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Viral Assemblages and Witnessing Extraordinary Times: Queer Patchworks of Intimacy, Precarity and Affect in an Indian City*

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on ethnographic field work conducted in Kolkata during 2019–2021 with queer and trans people during the COVID pandemic. This article develops a new framework of queer patchworks and discusses the various ways through which queer and trans communities are navigating survival during these non-normative times. This paper particularly responds to how digital media is being used by individuals and organisations as a form of witness, belonging, intimacy and care. Queer people in India live within different forms of marginality and precarity, homophobia, caste violence, unemployment and homelessness. This article brings together patchworks of whatsapp texts, broken zoom conversations, cooking gossip and *addas* on the banks of river Hooghly as a nod to these new realities which are reshaping queer identities; thus, offering new ways to also acknowledge, accommodate and 'queer' what counts as knowledge. A particular focus was moving away from totalising narratives and instead examine the tensions of being queer in contemporary India alongside the many contradictions. In turn, this engenders wider questions about queer desire, nationalism and belonging.

KEYWORDS

Viral assemblage; queer patchwork; India; queer; precarity; COVID-19

Introduction

This article started life as I was leaving Kolkata on May 2021 in the wake of a devastating outbreak of COVID-19 in India. The tragedy which saw hundreds of thousands lose their lives was an outcome partially created due to the negligence of the Indian government with particularly shattering impact on vulnerable communities – queer and trans people, working class and the caste oppressed. I develop queer patchworks as an approach to narrate the various ways through which queer and trans communities in India have been navigating survival during this extraordinary moment. My interlocutors live marginalised lives with various forms of precarity shaping their lived experience from everyday homophobia to caste discrimination and joblessness. Banerjea and

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*This article draws on my earlier chapter 'Queer patchworks: liveability, creative work and survival in the time of COVID' in Banerjea et al. (2022). This article uses a different argument and narratives.

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Browne (2018) ask what makes life liveable for LGBTQ people outside of equalities legislation thus offering a new way to explore liveabilities across transnational boundaries. This provides a useful framework to disrupt and understand the contemporary moment. Whatsapp texts, digital conversations over zoom, cooking together and *addas*¹ on the banks of the river Hooghly form the patchwork of this article. The narratives stand as a form of witness, belonging, intimacy and care where lives are not just a tragedy waiting for death but also resistance and a refusal to accept the status quo. Navigating multiple forms of discrimination these patchworks tell a story of survival under a new social and political reality which is reshaping queer identities and belonging in contemporary India.

The narratives serve as forms of witness made possible through technological/digital encounters, via phones and computers. Whilst mentioning these might seem immaterial; in a time of sharp divide between the problematic binary of 'remote' and 'home' most of us (for those of us who could afford to) used these devices to compile testaments, create forms of intimacy, record stories of survival and critique regimes of power. This article explores these issues through assembled relationalities within a heightened classed and neoliberal turn in the time of COVID.

Against this background, I am interested in the symbiosis of the everyday and ordinary lives of queer people during an extraordinary time marked by the pandemic lockdown and the Legislative Assembly elections in 2021 which threatened a drastic rightward turn in West Bengal politics. A particular focus was moving away from totalising narratives and instead examine the tensions of being queer in contemporary India alongside the many contradictions. In turn, this engenders wider questions about queer desire, nationalism and belonging.

Methodology: Viral Assemblages and Queer Patchworks

Methodologically speaking, this article builds on critical cultural studies tradition of Stuart Hall (1988, 1993) and the Birmingham School, tracing the relationship between community making, care and queer liberalism through diverse cultural texts. I do not suggest these texts are similar or even representative but rather a process which allows us to understand various forms of contradictions and assemblages of queer belonging at the time of pandemic. Given the important intervention made by Gunel et al. (2020) about the changing nature of field work engendered through the pandemic, neoliberal labour conditions and expectations of work-life balance, family and professional obligations, spending a long time in the 'field' has been virtually impossible. Responding to these field work challenges they offer patchwork ethnography (Gunel et al. 2020) to respond to short-term field visits and the fragmentary nature of data collection which are innovative and not bound by the fixity of disciplinary ethnographic demands. The patchwork method is especially useful to describe the multiple realities of queerness stitching up the numerous ways in which my informants are a witness to the extraordinary present time. I should also note that ethics has been at the core of this work and all research participants have been assigned pseudonyms with identificatory information removed given the sensitive nature of some of their disclosure.

After almost a year of being in lockdown, I made my first trip to India during the assembly elections in West Bengal during April 2021. The Saffron party has been

snapping at the heels of Trinamool Congress and alongside anti-incumbency sentiments and a growing sense of Hindu nationalism it suddenly felt like West Bengal, the bastion of the left for 34 years might turn a full 360 degrees and embrace a right-wing party for the very first time. Just a few weeks earlier, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had emphatically announced that India was the pharmaceutical capital of the world and Indians had nothing to worry about the growing number of cases. During the period, I was there, I saw and heard of hospitals overflowing, constant sirens of ambulances ferrying patients across the city and far from controlling the virus it had finally reached suburban and rural areas. A personal tragedy saw my own uncle succumbing to COVID as he was being ferried across the city trying to get him a hospital bed but ultimately breathing his last in the car as multiple hospitals turned us away due to lack of resources. As countries in the west closed borders putting India on a red list, the death toll continued to rise. At the same time, the global community has demanded for patents to be lifted on vaccines and more vaccines to be sent to the Global South but no such announcement was made when this article was being written.

Of particular interest is how do these new realities which are reshaping academic engagement and writing, offer new ways to acknowledge, accommodate and 'queer' what counts as knowledge. Assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Banerjea et al. 2022) offers a critical lens to observe how connections and relations are forged, interrupted and modified within the new realities of COVID. In alignment with Deleuze's assemblage theory and mode of inquiry this article centralises the lived experience of the participants which is acknowledged as being non uniform and contested. Deleuze writing about assemblage notes:

It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogenous terms ... establish [ing] liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: 69)

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 8) assemblage is a collection of multiplicities 'without a unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject'. Puar (2007: 211) calls assemblages 'a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces'. Viral assemblages is a way to call attention to these constellations of knowledge and embodiment where subjects shift and look different depending on different modes of being and experience. Queer patchworks are thus a way of excavating and understanding modes of power to see how these get instrumentalised, suggesting a move from naming and stabilisation of identities and experiences to understanding it in messy and often contradictory ways.

Doing fieldwork especially in India and more broadly in South Asia has been a challenge during the past two years and has been patchy and anxiety ridden. I made three trips between 2019 and 2021 navigating visa regimes and strict border lockdowns. At the same time, I got involved in multiple mutual aid groups springing all over whatsapp and attending community meetings on zoom and skype. These ended up becoming the 'field' for this research. Gunel et al. (2020) argue that whilst ethnographers have been adapting to various fieldwork challenges there has been very little attention paid to how these practices are being reshaped by our own lives and personal concerns. I offer queer patchworks as a framework to refer to our state of mind which includes our deep affective encounters with the precarities we have witnessed and the injuries we

have personally suffered during this pandemic. Queer patchworks is not just about the process of doing fieldwork but also the very writing of it given the multiple disruptions and tough life conditions which have led to different forms of writing with a need for creative interpretation with concepts and stories that are built into these patchworks.

Intimacy, Affect and Limits of Neoliberal Biopower

In order to contextualise queer intimacy and care, I would like to invoke Berlant (2012) who argues that love, desire and intimacy whilst situated within the realms of individualised social identity also has the potential of destabilisation – joining diverse lives and situations and linking it to wider histories and practices. This is especially important in the context of queer socialities where queer intimacies, and friendship is often formed around shared histories of experiencing stigma and oppression. At the same time, these are also formed around liberal notions of inclusion and reasserting a need to join and become productive political subjects (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2019). My research informants embrace and reject these notions at various points. Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) writing about intimacy also describes it as a system of relations which is responding to urgent needs at a given moment. Povinelli considers how normative ideas concerning intimacy operate in liberalism through the governance of intimate heteronormativity one produced and regulated by the state in subtle ways described as the ‘micro-practices of certain forms of love to the macro-practices of certain forms of state governance and certain forms of capital production, circulation, and consumption’ (Povinelli, 2006: 191).

Conceptually this article also draws on the framework of ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007) to draw attention to the extraordinariness of the present moment. Stewart writing about ordinary affects says:

Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation.

The narratives in this article describe ordinary actors who demonstrate the various forms of power and oppression that have typified the lives of sexual minorities in India exacerbated through the pandemic. I am aware that these stories could become products of analysis rather than its agents as the uncertainties and contradictions are confronted. These inconsistencies raise questions and challenge the normative/liberal models of queering. I am in agreement with Stewart (2007: 14) that ‘we rethink what our analytic objects might be ... also experimenting with forms of theory and writing that are responsive to the moving objects’. I am also acutely aware of the ways in which caste, class and religion intersect with sexuality in contemporary India. The political turn towards the right and Hindutva nationalism also signals what Baccheta (1999: 144) called ‘the dual operations of xenophobic queerphobia and queerphobic xenophobia’. Queerness is imbricated within this desire for a Hindu nation as the following narratives will show.

The institutionalisation of LGBT rights in offering productive political citizenship has demonstrated the tension between queer rights against discourses of surveillance, terrorism, migration and neoliberalism (Puar, 2007). The mere identification as queer does not

constitute transgression in contemporary India. Multiple kinds of bodies who do not conform to the normative desire of the neoliberal Hindu nation states such as the working class, Muslims, Dalits and trans are rendered abject and confined to 'slow death' to also borrow Berlant's (2007) term.

Following Foucault (2003) it can be argued that sexuality and queerness is an apparatus of biopower through which power is exercised over life (and death). Foucault argues that the ideologies of normativity renders subjects intelligible categorizing them and making certain bodies more worthy of recognition than others. This promise of social belonging requires identification with categories of being productive, happy conventional and personal transformation towards the regimes of success and enterprise.

A final point of consideration here is also the role of digital and social media. Whilst digital media has indeed opened up a new space for queer publics evolving into sites of resistance, intimacy, pleasure and community making (Dasgupta, 2017, 2022), these are also spaces that facilitate caste, class and religious oppressions resulting in the inclusion of certain voices over the rejection of others (Dasgupta, 2020). Scholars such as Noble (2018) call this algorithmic oppression which excludes racialised others, trans bodies and queers of colour. India has one of the highest uptake of mobile phones -1.18 billion connections and an average of 12 GB per month per user data consumption brought through the emergence of affordable smart phones and cheap data tariff (Abbas, 2021). Thus, the study of India and indeed queer India is also directly imbricated with digital India, a 2015 policy initiative to further drive India's ambition of technocapitalism. Queer online spaces in India is vast – from blogs, geolocative apps to social networking sites. The entanglement between digital media, queerness and identity will become clearer in the next sections. In the following sections, I build up bit by bit the patchwork assemblage in which the tension and anxiety of the present moment emerges through three distinct narratives. The patchworks grow out of my contention that boundaries between survival, self securitisation, prejudice and community making are blurry. Provocations of risk and vulnerability exist within the wider structure of queer worldmaking and exclusion which were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Assemblage 1: Singing Protest Songs with Subhash

April 2021: I am in Kolkata where elections are in full swing. The State is experiencing an eight phase election cycle and every part of the city is hosting mega rallies by different parties – from saffron clad lotus holding posters to the familiar sickle and hammer. There is real excitement in the air but also one of trepidation as reports flood in that the BJP, the Hindutva nationalist party might actually win the State overturning the 'liberalism' and secular values the States has been known to champion for so long. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India has already made several trips and today he is making a speech about *ashol poriborton* (real change). *Poriborton* was itself the war cry of the incumbent Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who dramatically ended the rule of the communist government after 34 years. I am sitting with Subhash in front of the television when Modi is making his speech. He bursts out crying and leaves the room.

Subhash and I have been friends for a very long time. We met several years ago when I was researching queer men's digital culture in India. Subhash had recently lost his job due to the COVID lockdown. He had some savings to help him tide through as he

was actively job hunting. Like many other queer people I had spoken too he was worried about BJP winning in the State especially given their views on minorities – women, Dalits, Muslims, LGBT people.

What is ashol poriborton? To make us all wear saffron clothes, make it compulsory to sing the national anthem or to take away the little rights we have as gay men? I am a proud Hindu, *maa kalir dibbi* (I swear on Mother Kali) but they don't speak for me. It looks like the media wants them to win. All of them are paid for. Who will speak for us?

LGBT rights became an issue for the first time in the assembly elections when the CPIM (Communist Party of India Marxist) shared their draft manifesto asking for comments. It spurred a coalition of organisations and individuals to come together and develop a 'Bengal Trans* and Queer Charter of Demands.'² Launched at a Media conference in March 2021 at the Press Club the aim of the charter was to put queer and trans concerns at the centre of the political discussion and place such concerns within part of the larger domains of education, health, livelihood, social security and so on, and in intersections with multiple marginalities. Queer activists I spoke to commented that these issues need to be seen within the broader context rather than through a narrow silo approach (Figure 1).

This has been a concern in the present political moment in India, where despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality since 2018, social anxieties and discrimination of LGBTQ people and the significance of this as transgressing an image of India as an otherwise modern and progressive state (Boyce and Dasgupta, 2017; Dasgupta 2017; Rao 2020).



Figure 1. CPIM, BJP and TMC flags during the West Bengal Legislative Elections, 2021. Courtesy Author.

Questions of queer citizenship, the positive inclusion of sexual and gender ‘non-normative subjects’ within state legislative actions, have accordingly emerged as a central theme around which the politics of sexual difference are being enacted in India in the present.

Subhash and I met to discuss COVID and queer rights in the summer of 2021. As a young politically conscious person he was very alarmed at the rise of communalism in the city we both grew up in. We sat in his room drinking copious amounts of tea and listening to Bengali revolutionary songs sung by the Calcutta Youth choir with Subhash frequently getting involved in debates and fights on Twitter and Facebook.

Ora amader gaan gaita deye na Paul Robeson

Amra amader gaan gai

Ora bhoje peyeche Robeson

They don’t allow us to raise our voice Paul Robeson

We sing our song of protest in raised voice

They’re fear stricken, Robeson

There is a vast body of literature on the symbolic construction of communities online to mobilise on popular political issues. Media practices (Couldry, 2004) have shown how activists approach different forms of media to create new social forms of collective action. What is probably missing in this literature is the role of emotion in guiding these actions. Subhash was not part of any coordinated effort to challenge misinformation or the right wing conspiracy theories which were flooding Indian social media space in the run up to the election, but rather he was almost acting as a lone person in ‘choreographing this assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012) driven by his emotion for social change.

Subhash: If we don’t resist who will? I have the privilege of using digital media. I can make vaguely good interventions and fight these trolls

R: What do you get out from this?

Subhash: Resistance is important. We all need keep speaking up. I also try not to come across as giving sermons. I try to share memes, point people to new sources and also sometimes make a ‘come back’ with a music video or funny GIF. I mean we are in the middle of a pandemic and queers and Muslims are being scapegoated, why should I stay quiet.

Grant Blank (2013) in response to the kinds of content being created online argued that political content is often created by elites whilst social and entertainment content by others. Subhash’s example shows that this is far from true. People produce and consumed different kinds of content – posts, gifs, memes, multimedia content. These are then as Subhash explained remixed and reused for other purposes including political communication and creative resistance. Mary Chayko (2017) rightly notes that reconfiguring content online is a common way to express oneself thus merging the very process of production and consumption. Subhash was doing this alongside many others who like him made it a point to challenge political issues on the internet. ‘It sometimes feels like a community’ of fighters Subhash said.

Communities help people feel part of a unit larger than oneself through deliberate construction or one spontaneously formed (as in this case) which has a wide range of

consequences for the participants (kinship, strength and intimacy described by Subhash). These groups are close and meaningful. It would be worthwhile to point out that Subhash's participation within these networks connected him both locally and globally. Through connections made on these platforms Subhash was also invited to whatsapp groups ('Take down the right' and 'India forum') and several other groups.

My queerness and activism has really opened up new doors for me and connected me to a global community who are queer, secular, socialists and want to fight inequality and hate and change the world.

Queer(ing) offers us a way of imagining alternatives to existing hegemonic structures. Halberstam (2011) argues that heteronormative common sense equates success with family, capital and hope whilst queer modes of thinking offer a rejection of those value for non conformity and critique where success as Subhash described above was creating a different mode of being, one constructed through emotional labour, global/local networks and utopianism – an *ashol poriborton* in his words.

Assemblage 2: Lockdowns and Limits of Liberalism

I am sitting in a roadside tea shop with Amulya. Amulya lives in Barasat, a suburb of West Bengal. He had lost his job during the first lockdown when the garment-making factory he worked in laid-off workers due to the lack of orders and a halt in production. Dire months followed during which time Amulya was convinced that the state government was to blame for the current situation:

I will die of starvation rather than COVID. There are no jobs. The industries are leaving and look what Mamata has done.³ Nothing. My friends tell me in other States the governments have worked much harder and provided food and money for its people. Over here she is only trying to appease the *mollahs* and communists. I don't care about her 'CAA CAA *chi chi*'.⁴ I just want to provide for myself and my family.

During the first lockdown within days, we saw signs of mass hunger with growing queues outside relief centres distributing food and essentials. The government of India was unprepared with even elementary protection like the mass deployment of PPEs, hospital beds, procuring oxygen or providing relief for the poor and destitute. In fact, as Harsh Mander (2021) points out, the response was 'locking down [the] poor' through a stringent and draconian programme that was indifferent to the majority of the workforce in the unorganised sector – many of whom also worked in India's entertainment and creative industries.

A few days later, I was waiting for another friend; an actor in the Bengali film industry. This time I was in Park Street's Barista Cafe. It has been almost two years since I was last here. As I walked to place my order, I was told, no you can't order in person anymore, sir. Find a seat and use the QR code to place your order. You will also need a WhatsApp number in order to place your order. I protested I did not have an Indian phone number so I will not be able to do any of that. Reluctantly my order was taken.

This is a new digital India (new but also already very present!) or rather should I say one of the multiple Indias that exist (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2019). Cafes like Barista which have sprung all over in the last two decades cater to the new professional disposable income class. The idea that one would not have a working smartphone to place

their order and come here is unthinkable. I wondered if this was exactly the kind of neo-liberal India that Amulya was railing against. The benefits of globalisation (Appadurai, 2001) had hardly made a difference to Amulya. It was far easier to blame the Bihari migrants and Muslims for him. It was easier than accepting that the lack of a robust cultural policy or labour rights had lost him his job rather than migrants who had moved here. Amulya was hopeful that if somehow the saffron party came to power in Kolkata all would be well. The very idea filled me with dread.

R: But what about their poor record on women's rights and LGBT rights. They will threaten our very existence.

Amulya: What do those rights mean to me when I can't even eat. You fight for these rights, I need to feed my family ...

I want to invoke Berlant (2004: 13) and ask what kind of political and economic demands does this present moment raise and require of ourselves. How does one remain compassionate in light of these contradictory (borne through anxious feeling about a changing political/economic order) actions and sentiments? Is Amulya right about the failure of coalitional politics and is it worth to reflect on the material disconnect between our lives and how we each perform queerness – fluctuating between liberal identity politics and fraught precarious liveable conditions.

The next time I heard from Amulya it was a whatsapp message. He sent me a video that was doing the rounds on several whatsapp groups. The video had an image of a group of people attending mosque taken weeks before lockdown was announced in India and purported that Muslims and mosques were primarily responsible for the spread of COVID-19. When I challenged Amulya about the misinformation that was being spread he doubled down to tell me this was all part of a larger conspiracy where the West Bengal government was playing 'appeasement politics' by not challenging the Muslim community. (Figure 2)

I challenged Amulya further telling him he was speaking rubbish to which he responded: 'of course you will say this. You are part of their group. Even on Grindr⁵ Muslim men are trapping Hindus to spread Covid but don't worry Modi is coming' (implying a BJP win in the legislative elections).

Showing solidarity or challenging Islamophobia has often led to the charge of 'playing appeasement politics'. In fact, in March 2021, the Prime Minister himself accused the West Bengal Chief Minister of 'appeasement and vote bank politics' for her solidarity towards the Muslim community. A study by Banaji and Bhat (2020) noted that the pandemic lockdown had led to an endemic barrage of disinformation targeting Indian Muslims producing hate and inciting violence. An example of this was a Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation that took place in Delhi in early March before lockdown was announced, which was described as a super spreader event. Amulya was quick to lay the blame on Muslims as being responsible for creating a situation which had led to the health crisis.

It is of course important that this be located within the wider context of incitement of hate in contemporary India against religious and sexual minorities whether it be the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 or the ascendancy of the current BJP led government. Political has been violently suppressed. Perhaps not surprisingly the

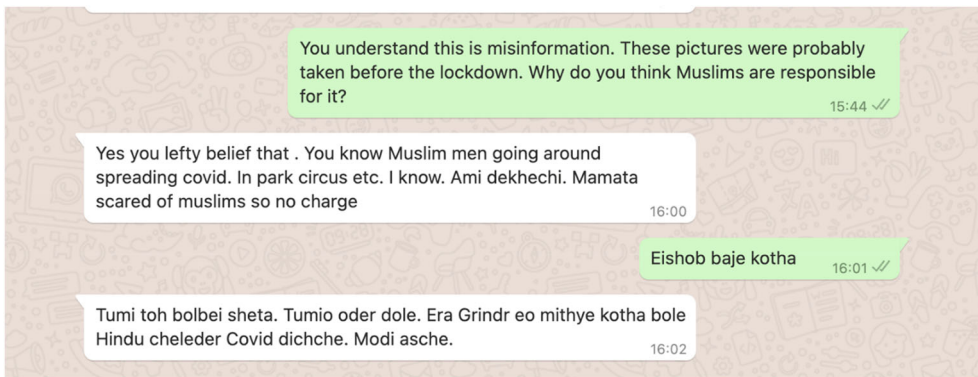


Figure 2. Whatsapp conversation between Amulya and me. Identifying information removed. Courtesy Author.

safety of those fighting for social justice has been especially fraught with the growth of digital surveillance and lack of online care by companies such as Facebook and Twitter which has been more concerned by profit-making rather than challenging discriminatory hate practices. Banaji and Bhat (2020: 3) rightly argue that ‘online and offline discrimination, harassment and violence are part of the same constellation and act on each other on the local, national and international levels’. As Amulya’s account shows incitement and hate was being conducted through whatsapp vigilantism during a global pandemic demonstrating the tensions between sexual and class precarity against religious otherness.

Assemblage 3: Queer Care

In sharp contrast to both Amulya and Subhash was Shayoni, a trans sex worker. In our first conversation since lockdown was announced she sent me a single sentence ‘amra ar bachbo na’ (We will not live). I sent her a strong sympathetic reply back saying she should not lose hope and wanted to know if she wanted to meet up online. Delta was ravaging through the city by this time and I was cautiously trying to isolate and also make arrangements to return to the United Kingdom. We decided to have a quick chat on zoom. When I saw Shayoni I told her she looked tired. She gave me a slight smile to say she needed some space to breathe. The lockdown in India has amongst other things revealed that for some people like Shayoni there was no ‘before’ and ‘after’ the COVID crisis. As a caste oppressed trans woman working as a sex worker her body had already been marked for failure- a slow death to borrow Berlant’s (2007) term.

Berlant notes that slow death does not prosper in traumatic events but is rather an ongoing process in temporal environments through the ordinariness of everyday life. Berlant further argues that consciousness of this is explicitly framed as the effect of this ordinariness of health crisis on productivity and profit generation. The structural inequality that frames the lives of people like Shayoni adds to the suffering – ‘populations marked out for wearing out’ (Berlant, 2007: 761). Shayoni made constant references to

how *shomaj* (society) had debilitated her. Puar argues that debilitation is a product of capitalist exploitation where certain subjects are coded as non productive and debilitation functions ‘as a form of value extraction for otherwise disposable bodies’ (Puar 2017: 79).

Shayoni was particularly irritated by the many NGO’s who she said ‘used me to get their funds and are now not even providing the basic food we need to survive’. Boyce (2007) has argued that constructions of male-to-male sexuality put forward through HIV/AIDS programming in India prescribed particular sexual subjectivities and categories especially such as *kothi*⁶ (which is how Shayoni identifies) which are widely contested and intervention and support programmes premised often on donor expectations rather than community demands. This was something repeated by other trans activists such as Raina Roy, a trans activist with Sambhabona Trust who along with local organisers started to fundraise to provide 250 trans people with a fixed monthly income (2000 INR or roughly £20 per month) for a brief period whilst other forms of employment were closed due to the lockdown. (Figure 3)

Shayoni describes her life as a struggle, one that has been ongoing for a while with the hope that this will change. In many ways she was optimistic this was a transient period, and it would not stay the same for too long. She saw the pandemic period as a manifestation of how everything from the queer rights movement to local politics has been driven by capital exacerbating precarity especially within the trans community. Sara Ahmed (2019: 304) argues that we struggle against structures, but struggle doesn’t always lead to transformation but is a slow chipping away of the oppressive structures that have caused it in the first place. Calling this ‘diversity work’ Ahmed notes that it is the energy required to keep going when one comes across these barriers is how things can get build ‘often from the shattered pieces’. Shayoni has been doing this work of chipping away at the oppressive structures since 2019 when I first met her challenging funding regimes, donor interventions and ‘privileged’ NGO workers.

Shayoni saw initiatives such as the fundraiser which were led by grassroots activists as effective ways to support the community especially when large NGOs had been quiet and not providing the support that individuals such as her expected. This was a direct example of queer care according to her. As Boyce and Dasgupta (2017) have argued the Indian queer sociocultural situation is often identified through ‘change’ in respect of an assumed aspiration for an out and self-identified same sex desiring subject. Queer utopian narratives which serve to imagine a future through normative imaginaries engaging in a politics of visibility and homonormative legitimacy instead of questioning the very nature of where this aspiration leads to is exactly the kind of issue which marks bodies such as Shayoni’s for ‘slow death’. How do we then understand queer care and what exactly can queer care look like? Shayoni tells me:

I don’t know about queer care but I do understand *paribar* (family). Are we not all part of the rainbow *paribar*? I guess some of you who can travel around and write about our lives wont understand the daily struggle we have to go through. Covid has devastated my community but wasn’t my community already broken up? I fought for 377 like you but tell me what good did it do me? Did I get my ration card faster, did it help me no longer be catcalled by the *gundas* (miscreants) of my *para* (locality) or did it even help me get kaaj (job). We fought side by side marched but you got the rights.

THE SITUATION IN WEST BENGAL FOR TRANS PERSONS

Thousands of trans persons have been impacted by **COVID-19**. They are not able to earn, secure a livelihood for themselves and their families. At a time like this unemployment seems indefinite for the foreseeable future and trans sex workers especially are unable to earn at all.

To make things worse, in May, 2020 the Cyclone, Amphan made its way through the state wreaking havoc. The worst impact was felt in areas like the Sundarbans Mangrove forests and South 24 Parganas.

Several members of the trans community have lost their homes to this and are currently struggling to rebuild their former lives.



Figure 3. Fundraiser for trans sex workers in West Bengal. Courtesy Author.

Care of course is a contested concept – who is cared for and who is deserving of care? When the pandemic struck and the West quickly called a lockdown, implementing furlough schemes to safeguard its workforce, places like India saw contracts cancelled, garment manufacturers and producers losing billions as the border closed. The government scrambled to put together flights and quarantine hotels whilst its own migrants were left in limbo as they lost jobs, were unable to travel and sanitised using disinfectants not meant for the human body. Bodies of daily wage workers just like trans people were

not seen worthy of care or state intervention. Prasad (2020) argues that the labour of queer kinship exist in affective interstices not just creating forms of support but also ‘recalibrating our politics’. This is an especially important point. Shayoni was right in invoking *paribar* or family as a way of hailing some sort of queer kinship. In previous work (Dasgupta 2017), I describe the concept of queer kinship/community being predicated through some sort of commonality, solidarity and interaction which more often than not excludes certain people based on religion, caste and class. Shayoni’s inability to identify with those who she fought ‘shoulder to shoulder with’ against section 377 is a testament to the mechanism of exclusions and the power and dominance of certain types of queer voices. Shayoni’s unhesitating narrative ‘stands as an invitation or beacon ... through which painful, sometimes shameful, experiences and feelings are pressed into recognition’ (Henderson, 2013: 97). Shayoni and I met briefly just before I left Kolkata. We went for a walk by the river Hooghly. As the lights dimmed around us and we looked at the distant horizon, Shayoni asked ‘Will things ever be the same, Rohitda?’ The question remained unanswered (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Walking with Shayoni. Courtesy Author.

Conclusion

Judith Butler (2004: 25) describes precarity as a politically induced condition ‘exposed to injury, violence and death’. Subhash, Amulya and Sayoni are part of the precariat (Standing, 2011) whose lives are exposed to daily injury and violence and are seen as disposable and replaceable. How does one articulate such grief exposing vulnerability and realising that something has transformed forever? Butler (2004: 26) notes how our bodies imply mortality and agency exposing us to the gaze of others. Subhash, Amulya and Sayoni affirm their grief, anxiety and suffering laying bare the social conditions of the present moment.

Queer people, the caste oppressed and religious minorities suffer disproportionately along key vectors of structural precarity – employment, social stigma and health inequalities, all of which have been exacerbated through the pandemic. Precarity is both a state of being exposed to bodily harm simply by being themselves as but also symbolic due to one’s caste and class background creating a political condition of vulnerability. Hollibaugh and Weiss (2015) argue that queers are more vulnerable to poverty and economic injustice yet there exists a class invisibility in the LGBTQ movement whilst at the same time there is an invisibility of queerness in the wider labour movement. These narratives are an assemblage of the present moment, providing a critical lens to witness this collective trauma offering a testimonial function of queer endurance and defiance.

Banerjee and Browne (2018) have rightly argued that liveability is not just about survival. Survival is about the bare existential conditions under which some people are just expected to live but survival and liveability cannot be separated. During COVID, we have seen these precarities further heightened. The patchworks are a testament of queer survival, hate and care, of pleasures, anxiety and queerness. Viral assemblages and queer patchwork is calling attention to the infrastructural and social failures which have led to the vulnerability we now observe during these extraordinary times.

Notes

1. *Adda* is the practice of friends gathering on a recurrent basis for extended (intellectual) informal conversations. It is a form of sociality and postcolonial political culture that is unique to Bengali culture. Chakrabarty (2007) elaborates *adda* as an exchange of ideas, dialogue and debate between friends within household and public spaces. Elsewhere I have discussed *adda* as a queer methodology (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2019)
2. The charter can be viewed here. It is hosted by Varta Trust one of the collaborating partner organisations. <https://vartagensex.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/08-pleqsus-queer-mnfsto-english-draft.pdf>
3. Mamata refers to Mamata Banerjee, the incumbent Chief Minister of West Bengal. She is the first woman to hold the office and was elected in a major grassroots campaign in 2011 She is known for challenging the government of India and the ruling party, BJP on several issues including the Citizenship Amendment Act.
4. This translates to Shame on CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act). CAA became a major issue during the Legislative Assembly election in 2021. Memes and edited videos of her saying it quickly went viral on social media. This can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0JPFps8qFk>
5. Grindr is a location based mobile application for social networking, dating and sex used primarily by gay men. It was launched in 2009 and has become one of the most popular gay

mobile apps. In 2021 Grindr reported India as one of the top 5 countries with most user accounts. Also see Dasgupta (2022).

6. Kothi is a category for gender variant or 'feminine' same sex desiring males most commonly used in India and Bangladesh. There is considerable debate about the emergence of this term with some scholars and activists seeing it linked to sexual health funding and NGO interventions and some seeing it as more 'authentic' and indigenous. (See Dutta, 2012 and Boyce, 2007).

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