

FOREWORD

CASTE-ING QUEER IDENTITIES

*Ujjithra Ponniah & Sowjanya Tamalapakula**

Are sexual identities caste marked? How does caste constitute same-sex desire? As a pilot study we interviewed men who identify as Dalit and gay in metropolitan cities. Our study shows that caste pervades the intimate both in how Dalit queer, desire and are desired. Ideas of purity and pollution which would be written off as caste practices found in the rural, constitute the everydayness of urban intimacy. Dalits bodies were transformed into objects of upper caste desire through stigma and violence. Caste pre-constitutes desire, curtailing its radical potential for self and societal transformational. Furthermore, the queer movement by emptying out caste is a space of upper-caste queer persons. The demands of the queer movement hence are limited to what our interlocutors referred to as “bland” politics of legalising marriage. The everyday struggles of safety and livelihood of Dalit queer and trans persons does not find a mention. The Dalit movement, while more accepting also continues to be a masculine, alienating space through its inadequate engagement with sexuality and gender. Two years after the reading down of §377, the realisation of constitutional morality and democracy in same-sex intimacies and politics remains thwarted by the graded hierarchies of caste.

I. INTRODUCTION

After decades of sustained people’s movement and legal activism, on September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (‘the §377 judgement’) that §377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalised consensual homosexual sexual conduct criminalisation was unconstitutional.¹ Taking the spirit of the progressive judgements before,² the Court respected the sexual inclusiveness and the right to privacy of consenting same-sex

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¹ *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, (2018) 10 SCC 1 (‘Navtej Singh Johar’).

² *See Naz Foundation v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, 2009 SCC OnLine Del 1762; *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, (2017) 10 SCC 1.

adults. It is noteworthy that the 2018 judgement repeatedly draws on Dr B. R. Ambedkar's writings on constitutional morality and democracy.³ Ambedkar wrote that "constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It must be cultivated. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it".⁴ He further said that "democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic".⁵ The judgement drawing on Ambedkar recognises that what came in the way of recognising the full potential of constitutional morality or democracy, was the lack of fraternity. Ambedkar defined fraternity as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" and "essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men".⁶ Much like Ambedkar, the judges write that society changes, imbibing constitutional morality at a gradual pace, hence, the role of the highest constitutional court is to safeguard against the excesses of state power and mobocracy.⁷ The judgement while borrowing heavily from the spirit of Ambedkar, does not pay attention to the dynamics of caste in queer relationship. It however sets the tone for scholars to take this forward.

Scholars have engaged with the ways in which caste reproduces without paying adequate attention to desire. One central mechanism through which caste reproduces in the urban setup is through kinship networks.⁸ These networks structure cooperatives, housing markets, IT companies, educational opportunities, businesses and rental markets in the urban areas.⁹ They play a significant role in employment opportunities, better salary, acquiring skills and capital acquisition.¹⁰ Opportunities while opening for in-group members, works by categorical exclusion.¹¹ The option of moving into self-employment for Dalits has its limitations, as networks leading to the formation of caste cartels continue in business.¹² The reproduction of these networks depends on caste endogamous marriages. This

³ Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, (2018) 10 SCC 1, ¶112.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*, ¶141.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*, ¶144.

⁸ Ujjithra Ponniah, *Reproducing Elite Lives: Women in Agarwal Family Businesses* in MAPPING THE ELITE: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND INEQUALITY(2019).

⁹ C.J. Fuller & Hariproya Narasimhan, TAMIL BRAHMANS: THE MAKING OF A MIDDLE-CLASS CASTE (2014); Surinder S. Jhoka & James Manor, CONTESTED HIERARCHIES, PERSISTING IN INFLUENCE: CASTE AND POWER IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INDIA (2017); Sukhadeo Horat, et al., *Urban Rental Housing Market: Caste and Religion Matters in Access*, 50 (26-27) ECONOMIC & POLITICAL WEEKLY (2015).

¹⁰ David Mosse, *Caste and Development: Contemporary Perspectives on a Structure of Discrimination and Advantage*, 110 WORLD DEVELOPMENT 422-436 (2018); Kaivan Munshi, *Caste and the Indian Economy*, (Cambridge Working Papers in Economics, Paper No. 1759, 2017).

¹¹ Charles Tilly, DURABLE INEQUALITY 159 (1999).

¹² Harish Damodaran, INDIA'S NEW CAPITALISTS: CASTE, BUSINESS, AND INDUSTRY IN A MODERN NATION (2008); Kaivan Munshi, *Caste and the Indian Economy*, (Cambridge Working Papers in Economics, Paper No. 1759, 2017); Sharad Chari, FRATERNAL CAPITAL: PEASANT-WORKERS, SELF-MADE MEN, AND GLOBALIZATION IN PROVINCIAL INDIA (2004); Barbara Harriss-White, et al., *Dalit and Adivasi Participation in India's Business Economy*, 1(1) Journal of Social Inclusion Studies 76 – 105 (2014).

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is found to be true across the caste divide. Heterosexual and caste endogamous desire then becomes essential for the reproduction of unequal social structures. Just as scholars working on caste have not focussed on desire, scholars working on sexuality have not paid adequate attention to caste.¹³ Homosexual desire gets constituted as the other and an aberration. A few parents of gay men have publicly accepted their gay sons' sexual orientation and right to marriage.¹⁴ A matrimonial advertisement in which a mother seeks a same-caste, vegetarian groom for her gay son, highlights the casteist nature of intimacy among gay men in Indian society.¹⁵ Prior to the reading down of the §377 judgement, the criminal status of queer persons was the major concern of the queer movement.¹⁶

Two years later, as educators in a premier higher educational institute, we see students more comfortably embodying their sexual identity in conversations and on social media. Representation of same sex relationships in mainstream Bollywood movies has slightly increased. This year Dutee Chand came out as the first lesbian Indian athlete.¹⁷ However, we are interested in engaging not with the exception but what appears to be the rule. Taking the spirit of Ambedkar in the judgement, we wish to engage with caste in queer identity and politics. Does caste permeate same-sex desire? How do Dalit queers identify themselves? Does caste come into queer politics? This piece emerges from our preliminary explorations into caste, desire, gender and queer identities. It is based on the case studies of two gay Dalit men (Parikshit and Gaurav),¹⁸ Both are the first in their family to be educated. They are currently employed and live in Delhi. This piece is structured in the following manner: **Part II** is on caste-ing queerness and queer-ing caste; **Part III** looks at desire, love and identity; and **Part IV** looks at costs to the queer movement by not incorporating anti-caste struggles. **Part V** offers concluding remarks.

¹³ Nivedita Menon, *Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality: Contests over 'Gender' in India*, 91(1) FEMINIST REVIEW 94-112 (2009).

¹⁴ Nithya Iyer, *Harrish Iyer's mother Padma Iyer places matrimonial ad for gay son in newspaper*, May 20, 2015, available at <https://www.india.com/news/india/harrish-iyers-mother-padma-iyer-places-matrimonial-ad-for-gay-son-in-newspaper-391331/> (Last visited on September 14, 2020).

¹⁵ Piyasree Dasgupta, *Iyer Groom Wanted for Son: Cheer It or Not, India's First Gay Matrimonial Ad is not 'Casteist'*, FIRSTPOST, May 22, 2015, available at <https://www.google.com/amp/www.firstpost.com/living/iyer-groom-wanted-for-son-cheer-it-or-not-indias-first-gay-matrimonial-ad-is-not-casteist-2256294.html/amp> (Last visited on September 29, 2020).

¹⁶ Sumit Saurabh Srivastava, *Disciplining the 'Desire': 'Straight' State and LGBT Activism in India*, 63(3) SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN 368-385 (2014).

¹⁷ NEWSCLICK, *Dutee Chand reveals she loves another woman; Here's why it matters*, May 19, 2019, available at <https://www.newsclick.in/dutee-chand-reveals-shes-love-another-woman-heres-why-it-matters> (Last visited on September 14, 2020).

¹⁸ Names have been changed for anonymity.

II. CASTE-ING QUEERNESS AND QUEER-ING CASTENESS

Caste and sexual identity are inseparable for Parikshit and Gaurav. At an early age, both knew that they were drawn to the same sex and said that their queerness did not cause them discomfort. It is noteworthy that this comfort preceded the §377 judgement. However, their caste identity was not as easily embodied as their sexual identity. Gaurav was the first in his family to be educated. He says,

“I did a lot of introspection about why I am [more]bothered about this particular caste identity than the queer identity... so that has been very clear with me. I can wear my queer identity on my sleeve more strongly but with my caste identity, I feel I could never wear it on my sleeves.[Y]ou know queer is a very Western concept, it is a very neoliberal concept, it is modern and you are celebrated. This Instagram and FB they celebrate it, ‘Oh wow you are a queer, you can be my friend’.These are celebrated but they will not celebrate Hijras; they are backward. But if you are an English speaker, Queer subject in India suddenly becomes a subject. So, I think language, you know, is another part of it. I know what queer means I can be open about queer politics, that is very celebrated. But at the same time if I say I am a Dalit, then you become Indian right, you are no longer this Western modern subject, no longer running behind first world politics and suddenly you become a backward subject”.

Gaurav shows the inbuilt hierarchies that operate within the two identities he straddles. While identifying as queer made him mobile, modern and likeable, his Dalit identity continued to be perceived as backward. The ‘right’ kind of queer had the caste capital of language. Education and language emerge as an important source of mobility and acceptance with Parikshit. By converting caste capital into ‘modern’ capital, upper castes appear to be casteless¹⁹ Caste then becomes an experience of the lower castes alone. This focus is skewed and does not enabling questioning the hierarchical and graded system that organises social and material life. Recalling the importance of English education, Parikshit spoke about his grandmother. When she moved to Bengal from Bangladesh, she would go around trying to teach herself to read English, from newspapers that were thrown. He says it made him wonder why she repeated the story or why she was reading newspapers that were thrown. With time he realised, no one would give her the newspapers to read. Her resilient spirit and the intergenerational nature of

¹⁹ Satish Deshpande, *Towards a Biography of the ‘General Category’*, 48(15) ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY (2013).

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discrimination, stayed with Parikshit as he moved to the urban from growing up in rural South India.

The urban compounded his identification with his caste identity, by introducing queer politics without caste. Parikshit says,

“When I read Gautam Bhan’s book or Pramada Menon’s book, no one was talking about queerness with caste...the default of the queer movement was the upper caste. Caste cemented the aesthetics of queerness. Desirability was very much tied to savarna middle class, good English, good family. That did not seem like the queerness I could have”.

Reflecting on the §377 judgement, Parikshit felt that it was a common minimum agenda. People from the marginalised castes were the most affected when it came to §377. They were the ones who were begging and doing sex work on the streets, making them vulnerable to police brutalities. However, Parikshit felt the movement sought ‘respectability’ by asking IIT students²⁰ and alumni to submit a support petition. IIT’s are “institutions of national importance” and its students represent ‘merit’ which is seen as an upper-caste virtue.²¹ Parikshit says, “as the movement became more ‘respectable’ it meant there was little space for the marginalised castes.” The face of the movement were the upper castes and not the Dalits.

Queerness, by being emptied out of caste, is alienating rather than empowering for Gaurav and Parikshit. Parikshit has been active in the Dalit movement and acknowledges that there is a lack of awareness about sexuality amongst the Dalit leadership. When he started talking about his caste identity with queerness, he was advised to focus on his caste identity alone. Parikshit is however more sympathetic to the Dalit movement than to queer politics because of the economic marginalisation of the former. He says,

“Dalit queer people come from very marginalised spaces and they are economically backward. They are really struggling for everyday survival. Many of them are trans people, sex workers and homeless people. I am not even like zero [point] one percent of this population. I think their struggle is that of survival”.

²⁰ For further details see THE WIRE, *20 IIT Students and Alumni File Petition, Move SC to Decriminalise Section 377*, May 14, 2018, available at <https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/20-iit-students-alumni-file-petition-sc-section-377> (Last visited on September 28, 2020).

²¹ Ajantha Subramanian, *The Meritocrats: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste* in MAPPING THE ELITE: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND INEQUALITY 37 – 70(2019).

Caste identity is clearly more stigmatising than the queer identity, for both Parikshit and Gaurav. From the narratives of Gaurav and Parikshit, it is seen that queer politics is caste-blind while caste politics is queer-blind. This leaves those who identify as Dalit queer as being caught between the interstices of both, without belonging to either completely. Gaurav dealt with his location by having meaningful relationships with Dalit straight or queer men without aligning himself strongly with either movements. Parikshit on the other hand aligned more closely with the Dalit movement, while finding association with other mobile and politically minded Dalit queer men, to critique the upper caste queer movement.

III. 'BLAND' QUEER POLITICS

There are costs to the queer politics by not engaging with caste. Parikshit repeatedly used the phrase 'bland' when it came to queer politics. When asked to elaborate, he said that the queer movement seemed to regard queer as a stand-alone identity. This according to him, meant that the queer movement did not make demands for right to livelihood, education or health. These demands, he says, might not be important for the Brahmin queer but "in the absence of livelihood there is no real meaning of being queer. What is the point in saying oh you can kiss in public if you cannot be alive in public?" The material disparities brought about by historical discrimination needed to be incorporated in the queer movement, for its political potential to be realised. The other context, in which the 'blandness' of the queer movement surfaces according to Parikshit, is in its demand for legalising marriage for same-sex couples. He says,

"[i]n a society governed by caste, inter-caste marriages mean only two Brahmin men or women can marry each other. Legalising same-sex marriages does not mean much for other people. Similarly, this articulation that 'love is equal' which the queer movement makes, is a tamed demand, therefore it gets wide acceptance".

Parikshit draws attention to how marriages or love, hold little value without addressing caste. When love is governed by caste or is inaccessible to the Dalit queer, it can be an effect embodied only by the upper castes. Gaurav echoes Parikshit's criticism of legalising same-sex marriages. He advocates other models of partnership that are based on friendship rather than the Brahmanical institution of marriage. Marriage, according to him, strengthens caste through endogamy. In the queer movement's demand for legalising same sex marriage, Gaurav says it shows how the queer caste elites are divorced from the realities of caste and marriages in India.

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Just as the queer politics in urban spaces thinks caste divides their movement, the Dalit movement in India has primarily focussed on heterosexual desire. The post-Ambedkarite Dalit movement has been a largely masculine space.²² Most of the debates in the Dalit movement are centred around the inter-caste marriage between Dalit men and upper-caste women. There are uncritical understandings that inter-caste marriage solves caste question. Dalit women have critiqued the unilateral promotions of inter-caste marriage as a masculine assertion.²³ The sexual desire of Dalit men is constructed by the upper-caste notions of beauty, body image and sexual purity.²⁴ While the Dalit women autobiographies mostly discussed Dalit patriarchy and casteism in the larger society, Dalit men have written on Dalit male sexual desire for upper-caste women.²⁵ However, Dalit women's sexuality is described only in the light of rape and sexual exploitation by upper-caste men. Even the violence against Dalit women who entered inter-caste marriage is not addressed by the male-centred Dalit movement.²⁶ Heterosexuality is a system power that provides privilege even to the marginalised sections like Blacks.²⁷ The assertion of heterosexuality is a privilege that the Dalit man finds difficult to shed. Masculinity and heterosexuality are considered aspects of honour and self-respect. Therefore, there are many instance of caste violence triggered by Dalit men sporting moustache or riding bikes.²⁸ While the experiences of Dalit men take up the space of mainstream Dalit movement, Dalit women's experiences and issues of queer sexualities are still at the margins.

IV. CASTE-ING DESIRE

Desire is both personal and relational. As a result, it involves both self-stylisation and a self-other relationship.²⁹ Caste pervades the intimate both in how Dalit queer, desire and are desired. Ideas of purity and pollution which would be written off as caste practices found in the rural, constitute the everydayness of urban intimacy. Gaurav said that there had been times where the person he was

²² Smita M. Patil, *Delving into the Vibrant Articulation of Dalit Women on Caste and Gender*, THE WIRE, September 1, 2018, available at <https://thewire.in/books/dalit-women-caste-gender-book-review> (Last visited on September 29, 2020).

²³ Gogu Shyamala, *Nallapoddu: Dalitha Sthreela Sahityam 1921-2002* (2003).

²⁴ Sowjaya Tamalapakula, *Politics of Inter-caste Marriage Among Dalits in India: The Political as Personal*, 59(2) ASIAN SURVEY 315-336 (2019).

²⁵ Sharankumar Limbale, *THE OUTCASTE: AKKARMASHI* 71(2003).

²⁶ Rekha Raj, *Dalit Women as Political Agents* in *THE PROBLEM OF CASTE: READINGS IN ECONOMY, POLITY AND SOCIETY* 355-66 (2014).

²⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT* (2008).

²⁸ Riding bikes is a marker of economic upward mobility as well as the assertion of masculinity. Therefore, Dalit men riding bikes or sporting moustache are contested by upper-castes. See Sambaiah Gundimeda, *Will the Victims of Caste Violence in Andhra's Peda Gottipadu Village Get Justice?*, THE WIRE, January 29, 2018, available at <https://thewire.in/caste/will-victims-caste-violence-andhras-peda-gottipadu-village-get-justice> (Last visited on September 15, 2020).

²⁹ Henrietta L. Moore, *STILL LIFE: HOPES, DESIRES AND SATISFACTIONS*(2011).

to sleep with would insist that he takes a bath. Gaurav found this insistence to be strange and said he would reiterate, “I am clean”. Similarly, Parikshit said that if he felt a little lazy it would be ascribed to his caste. At a Delhi party, he was told, “Dalit don’t shower every day, also you are used to hard labour, so you smell”. Another stereotype associated with the Dalit queer was that they are “raw in bed, like a wild animal.” It is discernible from these vignettes that desire is pre-constituted, according to caste. The Dalit body much like the Black man’s body is both to be feared and desired. The potential for ‘rawness’ was alluring but the fear of impurity meant that first a ritual bath was required. The visceral body aesthetics was caste marked. The Dalit body was desirable but only after it had been fixed by the upper caste gaze. In the process, Dalits bodies were transformed into objects of upper caste desire through stigma and violence. Sex was also associated with violence. If one identified as a Dalit femme, Parikshit said, one was considered the most undesirable to whom things could only be done to. Gaurav, who identifies as a Dalit femme, said there were many instances when he was treated with no respect. He felt the need to draw a boundary during sex, which was soon violated.

Caste also filters courtships on dating apps like *Grindr*. Gaurav recounts an instance where he faced blunt casteism. Someone he met on the app asked him for his surname. He then came to Gaurav’s home and asked him curtly if he was a Dalit. Gaurav was shocked and asked how he knew his caste identity. The man began to abuse Gaurav using casteist slurs in Punjabi like *Bhand* and *Kanjar*. Gaurav says he was quick to wrap up the session. On another instance he met a man on Tinder. This person had gone to St Stephen’s, a prestigious Delhi University college, and then to Oxford University. He asked Gaurav for his surname and then went on to assume that Gaurav was an upper caste too. He told Gaurav that he was pleased that they both were upper-caste and they could continue the relationship. Gaurav says, “I did not want to talk about caste and look how I cannot get rid of it”. On another occasion, an upper caste man Gaurav was in a relationship with, saw the need to come home and insult him for living in a Dalit colony. Gaurav says,

“I do not think I can do away with it[caste], I don’t know why I am reduced to this subject who is a Dalit. Whether I am hygienic or not that is a whole other thing. I do not know why there is this whole thing that I live in a certain place or I am polluted, because there are pigs around my house whereas my house is clean or not that does not matter”.

Despite having the necessary social and cultural capital through his education, if it was not his body, it was his place of stay that loudly proclaimed Gaurav’s caste. Gaurav seems to struggle to see any rationale in the stigma he faced. Many of the other men Gaurav met through dating apps found the need to emphasise their surnames when they would introduce themselves. On one

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instance, after sex, the man said, “didn’t you realise, I fucked you so hard, I am Gujjar”. Dhiren Bhorsa who studies geographies of urban desire on Grindr, in an interview, notes that, some profiles clearly mention that “Good Jaat-8 inches” and others mention “no SC/ST and only Brahmins”.³⁰ He further says,

“In gay parties when people discover I am from Rajasthan, I am quickly asked if I am a Rajput or a Brahmin. This only tells us of the spaces we are reproducing. People are always calculating the kind of bodies that can inhabit them and their desires”.

The sexual inequality translates into other dimensions of the relationship. Parikshit speaks about his frustrations of being in a relationship with upper-caste men. He says,

“How do you live with somebody or love someone when you see that the opportunities mentioned to them every day, you are not given? The concessions they are given, the kind of job opportunities they are given, the way their colleagues treat them, completely alien to how you are treated at your work. How can you hold love in a profoundly unjust setting? I think that for me a far more real a problem, so even if it is somebody I admire or like, I am unable to get away from the idea that they will just be more successful than I can be because of the way society works. Their dreams are far more achievable”.

Parikshit, who was in relationship with an upper-caste man, speaks about the disparity in opportunities, treatment and realisation of dreams. He asks a succinct question about how does one love in such unjust settings. The heart of the desiring subject was constituted by caste. In the process, desire is prefixed and already constituted.

V. CONCLUSION

The reading down of §377 is a landmark judgement. Fears of harassment through criminalisation have been addressed, facilitating many to embrace their sexual identities openly. However, as Ambedkar argues, constitutional morality cannot be actualised without realising fraternity in social life. The freedom to love, desire and have sex with whomsoever one wishes, is essential for individualisation of the self and society. It carries with it the radical potential of challenging caste patriarchies that form the underbelly of Indian social structures. However, its radical potential has been circumscribed by caste moralities. As shown in this

³⁰ Nirthika Pandita, *Queer Grounds for Prejudice*, THE ASIAN AGE, January 18, 2019, available at <https://www.asianage.com/life/more-features/170119/queer-grounds-for-prejudice.html> (Last visited on September 10, 2020).

piece, Dalit queer men who identify as a gay shoulder both the identities however struggle more with their caste identities. Their sexual identity opens up the possibility of refashioning themselves as modern subjects, while their caste identities grounds them in backwardness. Desire and intimacy were prefigured by ideas of how Dalit bodies should look, behave and smell. Both the interlocutors spoke about the exhaustion that came with being in relationships with upper-caste men. The queer movement by not being anti-caste and the Dalit movement by not being queer was missing out on their political potential of being transformative.