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# Capitalizing on desire: (re)producing and consuming class in Indian ‘gay’ pornography

Michiel Baas

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the emerging popularity of same-sex pornographic content in India featuring fitness trainers and bodybuilders. The article argues that its production and consumption is governed by socio-economic difference that is revealing for the resilience of (middle-)class boundaries. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, the analysis is complemented by engaging with informants’ social media updates and the un/intentionality of their homoerotic layering. By focusing on the trajectory of one trainer who now provides escort services and features in pornographic movies, the article shows that such productions need to be understood as amalgamated with and indivisible from non-pornographic content depicting near-naked muscular men. It treats homoerotically suggestive social media updates, YouTube productions that warn men against the pitfalls of male modelling and the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, and actual same-sex ‘porn’ as existing within a shared continuum through which we can understand different productions of desire and desirability.

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## Introduction

Before boarding his flight, Selvam<sup>1</sup> had texted me that he expected traffic from Chennai airport to be unpredictable and that he might be late for our appointment at TGI Fridays in the suburb of Teynampet. As a heterosexual gay-for-pay actor and model, Selvam makes money out of porn work (Lee and Sullivan 2016). He supplements this with performing as a go-go dancer at gay parties and providing various sexual services on an escort basis. Having just finished a pornographic videoshoot in Mumbai, he had planned to go home and freshen up first. Usually in firm control of all logistics, for this shoot he was collaborating with a third party and had not been altogether sure of the facilities beforehand. Somewhat relieved, he had texted me that the shoot had taken place in a five-star hotel room and he had been able to take a shower afterwards.

Dressed in a loose-fitting red Adidas track suit, his muscular build still manages to stand out as we make our way inside, security guards sizing him up and patrons briefly resting their gaze on him. Considering his looks and physique, I had once asked

**CONTACT** Michiel Baas  [michielbaas@yahoo.com](mailto:michielbaas@yahoo.com), [baas@eth.mpg.de](mailto:baas@eth.mpg.de)

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whether he had ever considered a career in Kollywood – Tamil Nadu’s film industry named after the suburb of Kodambakkam – a suggestion which he found flattering although ludicrous, considering his lack in terms of connections and socio-economic background. ‘It’s not a system based on talent. Or not purely on talent’, he explained. Surely I had noticed the number of sons and cousins of actors who also featured in the movies? Considering the small town he had grown up in located on the outskirts of the Greater Chennai region and his impoverished family, he felt that he had to live with the chances he had been meted out on the day he was born. It partly explained why he was now making money out of porn and sex work, but it was not the entire story. Bluntly he had put it as follows: ‘What’s the point of having a hot body if you cannot enjoy or make others enjoy ... It’s not going to be a museum piece’. It was definitely a more outspoken view than I had encountered in the near-decade I had spent conducting anthropological research among Indian fitness trainers and bodybuilders. Sharing my surprise, he had responded ‘it’s all in your mind ... for me I just think someone is enjoying my body’.

After having come across Selvam’s erotically suggestive social media updates a year earlier – posing in tiny swimwear and using banana and eggplant emoticons to get his message across – I had approached him with the idea of including his life-story in a chapter for a book I was working on at the time. This book – *Muscular India: Masculinity, Mobility and the New Middle Class* (Baas 2020) – which has since come out, takes as a point of departure the popularity of the lean, muscular bodily ideal and the emerging profession of fitness or personal trainer in urban India. It investigates the possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility for men of lower middle-class backgrounds who have received most of their education in a vernacular language. This new middle class contrasts with an older ‘upper’ middle class who tend to take the position of custodians of socio-cultural capital in Indian society and who are educated in English (Van Wessel 2004; Fernandes 2006; Brosius 2010; Baviskar and Ray 2015; Srivastava 2015).<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon theorization by Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and Wacquant (2001), *Muscular India* argues that, to a certain degree, bodily capital can substitute a lack in social and cultural capital otherwise, although this is contextually bound by the gym itself. Even if this bodily capital equates a muscularity and vascularity popularized by Bollywood actors and is framed as (sexually) attractive to the opposite sex in popular media, my interactions with trainers and bodybuilders suggested that this was rarely enacted upon. Selvam was a notable exception here. Over time he had shared snippets of his life with me via WhatsApp and Messenger, because of which I had been able to sketch a fragmented picture of his trajectory from ‘fitness work’ to porn and sex work. Meeting him that evening at TGI Fridays was the last opportunity I had to fill the holes in his life story as he had shared it with me so far. While *Muscular India* is mainly interested in Selvam’s life-course trajectory, what I seek to interrogate in this article instead is my quest for completion itself. With reference to Selvam’s case, what I mean by this is that initially my interest in his life story mainly revolved around developing an understanding of what had led him to transition from personal training to capitalizing on his erotic and sexual potential and catering to an all-male clientele. However, I gradually came to realize that inevitable to such an approach is the elusive idea of arriving at a ‘complete’ understanding of such a transition, which therefore relies on clearly predetermined and opposing start and end points; from fitness/personal trainer to porn and sex worker. Instead, I found that if we want to understand what might motivate a trainer to become involved in sex and porn work, it makes

more sense to treat these fields as forming part of the same continuum<sup>3</sup> in which the body is already layered with multiple and often incongruous notions of what makes it (sexually) attractive. To explore this in greater detail, I will examine how the muscular male body is interpreted and consumed along socio-economic/class lines. For this, it is crucial to better appreciate how this body is 'narrated' in popular Indian movies, what it is associated with in lifestyle magazines such as the Indian edition of *Men's Health*, and the way trainers and bodybuilders themselves use hashtags to communicate various ideas and possibilities about their bodies.

This article draws upon a decade-long research involvement through participant observation among and semi-structured interviews with male trainers, bodybuilders and others involved in India's burgeoning fitness and health industry. In particular, the article focuses on Selvam and two other men he regularly collaborates with for explicit photoshoots and videoshoots. Their experiences will be brought into dialogue with the ostensive homoerotic layering of the social media updates of informants who are not involved in porn or sex work. These social media updates rarely intentionally or explicitly reach out to a possible gay fanbase. Yet the way such updates get interpreted by and shared among men interested in same-sex contact points to entrenched notions of socio-economic difference. My Indian gay friends' experiences with and fantasies about the availability of my informants for sexual services underline this. Investigating the production and consumption of porn within this broader context allows us to build a nuanced understanding of its emergence in India and what it signifies. It paves the way to discuss porn (and sex) work in a way that relies less on 'extreme positions' (for instance, seeing Selvam as an outlier in terms of the transition he has made) and more as part of a momentum that knows manifold but not hierarchically sorted dimensions in terms of acceptability or commonality.

### Gay for pay and desire

Before coming to Chennai, I had discussed Selvam's case with a gay friend<sup>4</sup> from Delhi. Even if I had not shared Selvam's actual name, my friend instantly guessed who I was meeting. Without further ado, he had opened a folder on his laptop which contained numerous pornographic clips, some featuring Selvam seductively gazing into the camera and showing off his body, while in others he was involved in oral and anal intercourse with similarly muscular men. The research project I was involved in focused primarily on questions of upward socio-economic mobility and therefore I saw no use for the actual videos, declining the offer to copy them onto my laptop. In my interactions with Selvam I had always emphasized that my interest in him and his work was strictly professional. Conducting research among men whose bodies approximate an ideal type among gay men, I had often found myself confronted by my own gaze. What precisely was I seeing when I encountered these men in the gym, meeting them for coffee at Starbucks or observing them perform on stage at a bodybuilding competition? At first glance, Selvam's case contrasted markedly with that of other trainers and bodybuilders whose life-course trajectories I had mapped. Sex and sexual desire seemed explicitly and decidedly absent from their lives. A girlfriend, I was repeatedly told, would just get in the way of workout routines, while a wife would make following through on rigorous diets extremely complicated.<sup>5</sup> There were some who had explored sexual liaisons with female clients but

not only was this a no-no for the gyms that employed them, it almost always seemed to end badly.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, these men's social media updates indicated an awareness of the erotic qualities of their bodies. Flexing their muscles while capturing themselves in the mirror or having asked a buddy to snap a picture, social media uploads were frequently embellished with hashtags such as #sexybeast, #hunk, #hotboy and #humpday.

Almost all of the men I interacted with and interviewed over the years identified as heterosexual, which contrasted with the explicit homoerotically saturated photoshoots they engaged in. Asked about these, informants would hold that such photoshoots were merely an opportunity to showcase what they had achieved in terms of bodily transformation. The suggestion that the audience's gaze at a bodybuilding competition might venture beyond an appreciation of the physical dimensions on display was ardently dismissed. If it had occurred to them at all, they vowed that their focus was determinedly on their posing, making sure that the jury got to see the best of their muscularity and vascularity. In contrast, the explicit comments that social media posts generated did confirm that there was a rather blatant sexual dimension to their followers' appreciation. Could not the same be argued about the applause, cheering and whistling their bodies received while on stage? As with my quest for 'completion' in terms of Selvam's life-course trajectory, I came to realize that these questions rested too firmly and too narrowly on the idea of difference informed by my interaction with gay friends who themselves belonged to the English-speaking upper middle class, and thus a very different stratum of society than most of my informants. Often these friends had mocked me, suggesting that rather unscrupulously I had found the perfect research project to involve myself in. Probing me for gossip about the sexual availability of my informants, I was assured that 'such men' were 'easily to be had'. In the context of Delhi, Jat men<sup>7</sup> were always in for it, 'not even necessarily for money', as a Delhi friend had put it. Having resided in Bangalore as well, he assured me that his experiences with Malayali men compared favourably as well. Well hung, physically strong and muscular, he swore that 'they are quite the meat eaters', a double-entendre he assumed I would understand for all its intent and purposes. Most importantly, 'they' were not particularly perturbed by same-sex contact. As another gay friend had confided in me: 'It doesn't mean much to them ... They don't think of it as an issue'.

### Speaking of porn, sex and attraction

In an editorial to *Porn Studies*, Attwood, Maina, and Smith (2018) suggest that even if there is ongoing incitement to speak about sex, the way we approach the topic of sexual issues is strongly policed. A scholarly approach offers some legitimacy but, as the editors' note, it remains a problematic area of study to strike a proper attitude (2018, 1). This is complicated by the persistence of anti/pro voices that not only divide the audience but also infer that pornography requires a standpoint that exists in stark opposition to another; it either judges or responds to judgement. Whereas academic work offers an alternative to this kind of rhetoric with its emphasis on objectivity, '[t]he detailed examination of the texts, images and fantasies of sex may feel dangerously close to self-revelation ...' (2018, 1). It is therefore not surprising that research into pornography and porn work continues to be met with suspicion, disdain and hostility, even facing explicit rejection as a valid field of study (2018, 2 drawing on Gabriel 2017, 308).

In a crucial contribution to *Porn Studies*, Nathaniel Burke (2014) discusses a researcher's positionality vis-à-vis pornography when it is the object of one's study. Noting how one's position has a bearing on the final written product, he found that the relationship between his writing and the people he studied put him in a complicated spot (2014, 71). As a feminist, he felt it necessary to address gender and sexual inequality in the way they are constituted in the product of a gay adult film through hiring and directing processes (2014, 71). However, he also realized that his research questions with respect to this could be understood to render porn workers as complicit in the kind of inequalities he was seeking to highlight (2014, 71). Considering the already stigmatized professional occupation he was looking into, would he not be contributing to this? The introduction to a special issue on 'audiences and consumers of porn' for *Porn Studies* edited by Sharif Mowlabocus and Rachel Wood provides important perspective here as well. Their opening question 'who are pornography consumers?' (Mowlabocus and Wood 2015, 118) immediately evoked my response: are not we all? Studies of the sheer volume of online pornographic content underlines how omnipresent 'porn' is, yet its consumption is rarely directly admitted to. Who knows the pornographic preferences of friends and family? The moment a researcher acknowledges having an interest in porn, this suggests viewership and inside knowledge. Florian Vörös' (2015) study resonates with Burke's feminist concerns here. Offering a self-reflexive account of an audience reception study that examines gay, bisexual and heterosexual cisgender men's everyday uses of pornography, Vörös turns to the notion of ethnographic complicity and the tensions that emerge from this navigation of a treacherous terrain of pornographic pleasure and academic scientism. This article, therefore, responds to the need for further reflexivity for which auto-ethnography has been suggested as a useful way to approach the matter in hand (Blinne 2012). However, even considering the readers of this journal, this entails a risk of sorts. It requires a dedication that embraces feelings of the body, heart and mind, eventually resulting in a safe space where sexual stories can be expressed freely regardless of the self-pleasure (potentially) involved (Blinne 2012, 954-955). Therefore, the unease I experienced because of my friends' jocular remarks, and them forwarding Selvam's (and other's) pornographic material (thus seeing him and colleagues at work, so to speak), should be unpacked for what it signified about my own position in the field as a gay male and the way I relate to my research material.

Initially, the observation that had led me to develop an interest in Indian fitness and bodybuilding scene was its rather abrupt centrality in Bollywood movies. This development can be traced to *Om Shanti Om* (Khan and Puri, dirs 2007) in which the lead actor Shah Rukh Khan reveals his six-pack abdominals in one of the movie's hit songs. His dramatic bodily transformation was discussed extensively in mainstream media at the time. While for an older generation of fitness trainers Salman Khan's hit-movie *Pyaar Kiya to Darna Kya* (Khan, dir. 1998) had already given them an inclination of what could be achieved with their (Indian) bodies, its appeal did not immediately resonate with a middle-class audience. Shah Rukh Khan's transformation was followed by that of Aamir Khan, who took this to another level of muscularity altogether in the action blockbuster *Ghajini* (Murugadoss, dir. 2008). It fuelled a rapid growth of the fitness industry and when I conducted fieldwork in a small neighbourhood gym in South Delhi in 2013-2014, gyms had already become an indelible part of India's urban landscape.

Questions that had initially propelled my research included what this muscular body was precisely about and why it had seized the imagination of middle-class men in the way that it had. This had also led me to wonder where these trainers who had now found employment in the burgeoning fitness industry had emerged and originated from. The questions that I would later come to explore in relation to sex and porn work did not arise from the field itself but instead found expression through the commentary that my research received over time. Gay friends had repeatedly suggested that, rather opportunistically, I had situated my research in a candy store with the owner absent and the *laddos* up for grabs. This aligned with the feedback I received from (male and female) academic audiences over time. At lectures and conferences the question would come up of whether these men were also involved in sex work. Were they preyed upon by female clients for sexual services? The relative absence of experiences of sexual conquests or even an understanding of their masculine bodies as embodying a potential for sex in personal narratives (something which in itself already contrasted with the way they would label their bodies with various hashtags) thus juxtaposed with the way these men were reflected on by others.

When I first encountered Selvam online and realized that he was in fact capitalizing on his sexual or erotic potential, my first inclination was to treat this as a deviation from the norm. Interacting with him, however, forced me to reconsider this assumption. Instead, I realized that the way I approached his life-course trajectory rested too firmly on the assumption that this was in fact a deviation. Being gay myself, my attempt to communicate 'professionalism' (convincing my friends that I was not interested in these men; repeatedly reconfirming to Selvam that I was only interested in him in a research capacity) had added to this in an unproductive way. More than once Selvam suggested that he saw his sex and porn work as a 'natural' outcome of providing personal training. In rough brush strokes he painted a picture of not nearly making the income he required to pay for his own fitness ambitions and taking care of his family, to getting involved in photo-shoots to build up a modelling portfolio and potentially supplementing his income this way, to being asked to perform as a go-go dancer and, finally, this leading to paid-for 'muscle worship' and 'light' sexual services as being masturbated by a client. The way he presented the decision-making process that had characterized his trajectory made it seem profoundly logical. Questioning my own unease helped upset and question a more normative approach to the matter that had unwittingly made me think of Selvam – who identifies as heterosexual and who is married and has a young daughter – as a victim instead of an agent who was firmly in control of the business that his body represented.

### Porn in India/Indian porn

While my interest in the emerging field of (self-produced)<sup>8</sup> gay pornography in India originates from earlier work on the emerging fitness and bodybuilding scene in the country, the focus on India should not be read as one simply oriented towards gaining insight into regional difference, as Baishya and Mini (2020) also caution against. In doing so, one would run the risk of othering and exoticizing a field that nowadays relies on shared online technologies that makes content globally accessible. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think of the productions Selvam and colleagues feature in as

one-on-one copies from Western counterparts. Studies that have looked into pornographic content creation in a Western context therefore do not always offer deeper insight into what is at stake in India. As Jacobs, Baudinette, and Hambleton (2020, 251) note, when Asian bodies are discussed in porn studies research, the focus on North American cultural productions means that the analysis often touches upon regionally specific racial logics and concerns. In the case of India, the question of socio-economic/class difference is not just relevant for understanding its production and consumption but also how its emergence relates to broader societal developments. While scholars have noted the legal constraints which have sought to curtail accessibility and creation of pornographic content in India (Baishya and Mini 2020, 3–4), this study's mode of inquiry seeks to invert the ostensible interest in 'Indian' morality (pointing at abjection and rejection) and asks why 'an' Indian audience would be so keen to have it confirmed (by me) that 'it' exists. Moving away from a fetishist approach to regional difference as a way to explain why porn 'looks' the way it does, it is more productive to train our attention to issues of class and vernacularity as they play out within the context of rapid urban change and the idea of an emerging 'new' India.<sup>9</sup> This approach deviates from contributions to a previous special issue which sought to engage with the problem of how to speak about sex and sexuality in the South Asian context in terms of legal, moral and censorial issues. Such work draws upon Srivastava's (2006; 2013) pathbreaking work on footpath pornography as well as Bhattacharjya and Ganesh's (2011) internet-focused study that discusses the way sexual rights are expressed and engaged with online.<sup>10</sup> While Srivastava's work offers an important locus to understand issues of (middle-)class difference in urban India, the latter's focus takes us in a direction which holds little relevance to understand Selvam's trajectory and that of his collaborators. Contrary to the question of how pornographic material challenges cultural conventions and normativities, or for that matter how it speaks to notions of (hidden/veiled) sexuality and pleasure, the expectation of its existence and the way Selvam himself sought to 'naturalize' his journey point to its 'mundaneness', for lack of a better term. By treating pornographic content as amalgamated with, and indivisible from, the production of non-pornographic content depicting near-naked men, the notion of a continuum through which we can understand different productions of desire and desirability helps encapsulate this. The way intentionality of (homo)erotic layering is explained and interpreted is crucial for penetrating this and understanding how it draws in a hierarchical interpretation of middle-class belonging that revolves around notions of access, consumption and positionality.

In understanding the way (the bodies of) trainers and bodybuilders in India are perceived, utilized and ultimately consumed through different lenses and modes of production, it is paramount to delineate a hierarchical ordering in terms of the way those belonging to the middle classes reflect on each other. On the one hand are there those who consider themselves the upper and older (thus more entitled) middle class. This is informed by a generational history with being middle class (for example, Misra 1961; Joshi 2001). In general, its members have grown up speaking and receiving most of their education in English, often from privileged so-called convent institutions. Considering the long-standing networks they are part of and the neighbourhood that upper middle-class members reside in, these are families who are not just financially well-off but also hold an excess of social and cultural capital. This contrasts with a group of newcomers to middle-class ranks who are described as 'lower' and whose upbringing and



education is characterized by the fluency in a vernacular language instead (for example, Van Wessel 2004; Baviskar and Ray 2015; Srivastava 2015). The role caste plays in this needs to be thought of as byzantine rather than hierarchically clear-cut. As much as I agree with recent publications that have underlined that caste continues to matter (Yengde 2019), its conflation with class hierarchies is less obvious than is often assumed. The way semi-rural/urban North Indian caste communities such as the Jat and Gujjar have been able to capitalize on increased land values and the rapid growth of the National Capital Region (of which Delhi as well as satellite cities Gurgaon and Noida are part) means that that their monetary capital occasionally exceeds that of older/upper middle-class communities in South Delhi who are more commonly associated with the 'upper caste'. Parallels can be drawn with the Thevar and Gounder (Kongu Vellalar) castes and presence in the greater Chennai Region of Tamil Nadu, the Lingayats and their importance to Bangalore (Karnataka) and Maharashtra's Marathas. While none of these comparisons are ideal and this article certainly does not offer the scope to enter into detail with respect to these differences, what it sketches is a caste-class predicament that is less about financial wealth and more about sociocultural capital. This corresponds with a dyadic way of understanding middle-class difference – as in lower/newer versus upper/older – and the way it reflects notions of rural versus urban, tradition versus modernity and provincial versus cosmopolitan. This kind of imaginary dyadic–hierarchical ordering and reasoning draws the contours which help understand the way lower/new middle-class fitness professionals like Selvam are consumed, perceived and treated by upper middle-class men. I argue that there is no intrinsic difference whether this concerns men who utilize Selvam for his expertise as a personal trainer, seek out his escort services, consume and share his pornographic images or videos, or merely follow and appreciate his social media updates. It is therefore important that we remain careful in the way we treat 'actual' sexual intercourse as a boundary of significance here.

### Homoerotic layering and showcasing the body

The homoerotic layering of photographs of muscular men has long been a topic of fascination for historians and aficionados alike, yet its intentionality is rarely thoroughly interrogated. Instead, studies tend to evoke a certain inside knowing, as if those who are 'in the know' understand and appreciate something about these pictures that those who feature in them were not aware of. This seems especially true for early photography of muscular men. In *Universal Hunks*, for instance, David L. Chapman (2013) brings together the photographic history (1895–1975) of muscular men from around the world. Douglas Brown, who penned the foreword, asks what a hunk actually is, noting the subjective qualities of hunkeness itself. This kind of subjectiveness continues to inform how the homoerotic layering of imagery is interpreted and understood. The photographs included in *Universal Hunks* are all of muscular men whose framing conveys both admiration and adulation. The male gaze, one informed by same-sex desire, is obliquely present and seems to have left a mark on the curation of the book. The use of the word 'hunk' itself is already an indication of this, something magazines like *Men's Health* staunchly avoid, having always made sure not to be seen as a 'gay magazine'. Almost all muscle men featured wear some form of underwear or have their private parts covered with a leaf. Douglas Brown argues that

these images were produced as material objects that served a different purpose according to the context. However, he warns that like literary texts they should not be regarded as unique and autonomous entities but instead build on various pre-existing codes, discourses and other texts: '[E]ach photograph is inter-textual and, at any moment in time, is admired or scrutinized according to a multitude of shifting ideas about health and fitness, male beauty, masculinity, sexuality, pleasure, and desire' (Brown 2013, 9–10 as quoted in Chapman 2013). The analysis Erick Alvarez (2008) provides in his book *Muscle Boys. Gay Gym Culture* reflects this. In it, Robert Mainardi – author of *Strong Men: Vintage Photos of a Masculine Icon* (Mainardi 2001) – argues that most of these pictures were in fact meant to be sold to women but that many eventually ended up in the collections of men.

The difficult relationship between the appreciation of a muscular physique and the way such images appealed to those interested in same-sex contact has a century-long history. Up until the 1920s it appears to have been relatively unproblematic for men to appreciate other men for being handsome. The arrival of public figures such as Charles Atlas (1892–1972) conjured a shift in thinking about this, however. As an Italian-American bodybuilder, Charles Atlas contrasted scrawny 'sissy'-type guys with far more successful muscular 'real' men, in a well-known marketing campaign. By doing so, he suggested that a muscular body could be thought of as an antidote for masculine underperformance (Alvarez 2008, 57). This provides a glimpse into the continued ambivalent relationship between same-sex desire, something Alan Klein's (1993) classic study *Little Big Men* also emphasizes. Building on extensive fieldwork in the West Coast bodybuilding scene, his study was revealing for the way bodybuilders supplement their income by offering services such as (sexualized) muscle worship to male clients. Yet Klein found that same-sex desire and homosexuality remained topics of taboo in the gym. Ellexis Boyle (2010, 156) argues that this is where we encounter a homoerotic paradox that arises from the fetishization of the male body and the intimate relationships that men develop with each other in all-male sporting cultures. A dialectic, although not necessarily amicable, relationship can be dissected between homosocial bonding and what fuels and sustains homoerotic desire.

Such analysis as already provided builds upon a reasoning that places the consumer as if in direct opposition to the one consumed. There is an innocence at play (or assumed to exist) in these pictures that is 'sinfully' distributed and 'polluted' by a gaze that begs to differ. It not only sexualizes imagery that may not have been intended as such, but this reasoning in itself also puts the consumer in control of the narrative. I was not unfamiliar with doing so myself. Like my friends, I had interpreted these social media updates not just homoerotically or even as sexually charged but simultaneously denied them their intentionality. In fact, that was precisely what made it the most interesting, so it seemed. Personal trainer Bikram's social media updates, which I discuss in the following, speak to this. While Bikram is not involved in porn or sex work, I will bring his experiences in line with those of two men – Daniel and Prashant – who are, and who often collaborate with the earlier-mentioned Selvam.

### The potential for appreciation and 'fun'

Long-term informant Bikram, a personal trainer who mainly provides online training, is often approached for modelling assignments. After having competed successfully in

the Mumbai edition of the male modelling competition that was held as part of Muscle-Mania, he had received numerous inquiries from Bollywood recruiters. However, '90% of these are fake'. They will help you develop a portfolio for which you have to pay, but if you are short on cash, payment can be done in nature. In contrast, Bikram's regular updates on social media do suggest that the notion of sex is not altogether disjointed from the way he envisions himself. In a striking picture, he can be found gambolling on a Goan beach, a tiny pair of red swimming pants leaving little to the imagination. In another, he is wearing a pair of silver-coloured bikini briefs with a rather unnecessary zipper lining his crotch. In his understanding, all he is doing is showcasing his bodily accomplishments. He interprets the sexually explicit comments online as confirmation that his body is appreciated for what he had accomplished with it. His experiences resonated with other informants who had attempted to generate an additional income out of modelling, although building up a portfolio itself had often cost them more than it had ever generated. Almost none regretted this in itself but did voice their disappointment in how promising leads for lucrative assignments often turned out to be about sex instead. That their bodies were desired by other men was of little importance in this since they held their bodies to elicit admiration and envy in any case. Instead, what bothered them was their own lack of sociocultural capital to anticipate this situation. They felt blindsided not by (same-sex) desire but the inherent treacherous aspects of moving up the (middle-)class ladder. Those who did get involved in porn work invoked the 'sexualized' appreciation of their bodies as a way to explain it as a logical continuation of what they imagined their bodies to be about already. While money played an important factor in the way informants negotiated the stigmatized dimensions of porn work, it was ultimately the way they understood it as a continuation or extension of appreciation and male desire of their muscular bodies that allowed them to follow through on it.

Two men Selvam regularly collaborates with are 34-year-old Daniel from Cochin (Kerala) and 29-year-old Prashant who hails from a small town in Andhra Pradesh. While Daniel continues to work as a security guard for a multinational company and Prashant provides personal training to a select number of clients, both supplement their income by featuring in pornographic productions on a semi-regular basis. Recruited by Selvam on the basis of their social media updates, it took some convincing before they agreed. Initially their videos were of solo performances, whereby they showed off their bodies fully naked and/or masturbated on camera. Once they became more comfortable in front of the camera Selvam would pair them with other 'trainers' and they would engage in sexual intercourse as well. Especially, Prashant was worried about the consequences for his career as a professional bodybuilder, because of which he does not allow his face to be filmed. Both identify as straight or heterosexual, but when it comes to porn work describe themselves as bisexual. Deviating from its more regular interpretation, the way they employ 'bisexuality' does not relate to the idea of a sexual identity *per se* but to their ability to not only have but also enjoy sex with a same-sex partner. From the age of 19 years, Daniel 'did fun with boy and girl', as he put it. He prefers girls and envisions himself married with a wife and children, but at this stage of his life a girlfriend would require him 'to spend more time for chat, out, spend money for all etc.'. It is not something he can afford now. To this he added that 'I respect girl who accept me for fun', meaning casual sex. However, when it comes to porn work he would not like to involve girls since 'they trust and have fun with me so am respect them'. With male sex

partners it is different since he can think of them as colleagues who have a similar objective, which is to generate an additional income on top of their day-to-day professions. Studies on homosexuality and same-sex activity in India often argue that it is crucial not to confuse the two with each other. As Sudhir and Katharina Kakar argue: 'Sex between men, especially among friends or within the family during adolescence and youth, is not regarded as sex but masti, an exciting, erotic playfulness, with overtones of the mast elephant in heat' (Kakar and Kakar 2007, 101). Yet for Daniel, thinking of it as a 'fun' thing which references meaningless sexual pleasure ('fun') also helps understand how he thinks of himself as bisexual as a necessary aspect of porn work.

Prashant's experiences and reasoning resonate with Daniel's. Working out since a young teenager, his aspirations to become a professional bodybuilder means that his body requires continuous investment. With his father a factory employee and his mother a homemaker, this is money his family cannot provide him with: 'Because every month I have to invest at least 20k on my body ... Only Fans was last option for me'. When Selvam recruited him he therefore understood this as way out of his financial predicaments first and foremost. Like Daniel, it is his muscular body that he imagines to be the main lure for those who subscribe to his OnlyFans channel. Even though he was concerned about his family finding out, featuring without his face being recognizable reduced the risk of this and made it possible to capitalize on what he imagined other men to find attractive about his body: 'For me there is no problem there'. In fact, he enjoys porn work, especially when 'the men are good looking like me'. He is used to his body being admired in the gym and his Instagram has thousands of followers. That he sees an increasing number of men like himself active on OnlyFans serves as confirmation of porn work as an extension of his involvement in bodybuilding and modelling.

### Understanding the transition as continuum

While Daniel and Prashant are relative newcomers, Selvam has been generating an income out of porn work for at least two years now. He explained his trajectory as follows: 'When I started with fitness modelling some photographers wanted to have sex with me. Or some followers in social media'. Yet he was well aware that this might happen. Speaking in the plural he added that: 'So we take it lightly. Just close your eyes and let your dick be sucked. A mouth is a mouth at the end of the [day]'. If the guy he was performing with or rendering sexual services to was good-looking he might even enjoy it, he said.

Selvam describes himself as 'basically straight' but 'bisexual due to exposure'. He believes the same goes for other trainers who are involved in porn and sex work. Over dinner with two other trainers at a fitness event in Goa in which they had all competed in the male modelling category, the conversation had turned to the topic of sex work. The position the other two trainers had taken was that 'if someone from the organisation wanted to enjoy with them in exchange for some benefits they were open to it'. It has not surprised Selvam that most of the participants were already known to the organization. Selvam made it a point, however, to underline that 'they' did not see it as something gay: 'It's just the way it is ... in fitness case it's also the acknowledgement that people are ready to pay to enjoy your body'. To this he added: 'If you are sexy you keep getting this offers from eager men. And if one day it hits you in a low financial

moment you just go for it'. Yet he did not deny that there was still a sigma associated with it: 'It's kinda of a shameful activity for many', since 'your manliness might be question', as 'everybody knows that with a client you need to be flexible ... some things you wouldn't do as a straight macho man'. Ultimately, however, considered it a performance: 'But as in every performance sometimes might be more or less pleasant'.

## Conclusion

When I met Selvam that evening in Chennai we talked at length about the sexual services he provides and the sex with men he has on camera. Reflecting on his humble upbringing and the upward mobility he concludes that, in the end, 'We are tissue papers for clients to blow their noses in and then toss away'. He let it sink in for a minute to make sure I had understood what he meant. It was something that reverberated with other accounts of fitness trainers as well: as unique as their bodies may be perceived, they often thought of themselves as replaceable or even disposable. The impression that trainers were easily available for sexual encounters, whether of the straight or same-sex variety, spoke to this quite clearly.

This article has put forward that socio-economic (class) difference is crucial in understanding what informs the production as well as consumption of desire (for the male muscular body) in India. Regularly sharing publications with Selvam over time proved particularly insightful into how he reflected on this himself. In one such article I had discussed the role the body can play as an equalizer for a lack of sociocultural capital otherwise (Baas 2017). On the basis of it, Selvam had drawn the conclusion that he himself could be considered a person who was attempting to bridge 'the ostensible gap in middle-classness' (2017, 11). While he liked the idea of it, he was not convinced that he could ever fully cross over from a lower/vernacular middle-class status to an upper middle-class one, even if he had an income to match. In a tongue-in-cheek kind of way he would sometimes use quotes from my book as part of his social media updates, flaunting his muscular body in some aspirational context such as a five-star pool or hotel room. While his fanbase was not likely to engage with the double entendre, I knew it was a way for him to reflect on the opportunities as well as constraints that the idea of a new India offered. In our ongoing interactions Selvam has repeatedly suggested not to overthink his involvement in porn and sex work, and this is also how I imagine him to respond to this article as well. But that encouragement in itself has also greatly contributed to the conceptualization in this article. Consequently, the article argues that the transition from fitness to porn and sex work should be thought of less as taking place between end points and more in terms of forming part of a continuum whereby the body is already layered with multiple and often incongruous notions of what makes it attractive for consumption. Porn work is not a complication but an affirmation and continuation, as such.

After the launch of *Muscular India* (Baas 2020), Indian gay friends continued to share insights with me regarding the sexual availability of trainers. Rarely did it concern direct experiences. Instead, I could not help think of it as an urban fantasy that was revealing for the way the upper middle class reflects on upwardly mobile new entrants to middle-class ranks. For most of their lives my gay friends had been used to 'servants' catering to their every need; as drivers, cooks, gardeners, security guards, tutors and so

on. With the emergence of the lean and muscular bodily ideal, a new group of service professionals had emerged who were bringing bodily capital to the table as a way to compensate for a lack in social and cultural capital otherwise. Albeit metaphorically, often demeaning or disparaging assessment of sexual availability seemed to reaffirm middle-class boundaries. However, employing a dyadic interpretation in terms of the un/intentionality to ostensive homoerotically suggestive social media updates also meant reproducing socio-economic/middle-class difference in a way that I knew men like Selvam to challenge actively and directly. Their upward trajectories were characterized by challenging middle-class boundaries in which they utilized their bodily capital as leverage. Capitalizing on the desire their bodies elicit is therefore not just a matter of economics but should also be understood as an engagement with the way these men understand their bodies to be perceived, engaged with and ultimately consumed.

In this article I aimed to show that the emergence of self-produced pornographic material in India that is made available through online platforms such as OnlyFans needs to be understood as existing in a continuum with other productions that appear saturated with homoerotics. The question of intentionality and even the predicament of absence/presence of sexual desire in trainers' day-to-day lives speaks to a dyadic hierarchical ordering that ultimately negotiates agency as part of a (middle-class) schema that pits new versus old(er), lower versus upper, vernacular versus cosmopolitan, tradition versus modernity and rural versus urban. In our continued effort to understand the production and consumption of pornography we need to reflect actively on the context it emerges from as well as the way our questions and modes of inquiry speak to pre-held assumptions.

## Notes

1. All names of informants are anonymized. In some cases, additional details have been changed to provide additional privacy.
2. This article builds on an extensive analysis of publications about the Indian middle-class and new middle-class formations. I have cited a number of central works here, but for a longer and more detailed analysis I refer to the first chapter of *Muscular India* (Baas 2020, 24–54).
3. Although this idea resonates somewhat with Sedgwick's notion of a continuum between homosociality and homosexuality, for its conceptualization this article does not draw directly on this work.
4. All friends mentioned here are originally from India and identify as gay or homosexual. Since I identify as gay myself and have stayed and lived in India over long periods of time, I have built up an extensive network of gay friends who often host me when I am travelling around. As English-educated highly skilled professionals they form an important sounding board to my research, and in this article I build upon their responses in an anthropological fashion forming part of a thick(er) Geertzian description (Geertz 1973).
5. This comment needs to be understood primarily in terms of the first year of marriage when the newly married couple is expected to be hosted for dinner by a wide array of family members. Moreover, the wife is expected to dote on her husband by showing off her cooking skills and feeding him snacks and sweets.
6. Strikingly, most such accounts revolved around misunderstandings whereby the female client appears to have thought of 'it' as a one-night stand while the trainer in question had hoped/expected more.
7. An agricultural and influential caste in North India.
8. Almost all same-sex-oriented porn in India is self-produced and made available through sites such as Pornhub and OnlyFans.

9. See, for a particularly insightful study, Ravinder Kaur's *Brand New Nation* (2020). For a more extensive discussion of the vagaries of labelling India with the prefix of new, see *Muscular India* (Baas 2020).
10. See also Ketaki Chowkhani's (2016) pathbreaking work in this regard.

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