importantly point out that sometimes the term “transgender” is used instrumentally, as self identification in order to move out of one’s class or caste location. There are many instances where subjects or communities identify with various signifiers, like “kothi” *and* “transgender,” which are positioned against each other within the framework that marks “kothi” as local/authentic and “transgender” as foreign/global/inauthentic. The same is true for how “queer” is deployed and circulated in India as well. In this context, to reject the use of these categories can conversely limit the possibilities of transcending one’s class and caste location, as well as restrict access to queer communities that mobilize around these identifications. These dichotomies between the “global” and the “local” have unravelled further with the rise of digital media, and the active participation of LGBTQ activists on social media platforms. It becomes impossible to maintain clear dichotomies between “global” categories like “queer,” and “local” categories like “kothi,” when a large section of LGBTQ populations are exploring their gendered and sexual selves on social media.

Further, as I have argued in the previous chapter and this one, in India, as elsewhere, LGBTQ sexualities can, and have been:

deployed negatively to allay anxieties about “authentic” national belonging ... and [deployed] positively by nation-states in order to protect an image of global modernness ... [therefore, queerness] has not only been a site of dispossession, it has *also* been a creative site for queer agency and empowerment (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan IV, 2002, p. 2).

As such, fractured by its circulation in complexly knotted circuits of globalization and neoliberalism in India’s postcolonial context, queerness has become a signifier of various, even contradictory, positions and praxes. Simply arguing that terms such as “lesbian,” “gay,” or “queer” work against all embodiments of, and identifications with, non-heterosexual sexualities in the subcontinent achieves the same flattening effect that such critiques attribute to the use of these terms.

Crucially, in presupposing that these terms are “inauthentic” to the Indian context, these critiques implicitly rely on an “Indianness” that is untouched by processes of globalization or neoliberalism. For example, in 1996, Giti Thadani, recognized by many as “the founder of lesbian activism” (Dave, 2012, p. 10), and the founder of Sakhi, authored a book on the presence of lesbian love in ancient and modern India. In the text, Thadani traced lesbianism in South Asia by tracing it within Hindu mythology and Vedic philosophy. In doing so, Thadani unwittingly underscored the seemingly implicit congruity between Hinduness and Indianness that, as I show in Chapter 3, is also the basis of Hindutva ideology. As Bacchetta (2007) suggests, Thadani’s text “globalize[d] Indian Islam as an ‘external invasion’ responsible for Hinduism’s hetero-patriarchalization, including through (lesbian) temple destruction” (p. 119).

Given their overlap with Hindu nationalist logics, texts like *Sakhiyani* are now being used to situate Hindu nationalism as queer friendly by “Sanghi gays” invested in recuperating Hindu nationalism in service of queerness. Indeed, this is the stated premise for the formation of the Queer Hindu Alliance (QHA), as I showed in the previous chapter. In our interview, Ankur, one of the founding members of the QHA, had emphasized: “we are living in the time where ... the voice of queer Hindus is not represented in a non-judgmental way ... if you come from a Dalit perspective, or feminist perspective, you are forced to hate Hinduism.” Ankur attributed this “hatred” to a misreading of Hindu traditions and texts, and said that the purpose of the QHA was to share LGBTQ-friendly readings of Hindu and Indic texts with those misinformed by “radical politics”. Responding to these efforts of the QHA, Bhagya, a queer feminist activist from Mumbai, told me during our interview: “Queer people want to invoke so much Hindu symbolism and Hindu mythology, to show that progressive things within Hinduism existed. So, the conversation hinges on a certain mythical, progressive past, which is quite disturbing,” since it overlaps neatly with the Hindu nationalist revisionism of Indian history⁸³.

Finally, within an already fraught context of LGBTQ solidarities and activisms, relying on terms such as “queer” opened up the possibility of radical coalition building, through which an evolving understanding of queerness would eventually emerge. Particularly for lesbian feminists, whose activisms were built upon hesitant but sustained engagements with difference, “queer” opened up numerous possibilities of collective organizing between gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, and non-binary persons. Within a context where lesbian feminists felt repeatedly

⁸³ For more on how Hindu nationalists seek to re-write Indian history in order to strengthen their claim that India is a Hindu *rashtra*, see the article titled ‘*The Hindutva View of History*’ (Visweswaran et al., 2009).

sidelined by gay rights activists, organizing around “queer” politics allowed for broader LGBTQ coalitions to become possible, even if these alliances were infrequent. Collectives such as People for the Rights of Indian Sexual Minorities (PRISM) and Voices Against 377 came into being in 2001 and 2003 respectively, and focused on a variety of issues, including decriminalizing homosexuality, amendments to sexual violence laws, legalizing sex work, resisting Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia, among others. Therefore, according to Menon (2007), “queer has from the beginning in India, gone beyond sexuality ... enabling a continuous challenge to heteronormativity” (pp. 20-21) through coalition building.

However, despite these coalitions, that enabled queer feminists to contribute to the fight against Section 377 without compromising on their feminist politics, the rift between them and “pragmatic” gay rights focused activists, who had no time or patience for intersectional concerns, continued to grow. In fact, Amisha, an activist involved in queer feminist collectives across New Delhi and Mumbai, even polemically stated in our interview that “queer feminist spaces started, and continue to exist, as a reaction to these gay rights politics”. In the next section, I demonstrate how queer feminists define “queerness” *against* a “Sanghi gay” politics, reiterating that Hindu nationalism can, simply, never be *queer*. I also highlight how Amisha’s classification of queer feminist activism as a “reaction” relies upon their voluntary, informal, and unfunded nature, which often means that many queer feminist groups coalesce around specific issues or problems, rather than operating routinely or consistently. This imbues queer feminist activism with a kind of “crisis interventionism,” wherein queer feminist sociality remains ongoing, but concrete political projects are worked upon intermittently, and with irregularity. As such, queer feminist collectives approach the contemporary Hindu nationalist atmosphere through the lens of crisis,

and I analyze how their interventions offer a precarious and contingent imagination of resisting Hindu nationalism.

II. Queer Feminist Negotiations with the Hindu Nationalist Question

What is apparent from the emergence of lesbian feminisms and their evolution into queer feminisms, as I document and analyze above, is that, compared to how HIV/AIDS related queer activism evolved, these histories tell a very different story of LGBTQ politics in India. These are reflexive and affective politics, emerging through a critique of Hindu nationalism, and rooted strongly in the legacies and lessons of the IWM. If certain HIV/AIDS funded gay rights activists, who moved seamlessly from HIV/AIDS prevention to the decriminalization of homosexuality, critique the “malaise of intersectionality” (Iyer-Mitra, 2018) for slowing down the progress of LGBTQ activism, then queer feminist activists also continue to demonstrate how an intersectional politics is not just pragmatic, but also absolutely imperative for our times.

Highlighting their tense relationships with the IWM on the one hand, and with HIV/AIDS gay rights activism on the other, makes it apparent that lesbian feminisms of the past, and queer feminisms of the present, embody and enact a queer politics that is grounded in affective, ethical, and practical negotiations with the question of difference. Given their emergence from the autonomous women’s movement, lesbian and queer feminist collectives also remain, to a large degree, similarly autonomous, and this, too, impacts the scale and scope of their activism. Compared to the well-established networks of HIV/AIDS related gay rights activism, queer feminist activism remains fledgling, and much smaller in their scale and scope. However, the absence of funding and NGOized hierarchies also enables them to constantly mutate and

transform to respond to the shifting urgencies of any given moment. In this section, I demonstrate how queer feminisms continue to reject Hindu nationalism and oppose the developing narratives of aspirational homonationalism, but do so while battling the increasing atmospheric pressure of Hindu nationalism, which they see as a crisis for their perpetually fledgling activisms.

If the previous chapter offered one kind of homosexual resolution of the Hindu nationalist question, this chapter offers another, contradictory negotiation of the same. The queer feminist rejection of Hindu nationalism situates their negotiations with the question of nationalism in opposition to how “Sanghi gays” aspirationally embrace Hindu nationalism. It is also important to note that queer feminist framings of Hindu nationalist violence through narratives of crisis situate queerness as that which resists and opposes violent ideologies of nationalism. In doing so, queer feminists stitch together a different imagination of queer life and politics that can never be folded into Hindu nationalism, even if it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the question of national belonging altogether. At its most hopeful moments, by building solidarities with populations minoritized by Hindu nationalism, queer feminisms hold on to the possibility of a world without Hindu nationalism. This becomes crucial as a Hindu nationalist atmosphere encroaches, rapidly, into every sphere of life in contemporary India.

a. Queer Feminist Activisms against Homonationalism

In many ways, the ongoing debates around what it means to identify first as “lesbian,” and then as “queer” within India’s changing context grounds queer feminist politics and solidarities. Thus, how “lesbian” or “queer” have been understood has defined what lesbian/

queer feminist activism look like, how they coalesce, and which solidarities they work towards. Given that lesbian feminism emerged in opposition to Hindu nationalism by defining themselves as “Indian and Lesbian,” queer feminism also continues to define queerness against an imagination of the Hindu nation. As my interviews show, many who identify as queer feminist activists in contemporary India believe that supporting Hindu nationalism is *against* what it means to be queer, and quite simply, is antithetical to any manifestation of queerness.

For example, Aditi, a queer feminist and non-binary trans* activist involved with activism across New Delhi and Mumbai, and a fellow PhD scholar in Gender Studies, summarizes these complexities as follows: “I do not look at queer and LGBT as the same thing, although I think potentially anybody who is outside the cis-heteronormative norm can be considered queer. Politically I think queer is not about identity politics”. Similarly, Armān, another queer feminist and non-binary trans* activist in New Delhi, also notes that, while LGBT politics is about identity, queer politics is about an intersectional perspective and a commitment to building coalitions amongst various ongoing struggles. They therefore conclude that, “a queer person by definition cannot be a Sanghi”. Chitra, a queer feminist activist from New Delhi, also echoed that she wouldn’t call “Sanghi gays” queer, “because they are not queer”. For Chitra, queerness is about disruption, not assimilation. She continued that queer feminists “disrupt the family, the nation. We demand new laws be made for us, that the state rethink its structures ... we are not like Sanghi gay men who will not think about other marginalizations, but only about their own”.

Such understandings of queerness were reflected by most other participants and mirror a more or less agreed upon discourse among queer feminists, that differentiates between LGBT on the one hand and queer on the other. However, both Armān and Sohan, a trans* activist from New Delhi, also raised an important question about the politics of identifying as queer within LGBTQ activist spaces. Sohan summarized the problem as follows:

Since we fight for the right to self-determination, we should not contest anyone identifying as queer. However, we do reserve the right to ask you how you define your queerness in relation to your privilege ... We are no one to say someone is or is not queer, but we have to be conscious about differences between queer people then.

Similarly, Armān cautioned that, “[while] the LGBTQ community itself is very diverse, there is a lot of policing by the community” about who can be seen as “authentically” queer.

What we see in these negotiations and antagonisms about the meaning of queerness, as well as the embodiment of queer politics, is one iteration of perhaps the most foundational debate in queer theory — namely, *what is queer about queer studies* at any given moment? (Berlant & Warner, 1995; Eng, Halberstam & Munoz, 2005; Eng & Puar, 2020). Indeed, in Butler’s (1993) oft cited and canonized words:

[T]he critique of the queer subject is crucial to the *democratization* of queer politics ... If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes (pp. 227-228).

As such, within this understanding of queerness as a mobile, unfixed analytic, sign, and/or orientation, there is an implicit agreement that the referent, “queer,” will move and fix itself onto the most critical urgencies of any given moment (Aizura et al., 2020; Munoz, 2009; Villarejo, 2005).

This belief is also echoed, to varying degrees, by queer feminists in India, who, as we see, mark a distinction, even opposition, between the mobility and urgency of “queer,” which they define against the fixity and stagnation of “LGBT”. As Ambar, a non-binary queer feminist from New Delhi, defined it: “queerness is not just about the right to sexual choice and identity, not just the right to sex, but also the right to life”. This expansive understanding of queerness can be further explained by Sohan, for whom this difference between the fixity of “LGBT” and the fluidity of “queer” rests upon context: “We are not making queerness a new box, a new identity. Queerness doesn’t have watertight rules or norms ... it will break any box it is put into ... queerness is for anyone outside any norm”. Importantly, such definitions of queerness, that are based upon differing from the shifting goalposts of normativity, simultaneously situate homonationalist politics and “Sanghi gays” *outside* queerness, and therefore, outside the field of *queer* activism.

In many ways, this difference between the fixed signification of “LGBT” and the fluid signification of “queer” is at the heart of queer feminist critiques of organizations like Queer Hindu Alliance and Humsafar Trust, and the aspirational homonationalist politics they embody. Crucially, by situating such LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism as not “queer,” queer feminists, who have always struggled (due to the lack of funding and resulting instability) to set

the tone and pace of LGBTQ politics in India, also attempt to mark their own politics as legitimate, or as Dave (2012) has theorized, as virtuous. In doing so, they open up a space within LGBTQ activism to resist Hindu nationalism, even as aspirational homonationalism becomes more popular within such activism.

However, this insistence on the incommensurability between queerness and Hindu nationalism also threatens to paradoxically fix or ossify what “queer” can signify. As Aditi noted in our interview, this takes the shape of “policing” within LGBTQ spaces, wherein virtuosity risks becoming a barometer for what is or is not “queer”. In defining queerness as necessarily transformative and “radical,” queer feminists can threaten to produce, within their own collectives, a governmentality around the “right” ways to do queer politics. Dave (2012) described how the public and politicized emergence of the “Indian lesbian” had codified what it meant to be a “good lesbian,” which therefore alienated many who found it difficult to adhere to those requirements. Similarly, Gupta (2005) has also highlighted that many gay men resisted the demand from queer feminists to care deeply and equally about multiple issues of oppression.

In my interviews with Lakshmi and Ankur, who are affiliated with the Kashmiri Youth Movement and Queer Hindu Alliance respectively, they also stated, with unbridled bitterness, that they had felt excluded by the “radical” queer feminist spaces created by groups like LABIA, where they had been “shut down” by queer feminist activists because of their “moderate” or “liberal” views on LGBTQ inclusion and rights. As is clear from the previous chapters, given their support for Hindu nationalism, Ankur’s and Lakshmi’s viewpoints are certainly not “moderate,” and I read these comments as largely disingenuous. This can be instantiated by

juxtaposing Ankur's social media presence with what he had said during our interview. In the interview, he had stated that he is routinely attacked online for not being a "legitimate queer voice when it comes to queer rights". When I had asked how he responds to these attacks, he said: "I bow down to them in my mind, without any kind of negativity for them, and I move on". However, this "live and let live" attitude was in stark contrast with his own online behaviour. When the TISS Queer Collective posted a statement in solidarity with Kris Chudawala on Facebook, for example, Ankur responded by stating "I didn't know you had a copyright on 'Queer' topics," followed by multiple laughing emojis⁸⁴. However disingenuous, these comments highlighted that while LGBTQ normativity and pragmatism creates the figure of the "good queer" as one who stands with the nation, queer feminist activisms also construct a competing imagination of the "good queer," who is similarly respectable in terms of their sexuality, but marked by a commitment to an intersectional practice of social justice.

What is crucial for this dissertation is how these competing visions of LGBTQ activisms, that are embedded in how different LGBTQ activisms emerged and evolved in India, are now being reified along the axis of Hindu nationalism. Across the previous chapter and this one, I have outlined two very different, even if intersecting, narratives of how HIV/AIDS related gay rights activisms and lesbian/queer feminism have developed since the late 1980s. It is clear that both strands of activism have emerged through vast differences in terms of resources, but also through antagonisms around the question of gender, which has produced very disparate, and often contradictory, imaginations of LGBTQ life, rights, and politics. Hindu nationalism, through

⁸⁴ For Ankur's response to Patankar's removal from the management of Kashish Film Festival, see Appendix C, figure 5 and 6.

its majoritarian rhetoric and its ubiquity in contemporary India, is now deepening pre-existing divides, and amplifying old antagonisms. By seeping into old fissures, the violent atmosphere of Hindu nationalism is making it impossible for LGBTQ activists to side-step the question of nationalism, and is re-shaping them as “for” or “against” the (Hindu) nation as a result.

Further, this antagonism on the question of nationalism also shapes LGBTQ interactions on social media. In my interview with Koushik, a gay activist from New Delhi, he described how difficult it had become to moderate comments on the LGBTQ closed-user Facebook group ‘Harmless Hugs’. He said: “There’s a lot of discontentment and fighting on politics that is constantly a recurring theme on these groups, and not necessarily queer politics, sometimes just general politics around India ... it becomes too toxic and I don’t really enjoy it”. Further, Koushik shared that the Harmless Hugs administrators had told him not to use the term “BJP” in any posts or comments he shared. He said:

“In order to placate right-wing LGBTQ members who regularly throw tantrums about ‘anti-national’ sentiments, the consensus among the Harmless Hugs administrators has been to refrain from shaming ‘particular’ political parties — and that party is the BJP. So, when the Centre recently spoke against same-sex marriage, I shared with the team my desire to write a public post denouncing the judgment and also naming and shaming the BJP. However, I was told not to use the words ‘BJP’ and instead use the words ‘Centre’.

Given the kind of toxicity and censorship he was dealing with, soon after our interview, Koushik gave up his role as moderator on Harmless Hugs.

This kind of self-censorship on social media is not uncommon among LGBTQ activists. Particularly those who helm or otherwise manage gender and sexuality rights NGOs find that their social media is monitored and their tacit silence around questions of nationalism determines whether they will be able to retain their FCRA licence⁸⁵, which makes them eligible for foreign funding. Mayank, who identifies as a gay queer feminist activist from New Delhi, and the Director of a well-known gender and sexuality rights NGO, said: “we have to think seriously about what we say online ... I have to give my social media handles in FCRA applications ... what we say online has a bearing on funding, jobs are at stake”. Likewise, other LGBTQ activists also spoke about censoring themselves online for fear of being trolled, doxxed, and otherwise attacked. Ambar said: “while I used to post against the BJP publicly before, now I have limited my posts to friends only ... I don’t want anything adverse to happen to my mother, who lives alone, because of what I say”.

Based on this, it is my contention that the vitriolic nature of Hindu nationalist discourse, combined with the often polemic character of social media discourse, is also deepening the antagonisms amongst LGBTQ activists. Within this context, LGBTQ activists who support Hindu nationalism mobilize its rhetoric to discredit activists who resist Hindu nationalism. In the previous chapter, I analyzed how, given that LGBTQ pragmatism governs how the majority of gay rights activists are organized, difference is approached as dangerous and inconvenient, and

⁸⁵ The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) provides licences to NGOs, enabling them access to foreign funding. The FCRA was put into effect in the Emergency, in 1976, and has been amended by the BJP in 2020 in order to give the government increased power to scrutinize NGOs. Even before 2020, the BJP ruled central government was using FCRA to target NGOs that were opposing Hindu nationalism. For example, in 2016, the government cancelled the FCRA licence of Lawyer’s Collective for alleged misuse of foreign funding. According to *All India Radio News*, the government has cancelled more than 6600 FCRA licences between 2017-2021 (8 December, 2022).

is often understood as a roadblock to LGBTQ progress and inclusion. Here, I am suggesting that the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism offers a way to excise differing activist perspectives from within larger LGBTQ spaces, while also becoming another axis of difference in itself.

As I analyzed in the previous chapter, Kavi had mobilized Hindu nationalist logics against Bharosa Trust and Shivananda Khan in 2001, with the goal of discrediting his competitor for HIV/AIDS funds by labelling him as “anti-national”. Following a similar process, Kavi and the Queer Azādi March (QAM) team had also raised objections against LABIA, a queer feminist collective, during the Mumbai Pride March of 2015. Shals Mahajan, a founding member of LABIA, describes the events as follows:

[2015] was the last year when we marched as a collective [LABIA] in the Bombay [Mumbai] Queer Azaadi March ... We had moved out of the organizing several years ago but had still been participating in the march with our ‘political’ slogans and banners, despite repeated digs at our ‘politics’. The first time we wore T-shirts saying ‘the right to dissent,’ we were asked what dissent had to do with a queer march. But, in January 2015 things reached a strange impasse ... we’d carried banners claiming ‘Gender, Sexuality, Dharm [religious duty]: Where I am Respected, that is my Ghar [home],’ in several languages and distributed leaflets connecting the ‘ghar wapsi⁸⁶’ campaigns of the Hindu right to the increasing violence against trans women and Dalits and Muslims ... the QAM organizing committee, of which we were no longer a part, issued a statement distancing themselves clearly and saying that the QAM does not stand for it” (2019, p. 140-141).

⁸⁶ Translated as: Returning Home.

As I briefly discuss in Chapter 3, the ‘Ghar Wāpsi’ campaign is a Hindu nationalist creation that aims to “bring home” Hindu women who have married Muslim or Christian men by re-converting them to Hinduism. It mobilizes the violent Hindu nationalist schema of India being a Hindu motherland, and rests on the belief that any non-Hindus within India were, at some point in the past, converted from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity.

Most of the research participants based in Mumbai referenced this series of events as a precursor to the Mumbai Pride march events of 2020, and explained that activists like Kavi, organizations like the Humsafar Trust, and collectives like QAM work together to mobilize a Hindu nationalist politics against religious minorities, anti-caste activists, and queer feminist activists. Speaking about the expulsion of LABIA from QAM meetings and Mumbai Pride, Bhagya said that, “if you look at the power and influence these guys have, it’s actually very hard to occupy the same space, because things can get very wild, very toxic ... They have so much hatred for feminist politics”. Further, those supporting Hindu nationalism often belong to HIV/AIDS related activist networks, which are established, expansive, and well-funded, and those who resist Hindu nationalism, very often, belong to more informal, unfunded, voluntary collectives. This difference in terms of the scale and scope of these activisms sharpens the intensity of these antagonisms, and contributes to queer feminist understandings of Hindu nationalism as a crisis, as I analyze below.

b. Crisis Activisms: Queer Feminist Resistance to Hindu Nationalism

Above, I briefly analyzed how queer feminist activisms are marked by the ethical imperatives of queerness in ways that compel these activisms to respond to whatever crises seem

the most urgent and debilitating at any given moment. As Amisha, a queer feminist activist who splits her time between New Delhi and Mumbai, so eloquently described it: “*So much of our existence is couched in response to how so much of the world looks like this already*”. Here, she was referring to how queer activism is shaped in response to the various ways in which marginalization takes place at any given time. This orientation, of framing queer feminist activism as a response to crises, is deeply rooted in how these activism have evolved through tense negotiations with the IWM and HIV/AIDS related gay rights activism, and due to the largely voluntary and “autonomous” character of these spaces. As I highlighted earlier in this chapter, many queer feminist collectives remain mostly unfunded (like LABIA), and only seek funding sporadically for specific issues. Even when queer feminist collectives choose to become registered NGOs (like Sappho for Equality and Nazariya QFRG), the grants they receive never come close to matching the scale of HIV/AIDS funding.

Opting out of funding, or not being offered any funding, means that queer feminist groups run on a voluntary basis, making them susceptible to the constraints of time, the migration of its members to other cities for employment, and to some extent, the strength of interpersonal relationships amongst group members. Their lack of funds impacts numerous other conditions required for a smoothly functioning collective. For example, they often do not have a regular space to meet, the time members are able to volunteer is varied and often inconsistent, and the issues they are able to work on are hamstrung by all these considerations. Therefore, the life-times of autonomous and voluntary queer feminist collectives are markedly different from those of funded organizations, or more established and vastly larger NGOs (Gandhi & Shah, 1992).

This is why many queer feminist collectives are unable to survive beyond a few years — almost all the lesbian/queer feminist collectives that began in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s are no longer operational, with even LABIA shutting down in 2021 after 25 years of existence. Sappho for Equality remains, perhaps, the only exception, but that is due, in large part, to its status and funding as an NGO. Its unfunded counterpart, Sappho, became defunct in 2015. In this sub-section, I describe how queer feminist activisms, already struggling to survive, are made even more precarious in Hindu nationalist times. Further, I argue that these struggles have contributed to queer feminist spaces developing robust crisis intervention frameworks, and these frameworks are what these collectives now extend in order to resist Hindu nationalism, which they see as a crisis.

Shaped largely by constraints of funding, time, and space, many queer feminist collectives, like Sappho for Equality and LABIA, decided to run crisis helplines, which required very few resources, when they were formed. Dave (2012) outlines how, in the early years of these collectives, calls to crisis helplines would be varied, and women from across the country would call to talk, discuss their difficulties, and simply feel recognized. Occasionally, the calls would include requests for help — to escape a forced marriage, to run away and find shelter elsewhere, and so on. In these cases, members would coalesce, and relying upon their connections and experience in the IWM, would find a temporary home for some women, or help them find employment, and so on. In this way, crisis intervention became an essential component of early lesbian feminist activisms, and eventually came to characterize queer feminist activisms as well. However, as Amisha said: “every time there has been some kind of crisis, money is raised to deal with that crisis. That can be hospitalization that requires 30,000 rupees to be raised.

That can be done. 30 lakh (3 million) is a different matter, and 30 crores (300 million), never”. This suggests that the kind of crisis intervention work queer feminist collectives are able to do is also marked by their limitations in terms of size, scale, and funding.

During my interviews, queer feminist activists inevitably spoke about how their crisis intervention work had shifted, first, due to the exigencies of Hindu nationalism, and then, once again, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Prashant, a transman involved in queer feminist organizing with LABIA in Mumbai, described this as follows:

Everything has become more difficult. People struggle a lot more with making ends meet these days, and here I am talking about people who are extremely privileged, like us. So in that way, the amount of work we can do in LABIA has reduced a lot more. This is why we took a decision that we will focus more on research work for the time being, till we can find more time to do more things. When there are crisis calls, all these decisions obviously need to be modified. During Covid-19 times, there have been so many calls of crisis, and not just from the queer community. The general environment has gotten worse [due to Hindu nationalism], so our work has now become about all groups that get discriminated against. Nowadays this extends to so many people, especially in the lockdown. [So we work with] people discriminated against on the basis of caste and religion as well. Some of us have been talking [to them], some of us have been counselling [them], and otherwise it's mostly trying to raise money among ourselves or from our friends [to meet their needs].

Prashant importantly draws a seamless connection between how “everything has become more difficult,” and how these overlapping difficulties shape how difficult it becomes for queer

feminists to do crisis intervention work in conditions marked by Hindu nationalism and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prashant also spoke about how this awareness of overlapping struggles and crises allowed LABIA to expand the scope of its intervention to include those impacted by Hindu nationalist violence and Covid-19. Often, this crisis intervention work moved seamlessly from one issue to another. For instance, during the CAA protests, I was inducted into a private WhatsApp group called ‘Queers Against CAA,’ where queer feminist and trans* activists from across the country were coordinating and arranging resources for activists arrested during those protests. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic set in, the group moved to arranging rations and funds for various communities, including LGBTQ people, sex workers, non-dominant caste and Muslim communities who were being targeted by Hindu nationalists for various reasons, informal labourers stuck without employment in various cities, and so on.

Clearly, for queer feminist activists, Hindu nationalism is a crisis that requires intervention. As I have already analyzed earlier in this chapter, the patriarchal and gendered norms that undergird Hindu nationalism are against queer feminist imaginations of life, and its entrenchment in contemporary Indian society has given rise to increasing rates of gender-based violence (Chattarji, 2019). Additionally, as I outlined in Chapter 3, recent years have seen an expansion of state impunity, marked by a rise in arrests of activists who are easily deemed “anti-national”. Given the intersectional nature of many queer feminist collectives, many activists who are arrested for being “anti-national” are associates, comrades, or partners of queer feminist activists, who are then forced to negotiate with the desperation of finding ways to free their

companions from prison. For example, Karishma, a queer feminist from New Delhi, despaired that a mutual friend, also a trans* activist, was currently in prison: “Other than getting them out, their phone has been confiscated, so does that mean all our group chats have been compromised? If they have, where do we go next? What do we need to cover up? So it’s another spiral of ‘Oh my god, I can’t even think about it’”. Here, Karishma highlights the toll of Hindu nationalist violence on queer feminist activisms.

Making matters worse, there is often a coordinated onslaught of attacks against queer feminists on social media, targeting them for speaking up against Hindu nationalist atrocities, or, for simply doing queer feminist outreach. For example, in July 2020, a columnist for *OpIndia* (an infamous Hindu nationalist “news” website) wrote an essay vilifying Nazariya QFRG’s workshop on gender at a school in New Delhi, stating that they were “brainwashing adolescent children into the toxic ideology of gender identity politics”. Soon afterwards, photos of a colouring book produced and sold by Nazariya QFRG, that included nude images of gender-queer persons, were circulated on social media, and it was claimed that these books were being sold to children. As a result, Nazariya QFRG faced significant backlash, insults, and threats on social media⁸⁷, and some “Sanghi gays” also chimed in to state their opposition to Nazariya QFRG’s actions, marking, yet again, their solidarity with Hindu nationalism, at the cost of destabilizing queer feminist activisms.

⁸⁷ For examples of such tweets, see Appendix C, figure 7.

For these reasons, the atmosphere of Hindu nationalism and its attendant violence is experienced by queer feminists as an ongoing, and increasingly debilitating, crisis. As Amisha explained:

we are moving from crisis to crisis. We feel the constant need to react to what is going on in the rest of the world, and also re-examine our politics ... queer feminism is such a small space, and these alliances are so fragile.

Indeed, with well established crisis intervention frameworks already in place, queer feminists in contemporary India do move “from crisis to crisis,” crowdsourcing lawyer fees for an incarcerated activist on one day, arranging housing for runaway queer and trans* persons the next. This crisis intervention work is also aided by social media, which, despite being a space where queer feminists are often attacked by Hindu nationalists, also becomes a rich resource for them to raise funds, seek help, and raise awareness.

It is important to note that, as the violent atmosphere of Hindu nationalism becomes more pervasive in Indian society, producing an ever-increasing number of “anti-national” populations to target, queer feminist activism also expand their horizon to demonstrate solidarity with these growing “anti-national” communities now being minoritized by Hindu nationalism in heightening ways. Thus, as Hindu nationalism’s definition of “anti national” others expands, queer feminists also stretch their imagination of queer activism to include everyone excluded by the ideological schema of nationalism. An important aspect of this, as Amisha, Prashant, and other queer feminists highlight, is a constant re-examination of one’s own politics, that produces queer feminist collectives as sites of reflexive queer praxis, forever moving from one crisis to the next.

In this way, queer feminist activists continuing to reshape their politics to meet the needs of the unfolding crisis of Hindu nationalism reminds us “what political hope is made of” (Duggan & Munoz, 2009, p. 276). Even as these collectives experience heightening precarity, in the form of attacks from “Sanghi gays” and other supporters of Hindu nationalism, they extend their solidarity to all those being minoritized by Hindu nationalist violence. Not only does this offer an important site of resistance to Hindu nationalism, it also demonstrates a vastly divergent response to experiences of crisis and risk compared to gay rights activisms. In the previous chapter, I argued that gay rights activisms developed a kind of LGBTQ pragmatism in the face of the life or death conditions caused by the HIV/AIDS crisis. Juxtaposing that form of LGBTQ pragmatism, which undergirds aspirations of homonationalism, with queer feminist responses to crisis underscores that queer feminist activisms operate through a very different understanding of queerness. If gay rights activisms are framed through a pragmatic attention to LGBTQ inclusion in the present, queer feminisms are rooted in queer utopian imaginations of a future without Hindu nationalism. This enables them to expand their solidarities in conditions of heightening risk and precarity. As such, queer feminist perspectives offer an essential contradiction to “Sanghi gay” aspirations of homonationalism and help us critically reexamine what queerness itself can mean in terms of worldmaking, especially from the vantage point of an intersectional politics defined against the pull of increasing LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism in India.

III. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined queer feminist resistance to Hindu nationalism, and contextualized this rejection within the history of lesbian feminist emergence. Like gay rights activisms, debates around naming, authenticity, and national belonging have been pivotal to the evolution of queer feminist activisms. However, I demonstrate that queer feminism negotiates with these questions very differently — while gay rights activisms strengthen their investment in belonging to a Hindu nation, queer feminists reject Hindu nationalism for its heteropatriarchal violence, and situate “queerness” against aspirations of homonationalism. As such, Hindu nationalism deepens the existing differences between gay rights activisms and queer feminisms, becoming another axis through which their antagonisms weaken their already contingent solidarities.

Further, I argue that queer feminisms, already struggling due to a persistent lack of resources, become even more precarious in Hindu nationalist times. However, despite their precarity, already operating in a framework of crisis intervention, queer feminists are now extending their solidarities to include all those minoritized by Hindu nationalist violence. This also reveals another crucial difference from gay rights activisms, and demonstrates that, for queer feminists, conditions of crisis produce robust imaginations of resistance, rather than generating aspirations of belonging into the nation. While the HIV/AIDS crisis pushed gay rights activisms towards LGBTQ pragmatism, experiencing Hindu nationalism as a crisis reinforces queer feminist imaginations of a world without its attendant violence.

This resistance, that queer feminists enact and envision, offers a crucial antidote to the stifling atmosphere of Hindu nationalism, that threatens to engulf all its critics. In practicing this resistance to Hindu nationalism, and rejecting LGBTQ aspirations of homonationalism, through the material and everyday work of crisis intervention, queer feminists bring another kind of queer politics into being. By raising funds for incarcerated activists, collecting rations for queer and trans* communities struggling during Covid-19, arranging rent, employment, and housing for minoritized communities, and so on, queer feminists practice care and solidarity. In doing so, they shape another politics of what queerness means, and what queerness does, in Hindu nationalist times. They bring into being another imagination of life that is rooted in resisting the divisiveness that Hindu nationalism has sown in Indian society. In the next chapter, I focus on another kind of resistance to Hindu nationalism, one that emerges from Dalit queer and trans* activism.

Chapter 6

Dalit Queer and Trans* Critiques of Hindu Nationalism

When I asked LGBTQ activists about how they understood the events of Mumbai Pride 2020, many of them explained that “Sanghi gays” orchestrated Kris Chudawala’s arrest because they were invested in a narrow, identity-focused vision of LGBTQ rights and progress — a vision, they believe, that is being threatened by the “malaise of intersectionality” (Iyer-Mitra, 2018). However, some interviewees, who identified as Dalit queer/trans* persons, drew connections between the participation of anti-caste queer and trans* activists in the sloganeering, the resulting hostility against Chudawala and other protesters, and a larger, more persistent pattern of caste-based discrimination within LGBTQ activism. For example, Amogh, a Dalit trans* activist based in Mumbai, said:

Sanghi gays care less about the issues, and more about the fact that we, as young Dalit trans* people, are questioning their position as savarna [dominant-caste] cisgender gay men, who control the money, resources, and power ... It is these same savarna cisgender gay men who are extremely right-wing, pro-Hindutva, pro-CAA. All these intersections exist. On the other hand, you will see Dalit or OBC [non-dominant caste] trans* and queer people ... who fight these ideologies, because we have been subjugated and experienced discrimination from people in the queer community itself.

In saying this, Amogh highlights how the intertwined matrix of gender, sexuality, and caste determines support for, or resistance to, Hindu nationalism⁸⁸. While I have examined how gender

⁸⁸ For more examples of this sentiment on social media, see Appendix D, figures 1, 2, and 3.

shapes LGBTQ responses to Hindu nationalism in the previous chapter, in this chapter, my focus is to outline how caste determines LGBTQ positions for, and against, Hindu nationalism.

Specifically, in this chapter, I argue that Dalit queer and trans* activists articulate another form of resistance to Hindu nationalism. By exposing the fallacies that undergird the taken for granted assumptions framing an invested desire in aspirational homonationalism, and by reiterating that caste discrimination is intrinsic to Hindu nationalist ideology, Dalit queer and trans* activists reveal how deeply intertwined caste hierarchies, LGBTQ activists, and Hindu nationalism are. In order to make this argument, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides a brief overview of caste and how it frames Indian society and culture in general, before describing how caste discrimination shapes LGBTQ activists in implicit and explicit ways.

The first section of this chapter contextualizes the conditions in which queer and trans* critiques emerge, and the second section delves into these critiques in more detail. Specifically, I focus my analysis on two critiques of LGBTQ activists by Dalit queer and trans* activists that interrupt narratives of LGBTQ progress that undergird aspirational homonationalism. The first critique argues that situating the decriminalization of homosexuality in the right to privacy reinforces caste-based discrimination within LGBTQ activists because many Dalit queer and trans* communities are excluded from privatized, “respectable” modes of sexual life. The second critique focuses on Dalit and trans* categorizations through the legal rhetoric of “backwardness” that, I argue, interrupts LGBTQ narratives of progress that undergird aspirational homonationalism. In doing so, these critiques reveal the limits of LGBTQ complicity with Hindu

nationalism, and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, like queer feminist activisms, force us to imagine LGBTQ activisms *otherwise*, pushing us towards a more expansive horizon of what queerness can do, and what LGBTQ activisms must become in order to resist Hindu nationalism. However, as I demonstrate across the previous chapter and this one, even though queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms resist Hindu nationalism, they do so in distinct, even if interconnected, ways.

I. Caste Discrimination and LGBTQ Activisms

Caste is, and has been, a defining feature of Indian society in general and Hinduism in particular, and creates a hierarchy of people based on their birth. B.R. Ambedkar⁸⁹, widely recognized as the architect of the Indian Constitution and an anti-caste leader, described the caste system as the “tyranny practiced by the Hindus” (1936, p. 103); “the monster that crosses your path” (ibid., p. 108) at every instance in Indian society; “a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other” (ibid., p. 108); and, as a “social division of people of the same race” (ibid., p. 109). As such, caste is an organizing principle of Indian society. In this section, I outline the ways in which caste discrimination shapes LGBTQ activisms, and reflect on the politics of

⁸⁹ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in 1891 into a Mahar family, considered an “untouchable,” or Dalit, caste in India. Besides practising law, he was also a prolific writer, and championed social movements for the eradication of untouchability in India. Prior to India’s independence, Ambedkar fought to organize Dalit communities into taking political action, and worked towards enshrining protections for Dalit and other non-dominant castes in the legal system. After India’s independence, Ambedkar oversaw the drafting of the Indian Constitution, and also became the Minister of Law and Justice. Due to his work towards eradicating caste discrimination in Indian society, Ambedkar is fondly referred to as “Babasaheb” or “Babasaheb Ambedkar”. Current anti-caste and Dalit movements often use the slogan “Jai Bhim” (trans. as Hail Bhim) to honour Ambedkar, and their flag is blue in colour to honour Dr. Ambedkar’s famous blue suit. In honour of Ambedkar’s role in shaping the Indian Constitution, and as an homage to his work towards eradicating untouchability, India celebrates Ambedkar Jayanti on his birthday, 14 April, every year.

including Dalit queer and trans* participants in this research as a dominant-caste researcher. However, before I do so, I offer a brief description of the caste system.

Ideally, within the caste hierarchy, all castes occupy a specific position in society, and each caste group is tasked with its own social role, or occupation. According to the varna system⁹⁰, caste can be divided into four categories: Brahmins⁹¹, Kshatriyās⁹², Vaishyās⁹³, and Shudrās⁹⁴. Together, these four castes are called “savarna,” or “with-caste”. Implicit within the varna system is a fifth category of people who are excluded from the caste system entirely. These “avarna,” or “out-caste” communities include various tribal populations (ādivāsis) and Dalits⁹⁵,

⁹⁰ Translated as: Caste system. It is widely believed that the basis of the varna, or caste, system lies in the *Manusmriti*, which is widely seen as an ancient and authoritative book that codifies Hindu practices and laws. *Manusmriti* (translated as: The Laws of Manu) is one among eighteen *Dharmashastras* (translated as: The Teachings of Duty). *Dharmashastras*, in turn, derive their authority from the *Vedas* (translated as: Knowledge), which are the oldest scriptural texts in Hinduism. If the *Vedas* are seen as the essence of Hindu philosophy, then the *Dharmashastras* are the books that codify the teachings of the *Vedas* in the form of Hindu religion, laws, and practices of good conduct for all Hindus. Since the caste system is rooted in the *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar believed that caste discrimination, codified in the form of the caste/ varna system, was inherent to Hinduism itself. He therefore argued in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) that Hinduism must be abolished in order to abolish caste discrimination. Ambedkar himself converted to Buddhism in his later years, and many non-dominant caste communities, especially Dalits, have done the same.

⁹¹ Occupationally priests and teachers, who are seen as the specialists of the *Vedas* and *Dharmashastras*, and therefore also tasked with upholding them.

⁹² Occupationally rulers, kings, and soldiers, who are tasked with administrative duties in Hindu society, under the guidance of Brahmins.

⁹³ Occupationally merchants, traders, and feudal landowners, who were tasked with matters of trade and economy, and were subservient to Brahmins and Kshatriyas in matters of religious practice and administrative regulations respectively.

⁹⁴ Occupationally labourers and artisans, who were given the various menial jobs required for a functioning Hindu society, and were the lowest members within the caste hierarchy.

⁹⁵ Translated as: “Ground down,” or “crushed”. Ilaiah (2002) argues that the term “Dalit” became popular in India after the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s, which was inspired by Ambedkar’s speeches and writings in India, and the Black Panthers movement in the USA.

who are codified in the Indian Constitution as Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes⁹⁶ respectively. Avarna populations are generally considered “untouchable” within Hindu society, because they are tasked with roles that are marked by a permanent sense of “pollution,” such as manual scavenging, disposing of the dead, tannery and leather production, etc. (Dumont, 1970). The Indian Constitution also codifies Other Backward Castes (OBC), in order to define communities who are not “avarna,” nor Dalit or Scheduled Castes, but are still marked by social and economic deprivation. Special provisions, such as reservations in government schools and places of employment, were written into the Indian Constitution with the goal of promoting the “upliftment” of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes,⁹⁷ as well as with the aim of ending the historically rooted and ongoing discrimination against them.

Within each varna or caste, there are numerous sub-groups, or jātis, which are also hierarchized, and can be placed differently in the caste hierarchy based on geography, or during different periods of Indian history and society. Teltumbde (2010) explains:

Varna represents Hinduism’s hierarchical framework, but it is jāti which really dictates the rules and regulations of life for the average Hindu. Each jāti has its own special

⁹⁶ Scheduled Castes (SC) is a category rooted in the colonial censuses of India. Under British administration, these communities were known as the ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Exterior Castes’, etc. Some scholars have argued that the presence of the British, particularly their demographic exercise of producing a national census, codified caste in more permanent and entrenched ways in Indian society. For example, see Nicholas Dirks’ book, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2002), Walby & Haan’s essay, *Caste Confusion and Census Enumeration in Colonial India, 1871–1921* (2012), and Lata Mani’s essay, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (1989).

In contrast, Scheduled Tribes (ST), first codified in colonial India through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, are referred to in the Indian Constitution as tribal, or ādivāsi communities with cultures different from Hinduism, that are marked by economic deprivation, geographic isolation, low levels of literacy, and/or a declining population.

⁹⁷ Jayal (2013) argues that these categories do not have any sociological basis, and are categories somewhat alien to the “self-description of an individual’s identity(p. 230), and therefore terms them “synthetic categories of governance” (ibid., p. 230).

norms dictating permissible food, occupation, marriage, social interaction and so forth, and from each jāti/caste come numbers of sub-castes (p. 13).

According to Bêteille (1996), if caste is the system that structures Hindu society, then jāti is the unit of that system. As such, the practice of caste discrimination becomes highly refracted and versatile on the level of the jāti, and jātis are marked by the (limited) possibility of social mobility. If varnas organize the broad principles of societal division in Hindu society, then jātis determine how caste discrimination is practiced in everyday life. Underscoring the limited mobility of jātis in everyday life, consistently pervasive hierarchies of caste differentiation ensure that caste determines kinship, economic and political capital, societal status, and access to resources and mobility, while being governed by a range of practices that hinge on touch, purity, and the humiliation of populations considered “lower” in the caste hierarchy, or completely outside it.

Within these hierarchized structures of caste, “Dalit” and “Bahujan”⁹⁸ (sometimes combined as Dalit-Bahujan) operate largely as politicized communities and categories that denote histories of anti-caste struggles and are grounded in imaginations of emancipation from the caste system, and therefore, from Hinduism. As Rao (2018) argues, the political category “Dalit” has been deployed since the 1970s in two ways:

⁹⁸ Translated as: Many people, or majority. “Bahujan” is an expansive term that includes shudrās, Dalits, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes. This powerfully alerts us to the fact that there are more castes and communities oppressed by the caste system than “oppressor” castes. Since domination, oppression, and discrimination are at the heart of caste hegemony, throughout this dissertation, I have chosen to use the terms “dominant-caste” and “non-dominant caste,” instead of “upper-caste” and “lower-caste,” except in instances where research participants have deliberately self-identified as “Dalit” or “Bahujan”. I have also used the term “Dalit queer activism,” particularly in this chapter, in order to foreground a very specific kind of LGBTQ activism.

One was to use the term to describe the historic discrimination suffered by communities categorized as ‘untouchable’ and to denote their exclusion from full participation in social, economic, and political life. The alternative imagined Dalit as a horizon of possibility that linked communities of the dispossessed in solidarity around shared struggles (pp. 4-5).

Similarly, within a context in which caste discrimination is often invisibilized or elided, according to Karunakaran (2016), “Bahujan,” in particular, sheds light on how caste is not simply a problem that marks non-dominant caste populations and Dalits alone. Therefore, not unlike “queer,” “Dalit” is also a political identity that attempts to “convert the negative centrality of the Dalit into positive political content” (Rao, 2009, p. xiii). This is why most anti-caste activists and scholars prefer to use the terms Dalit, Bahujan, or Dalit-Bahujan, and eschew other terms, such as “shudrā,” “ati-shudrā,” or “Harijan⁹⁹,” that continue to promote caste discrimination (Ilaiah, 2002).

Through histories of migration, indentured and otherwise, caste has also travelled outside India, and there is a significant body of scholarship that theorizes how caste compositions and practices are transfigured and simultaneously maintained in the Hindu diaspora across North

⁹⁹ “Harijan” (translated as: Children of God) was a term coined by Gandhi, in an attempt to uplift non-dominant caste communities in Hindu society. In order to do so, Gandhi suggested that each dominant-caste person do the menial labour that non-dominant caste communities engaged in, such as cleaning toilets, sweeping, etc., in an effort to remove the derogatory connotations of “untouchable” or menial work. However, Ambedkar famously opposed this, because for Ambedkar, the nature of labour was not the root of the caste system, but Hinduism itself was the problem. The antagonistic relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar has been a key topic of inquiry in studies of Indian history. Both social reformist leaders also battled on the issue of separate electorates for the “Depressed Classes” in the legislature of British India. While Ambedkar was in favour of separate electorates, Gandhi was not, and chose to fast unto death in order to oppose them. They finally reached a compromise in 1932 by signing the Poona Pact, which reserved 148 seats for “Depressed Classes” in the provincial legislatures. For more on the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate, see Aishwary Kumar’s *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy* (2015).

America, UK, South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname (Dhanda, 2017; Jaoul, 2021; Kumar, 2004; Upadhyay, 2019; Veer & Vertovec, 1991; Yengde, 2015). Within this context, Hindutva's role in caste exploitation in North America has been reported on widely, especially in recent years (Chopra & Subramanian, 2022; Dave, 2022; Krishnan, 2021). In light of this, as organizations attempt to include caste in their anti-discrimination statutes, this is being strongly resisted by Hindu nationalist organizations like the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) (Naik, 2022). Another example of the centrality of caste discrimination in Hindu nationalist practices in the diaspora comes from Werleman (2022), who recently reported that the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), a Hindu sect in New Jersey with close ties to the Sangh Parivar, has employed non-dominant caste labourers from India to build several temples across the country, paying workers an inhuman \$1.20 an hour.

As I described in Chapter 3, Hindu nationalism is deeply rooted in the Hindu diaspora, and such examples make it clear that caste discrimination is inherent to Hindu nationalist ideology. Simply put, caste discrimination is a defining feature of Hindu nationalism and its imagination of India. As I noted in Chapter 3, Savarkar's treatise on Hindutva is rooted in notions of Hindus as a "superior race," which relies on logics of purity and pollution maintained in the caste system. Further, I also noted that the formation of the RSS was, in part, a response to the rising popularity of Ambedkar as an anti-caste leader. In other words, as Ambedkar called for the annihilation of caste by giving up Hinduism, Hedgewar and other dominant-caste Hindus formed the RSS with the hope of reinvigorating the principles of Hindutva in India. The intertwined nature of Hindutva and caste discrimination has also come to shape LGBTQ

activisms, and in light of this, recent years have led to the emergence of a distinct Dalit queer and trans* politics.

a. Caste Discrimination within LGBTQ Activisms

In general, caste practices are ubiquitous in Hindu society in particular, and Indian society at large¹⁰⁰, framing daily life in implicit and explicit ways. As such, it is not surprising that caste discrimination and, often, silence around it, has also framed LGBTQ activisms in the past, and continues to do in the present. For example, in the summer of 2015, gay rights activist Harrish Iyer, who was once a part of Humsafar Trust and is now a member of the Indian National Congress (INC), shot to fame because his mother had placed an advertisement in the popular Mumbai newspaper *Mid-Day*, seeking a groom for her son. In typical matrimonial advertisement style, it read: “SEEKING 25-40, Well-Placed, Animal Loving, Vegetarian, GROOM for my SON (36, 5’11”) who works with an NGO, Caste No Bar (Though IYER Preferred)”. This was perhaps the first advertisement in India that sought a same-sex matrimonial match, and was widely celebrated by many for this reason. However, the advertisement was also criticized for specifying that an “Iyer” groom would be preferred — Iyers are dominant-caste, Tamil (Southern Indian) Brahmins.

While this advertisement was a clear instance of how caste discrimination shapes LGBTQ desires and relations, it was also bookended by explicit alliances between Dalit, Bahujan, and LGBTQ activisms, marked in two Pride parades that took place that same year. In

¹⁰⁰ Even though the caste system is rooted in Hinduism, caste discrimination also occurs among other religious communities in India. For example, see *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India* by Imtiaz Ahmad (2018) and *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India* by David Mosse (2012).

February 2015, the first Telangana Queer Swabhimāna (Self Respect) Walk was inaugurated by the prominent anti-caste activist and political theorist, Kancha Ilaiah, demonstrating solidarity between anti-caste and LGBTQ politics. Later, in November 2015, the Delhi Queer Pride parade featured posters titled “Queers Against Hindutva” and “Dalit, Queer, and Proud,” and Dalit queer activists Dhiren Borisa, Dhruvo Jyoti, and Akhil Kang addressed the audience with a Dalit queer manifesto. They said:

We are not minuscule minorities¹⁰¹, but we are also lower caste ... we are proud Dalits and proud Bahujans ... When we were marching, some man came up to me and said, ‘Oh you bring caste into everything’. We want to say to him that we bring caste into everything because caste *is* in everything ... Caste is in my body, caste is in my pants ... caste is in my sex, caste is in my everything, and caste is in everything of yours too ... We are proud of the difference within us and among us. But for us our Pride is incomplete without celebrating our identity as Dalit queer individuals. For us, coming out of the closet is not just about our sexuality, but about our caste too ... We want to remind everyone that caste is alive and festering. Caste is not dead ... it exists in erasures of culture, history, and identity ... LGBT individuals can be lower caste too¹⁰².

This address was widely covered on social media and in magazines, and was seen as heralding an emerging Dalit queer and trans* voice within LGBTQ politics that had been largely erased

¹⁰¹ The term ‘minuscule minority’ has special relevance for LGBTQ activism in India. As I document below, in my brief recap of the legal journey of the decriminalization of homosexuality in India, the criminalization of homosexuality was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2013 on the grounds that homosexuals formed a ‘minuscule minority’ of India’s population.

¹⁰² The full address can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsQIq2_Di7A&t=284s.

from, or invisibilized within, these spaces before, and that spoke against caste discrimination within and outside LGBTQ communities (Dalit History Month, 2021; Jyoti, 2017; Tarshi, 2017).

Since 2015, numerous initiatives such as the Dalit Queer Project, Dalit Art Archive, and Project Anti-Caste Love have been inaugurated, in order to continue to expose caste discrimination within LGBTQ spaces, and to shape a distinct Dalit queer and trans* politics. Using art, poetry, and storytelling, these projects curate a distinct articulation of the specificities that emerge at the intersection of Dalit, Bahujan, queer, and trans* experience. Contributing to this, many personal accounts performing, and thinking with, Dalit queer and trans* existence have also become popular on social media in the past few years. I contend that social media has played a crucial role in the popularization of Dalit queer and trans* activism in the last few years. These activism around Dalit queerness have been fuelled, in part, by the mass student protests that occurred in the aftermath of Rohith Vemula's suicide¹⁰³ in 2016, which galvanized conversations on caste discrimination in new ways¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰³ Rohith Vemula was a 26-year-old doctoral candidate who was involved in anti-caste Ambedkarite activism at the University of Hyderabad. Along with four students also involved in anti-caste activism at the university, Vemula was suspended in December 2015 for alleged violence against students involved with Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), which is the student wing of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The suspension occurred within a larger milieu of rising Hindu nationalist violence in universities across India, which specifically targets anti-caste and Left-leaning student groups for being "anti-national". Once suspended, the students, whose stipends had been pending since April 2015, were asked to vacate their university housing. They set up tents inside the campus and began a hunger strike to protest the university administration's policies. Vemula committed suicide on 17 January 2016, leaving behind a letter that outlined the structural nature of caste discrimination in Indian universities at large. This led many to argue that Vemula's suicide was an institutional murder.

¹⁰⁴ In a letter to Rohith Vemula published online in *The Quint* on 19 January 2023, Yashica Dutt writes the following about what his suicide, and his suicide letter, meant for Dalit activists, queer or otherwise: "For some, it was the first real evidence of caste that had held them by the jaw and compelled them to stare directly into the crushing disappointment that rises like smog from the being of a Dalit person lost to a brutal system. The first trace of exclusion, bias, inequality that they could not overlook with ease, even though they tried; of course they tried. For others, it was a first of a different kind. The first instance of a mirror reading back feelings they never had the courage to locate in their bodies. The first rhyme of rebellion in minds that were chained into submitting to the pursuit of an equality that might never be theirs."

This growing discourse on Dalit queer and trans* activism marked the duration of my fieldwork as well. “Savarna” was frequently deployed as an insult towards “right-wing queers,” or “Sanghi gays,” on social media¹⁰⁵. Additionally, my research participants, mostly queer feminists and Dalit queer and trans* activists, often highlighted how caste frames LGBTQ activism, in implicit and explicit ways. Joy, a non-binary queer activist from New Delhi, narrated how they were ridiculed by Hindu nationalist mobs on social media:

The overlap of class, caste, and queerness is so much that people use non-dominant castes as a slur, to ridicule you. With me, it so happened that I belong to that same caste. So, basically, one of the tweets was calling me a Chamar¹⁰⁶, saying ‘kaisa Chamaron jaisa dress hua hai’ (You’re dressed like a Chamaar) ... this is the language of the Brahmanical gaze — of thinking that all chamaars dress like this.

In recapping this violence, Joy was demonstrating the indivisibility of caste, class, sexuality, and gender as it framed their experience as a non-binary queer activist from a non-dominant caste resisting Hindu nationalism.

In other instances, caste frames LGBTQ spaces in more tacit ways. One of the last interviews I conducted was with Devanki, a queer and gender non-binary activist living in New Delhi. Devanki and I have known each other for almost a decade, when we were both beginning to engage with queer feminist and LBT groups in New Delhi for the first time. After reconnecting when I returned to India in 2019, our interview in September 2020 was tinged with familiar feelings and nostalgia, allowing for a more reflexive conversation to occur. Coming

¹⁰⁵ For an example of such comments, see Appendix D, figure 4.

¹⁰⁶ Chamars are designated as Scheduled Castes, and mostly hail from northern India. They are associated with the occupation of tanning leather.

from a dominant-caste, English-speaking context, like myself, Devanki reflected on how caste organizes LGBTQ activist spaces: “I think most of our queer spaces are deeply endogamous in their power relations ... at the helm of a lot of these movements are people with a lot of social capital”.

As our conversation progressed, Devanki and I talked about how many LGBTQ spaces value a certain kind of aesthetic sensibility which requires class and caste capital. As I have analyzed in the previous two chapters, both, HIV/AIDS related LGBTQ activisms and queer feminist activisms developed their own codes of respectability over time. Roy (2022) has also argued that these new norms of “respectable” gendered comportment and sexual behaviour influence how the aesthetic choices and desires of LGBTQ subjects change as they become more involved with LGBTQ activist networks. She sheds light upon how new members at Sappho for Equality come to learn what is valued within the space of the collective, and writes that even “[q]ueer activisms that resisted being consumed by neoliberal and homonormative (homocapitalist) governmentalities were nevertheless spaces in which social hierarchies endured such that caste markers were lived in closeted ways” (pp. 167). Therefore, it becomes clear that caste hierarchies shape not only “exceptional” moments where discrimination is visible, but also frame the everyday sociality of LGBTQ activisms.

Other research participants, especially those from Dalit and Bahujan communities, echoed these sentiments as well, and it became clear that caste structures LGBTQ space and sociality. For instance, Raghav, a Dalit queer activist from Mumbai, explicitly said: “the queer community in Bombay is very elitist ... A lot of the times, you cannot occupy these kinds of

spaces, because the way you look, the way they react to you”. Similarly, Kamala, a Dalit trans* activist from New Delhi, also noted the same, saying: “LGBTQ spaces in Delhi are so casteist, where it’s based on your contacts that you get invited to dinners, parties, even get jobs”.

Further, research participants also spoke about how ubiquitous caste markers and preferences were on online dating apps like Grindr. For example, Raghav said: “if you open Grindr, you see profile names like ‘Rajput boy’ or ‘Jatt boy’. And then a lot of Grindr bios specifically say that anyone they want to match with shouldn’t be from this area [where Dalit communities are congregated]”. Rajputs are a dominant-caste community, and Jatts are designated as an Other Backward Caste; both communities are known for their caste pride and violence against Dalit and Bahujan castes. According to Raghav, this manifestation of caste pride signals to Dalit-Bahujan queers that they should not match with these profiles, explicitly policing sexual desire through caste.

Going beyond these overt instances of caste-based sexual preference, the psychic life of caste also implicitly shapes what is considered desirable in unspoken ways. Shirsho, a Dalit queer activist from New Delhi spoke about the coded ways in which caste shapes queer sexual desires, saying:

“In Delhi, a lot of the queer people meet each other online ... and there’s a clear articulation of caste there in terms of the kind of bodies they want, in terms of English, in terms of what kind of language articulation they look for, being sapiosexual for example. Borisa (2020), too, has argued that the desire for a fair-skinned, muscular, well-dressed and groomed sexual partner, and, as Shirsho notes, an English speaking, intellectual subject, often

requires caste and class capital to achieve. As such, privileging these markers as desirable reveals how caste structures queer sexuality and sociality. Within this context, participants also spoke about how they felt nervous about coming out as Dalit to their sexual and/or romantic partners, and were often treated poorly in their relationships because of their caste position¹⁰⁷. For example, Kamala talked briefly about how she had been nervous about coming out to her dominant-caste boyfriend in the past, and had been worried about whether her caste status would lead to them breaking up. Raghav, too, talked about how his dominant-caste sexual partners would often make comments about his dark skin, or, if he brought up caste in their conversations, tell him he should “only date counsellors”.

As such, over the last few years, Dalit queer and trans* critiques have been forcefully highlighting how Dalit-Bahujan bodies remain marked by untouchability, and therefore undesirability, even within LGBTQ activisms and communities, which are framed around politicizing desirability. However, even as Dalit queer activisms are carving out a distinct space within the larger landscape of LGBTQ activisms, there has also been a renewed interest in recuperating Hinduism towards LGBTQ agendas at the same time. For example, the Queer Hindu Alliance (QHA), a voluntary organization promoting “queer-friendly readings” of Hindu scriptures, was founded in 2019. According to Raghav, the invocation of a LGBTQ-friendly Hindu past reinforces caste discrimination, and he states: “Dalits can never relate to this history. We cannot ever use religious scriptures in our struggles because they do not allow us to express our love, even if we are heterosexual”. Here, Raghav is highlighting that caste discrimination is

¹⁰⁷ In a somewhat different context, Yashica Dutt’s book, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) deals with similar experiences powerfully. Chatterjee (2022) also analyzes the film *Geeli Pucchi* (dir. Neeraj Ghaywan) to conclude that Dalit queer bodies remain marked by untouchability, and therefore by undesirability.

entrenched in Hindu scriptures, and drawing upon them to legitimize LGBTQ lives is another way in which “queer spaces are governed by caste”.

As such, it follows that, since Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are based on upholding these practices of caste discrimination, then aspirational homonationalist gestures that recuperate Hindu nationalism as LGBTQ-friendly also uphold the same caste hierarchies. This is especially obvious in the revisionist ways through which some LGBTQ activists attempt to rehabilitate Hinduism by mobilizing Hindu mythologies as recuperative texts for ancient, indigenized manifestations of queerness¹⁰⁸, but it is also manifested in the prolonged silence, omission, and erasure that has marked LGBTQ complicities with caste discrimination within activist spaces. As Shirsho told me, “*Dalits are queers within queers*”.

As such, in recent years, while aspirational homonationalist claims have become more popular within LGBTQ activisms, Dalit queer and trans* critiques have also forcefully resisted such overtures, and have acquired a renewed charge. To clarify, I am not suggesting that Dalit queer and trans* critiques of LGBTQ activisms are new, or emerging for the first time. For example, Narrain & Bhan (2005) argue that queer politics in India is “intrinsically and inevitably connected with the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on” (p. 4). Shah (2005) also describes how, as someone involved in feminist and queer activisms, she was cognizant of how “Dalit women, tribal women, women from religious minorities, single women” (p. 147) had

¹⁰⁸ Hinduism is recuperated as queer friendly in a number of ways. First, as I briefly outlined in Chapter 5, texts such as *Sakhiyani* (1996), that implicitly mobilize Hinduism as a metonym for Indian culture, not only feed into the Hindu nationalist revision of Indian history, but also fail to account for caste as a vital organizing principle of Hindu/Indian life and society. Second, in many anthologies of queer writing from and on India, caste is entirely invisibilized as a structuring principle of desire (Hajratwala, 2012; Sukthankar, 1999). Third, in recent years, popular books about Hindu mythology that have made it accessible to broad publics have made claims about Hindu mythology being queer and trans friendly (Pattanaik, 2008; 2014), again privileging Hinduism and eliding caste.

pointed out the limitations of women's movements, and suggests that this awareness must influence how queer politics in India must develop. Similarly, in my interview with Terence, he noted that questions about how caste complicates queer sexualities were being asked in the nascent stages of LGBTQ activism as well, saying that, in the first decade of the 2000s, "conversations on caste had just begun within queer groups". However, it is undeniable that Dalit queer and trans* critiques have become more prominent in the past few years, and are now charting a new path for LGBTQ activism.

Overall, Dalit queer and trans* critiques highlight that "caste is central to understanding queer and trans* formations in contemporary India" (Upadhyay & Bakshi, 2020, p. 338). It is not simply that these critiques amplify how Dalit queer and trans* communities and their concerns remain largely ignored within LGBTQ activism. Rather, they alert us to the implicit *and* explicit ways in which caste hierarchies structure the space, grammar, sociality, and rhetoric of LGBTQ activism. Further, Dalit queer and trans* critiques go beyond critiquing LGBTQ aspirations of homonationalism, and rightly suggest that barely any space has been made to seriously interrogate caste discrimination as a *queer* issue, and that mentions of it within LGBTQ activism have, so far, been nominal or tokenistic at best. For example, explaining her struggles, Chitra, a queer feminist belonging to a non-dominant caste, said that it was always a struggle to center caste perspectives within LGBTQ spaces. Kamala also explained that, within many LGBTQ spaces, activists might know the "right language, know how to assert the right kind of anti-caste politics, [that] they will even apologize if called out [for being caste-biased], but they won't change their personal lives."

Going further, Chitra noted that, even among queer feminists who want to take caste seriously, there is a tendency to “offer sympathy, pity, or infantilize us as activists. They say, ‘we support you, we will make space for you,’ but we don’t need space! We want to break existing structures”. Kamala’s and Chitra’s arguments about the performative inclusion of anti-caste concerns within LGBTQ activism reveals how deeply rooted caste discrimination is in these spaces. Chitra’s comment, about tokenistic inclusion within queer feminist spaces, also sheds light upon the tensions between Dalit queer and trans* activism and queer feminist activism, despite their convergences with respect to resisting Hindu nationalism.

b. A Note on Refusal, and Being an “Interruption”

As I argue above, caste hierarchies are a cornerstone of Indian society. A significant portion of this violence has historically taken shape by denying non-dominant caste and Dalit-Bahujan populations access to education. When anti-caste scholarship does emerge, against numerous structural barriers, anti-caste scholars argue that dominant-caste researchers often seek to appropriate this scholarship, as well as non-dominant caste people’s experiences. This argument is made most sharply in an anthology titled *Hatred in the Belly* (2015), which was prompted by Arundhati Roy’s 180 page introduction, titled *The Doctor and the Saint* (2014), to a re-print of Ambedkar’s most canonical text, *Annihilation of Caste*. However, as Ramdas & Bedide (2015) specify at the start of their anthology, *Hatred in the Belly* is not simply a response to Roy. Rather, they write: “[the book] covers a much wider range of hegemonic endeavours to erase, derogate, suppress, or appropriate many epistemic tools of resistance against caste” (p. 4).

Rooted in these politics of knowledge production, as well as in multiple experiences of discrimination within LGBTQ activist spaces, many Dalit queer and trans* activists either ignored, or refused, my request to be a participant in this research. Dalit queer and trans* activists importantly point out that any shared experience of queerness is not enough to undo the structural inequalities of caste, and for many, my dominant-caste position was a bigger barrier than any commonality we may have had as LGBTQ people or allies. As I outlined in Chapter 2, feminist and queer anthropological research has suggested that researchers engage with such questions of marginality and oppression through critical reflexivity. Hemmings (2012), in particular, has argued that feminist reflexivity requires an “affective solidarity” between the researcher and researched. However, in light of such persistent caste inequalities, it is important to ask whether any such “affective solidarities” could be built between Dalit queer and trans* activists and myself.

I suggest that any attempt to reduce the difference between myself and Dalit queer and trans* participants would have been an erroneous, and perhaps disingenuous, gesture on my part. No amount of solidarity, affective or otherwise, could surmount the weight of caste discrimination. However, I could not disengage with Dalit queer and trans* critiques either, since that would not adequately represent the world I was researching, and would paradoxically continue the erasure of Dalit queer and trans* voices in LGBTQ activism. Within such a context, I rely on Adjepong’s (2019) conceptualization of “invading ethnography,” which situates the ethnographer as “an alien entity that invades a social setting, thereby calling attention to ethnography’s colonial history” (p. 28). Drawing upon queer of colour critique and attempts to decolonize anthropology (Bejarano et al., 2019; Harrison, 1991), here, the *ethnographer* is seen

as the sign of difference, and the metaphor of “invasion” foregrounds this difference within the research.

Therefore, when some Dalit queer and trans* activists did agree to participate in my research, it was important for me to acknowledge that my research and writing would not falsely attempt to bridge our different caste positions, and that my effort would be to let their perspective overshadow and inform my own. In our interviews, our conversations inevitably turned to my role as a dominant-caste academic writing about caste. Our discussions took shape in the context of larger debates around representation, about whether dominant-caste scholars should address Dalit issues and claim authority over them, and if so, what were ethical ways to do so. Continuing the metaphor of “invasion,” many Dalit queer and trans* participants viewed their presence in my research through the lens of disruption. They wanted to determinedly interrupt any narratives I may build around LGBTQ progress and inclusion. Further, they wanted to record their critiques, as Dalit queer and trans* activists, as central to, or as an interruption of, any theory I might advance about LGBTQ activism in India.

This was most succinctly summarized in my conversation with Kamal. When I had approached him to participate in this research, he had asked me how I make sense of caste, and something about my answer had convinced him enough to agree to an interview. He said:

Shraddha, when I engaged with you, I asked you very clearly about your caste because it's very clear from your surname that you're Bengali and upper-caste. My idea was not only to understand your location, because I believe we need more savarnas to write about diverse topics ... [When I was reading about you, I was thinking you will understand

that] whenever there is a *hassle*, there is some change. My entire existence is a *hassle*. In your research also, me talking about Dalit bodies is creating a *hassle*, creating some kind of change. So some young person who will be reading your work who didn't think caste and sexuality matter will change their mind and know this narrative also exists.

This was a valuable moment for me, one that oriented me as a researcher to my participant's desire — he wanted to be a *hassle*, a disruption, and interrupt, even invade, any grand narrative of LGBTQ activisms in India that I could write, especially given how most previous writings on LGBTQ lives and politics in India, including my own, have failed to develop the presence of caste as an important determinant of sexual life (Bose & Bhattacharyya, 2007; Chatterjee, 2018a; Dave, 2012; Katyal, 2016; khanna, 2016; Menon, 2007).

Based on Kamal's argument about "creating a hassle," and building upon other Dalit queer and trans* critiques of LGBTQ activisms, in the next section I argue that caste offers us a way to disrupt the artificial smoothness of linear progress that marks many narratives of LGBTQ life and activisms in India. Since these narratives of progress reinforce aspirational homonationalism, Dalit queer and trans* critiques offer an important mode of resistance to the increasing complicity between LGBTQ activisms and Hindu nationalism.

II. Dalit Queer and Trans* Critiques of LGBTQ Activisms

A significant reason behind Dalit queer and trans* activisms becoming more noticeable in the past few years has been the decriminalization of homosexuality in India in 2018. While Dalit queer and trans* critiques have long-circulated within LGBTQ spaces, in interpersonal conversations and meetings, they have not been made available for public consumption (through

blog posts, opinion essays, etc.) in the way they are now. This is because, as Borisa, Kang, and Jyoti noted in their Dalit queer manifesto in 2015, many Dalit queer and trans* activists have often been told that they would “divide the LGBTQ movement” by bringing up caste. Even though Dalit queer and trans* activists were critical of the discourses around decriminalization, this was a serious allegation in a context where homosexuality had not yet been decriminalized, especially since the Supreme Court had re-criminalized homosexuality in 2013 on the grounds that homosexuals were a “minuscule minority” in India¹⁰⁹. Therefore, many Dalit queer and trans* activists chose not to make their critiques available for public consumption until Section 377 was read down.

Section 377 first began to be opposed in 1994, when AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to decriminalize homosexuality in the Delhi High Court, because the law was being used by authorities to refuse to distribute condoms and curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS in prisons. Eventually, in 2001 another petition was filed by Naz Foundation, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS and sexual rights in New Delhi. Since Section 377 was also one of the laws used to apprehend cases of child molestation, this petition asked that Section 377 be “read down” to exclude acts of consensual and private sex from within its purview. The Government of India and the Delhi High Court rejected this petition on the grounds

¹⁰⁹ In my interview with Terence, for example, he recounted: “I remember there was a meeting of all the parties that were involved in some way or the other [in the petition to read down Section 377] the week before the judgment was supposed to come out in 2018. There must have been a 100 people there. [A Dalit queer activist] said to Ashok Row Kavi, “You and I are not the same community, and I can’t wait for this fucking judgment to come so that we don’t have to pretend that we sit at the same table. Just because we’re both gay doesn’t mean we have the same framework” ... And two years hence, we can see ... our politics has moved in completely different ways. I’m glad Dalit queer activists are making a louder noise today and this judgment has just given them the freedom to be able to say things that they were unfortunately keeping under wraps until 377 went away”.

that laws must reflect “public morality,” and because the Delhi High Court did not think that Naz Foundation’s work was being impacted by Section 377. In 2006, the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) filed an affidavit that stated that the presence of Section 377 hindered HIV prevention initiatives, and Naz Foundation filed an appeal with the Supreme Court of India contesting the rejection of their petition by the Delhi High Court. Meanwhile Voices Against 377, a coalition of LGBTQ activists and NGOs working on gender, sexuality, and child rights also filed an intervention supporting the Naz Foundation’s petition.

In 2009, the Delhi High Court decriminalized consensual and private sexual relations amongst adults of any gender, and numerous petitions were filed in the Supreme Court challenging this judgment by various religious boards, individuals, and political parties. Between 2009 and 2011, many interventions were filed in support of the Naz Foundation judgment as well. According to Narrain & Gupta (2011), this “judgment was more than just a legal verdict as it marked the beginning of the process by which queer people became the subject of rights” (p. xi). The decriminalization of homosexuality by the Delhi High Court in 2009 led to renewed fervour in LGBTQ organizing. Even though the judgment only pertained to the geographic borders of Delhi, the symbolic function of the judgment had far reaching consequences. As Narrain & Bhan (2005) write, “law is not simply a space of enforcement, but is an active arbiter of social norms and morality” (p. 8). This was apparent in the immediate aftermath of the verdict.

However, in 2013, the Supreme Court of India overturned the Naz Foundation judgment, effectively recriminalizing homosexuality across India, stating that homosexuals only form a “minuscule minority” of the subcontinent’s population. This was a strange argument, since the

Supreme Court seemed to be suggesting that minority populations in India *shouldn't* have rights, *because* they were minorities. Analyzing this judgment, Rao (2020) writes:

Dismissing the evidence that had been placed before it, [the Supreme Court] held that queer activists had 'miserably failed' to demonstrate that the State deprived sexual minorities of their fundamental rights. Indeed it seemed to doubt that such a case could ever be made given that sexual minorities constituted a 'minuscule fraction' of the country's population (p. 183).

On these grounds, in 2014 and 2015, the Supreme Court continued to dismiss the review petitions filed by Naz Foundation and others to revisit the 2013 Supreme Court judgment, even as LGBTQ activists fought for decriminalization with renewed intensity. Eventually, in 2016, the Supreme Court began proceedings to revisit its own 2013 verdict, when, among others, six individuals — Navtej Singh Johar, Sunil Mehra, Ritu Dalmia, Aman Nath, Keshav Suri, and Ayesha Kapur — filed a petition to overturn the 2013 verdict and decriminalize homosexuality, on the grounds that Section 377 impeded their fundamental right to life and freedom. Finally, on 6 September 2018, Section 377 was definitively read down by the Supreme Court of India, decriminalizing consensual and private sex among people of any gender across the country.

The discourses around Section 377 are varied and much has been written about them (Narain & Gupta, 2011; Khanna, 2016; Puri, 2016). Given how central Section 377 has been to LGBTQ activists in India, it is impossible to not foreground the struggles against it in any writing on LGBTQ life in the subcontinent. At the same time, the centrality of the demand for decriminalization within LGBTQ activists has always been contested. As I documented in Chapter 5, many queer feminist activists were troubled by the focus on privacy that marked all

the petitions to decriminalize Section 377, even as they fought to decriminalize homosexuality. Much to the disappointment of queer feminists, in the end, it was this intimate linking of homosexuality with privacy that ensured Section 377 would be read down. A Supreme Court ruling in 2017, that established privacy as an inalienable right of Indian citizens, paved the path for decriminalizing homosexuality in 2018. In fact, for many LGBTQ activists, the 2018 verdict was predictable precisely because they knew the 2017 verdict on privacy would function as an inviolable precedent (Sahai, 2018).

As I analyze in this section, the coding of sexuality in privacy and respectability in the fight against Section 377 has been at the heart of Dalit queer and trans* critiques of LGBTQ activism. In offering these critiques, Dalit queer and trans* activists deconstruct the myth of LGBTQ progress that situates decriminalization as the first step towards inclusion into the (Hindu) nation. Further, I argue that by centering “backwardness” within a larger LGBTQ context that privileges “progress,” Dalit queer and trans* activists visibilize who is left behind as LGBTQ communities make “progress,” and in doing so, they highlight the costs of LGBTQ inclusion into the nation. As such, this section demonstrates how Dalit and trans* claims of “backwardness” destabilize the narrative of LGBTQ progress, and in the process, resist LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism.

a. Section 377 and the Myth of LGBTQ Progress

Dalit queer and trans* critiques of the battle to decriminalize homosexuality argue that: first, rooting decriminalization in the right to privacy centered a “respectable” manifestation of sexuality that excluded many non-dominant caste, lower-class LGBTQ populations; second, the

final petition which led to Section 377 being read down in 2018 came from people who “did not belong to the LGBTQ community”; and, third, the centrality of Section 377 within LGBTQ activism came at the expense of removing focus from the other laws that were far more detrimental to Dalit trans* communities in particular. Based on this, Dalit queer and trans* activists assert that any LGBTQ “progress” and inclusion that decriminalization signals has been built upon their exclusion from these activisms, and are founded upon their erasure from the imaginations of LGBTQ life and freedoms. I outline these critiques in more detail below.

In general, the process of decriminalizing homosexuality and the government of LGBTQ intimacies through the rhetoric of dignity, privacy, and respectability alienated numerous non-dominant caste, lower-class LGBTQ communities because they were excluded from dominant imaginations of “respectable” and privatized sexuality. In the 2018 verdict, “respectability was played up through the caste and class privileges of certain petitioners ... Queer movements, like our courtrooms, care not for everyone but only a few who ‘deserve’ justice” (Borisa, 2020, p. 91). As I have already analyzed in Chapter 4, HIV/AIDS related LGBTQ activisms developed codes for “respectable” gendered and sexual behaviour, which worked to distance “at risk” communities from sex work, and also relied upon middle-class, dominant-caste morality. Given that the struggle to decriminalize homosexuality emerged from HIV/AIDS related concerns, here, I contend that these same norms were underscored in the petition and judgment to decriminalize homosexuality.

Crucially, the linking of privacy, sexuality, and respectability also meant that sex work was removed from the purview of legality. While sex workers have been an intrinsic part of

LGBTQ activists, since they have also been marked as “at risk” for HIV/AIDS, they found no mention in the petitions against Section 377. As Shah (2013) has argued, centering “dignity and privacy [in the fight against Section 377] against the dominant anti-prostitution paradigm seems to place prostitution outside of these parameters” (p. 172), wherein “sex workers cannot make the same claims to state protection, or decriminalization, that LGBTQ people can, because transactional sex is, by definition, ‘public’” (ibid., p. 176). This is particularly fraught because many LGBTQ people engage in sex work, and among those who do, a predominant portion belong to non-dominant castes. Additionally, the way discourse around Section 377 is framed structurally disallows a robust engagement with sex workers’ rights, producing Dalit queer and trans* sex workers as invisible (Baudh, 2017). As Shah (2013; 2014) avers, sex workers are not able to rely on the discourse of marginalization or minoritization in the same way as LGBTQ communities because sex work cannot be essentialized as inherent to sex workers’ lives — it cannot be made a private, intrinsic qualifier of subjectivity, unlike sexual orientation, which can (and has) been internalized as an identity and a biological reality, and therefore becomes worthy of decriminalization and state protections.

Further, Borisa (2020) also critiques the coalition of dominant-caste, upper-class petitioners and lawyers who were involved in the petition that led to the reading down of Section 377 in 2018, and suggests that the verdict for decriminalization only came to pass because it centered the rights of dominant-caste, upper-class petitioners. Even in the immediate aftermath of Section 377 being read down, it did not go unnoticed that those who were being hailed as the champions, heroes, or stalwarts of LGBTQ freedoms in India were actually not from “within the

queer movement”¹¹⁰. In an essay by Kang & Sahai (2020) on the caste hierarchies within LGBTQ activisms, Kang notes that despite the textured history of LGBTQ activisms in India, and the many coalitions that have shaped the struggle to decriminalize homosexuality, “it’s quite preposterous that a few individuals *can* make it all about themselves. This is also a savarna, upper-caste tendency – to centre narratives around themselves and glorify themselves”. Here, Kang is alluding to the ways in which the lawyers and petitioners involved in the 2018 judgment were hailed as the icons of LGBTQ activisms in India¹¹¹, and tying that to larger discourses within Dalit queer and trans* activisms which assert that dominant-caste communities appropriate, and erase, non-dominant caste contributions to LGBTQ activisms.

Many participants spoke of this in my interviews as well, and were dissatisfied and angry with how the final moment of the long struggle for decriminalization had been co-opted by dominant-caste, upper-class advocates, further invisibilizing the long histories of contentious solidarities that make up LGBTQ activisms in India. Saanj, a queer, trans*, Bahujan activist based in New Delhi asked:

¹¹⁰ The 2016 petition, that eventually led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, was filed by the following people: Navtej Singh Johar, a renowned classical dancer; Sunil Mehra, a famous journalist; Ritu Dalmia, a celebrity chef; Aman Nath, an author and hotelier; Keshav Suri, also a hotelier, and; Ayesha Kapur, an actress. The petition was represented in the Supreme Court by Menaka Guruswamy and Arundhati Katju, two lawyers who shot to fame after the verdict. It is not my aim to do so in this chapter, but it would be meaningful to analyze how it was this particular petition, filed by individuals with immense social, cultural, and economic capital, and filed without any consultation with LGBTQ activists and lawyers who had been involved in the fight to decriminalize homosexuality since the early 1990s, was the petition that gained the most traction and led to the reading down of Section 377. Within this context, it would also be important to analyze how “the queer community” is shaped retroactively through arguments amongst LGBTQ activists that note that the petitioners did not belong to this “community”.

¹¹¹ For example, Arundhati Katju and Menaka Guruswamy, the two lawyers involved in fighting for the 2016 petition in the Supreme Court, were celebrated as Time Magazine’s ‘100 Most Influential People’ in 2019. They were also labelled “Pioneers for the Indian LGBTQ+ Community” (Project Stree, 2021). Similarly, the petitioners were called “LGBTQ+ heroes” (Sharma, 2018), and media coverage, in general, hailed these lawyers and petitioners as leaders of LGBTQ rights in India.

Why is it that only these people are being selected [to represent us]? Is that not a larger Hinduized version of the State that is trying to be shoved down our throats? ... There is an ‘acceptable queer’ who has already been formed, and who is in tandem with the politics of the current State ... It is no coincidence that these are all upper-caste people ...

You swoop in with these ‘eminent’ personalities and become ‘the queer voice of India’.

Here, Saanj was not expressing displeasure at the co-optation of LGBTQ activism alone. Rather, they were highlighting the work of caste in these processes, as the underlying grammar structuring what becomes visibilized within the circuits and rhetorics of LGBTQ activism.

Similarly, Joy also asked:

“Who is decriminalization for? The majority of the people who were at the brunt of the violence of this law belonged to lower-classes and non-dominant castes, who had to go to parks to get fucked. But the act of having sex in public spaces is still criminalized”.

In doing so, like Saanj, they, too, are alluding to how caste hierarchies function to disregard, and often erase, the role of Dalit-Bahujan populations in Indian society.

Across Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I have analyzed the contentions between different strands of LGBTQ activism, and demonstrated how these antagonisms have often culminated in concerns about who LGBTQ activism represents, and which kinds of LGBTQ activism, visions, and work, are valued. Dalit queer and trans* critiques, that shed light upon their own erasure from within LGBTQ spaces, offer another perspective to these debates. Dalit queer and trans* activists contend that a “legitimate” LGBTQ figure has been configured as one who “stands with the nation,” and therefore supports Hindu nationalism. These intimacies between LGBTQ activism and Hindu nationalism, as well as attendant aspirations of homonationalism, are

incommensurate with Dalit queer and trans* existence, and are based on their invisibility from within LGBTQ activisms.

Finally, Dalit queer and trans* critiques also shed light on how discourses around Section 377 only focused on homosexual subjects, and elided the violence of the law on Dalit trans* communities, who are most likely to be impacted by it. As Puri (2016) has shown, Section 377 had not been used to penalize consensual homosexuality as much as it has been used to blackmail, arrest, and extract bribes from hijra, kothi, and trans* sex workers, many of whom also belong to non-dominant caste backgrounds. Further, these “unruly” manifestations of gender and sexuality that cling to trans* bodies have also had long histories of being governed through other laws, which have not received nearly as much attention as Section 377 has within LGBTQ activisms. Puri writes:

sexuality’s significance to the state links a whole nexus of laws, policies, and discourses — among them the anti-sex trafficking act and lower order laws, including vagrancy and public nuisance, that are easier to enforce and therefore likely to have greater impact than the antisodomy law on same-sex sexualities, especially those vulnerable due to their gender expression and social class (ibid., p. 12).

This is corroborated in reports by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (2001; 2003) and Centre for Law & Policy Research (2019). These reports, along with the interviews with the participants of this research, makes it clear that violence is compounded when trans* persons belong to non-dominant caste communities.

Adding to this critique, Semmalar (2014) writes that non-dominant caste trans* communities have been, and continue to be, marginalized within LGBTQ activisms. He describes the campaign to decriminalize homosexuality as a legal campaign by “a few rich gay lawyers in New Delhi,” (p. 289) which is then portrayed as “*the* Indian LGBT movement” (ibid.). He argues that, “[f]or years, the campaign exaggerated the reach of Section 377” (ibid.) and produced it as *the* law that hinders LGBTQ existence the most, even though other laws penalizing public indecency and curtailing sex work are the ones used most often against trans* communities. Semmalar asks what kind of solidarities are possible between different sections of LGBTQ populations, especially given the consistent erasure of Dalit queer and trans* voices within these spaces. He writes, “[w]hat solidarity is there between civil society activist groups for whom our very being is so ‘uncivilized’ that they not-so-civilly ask us to leave meetings?” (ibid., p. 290).

Dalit queer and trans* critiques of the struggle to decriminalize homosexuality in particular, and LGBTQ activisms in general, emphasize that any advancement in LGBTQ activisms has been contingent upon the erasure and invisibilization of their concerns¹¹². This is why Dalit queer and trans* critiques mark an interruption in seamless narratives of “LGBTQ progress”. As Kamal suggested, these critiques muddy the waters of linear teleologies of LGBTQ activisms that attempt to move from decriminalization to same-sex marriage as stepping stones for inclusion into the nation-state. Sustained attention to the realities of Dalit queer and trans* lives forces LGBTQ activisms to reflect upon who is represented in the verdict reading down Section 377, and who has been included into mainstream society as a result.

¹¹² For an example of such a critique on social media, see Appendix D, figure 5.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the LGBTQ pragmatism framing HIV/AIDS related activisms produced an aspirational homonationalism that is rooted in the belief that supporting Hindu nationalism in the present will yield LGBTQ rights in the future. Underscoring this schema is the implicit logic that LGBTQ “progress” is measured through the granting of rights, freedoms, and inclusion into the nation-state. It is this desire for inclusion, and its resulting ossification and hierarchization of sexual identities, that produces the homonormativity required to effectively belong to the national body (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007). Those supporting Hindu nationalism do so, in part, by offering the reason that Hinduism is LGBTQ-friendly. A key aspect, then, of aspirational homonationalism in India is the belief that Hindu nationalism advances, or will advance, LGBTQ progress and rights. By centering the ongoing atrocities on Dalit queer and trans* communities, Dalit queer and trans* critiques invade these rhetorics and render them, to a large extent, meaningless. Therefore, like the queer feminist critiques outlined in the previous chapter, these critiques also force LGBTQ activisms to ask which LGBTQ communities define what constitutes “LGBTQ progress,” which communities make such “progress,” and at what costs.

b. Dalit Queer and Trans* “Backwardness” against LGBTQ “Progress”

Dalit queer and trans* activisms also undo and disrupt narratives of LGBTQ progress because, as distinct groups, Dalits and trans* communities are positioned as “backward” in Indian jurisprudence. Jayal (2013) notes that: “Framed as an attribute of communities rather than individuals, backwardness reinforces the idea of citizenship mediated by community”¹¹³ (p. 230).

¹¹³ This marks another point of difference from discourses around Section 377, for example, which were based on an *individual’s* fundamental right to privacy and dignity.

Within the Indian context, backwardness is variously tied to common-sense understandings of minoritization, deficiency, entitlement, stigma, and discrimination, and it is necessary for a community to be regarded as “backward” in order for them to access reservations (affirmative action). At their core, reservations are a system of affirmative action that is designed to increase the representation of “backward” castes and tribes in education, employment, and politics. Without delving into the debates around reservations, which are varied and extremely contentious, what is important in the context of this argument is that the legal category of “backwardness,” instituted in the Indian Constitution by Ambedkar with the purpose of offering infrastructural support to Dalit, Bahujan, and Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities, is currently being used to safeguard rights for trans* communities. Within this framework, the goal of reservations becomes to bring trans* communities into modernity, development, and progress¹¹⁴.

It is crucial, as Rao (2020) argues in his book *Out of Time*, to juxtapose these claims of “backwardness” against the spectre of LGBTQ progress and inclusion into the nation-state. In Rao’s argument, as well as in this dissertation, LGBTQ progress signals a future in which LGBTQ subjects become included into the national imaginary. This underscores the relationship between homonationalism, homonormativity, and what Freeman (2005) terms “chrononormativity,” namely, the normative effects produced by subscribing to the linear

¹¹⁴ It is crucial to note that legal proceedings have also kept LGB and trans* communities out of lock-step. Right after homosexuality was re-criminalized in 2013, the NALSA judgment was passed in 2014, giving trans* persons the right to the self-determination of their own gender. However, while their gendered identities were reinforced, their sexual identities were criminalized (Poushali, Sutanuka & Shraddha, 2014). A few years later, when homosexuality was definitively decriminalized in 2018, a violently transphobic Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill was simultaneously being deliberated upon in the legislature. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed in 2019, and led to significant protests among the trans* community.

temporality of a past, present, and future. As such, homonationalism works through the temporal logic of “straight time,” wherein “there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (Munoz, 2009, p. 22). As I showed in Chapter 4, the aspiration of homonationalist inclusion emerges from an LGBTQ pragmatism that draws a *straight*, or homonormative, line of LGBTQ progress, that begins from decriminalization and ends at same-sex marriage and adoption rights. Even though these demands are for rights LGBTQ communities “cannot not want” (Spivak, 1999) and absolutely must have, they pose a problem because the discourses and activisms around these rights produce a singular, identity-based understanding of LGBTQ progress that, as this dissertation demonstrates, neglects and effaces the intersections produced by queer feminist, Dalit queer and trans* realities.

In the context of this chapter, it is important to note that homonationalist discourses, aspirational or otherwise, that predicate LGBTQ progress and inclusion on being “good (Hindu nationalist) LGBTQ subjects” impose their linear teleology upon LGBTQ communities deemed “backward”. Within these schemas, it becomes the responsibility of those remaindered by progress (hence, designated as backward) to now “catch up”. For example, the prominent trans* activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi has repeatedly highlighted the value of trans* communities in nation-making projects in order to argue that they are deserving of special rights and protections. She has variously suggested that hijras should help build the Ram temple in Ayodhya (Goel, 2020), engage in door-to-door canvassing for the BJP before state elections, and even create an army that can be deployed in Jammu & Kashmir to defeat Pakistan. While trans* communities in India are largely marked by religious syncretism (Reddy, 2006; Saria, 2021), Tripathi has attempted to make Hinduism seem like the natural home for trans* subjectivity, thereby

reinforcing Hindutva's version of India's golden period of Hindu history. Just as "Sanghi gays" demonstrate their value to the Hindu nation by participating in Hindu nationalist violence, Tripathi calls upon the trans* community to do the same.

Since the rhetorics and aspirations of homonationalism in the Indian context rest on imaginations of an inclusion into the (Hindu) nation-to-come, it becomes important to emphasize that, by being situated as "backward," Dalit queer and trans* activisms interrupt these teleologies of LGBTQ progress. "Backwardness" arrests the story of LGBTQ progress by highlighting that some LGBTQ communities are being left behind in order to achieve such gains. Contrary to the chrononormativity of straight time, "backwardness," particularly in the Indian context "performs a double function; it marks a degraded condition that fixes you in the past even as it constitutes the means for your forward mobility by providing a positive basis for claims before the state" (Ramberg, 2016, p. 228). In this sense, both, Dalit populations, and trans* communities are placed within an ambiguous asynchronicity of being mired in "backwardness" in order to access the benefits of reservations, while simultaneously being oriented towards the "futuraity" promised by the successful resolution of what those reservations aim to achieve.

However, even as Dalit and trans* populations are framed through "backwardness" within Indian jurisprudence, "there is no legal understanding of persons who are *both* transgender and Dalit" (Baudh, 2017, p. 222). In 2014, the Supreme Court passed a verdict (NALSA vs. Union of India), commonly referred to as the NALSA judgment, in which they recognized trans* communities as "socially and educationally backward," and recommended that reservations be implemented towards their "upliftment" and integration in mainstream society.

Following this, after much activist effort, in 2021, the Karnataka state government decided to provide trans* persons 1% reservation by including them *within* the OBC category. This move is being widely protested by Dalit queer and trans* activists, as well as trans* collectives, on multiple grounds (The News Minute Staff, 2018). First, the inclusion of transgender persons within the OBC category disallows trans* persons belonging to SC or ST communities from claiming the right to reservations under both categories. Second, trans* persons belonging to OBC communities will not be able to benefit from these reservations in a new way, since they are already beneficiaries based on their caste status. Third, trans* persons will now be considered at par with other OBC community members, who may not be trans* themselves. Instead of this, trans* activists have been demanding “horizontal reservations” for the past few years, which would ensure 1% reservation for trans* persons *across* caste categories.

In a draft of a policy brief on the reservation for trans* persons prepared by the Centre for Law and Policy Research, they state:

Categorizing transgender persons as a ‘socially and educationally backward class’ assumes homogeneity in their social position, a concern which has been voiced by various sections of the community. It would not address the discrimination faced by Dalit or Adivasi trans* persons, because placing them in the vertical category would give them a separate status and would not enable them to be placed under the separate quotas for SC, ST or OBC. It would also mean that trans* persons, on seeking reservations, would have to in effect give up their caste identities and all the protections and benefits that are associated with such identities (2018, p. 11).

Given that Dalit-Bahujan trans* activists such as Grace Banu (2021) have consistently argued that caste discrimination is entrenched within trans* communities, the false equivalence between caste and trans* identities becomes even more dangerous for non-dominant caste trans* persons, who are asked to choose between identifying as trans* *or* non-dominant caste in order to access reservations.

This erasure of Dalit trans* persons, who exist at the intersection of casteist and gendered discrimination, is akin to the erasure faced by Black women in Crenshaw's essay, *Mapping the Margins* (1991), in which she outlined intersectionality as a category of analysis. Since its coinage, intersectionality has been an oft debated concept in feminist and queer theory, with one of its most important critiques coming from Puar (2007), who suggested that intersectionality presupposes that intersectional identities can be disassembled into distinct units. In its place, Puar (2007) offered a theory of assemblage, which frames her conceptualization of homonationalism, and underscores that race, gender, sexuality etc. are "interwoven forces" that cannot be understood as discrete. However, it has been pointed out that this entails a misreading of intersectionality (Rao, 2020). Puar (2017) has also acknowledged the same, writing "intersectional identities and assemblages must remain as interlocutors in tension" (p. 213) with one another.

Within the context of this debate, what would it mean for Dalit queer and trans* communities to inhabit the ambiguous "backwardness" of their identities in a way that also builds towards possibilities of collective emancipation that are rooted in the *intersectional* nature of caste, sexuality, and gender that shapes their existence? One answer, of course, lies in the

coalitions between Dalit queer activists, queer feminists, and trans* activists already underway, that are attempting to think through the violence of Hindutva and heteropatriarchy simultaneously. For example, when Laxmi Narayan Tripathi made a public statement in support of building the Ram temple in Ayodhya, 183 trans/intersex/gender non-conforming individuals, 20 queer feminist collectives, 8 allied groups, and 146 allied individuals collectively published a statement condemning Tripathi's position. The statement clearly outlined that Tripathi was a:

dominant-caste brahmin trans* woman [who] has been appealing to Hindutva ideology and justifying the existence of the caste system in India ever since she began aspiring for a political position within the current ruling party ... We emphatically ... declare that she and other trans* persons representing religious bodies do not represent the vast array of trans and gender-diverse communities of India¹¹⁵.

In doing so, this statement mobilized Dalit queer, trans*, and queer feminist activists together, creating “a horizon of possibility that linked communities of the dispossessed in solidarity around shared struggles” (Rao, 2018, p. 5).

Similarly, Vidya & Semmalar (2018) make three related arguments that situates transphobia *as* Brahminism, linking caste, gender, and sexuality in inextricable ways. First, they highlight that trans* persons are often treated as untouchable in mainstream society. Second, they suggest that some occupations, like sex work and begging, have become fixed to trans* bodies, just as occupations like manual scavenging have become fixed to Dalit bodies. Third, they note that, to uphold the purity of the Brahmin woman, two kinds of “impure” figures have to be

¹¹⁵ You can find the entire statement on Round Table India, here: <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/trans-gender-nonconforming-gnc-intersex-collectives-strongly-condemn-kinnar-akhara-s-support-for-ram-temple-at-ayodhya/>.

constructed — first, the figure of the transwoman, against whose failure the Brahmin woman's femininity may shine; and, second, the figure of the Dalit man, against whom the purity of the Brahmin woman must be protected. Based on this they emphasize that caste and gender are indivisible, and posit that all trans* activism must, therefore, be anti-caste. Further, Vidya also adds that she sees “the hijra family system also as a survival strategy when severe segregation from the rest of society is imposed on transwomen across caste” (ibid., p. 64). By doing so, she suggests that the alternative structures of kinship that have been part of trans* lives for decades also help to radically disrupt the caste purity that is maintained through endogamous marriages and the biological families.

As such, even though the legal category of “backwardness” makes it difficult to imagine Dalit and trans* solidarities, Dalit queer and trans* activists work to highlight the specificities of existence at this hitherto invisibilized intersection of gender, caste, and sexuality. These activism not only offer a necessary critique of LGBTQ narratives of progress and inclusion, but also help construct a robust imagination of Dalit queer and trans* life that pushes us to envision queerness and its politics differently. For instance, Raghav told me that we needed to expand what we understand as “queer issues,” saying: “Things like police brutality, eviction and homelessness, institutional suicides are all queer issues ... How long will we only focus on marriage and adoption?”. Shirsho, too, added that migration and unemployment, especially in the wake of Covid-19 was a Dalit queer issue. He said: “This is a longer tragedy that's going to linger for the next 30-40 years ... If this doesn't do anything to what we think of as queer, then clearly something is wrong”.

In stating their dissatisfaction with the cloistered imagination of what can be considered a “queer issue,” Dalit queer and trans* activists like Raghav, Vidya, Shirsho, and others force us to envision queerness *otherwise*. This also suggests that, like queer feminist activisms, Dalit queer and trans* activisms are attuned to how gender, caste, and sexuality are reconfigured through the various crises that are unfolding in our contemporary times, and they demand that LGBTQ activists in India expand their horizon to center these intersectional realities. Further, by highlighting who is left behind through projects of LGBTQ inclusion, Dalit queer and trans* critiques build a kind of activism that is not routed through the schematics of national belonging, and dares to offer a more collective vision of queer and trans* survival.

III. Conclusion

Centering the question of caste within LGBTQ activisms destabilizes many existing assumptions at the heart of these activisms, and exposes the limits of aspirational homonationalism and its demands towards inclusion into the Hindu nation. In this chapter, I’ve demonstrated how the schemata of caste structures Indian society, and therefore, also structures LGBTQ activisms. Caste determines LGBTQ sociality, and is central to its politics of desirability and touch. Dalit queer and trans* critiques rightly argue that dominant LGBTQ agendas, as well as mainstream aspirations of LGBTQ life, are based upon the invisibilization of caste hierarchies within LGBTQ activisms. This is evidenced in how Section 377 became central to LGBTQ activisms, despite there being numerous other laws that render Dalit queer and trans* lives as criminal. This is also proven by the centrality of rhetorics of respectability and privacy in the verdict

decriminalizing homosexuality, which erased the perspectives of many Dalit queer and trans* populations without access to private space, or engaged in sex work.

Like queer feminisms, Dalit queer and trans* activisms also resist LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism. At the same time, Dalit queer and trans* activists also critique queer feminisms for being tokenistic in how they include, rather than center, questions of caste within their spaces. By underscoring the overlap between Hindu nationalism and caste discrimination, Dalit queer and trans* critiques highlight that supporting a Hindu nation is, by default, a casteist aspiration. Given that non-dominant caste populations are included into the Hindu nationalist project only conditionally, as subjugated to dominant-caste Hindus, Dalit queer and trans* activisms reject LGBTQ narratives that attempt to define Hinduism as LGBTQ-friendly, since those understandings of sexuality are clearly unmarked by caste. Further, in laying claim to “backwardness,” Dalit queer and trans* communities visibilize the material conditions of their lives and interrupt LGBTQ narratives of progress. In doing so, these activisms offer another form of queer and trans* resistance to Hindu nationalism, because they demonstrate that not only have they been left behind by LGBTQ progress, but also that any LGBTQ progress has come at the cost of invisibilizing their concerns.

Through these critiques, Dalit queer and trans* activisms begin to voice another imagination of queer life and politics, one in which caste, gender, and sexuality remain centered as intersectional, indivisible concerns. This expands the horizons of what LGBTQ activisms can look like, and must fight for. In these imaginations, that are only now coming into being, it is important to note that, both, queerness and caste remain unfinished projects. Just as Butler

(1993) defines queerness as “the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (p. 228) that will have to be continuously redeployed, according to Rao (2009), “Dalit emancipation is an unfinished project” (p. xi). As such, Dalit queer and trans* activism involve attempts to convert the negative charge of exclusion and humiliation into a radically emancipated political imagination, one that resolutely rejects the pragmatic politics of inclusion into the Hindu nation.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

These are conflict-ridden times for LGBTQ activism in India. On the one hand, we find some LGBTQ activism more invested than ever before in an identity-based politics that seeks recognition, representation, and inclusion into a Hindu nation. On the other hand, we see some LGBTQ activism more motivated than ever in building solidarities and coalitions across gender, caste, class, and religion in an attempt to resist the divisiveness and violence that marks Hindu nationalist India today. Through a queer, feminist, digital ethnography, this dissertation maps the histories of alliances and antagonisms between different LGBTQ activism onto unfolding frictions within these activism on the question of Hindu nationalism, and demonstrates how Hindu nationalism deepens and redefines the existing fissures between them. As such, my aim has been to theorize what it means to be queer in the contemporary Hindu nationalist atmosphere, and to examine what is at stake, for LGBTQ activism, in participating in and resisting the violent logics of the Hindu nation.

One of the predominant theorizations of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and nationalism has been offered by Puar (2007), who has argued that homonormative nationalism, or homonationalism, rests upon LGBTQ progress becoming a metric for national progress. As an assemblage, homonationalist rhetoric is upheld by the nation and its subjects. In contrast, I have argued that, in India, LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism is advanced by certain LGBTQ activism, despite Hindu nationalist ambivalence or antipathy towards LGBTQ rights. This has required a reworking of homonationalism to better understand how it might apply to the Indian

context. I have suggested that what we see in India is an *aspirational homonationalism*, which I defined as LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism in the present that is rooted in the desire for inclusion into a Hindu nation in the future.

While Puar's (2007) analysis of homonationalism emerges from her mapping of the consequences of the successes of the LGBTQ movement within a national climate that conscripts LGBTQ progress as national progress, aspirational homonationalism theorizes the desire for national belonging within a nationalist imagination that does not yet fully include LGBTQ populations within its midst. To clarify, I am not suggesting that homonationalism requires the complete absence of institutional homophobia, and as Puar (2017; 2022) has argued, homonationalism continues to operate even in conditions where LGBTQ rights are being clawed back. However, I am claiming that homonationalism rests upon the symbolic and material inclusion of LGBTQ populations into the nation. Further, the homonationalist narrative of LGBTQ inclusion being seen as a national progress is discursively produced by both, the nation-state and its subjects.

Unlike emerging scholarship on homonationalism in India (Sircar, 2017; Sircar & Jain, 2017; Upadhyay, 2020), which suggests that homonationalism in India is a recent phenomenon, I argue that aspirations for homonationalism emerge from a long-term interplay between LGBTQ pragmatism and an investment in national belonging — while a pragmatic approach to LGBTQ activism ensures the mobilization of an identity-based sexual politics that desires homonormativity, the yearning for national belonging drives these activisms towards seeking legitimacy in the form of inclusion within the Hindu nation, tying these aspirations of

homonormativity to the rhetorics of Hindu nationalism. Situating aspirational homonationalism within older histories of LGBTQ support and resistance to Hindu nationalism indicates that it is important to focus on the long-term investments in Hindu nationalism within LGBTQ activisms to understand how homonationalism takes shape in India.

Especially within a postcolonial context where homosexuality has been considered to be “alien to Indian culture,” since the 1990s, some LGBTQ activisms have sought to authenticate their homosexuality by shoring up their Hindu identity, thereby contributing to the idea that India is a Hindu nation. It is this aspiration that is now being deployed to construct the legitimate LGBTQ subject in India as an ostensibly Hindu subject. Within the largely polarized Hindu nationalist atmosphere of contemporary India, this legitimacy is also sought to delegitimize the LGBTQ activisms that resist Hindu nationalism, and that differ from predominantly gay rights activisms on issues of gender and caste. As such, Hindu nationalism becomes another axis through which certain gay rights activisms seek to delegitimize predominantly queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms. By doing so, they also seek to control the dominant imaginations and agendas of LGBTQ activisms.

Given these tensions, this dissertation has also drawn upon queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, juxtaposing aspirational homonationalism with their robust critiques of Hindu nationalism. Rooted in the Indian Women’s Movement, queer feminist activisms emerge against Hindu nationalism, steadfastly resisting its heteropatriarchal assumptions of womanhood, as well as its violent majoritarianism. Relatedly, Dalit queer and trans* activisms demonstrate how caste oppression is ingrained within Hindu nationalism, and reject any LGBTQ activisms

that are complicit with the Hindu nationalist project. Even though the solidarities between queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms are nascent and fragile, these activisms collectively reflect on the costs of LGBTQ inclusion into the Hindu nation, and ask what kinds of LGBTQ subjects such inclusion portends. In re-orienting their activisms in response to the increasing entrenchment of Hindu nationalism in contemporary Indian society, these activisms expand the horizons of queerness to include all those minoritized by its violence.

Taken together, these arguments highlight how LGBTQ activisms are now compelled to contend with Hindu nationalism in unavoidable ways, and the deepening fissures between these activisms indicates that the atmosphere of Hindu nationalist violence, that determines life in contemporary India, is also redefining LGBTQ activisms, forcing them to stand “for or against the nation”. I also suggest that complicity with and resistance to Hindu nationalism is about two very different imaginations of sexual life and subjectivity, wherein “queer” itself is mobilized in two contradictory ways: as identity versus as a way of life.

Overall, this dissertation focuses on the fractures and antagonisms between different LGBTQ activisms much more than it tells a story of solidarities between them. In large part, this reflects the polarized and divisive nature of Indian society today, of which LGBTQ activisms are one microcosm. However, it is also true that the antagonisms within LGBTQ activisms can be seen more starkly in the aftermath of the decriminalization of homosexuality. Chapters 5 and 6, in particular, indicate that the primacy of Section 377, and the rhetorics deployed in the battle against it, have always been critiqued by queer feminists and Dalit queer and trans* activists. At the same time, the struggle for decriminalization also held LGBTQ activisms together, even if

provisionally. Since Section 377 has been read down, it is as if the common thread that brought LGBTQ activism together no longer exists. It is telling that the violence of Hindu nationalism has not become another common thread that has brought these activism together. Rather, Hindu nationalism has further split some of these activism apart. Yet, it has also provided the ground for queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* solidarities to develop, and it is these solidarities we must strengthen, protect, and hold on to.

I. Research Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

One of the most significant findings of this research involves the theorization of aspirational homonationalism. Contrary to existing scholarship on homonationalism in India (Sircar, 2017; Sircar & Jain, 2017; Upadhyay, 2020) that simply suggests that recent years have marked “India’s homonational turn,” aspirational homonationalism rethinks how homonationalism can be applied in the Indian context. As a concept, it reworks and extends the current understandings of homonationalism (Puar, 2007; 2017) by demonstrating that homonationalism can exist as an aspiration in contexts which are largely devoid of LGBTQ rights, and remain, for the most part, homophobic. By mapping how homonationalism takes shape through LGBTQ desires for national belonging, aspirational homonationalism evidences all that LGBTQ populations can do in service of a nation that does not even fully include them within it. Further, by focusing on how certain LGBTQ activism in India remain steadfastly dedicated to producing, and eventually belonging to, a Hindu nation, aspirational homonationalism signals an invested desire within LGBTQ populations to actively participate in majoritarian and ethnocidal nationalisms.

In doing so, the conceptualization of aspirational homonationalism goes beyond intervening in queer studies pertaining to South Asia, and makes a contribution to broader discourses on gender, sexuality, and nationalism within feminist and queer studies. How gender and sexuality shape national belonging has been a central question for feminist and queer studies (Allen, 2013; Berlant, 1997; Duggan, 1994, 2003; Ferguson, 1997; Gopinath, 2005; Menon, 2007; Murray, 2017; Puar, 2007; Shah, 2019; Vijayakumar, 2021; Wahab, 2012). As Eng & Puar (2020) have argued:

Normative LGBTQ subjects ... have been incorporated into (neo)liberal regimes of rights and recognition ... often at extreme peril to racialized, immigrant, undocumented, immiserated, and dispossessed communities ... These inclusions and exclusions speak to the morphing capacities of queerness, demonstrating that LGBTQ alignments with nationalist and racist ideologies are in fact not aberrations but, rather, constitutive of a normative queer liberal rights project itself (p. 3).

Aspirational homonationalism traces these processes of inclusion and exclusion into the nation, as well as its costs, in a context where LGBTQ subjects are still on the threshold of being folded into the “regimes of rights”. Of particular importance here is how “Sanghi gays,” or aspirational homonationalists, use the rhetorics of nationalism to delegitimize queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, contributing to their increasing precarity in Hindu nationalist times. This overlap between LGBTQ populations and violent nation-making projects has far-reaching consequences for studies in gender, sexuality, and the current rise in far-right nationalisms across the globe.

Relatedly, this research adds to recent scholarship that highlights the extent to which Hindu nationalism now shapes the very grammar of Indian society (Blom Hansen, 2021; Chattarji, Chopra, 2019; Blom Hansen & Jaffrelot, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). The polarizing atmosphere of Hindu nationalism, across digital and physical registers, is further heightened by the state-sanctioned vigilantism that has become increasingly popular in contemporary India. This atmosphere of Hindu nationalist violence now divides LGBTQ activism more sharply than ever before, and heightens the stakes for LGBTQ activism supporting and resisting Hindu nationalism. By outlining how Hindu nationalism compels LGBTQ activism to now stand “for or against the nation,” this research gestures to the impact of majoritarian nationalisms on the lives and activism of gendered and sexual minorities in India, but can also have implications on theorizations of similar processes in other contexts.

Further, by focusing on the perspectives of queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* activists, this research bridges a serious gap in queer and trans* scholarship emerging from, and on, South Asia. Most scholarship on LGBTQ life in South Asia focuses on gay, MSM, and hijra populations (Bose & Bhattacharyya, 2007; Boyce, 2007; Cohen, 2005; Dasgupta, 2017; Katyal, 2016; Khanna, 2016; Khubchandani, 2020; Puri, 2016; Reddy, 2006; Saria, 2021; Shahani, 2008; Vijayakumar, 2021), with very few scholars working on lesbian and queer feminist lives and activism (Dave, 2012; Roy, 2022; Sharma, 2006). This disproportionate attention mimics, in many ways, the uneven distribution of funding within LGBTQ activism (although, I am not suggesting that these discrepancies in theory and activist funding happen for the same reasons). As a result, there is an urgent need to focus on queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* perspectives from South Asia. Centering queer feminist and Dalit queer and trans* voices in this

research offers important critiques of LGBTQ activism in India, and also highlights the ways in which these activists build solidarities in order to contend with and resist the atmospheric pressures of Hindu nationalism. In a context where the violent histories of Hindu nationalism are re-written (Visweswaran et al., 2009), this dissertation is a small attempt at keeping a record of its many cruelties from the perspective of the populations it minoritizes.

Along with its promise, this work also remains limited in many ways. First, as I have already noted, the absence of queer Muslim voices in this research is significant. Queer Muslim perspectives would have shed some much needed light on how LGBTQ support for Hindu nationalism shapes their realities and solidarities within activist spaces, enriching the arguments of this dissertation. Second, even though this research is based on a digital ethnography, the ways in which social media shapes contemporary LGBTQ activism remains an underdeveloped aspect of this research, and can be built upon in the future. Of particular interest here is how social media can hinder and build solidarities between LGBTQ activists, and how these processes are impacted by the use of social media by Hindu nationalists to intimidate and attack its detractors. In other words, how does social media shape contemporary LGBTQ activism, and how does the use of these same social media spaces by Hindu nationalists shape the atmosphere within which these solidarities between LGBTQ activists may be built? Relatedly, given the systematic use of social media by the Sangh Parivar (Chopra, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021; Udupa, 2021) how does targeted trolling by Hindu nationalist mobs online shape LGBTQ activism online?

Finally, while this research alludes to the different ways in which crisis shapes LGBTQ activisms, it does not develop this idea fully. In Chapter 4, I argued that the HIV/AIDS crisis shaped LGBTQ pragmatism; the proximity of death for many homosexual and trans* communities produced the desire for normativity, inclusion, and belonging. However, in Chapter 5, I demonstrated that crisis had a very different effect; queer feminisms adopted a crisis interventionist approach to resist Hindu nationalism. As such, while HIV/AIDS related gay rights activisms mobilized their proximity to crisis to move towards normativity, queer feminisms practiced a crisis-based response to expand their horizons of what queer resistance to normativity might look like. These divergent approaches to crisis, I hypothesize, emerged because of two different teleological understandings of “crisis” — while the HIV/AIDS crisis was framed as an event, with a discrete sense of time before and after the crisis, queer feminisms interpret Hindu nationalism’s crisis as a continuing condition, akin to Berlant’s (2011) theorization of ‘crisis ordinariness’.

Tracing the different iterations of “crisis” across LGBTQ activisms in contemporary India could highlight the important work ‘crisis’ does in producing these activisms — based on how it is deployed, it can make ‘sexual minorities’ an exception, it can offer an opportunity for LGBTQ communities to form and coalesce, it can stave off critique, it can provide the impetus for activism. Just as ‘queer’ acts as a floating signifier in much of queer theory and praxis, ‘crisis’, too, can float and occupy multiple, often contradictory meanings. Therefore, one way to continue this research in the future is to ask: what is the role of crisis in LGBTQ activisms, and what do LGBTQ activisms build through crisis?

As such, in alignment with how queer feminisms in India situate Hindu nationalism as an ongoing crisis, I end this dissertation by suggesting that theorizing ‘crisis’ is an important way in which the questions I asked in this research could be reshaped and carried forward. I began this research by asking how LGBTQ activisms respond to Hindu nationalism, and how they are reshaped by it. I argued that Hindu nationalism amplifies the differences between LGBTQ activisms, becoming an axis based on which these activisms reiterate different imaginations of queer life and politics. Interpreting LGBTQ complicity with Hindu nationalism, in particular, required a theorization of aspirational homonationalism. It is no surprise that this dissertation, that has focused so much on antagonism and difference, ends with a question about crisis. But, what is also remarkable is that queer feminisms and Dalit queer and trans* activisms, and the emerging solidarities between them, require us to ask what we can build amidst the ongoing violence of crisis.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Hindu Nationalism in India

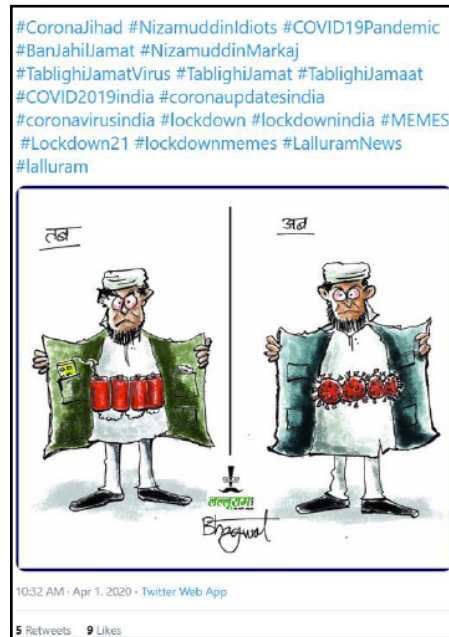


Figure 1: The image on the left states “Then,” and the image on the right states “Now,” drawing a continuation between Muslims as suicide bombers in the past and as Covid-19 spreaders in the present. Image courtesy: Twitter.

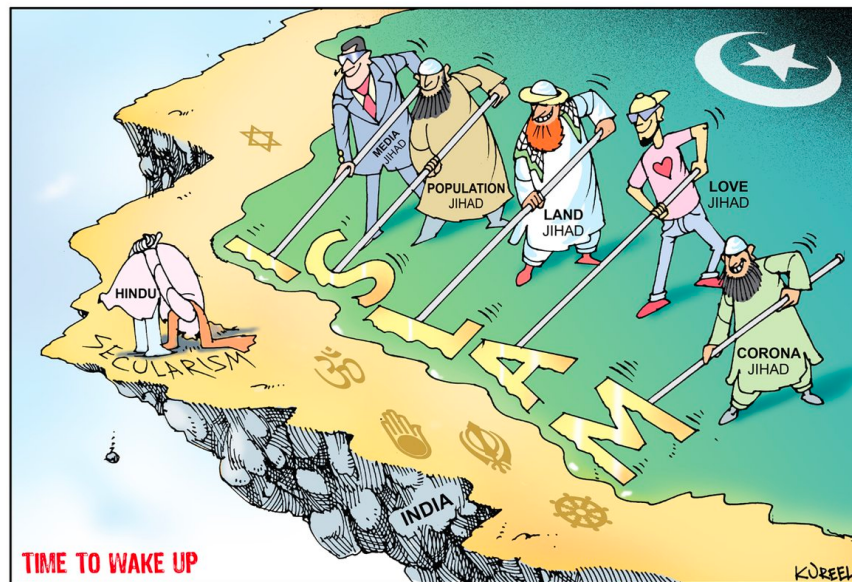


Figure 2: The “secular” Hindu buries their head in the sand at the edge of a cliff as numerous Muslim “Jihad” agendas seek to push the Hindu off the cliff. Image courtesy: Twitter.

Appendix B: Theorizing Aspirational Homonationalism in the Indian Context

I would like to register my strong protest against what transpired in the last few moments of Queer Azaad Mumbai Solidarity gathering yesterday.

The stage management was being done by Harish yesterday for the Solidarity Gathering . The Plain Jar group were organising speakers . Police permissions were given in the name of seven individuals. Saurabh, Tinesh were handling the police who repeatedly called to take updates on the proceedings at Azaad Maidan.

While most of the proceedings, yesterday went smoothly, the event flow and the spirit of the events took an unnecessary turn thanks to Urvashi Chudawala of the TISS Queer Collective.

Since I do not wish to misgender Chudawala, I am referring to them as they.

- 1. They continuously interrupted the event flow, were rude and aggressive with the MC.*
- 2. Came up on stage and changed the event flow on the mike.*
- 3. They had already been given a chance to speak, but continued to require more time on stage.*
- 4. The Announcements about QAM and the acknowledgment to the entire team could not happen*
- 5. Chudawala was aggressive, nasty and misbehaved with the Swastika parents standing on stage*
- 6. They further announced that this was the end of the Pride Gathering when it was not.*

Post that I take full responsibility of what transpired on stage and this is what I have told them

- 1. I have in no uncertain terms told Chudawala that they should take organizing responsibility of QAM rather than being token idea and email pushers here*
- 2. They have undermined the effort and contribution of QAM volunteers who do have regular jobs and other engagements and make themselves available.*
- 3. Neither Chudawala or any member of the TISS Queer Collective make themselves available for QAM logistics or the permissions*
- 4. That they are ill-behaved , entitled, posers who do glib talk but do precious little on the ground.*

The contents of their sloganeering give me a good reason to believe the reasons for the QAM pride march permissions were denied by the police . There were individuals and group such as them who did bring up the CAA, NRC and "Shameel" in their sloganeering.. I hope the TISS Queer collective with Chudawala at the helm of their bullying and aggressive posing do more than preach, lecture and overtake community proceedings.

If the issues raised need to be put on the QAM Agenda, then come for meetings and involve yourself in the process of consensus that YOU espouse. Start practicing what you preach.

As a follow-up, QAM should ask TISS, what is the position of TISS Queer Collective, is it an officially recognized group of TISS and does TISS endorse them.

*In Solidarity
Pallav Patankar*

Figure 1: Statement by Pallav Patankar on Mumbai Pride March 2020, circulated publicly on Facebook and Twitter.

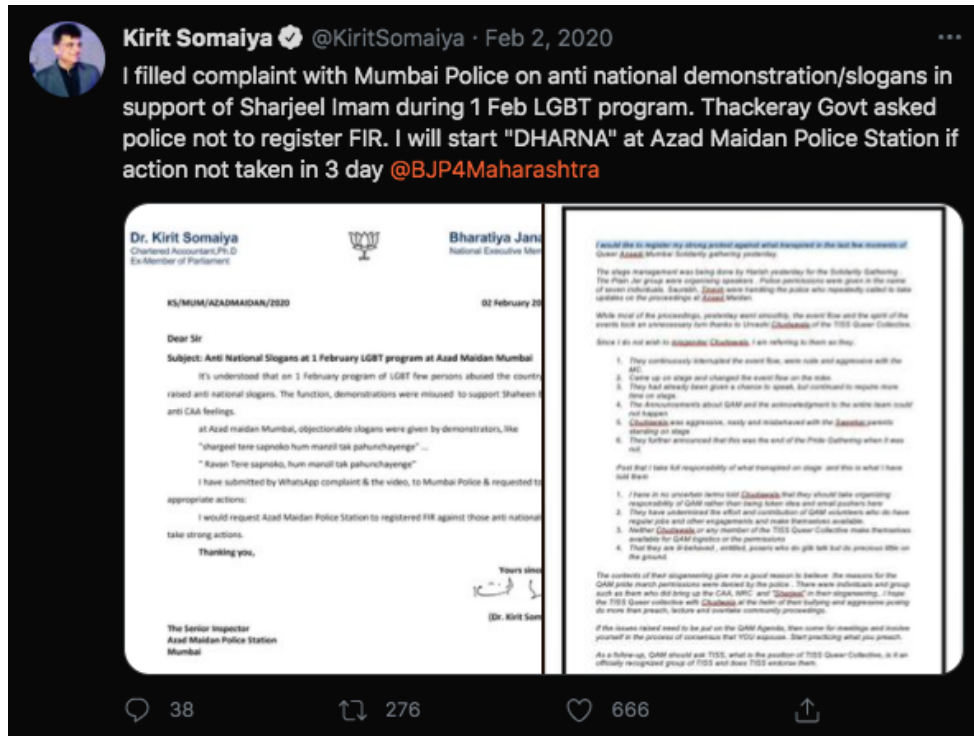


Figure 2: Tweet by Kirit Somaiya, the BJP minister who filed a police complaint against Kris Chudawala and 51 other protesters (pictured on the left), with Pallav Patankar's statement on Mumbai Pride March 2020 (pictured on the right).

Statement: Opposing sedition case against 51 people from Mumbai Pride

By: Concerned queer citizens of Mumbai.

On 2 February 2020, an FIR with charges of sedition was lodged against 51 individuals for raising slogans at Azad Maidan during Mumbai Pride 2020. These charges are baseless and deserve to be condemned.

This FIR is an act of political vendetta by right-wing politicians who have tried to hijack Pride to suit their agenda in the run-up to the Delhi elections. The systematic targeting of a young trans student, Kris Chudawala (referred to by their deadname in the FIR), is malicious and unnecessary.

By distorting the intent and taking one slogan out of context, politicians are using the same strategy they tried to use at JNU, at the Gateway protests, and at Shaheen Bagh. By picking on one person, they have shown that this FIR is part of a continuous attack on student voices across the country. We cannot fall for their propaganda.

The Supreme Court of India has laid down strict guidelines about the definition of sedition. This FIR clearly violates those guidelines. As allies and members of a community that fought against a colonial law, Section 377, we cannot support the persecution of LGBTQIA+ individuals under sedition - another colonial law.

Pride has always been about protest and celebration. We will continue to stand up against the persecution of oppressed groups everywhere - because, as queer people, we know what oppression looks and feels like. And because, as Audre Lorde said, "there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

As citizens of India, we demand that this FIR against Kris Chudawala and others be dropped immediately. Further, as queer individuals and allies, we ask that their dead name or photo not be used and that their right to privacy remain respected and protected.

Signatories: 1600, including academics like Uma Chakravarti and Gautam Bhan, journalists like Pamela Philipose and Geeta Seshu, those in the entertainment industry like Aditi Mittal, Anjum Rajabali and Onir, lawyers like Arvind Narrain and Vandita Morarka, activists like Teesta Setalvad, Kalyani Menon-Sen, Abha Bhaiya, Pawan Dhall, N Sarojini, Divya Kandukuri, L Ramakrishnan, and Bittu KR, and hundreds of other students, professors, mental health professionals, doctors, & artists.

This also includes members of queer and feminist groups like Nazariya Queer Feminist Resource Group, LABIA - A Queer Feminist LBT Group, The Pink List, Queerala, Women and Transgender Orgs JAC, Hyderabad, Telangana Hijra Intersex Trans Samiti, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Saheli, WSS, Feminism in India, and Fem Postitive.

Figure 3: Collective statement by numerous activists and academics opposing Kris Chudawala's arrest, and Pallav Patankar's and QAM's stance during Mumbai Pride March 2020, circulated publicly on Facebook and Twitter.



Sunday, 02 February, 2020

We are Queer Azadi Mumbai (QAM), a collective organizing body and permissions team of the 'Mumbai Pride Solidarity Gathering 2020' conducted on Sat, 01 Feb 2020 at Azad Maidan. We completely dissociate ourselves from and strongly condemn the abrupt radical slogans in support of Sharjeel and/or any other slogans against the integrity of India at the gathering.

QAM works on the process of consensus before executing any action, however, we would like to highlight that neither QAM nor the individuals who have signed the permissions were communicated with or kept informed of the intent and/or content of this sloganeering. It was irresponsible and potentially detrimental and none of the individuals raising these slogans were part of the organizing process or permissions process with us. These slogans, performances and protests happened abruptly and precipitously without the consent of the organizers.

The people sloganeering yesterday are not known to us personally. However, as soon as the organizers realized that some sloganeering was inaudible on the stage, the organizers proactively used their microphones to stop all activities and clearly advised all the attendees that any sort of speech/slogan/communication within the gathering must happen from the stage and with official consent of the organizing members.

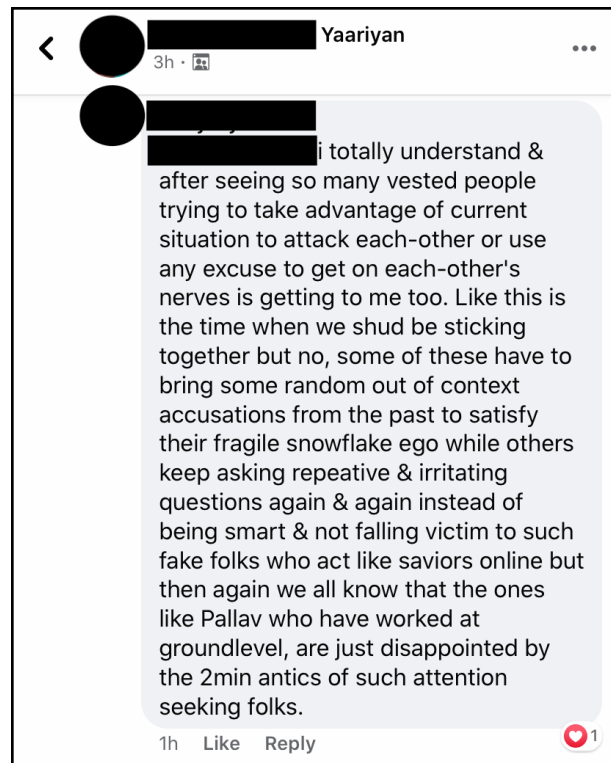
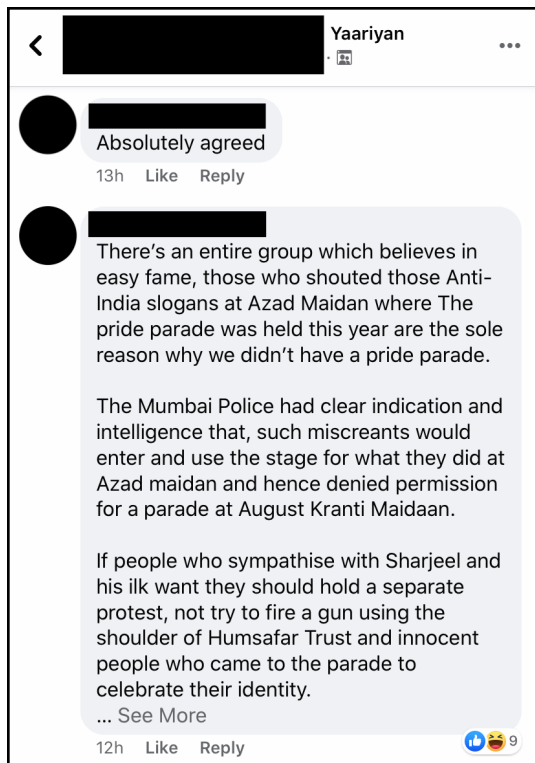
We would like to reiterate that permission was granted for our gathering by Mumbai Police on express conditions, which we communicated to all the attendees and visitors one day before, through our social media channels. The responsibility of the gathering was taken by individuals who signed the permission, and we feel that irresponsible sloganeering under the garb of dissent not just affects the safety of individuals who signed the permission but QAM as an entity.

Our collective believes in the integrity of the Nation and considers the constitution of India as the Supreme law and we strongly condemn anything that goes against the principles of our Constitution and Law.

We further add that QAM will co-operate with legal processes that may be required by law enforcement systems in this matter.

Queer Azadi Mumbai,

Figure 4: Statement by the Queer Azādi Mumbai Committee on the events of Mumbai Pride March 2020, circulated publicly on Facebook and Twitter.



Figures 5 (top-left), 6 (top-right), and 7 (bottom-right): Screenshots of Facebook comments in support of Pallav Patankar, and against the sloganeers.



Indradhanu Pune Pride 2019

February 14 at 12:04 PM · 🌐

👍 Like Page

- 1) Please be informed that any kind of anti-national agenda (Shouting anti national slogans, poster, caste or religion based derogatory remarks etc.) that might disturb national integrity, security & harmony should not be tolerated during Indian LGBT pride walks.
- 2) LGBT community members that are anti national gang supporters can not represent the entire LGBT community, portraying the false image.
- 3) We, being citizens of India, have total right to -----
 - a) Oppose such acts in authorized ways
 - b) Raise voice against such nonsense
 - c) Register FIR in police station, in case, our religious sentiments get hurt.

Figure 8: Facebook post shared by the Pune Pride March organizing committee in the aftermath of the events of Mumbai Pride March 2020.

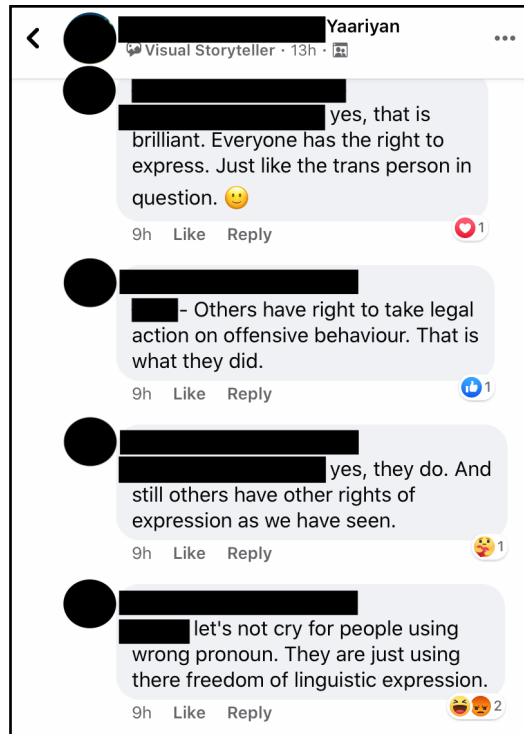
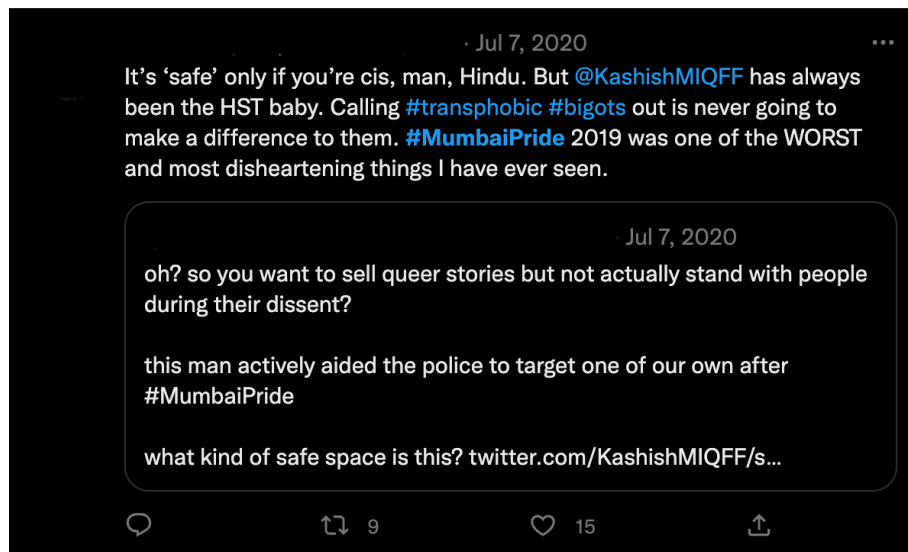


Figure 9: Screenshot of Facebook post with comments defending Patankar’s deadnaming of Kris Chudawala.



Figure 10: Screenshot of Sonzal Welfare Trust's statement against Pride Kashmir on Instagram.

Appendix C: Queer Feminist Negotiations with Hindu Nationalism



Figures 1 (top) and 2 (bottom): Screenshots of tweet condemning Pallav Patankar's directorship of the Kashish Film Festival.

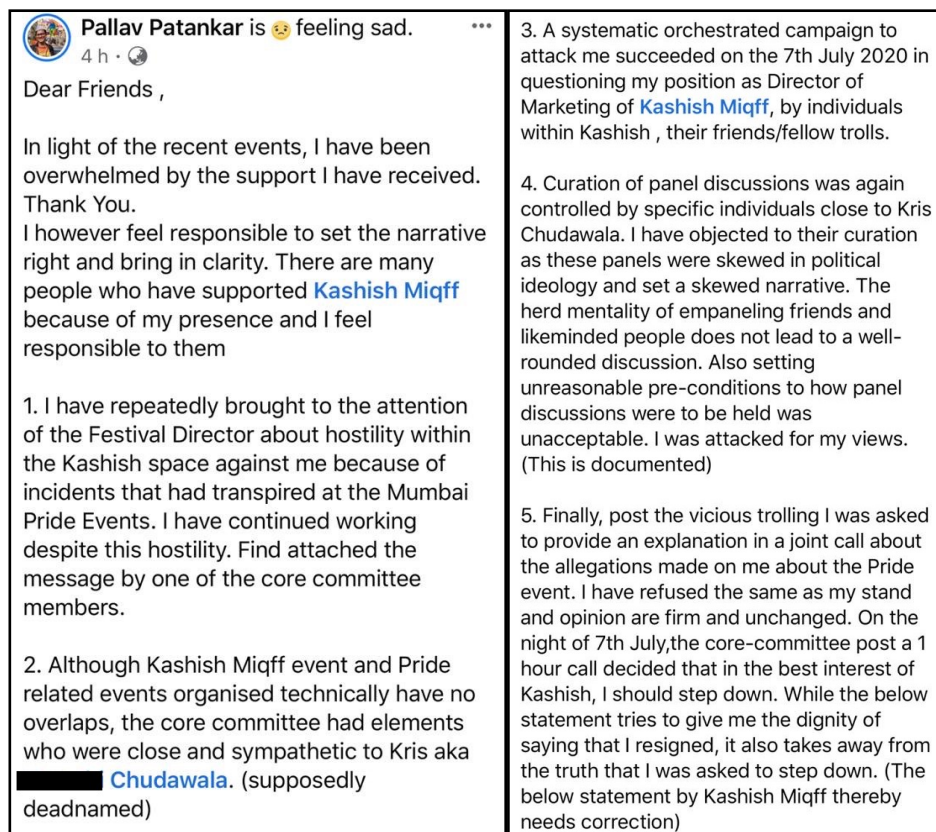


Figure 3: Screenshots of Patankar's post describing his views on his stepping down from the management of Kashish Film Festival.



Figure 4: Ashok Row Kavi's tweet condemning the queer feminist criticism of Patankar's directorship of Kashish Film Festival.



Figures 5 (left) and 6 (right): Ankur's response, on Facebook and Twitter, to Patankar's resignation from Kashish Film Festival's directorship.



Figure 7: Tweets attacking Nazariya QFRG after the essay in *OpIndia*.

Appendix D: Dalit Queer and Trans* Critiques of Hindu Nationalism

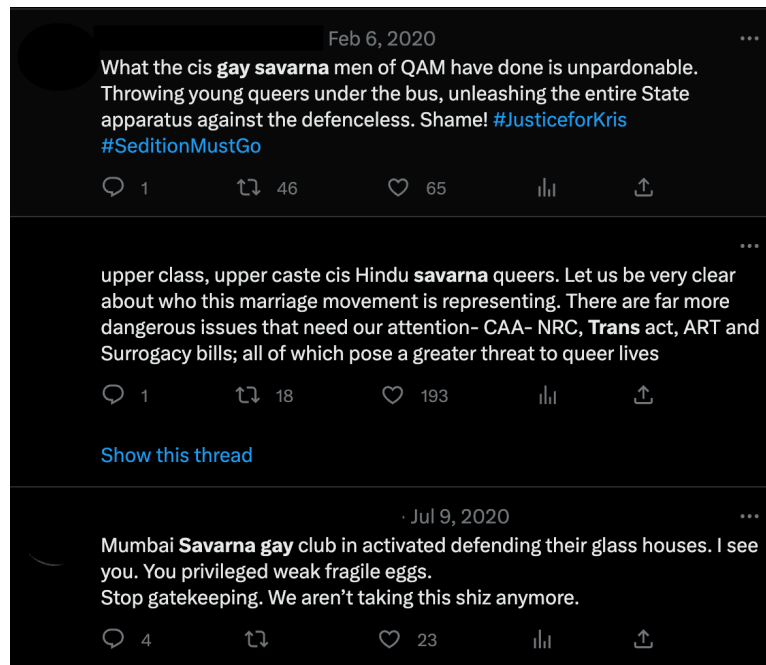


Figure 1: Tweets condemning Pallav Patankar's and QAM's involvement in the arrest of Kris Chudawala.



Figure 2: Tweets condemning Pallav Patankar's and QAM's involvement in the arrest of Kris Chudawala.

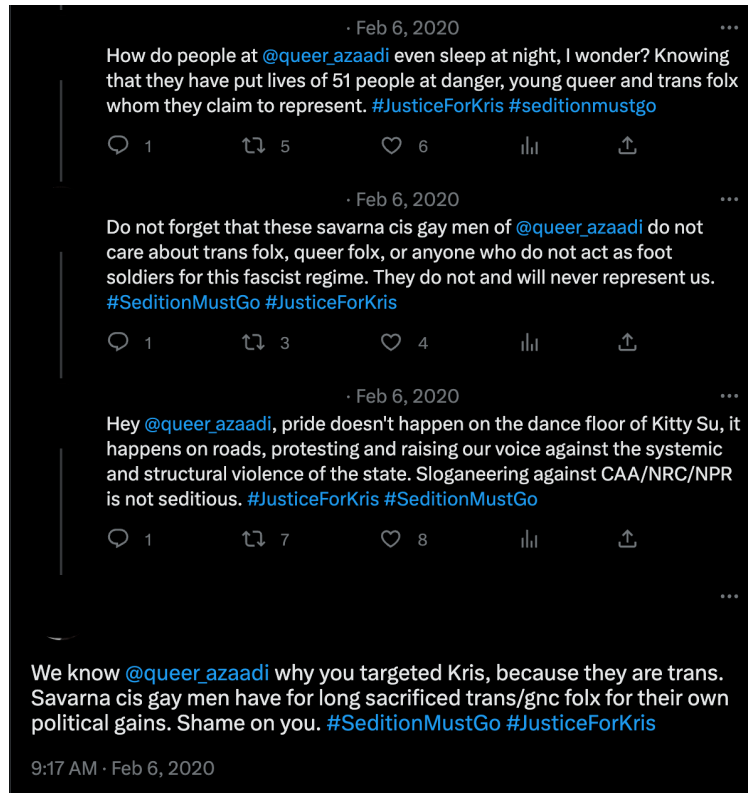


Figure 3: Tweets condemning Pallav Patankar's and QAM's involvement in the arrest of Kris Chudawala.



Figure 4: Tweets condemning Pallav Patankar’s directorship of the Kashish Film Festival.

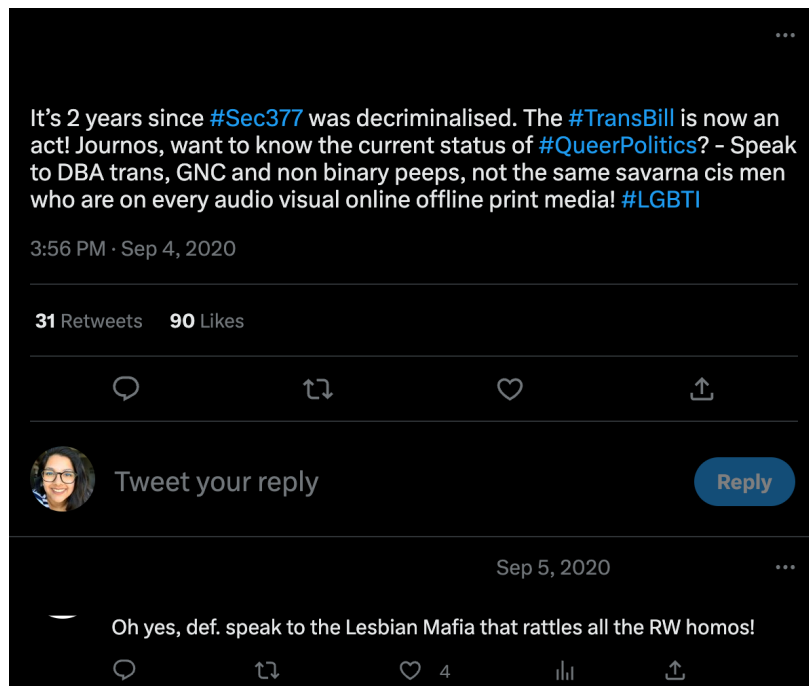


Figure 5: Tweet commenting on the state of LGBTQ activisms after Section 377 was decriminalized.