



Politics of Pleasure: Setting South Asia Straight

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Men who have sex with men have always existed throughout the history of South Asia, however, those subscribing to a gay identity may face an increased and specific stress in most of the contemporary societies on the subcontinent. Colonial Victorianism repressed sexuality by and large and it seems that the repression's origin has become forgotten. At present, the revival of religions since the 1980's is blamed for boundaries to the opening up of the public discourse, slowing down the pace of legal reforms as well. Since the US discovered Islam as a potential antagonist, the Gay International fostered a battlefield for gay rights particularly within Muslim societies. At the same time the modernity-specific pluralization and radicalization of self-chosen identities marches on seemingly unconquerably – not only within the religious sphere. Histories of sexualities are usually full of ambiguities and absurdities. This paper, however, is neither a historical survey nor does it suggest any theoretical framework. These lines do not result from a research project.¹ They are written with the simple intention to witness more debates about love and its inclusiveness in South Asian civilization – and less about conflict.

Sex & celibacy – or: before homo and hetero went different ways

Christianity largely had and continues to have an uneasy relationship with homosexuality. Although the institution of the church served for long as one of the most important refuges for men who preferred monosexual lifestyles and homosocial communities, the same institution fostered repression of and discrimination against homosexuals, which were in its beginning also an effort to break with Classical antiquity (Schroeder 2009: 333f.):



"A famous prohibition against children in early Christian monasteries reads: 'Do not bring young boys here. Four churches in Scetis are deserted because of boys' [...] Such warnings seem a reminder that Christian monasteries should not be confused with the classical Greek philosophical school, in which sex between teacher and pupil was an accepted part of the curriculum."

Western histories of homosexualities usually begin with documents from ancient Greece – a culture the Christian civilization radically broke with while introducing the Middle Ages, and thus there came about a unique tradition of condemning same-sex love and emotions as a sin and a disease. The Western concept of the secular nation-state was most conducive to the processes of institutionalizing homophobia; hence "homophobia sometimes seems to be especially virulent in, and perhaps even unique to, Western culture."(Fone 2000: 3) – but got successfully exported to South Asia and elsewhere along with other values.



Charles Nicolas Rafael Lafond (1774–1835): Sappho sings for Homer, 1824



Homosexual acts are documented in numerous Preindustrial Cultures (Roscoe 1996). In South Asia (Goldman 1993), the *Atharvaveda* is probably one of the oldest sources. The text was compiled between the twelfth and tenth centuries B.C. and reports about *kliba* (mostly wrongly translated as eunuch) and *napumsaka* (unmanly man), i.e. men who seem to desire to have sex with other men (i.e. Pandit 1895-98). The Sanskrit terms for anal intercourse (*adhorata*) and oral sex (*auparis-taka, maukhya*), however, apply for both, hetero- and non-heterosexual engagement.

One of the most famous *napumsaka*-stories is found in the *Mahabharata* (4; 59; 237ff.) and its protagonist is Arjuna, the well known hero of the *Bhagavadgita*:² After rejecting Urvashi's offer for sexual intercourse, the Apsara cursed Arjuna to become an eunuch. Indra then modifies the curse in a way that Arjuna loses manhood only for the period of one year of his choice. After the Pandavas lost their kingdom to the Kauravas, they had to live in the forest for twelve years and spend another year incognito within society. Arjuna then chooses to turn into the third sex dancer Brihannada (lit. she, who has a big tool), teaching dance at the court of King Virata. *Napumsakas* are described in the Sanskrit literature as loud screaming dancers especially during weddings. They are portrayed with female characteristics, for example long hair and the weak physical and mental abilities attributed to women. In the late Vedic period, between 800 and 600 B.C., their birth is considered to be nearly as shameful for their fathers as the birth of a daughter (Syed 2001). All this was considered solid proof of lack in paternal seminal strength. One model of explanation is that the sex of the embryo is determined by the quality and quantity of the paternal white seed (See Das 2003 for details outlined in different medical Sanskrit texts): If the red maternal seed is more powerful, the child will become a daughter. If both seminal liquids were equally strong, the embryo would turn into a third sex male. To avoid this, medical texts suggests that the father may drink sperm of a more potent man or absorb male semen by passive anal intercourse – in order to prepare for the heterosexual act of producing a son (Syed 2003).

"The dharma textbooks generally ignore, stigmatize, or penalize male homosexual activity: Manu prescribes either loss of caste (11.68) or the mildest of sanctions, a ritual bath (11.174), in dramatic contrast with the heavy penalties, including death, for heterosexual crimes like adultery;



the *Artha-shastra* stipulates the payment of just a small fine (3.18.4, 4.13.236). Most Sanskrit texts regard atypical sexual or gender behavior as an intrinsic part of the nature of the person who commits such acts." (Doniger 2009: 332).

Due to their specific nature and position in society, special laws apply to the *napumsakas*. As they are not considered sons, they are not legal heirs. However, if they marry and have sons, their sons then do become legal heirs (Olivelle 1999).³ The law of Manu considers them as dishonest as women; hence they were not allowed to bear testimony in court. If their brothers are not willing to perform the heterosexual act in their place, they also become the only men, whose wives are allowed to divorce from their husbands. They are not allowed to be killed in war, however, if murdered there is no posthumous legal protection (on further legal implications of homosexual relations between men of different *varnas* see Sharma 1993).

The epic and poetic literature is full of stories making fun of the lack of sexual interest *napumsakas* take in the opposite sex (Syed 2003 provides a highly useful overview). Many verses are portrayed as originating from moaning wives. There are also many descriptions of calculating girls, who tease bashful lovers as *napumsakas* in order to motivate them to be more proactive. In terms of intensity of sexuality, while female sexuality is compared to a smoldering campfire, and male sexuality to a forest conflagration, *napumsaka* sexuality is like a city ablaze (Zwilling 1996).

Richard Schmidt (1897) refers to these people as *Tertia species Eunuchi* (vulgar terms are translated into Latin and not into German by Schmidt) in his German translation of the *Kamasutra*. This term is highly problematic and most misleading as there is no rational reason for why this people should have been castrated. The *Kamasutra* term of the third sex (*tritiya prakriti*, KS 2, 9, 6ff.) refers simply to a man desiring men. Its ambiguous subcategories (*kliba*, *napumsaka*, *pandaka*) have been a part of the Indian worldview for nearly three thousand years (Zwilling 1996; Wetzler 1998). It could well be that Magnus Hirschfeld (1904), who was citing Schmidt, was inspired by Schmidt's references to the Sanskrit sources while developing his concept of the third sex and the theory of the female soul in a male body, which was most crucial for the genesis of the first Western homosexual movement.



Sanskrit literature is full of stories about people of the third sex and several translations of classical texts would indeed make more sense when the “eunuch” would be understood as some sort of “homosexual” (Syed 2003; Sweet 2002; Angot 1993; Goldman 1993). Other Hindu queer tales (Pattanaik 2002; Vanita and Kidwai 2000) include of course Vishnu’s turning into Mohini, Shiva’s castration and turning into a *kimpurusha* (lit. “Is it human?”), Ardhanareshwara, Sikhandin’s sex change, Vaishnava Sakhibhava monks (who wear female apparel while striving to become a sakhi, female companion, of Radha, the beloved of Krishna, the only ultimate male), *hijras*, and *jogappas* (*devadasis* of the goddess Yellamma).

To conclude: Homosexual acts and emotions are reported in a diverse variety of Sanskrit literature – clearly confuting today’s popular Hindu misconception of homosexuality having been introduced to the subcontinent by invading Muslim troops. As the main divide in Sanskrit texts is between sex and celibacy, not between different types of sexual behavior, the tone of ancient sources is significantly less judgmental compared to colonial and post-colonial modern references. Two decades before Assmann (2003) connected intolerance with monotheism, Hoffman (1983) already argued that polytheistic religions take a more flexible view of gender and this is why Hindu texts and societies have not denounced or persecuted homosexual activity the way Judaic, Christian and Muslim texts and societies have.

The ambiguous Sanskrit concept of *napumsaka* is somehow alive in the South Asian Muslim culture as well – the Urdu term for “non-male” being *namard*.

Segregation & promiscuity: Muslim monosexualities

When migrating Muslim scholars and administrators followed the Muslim mercenaries to India, they settled predominantly in urban areas, fostering a street culture of men mingling at bazaars. “Homoerotically inclined men are continuously visible in Muslim medieval histories and are generally described without pejorative comment.” (Kidwai 2000: 107). Romantic and erotic interaction among bazaar boys are described in Mir’s *ghazals*, while his poem *Shola-i Ishq* narrates a love affair between a Muslim and a Hindu man. “Muslim mystic poets Madho Lal Hussayn, Ras Khan, and Sarmad were in love with Hindu boys.” (ibid.: 108).



During the medieval period institutions like harems, male brothels and slavery grew substantially in South Asia. The early Sultans of Delhi relied heavily on slave troops and hence patronized slave traders, who commoditized eunuchs as the most reliable slaves (as they wouldn't steal in order to support their progeny).

Eunuchs therefore were entrusted with the most responsible positions (Chatterjee 1999). The political theorist and historian Ziauddin Barani (1285-1357), although not condemning homosexual relations, criticizes in his work *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* (1357) those Sultans who surrender crucial instruments of power to their male lovers. He mentions for example the Sultan Alauddin Khilji (reigning 1296-1316), who fell in love with the eunuch slave Malik Kafur, who was captured as booty from Gujarat. The Sultan appointed him the deputy ruler (*Malik Naib*) and commander of his army. Some say it was Malik who killed the Sultan. In any case, *Malik Naib* raised Alauddin's six year old son to be the heir to the throne and in spite of being a eunuch, married his mother, thus becoming the regent (Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 131ff.). Barani's ideal Muslim ruler - not only in this context - is Mahmud of Ghazna.

Several historically important Muslims have become famous for their at least semi-homosexual lifestyles. One of the most famous Muslims in South Asia is Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030), the first Muslim "invader of India", destroyer of the Somnath temple, and first Muslim leader to make military alliances with Hindu kings. After annexing the Punjab, Mahmud made Lahore the regional capital, hereby initiating the Islamic period of Lahore's history. His lifelong romance with his cupbearer, constant companion and lover Ayaz, who was purchased as a non-Muslim slave, has become a symbol for the ideal love story and was the subject of several epic and lyrical poems in Persian and Urdu (Kugle 2002). In 1021 Mahmud made Ayaz ascend to the throne of Lahore. Their love is praised by Rumi (1207-1273), or in Sadi's *Bustan* (compiled in 1257) etc. Zulali authored a particularly interesting and clever romance, the Masnawi *Mahmud-o Ayaz* (1592), emphasizing that Ayaz had been kidnapped by the king of Kashmir (ibid.: 34):

"Yet they are reunited and their love triumphs. The poet's



emphasis on universal love through the very particular relationship between the two men leads him to rewrite many of the facts of Mahmud's adventures. Mahmud invades India and destroys Hindu temples in order to rescue the hostage Ayaz. Love is the lens through which his military exercises are to be understood – not plunder or piety."

At the age of 16, Babar (1483-1530), the first *Mughal* ruler of India, fell in love with a boy he calls Babari in his Turkish autobiography *Tuzuk-i Baburi* (well-known under the title of its Persian translation *Baburnama*):

"At this time there happened to be a lad belonging to the camp-bazaar, named Baburi. There was an odd sort of coincidence in our names:

*I became wonderfully fond of him;
Nay, to speak the truth, mad and distracted after him.*

Before this I never had conceived a passion for any one; and indeed had never been so circumstanced as either to hear or witness any words spoken expressive of love or amorous passion. (...) Sometimes it happened that Baburi came to visit me; when, from shame and modesty, I found myself unable to look him direct in the face. How then is it to be supposed that I could amuse him with conversation or a disclosure of my passion? From intoxication and confusion of mind I was unable to thank him for his visit; it is not therefore to be imagined that I had power to reproach him with his departure. I had not even self-command enough to receive him with the common forms of politeness. One day while this affection and attachment lasted, I was by chance passing through a narrow lane with only a few attendants, when, of a sudden, I met Baburi face to face. Such was the impression produced on me by this recounter that I almost fell to pieces. I had not the power to meet his eyes, or to articulate a single word. With great confusion and shame I passed on and left him, remembering the verses of Muhammed Salih:



*I am abashed whenever I see my love;
My companions look to me, and I look another way.*

The verses were wonderfully suited to my situation. From the violence of my passion and the effervescence of youth and madness, I used to stroll bare-headed and barefoot through lane and street, garden and orchard, neglecting the attentions due to friend and stranger; and the respect due to myself and others:

*During the fit of passion, I was mad and deranged;
nor did I know
That such is his state who is enamored of a fairy face.*

Sometimes, like a distracted man, I roamed alone over the mountains and deserts; sometimes I went wandering about from street to street in search of mansions and gardens. I could neither sit nor go; I could neither stand nor walk.

*I had neither strength to go nor power to stay;
To such a state did you reduce me, O my heart!" (Milford
1921)*

Delhi-based mystic poet-musician Amir Khusro (ca. 1253-1325), lover of the Chishti saint Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia, penned Persian poetry. Among others he authored the following lines (translated by Kidwai in Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 127f.):

"Delhi – Oh its unadorned beloveds
Wear turbans but their tresses are loose.
They openly kill with their pride
Though they drink liquor in secret.
The Muslims have become sun-worshippers
Because of these simple sprightly Hindu boys.
I am desolate and intoxicated.
Because of these pure Hindu boys.
Tied up in their locks,
Khusro is like a dog with a collar."



Sufi mystic Shah Hussayn (ca. 1539-1599) was deeply in love with the Hindu Brahman Madho Lal (Syed). Sikand (1998) called him a martyr for gay love. In his Persian biography *Haqiqat al-Fuqara* (ca.1662) Shaikh Mahmud ibn Muhammad Pir reports (Kugle 2000: 146):

"O God, our friend Hussayn doesn't even know
Who this boy is who is playing with his heart.
I know, insisted Hussayn, that my heart's curse
Is a young infidel, who will raze the house of my faith to
the ground.
With the graceful curls of his hair, this bare-chested idol
Has tied up my heart, hung it from the sacred thread on
his shoulder!"

Boy-love, *amrad-parasti* (lit. worshipping the beardless), is an important theme in the Urdu *ghazal* as well (Rahman 1990). Sadi refers to beardless youth also as *sadaru* (lit. clean), collecting stories about men falling in love with them in his *Gulistan* and *Bustan*. Nomani (1912) suggests that Arab soldiers started to desire boys only after they conquered Iran – due to the distance of their women. The most overt references to boy-love in the Urdu *ghazal* are found in the works of Mir Taqi "Mir" (ca. 1724-1810) and Najmuddin Shah Mubarak alias Abru (ca. 1692-1747). Abru, for example, authored the following lines (ibid.: 6f.):

"Jo launda chor kar randi ko cahe
Wo koi ashiiq nahin hai bul-hawis hai.
He who leaves the boy and loves the whore,
He is no lover but only a man of lust."

"Jo launda pak hai so khwar hai tagre ke tain ajiz
Wahi raja hai dilli men jo ashiiq ke tale par jae.

The boy who is chaste is persecuted and is made helpless by those who are strong
He is the king in Delhi who lies below the lover."



Only in the nineteenth century – under the impact of colonial value systems – homophobia became a dominant voice and this literature was branded a *vulgarity*. In 1882 a campaign to purify Urdu poetry was started by Altaf Hussain Hali, who called to purge the theme of *boy-love* from the canon (Pritchett 1994: 179-183). Hindus blamed Muslims for introducing homosexuality and similarly Sunnis blamed Shias (for example the Deobandi scholar Zafeeruddin 1999 – his first polemical tract in Urdu on homosexuality was titled *Nasl Kushi* – Race Suide). In April 1946 Bareilly-based journal *Tahqiqat* printed the essay *Iran ki Amrad-parasti ka Asar Urdu Shairi par* by Andalib Shadani considering *boy-love* as: “an insult to that pure emotion. Wouldn’t it be great if all well wishers of Urdu destroy whatever they can of such poetry so that this ugly blot on Urdu’s reputation is washed away!” (Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 201). Pakistan’s nationalist poet Muhammad Iqbal mentioned Mahmud and Ayaz in his *Shikwa* (1909) in a way that just does not broach the issue of homosexuality:

*"Ek hi saf mein khade Mahmud-o Ayaz
Na koi banda raha na koi banda nawaz.
In the same row Mahmud and Ayaz stood (to pray),
None was slave and none was master."*

Victorian secrets: penetration politics in British India

Criminalizing homosexuality and challenging religious (at first: papal) authority have been connected since the beginning in the British state. In 1533, Henry VIII – while renegotiating the boundaries between the Catholic Church and the British state – secularized sodomy and from being a sin against God it became a crime against the state. The statute was first and foremost deployed against Catholic monks. “Once the law was passed, Henry’s commissioners began to inspect the monasteries; within a year Henry declared them dissolved and their goods forfeit to the state.” (Fone 2000: 216). Europe’s homophobia is hence less rooted in Christianity than in concepts of the secular nation-state.

Men engaging in male-to-male sexuality did not face legal prosecution in pre-British India. In British India, in particular after the so called “Mu-



tiny" or "Great Rebellion" in 1857, it became even more imperative for the rulers of the imperial state to maintain their sexual purity (first of course within the army). The colonial anti-sodomy statute, Section 377, was introduced into the Indian Penal Code on October 6 1860 by the Indian Law Commission, presided over by Lord Macaulay (Bhaskaran 2002: 15). It reads:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation. Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

Comment. This section is intended to punish the offense of sodomy, buggery and bestiality. The offense consists in a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman, or by a man in any manner with an animal."

This law was quite progressive for Britain – as it reduced punishment for homosexual acts from execution to ten years' imprisonment. For India however, the law introduced unprecedented persecution, making the subcontinent more medieval. The United Kingdom legalized sex between consenting adults in 1967 (for a detailed history see Jeffery-Poulter 1991).

"The extreme homophobia we witness today, manifested in lynchings and murders of gay people in the West, public executions of them in the Middle East, and violence against gay people and calls to persecute them in many countries, including India and Nepal, is a product not of the ancient or medieval past, but rather of modernity. Even though medieval European churchmen condemned certain same-sex sexual acts, these acts were rarely punished as crimes. Rather, they were treated as sins to be expiated by re-



ligious penance. This changed with the Renaissance [...]”
(Vanita 2005: 10)

Orientalist ethnopornographies

Thomas Bauer, author of *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2011), stresses several absurdities shaping the Western contemporary perspective on Islamic civilization (Bauer 2010): Classical Islamic law clearly prohibits homosexual acts (Schmitt 2001). However, the draconian punishments prescribed for such acts, were in practice not enforced even once during a thousand years of history. Quite to the contrary, Muslim scholars and poets penned lakhs of homoerotic love poems especially between 800 A.D. and 1800. These poems are an important part of the more sophisticated literature produced in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. During the decades following 1830, homoerotic poetic literature production ceased very abruptly. The reason for this sudden end cannot be found in Islam, but in the increasing influence of Victorian value systems and sexual ethics. Victorian sexual values are still alive and rooted in Muslim societies today – one reason why so many Muslims have an ambiguous relation to their own tradition of literature. In particular, Islamists consider this Islamic tradition of literature as proof of moral decadence, which led to the degeneration of Islam and political downfall of Muslim empires.

What Western analysts consider a characteristic of modernity and progress – tolerance in sexual practice – was characteristic of the Muslim world for over a millennium. During the nineteenth century, Muslims approved Western values with the dramatic damnation of homosexual acts and emotions. They began to consider the seemingly open moral practice of their forefathers, one reason for why their societies were not as modern and progressive as the West. Today, observers of the West criticize Muslim societies for the lack of gay rights, considering homophobia as typically Islamic, although it is mostly imported from Europe. Homosexual acts are still not punishable in most of the Muslim majority countries – and where punishments are legal, these punishments do not derive from Islamic *shariah*, but the British law. In Britain these laws have been eliminated of course and in many Islamic states the British origin of these laws has been forgotten. Here



as there homophobia is considered as typically Islamic – a dramatic example of asynchronicity.

Global gender equality & the perversities of the Gay International

After the Cold War, and even more after 9/11, the United States started to consider Islam as a potential antagonist. Human rights have become an alibi for economic, military and political interventions (Spivak 2008). “The sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retroactively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military action against Afghanistan, is a sign of the extent to which feminism, as a trope, is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of first world impermeability.” (Butler 2004: 41). In particular gay rights became an instrument of this neocolonial project to transform Muslim countries. The universalization of Western gay rights provided the Gay International (Massad 2008: 160-190; Massad 2002) with the missionary task of imposing its identities in non-Western countries and attacking alleged repressions of sexual freedoms, hereby aggressively challenging traditional cultures of tolerance and ambiguities. European and American gay scholars produced a variety of academic literature, explaining homosexuality among Muslims, transforming the people, who engage in male-to-male sexuality, into subjects identified as homosexual and gay. Ironically, the liberatory claims made by these scholars are in practice quite the contrary. “The fact that the Gay International resorts to the same organizations (the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Congress, U.S.-based human rights organizations, the American media, inter alia), practices, and discourse that advance U.S. imperial interests is hardly a mitigating circumstance.” (Massad 2008: 175). Roscoe/Murray title their edited book *Islamic Homosexualities* – as if Islam could be homosexual. And Duran (1993: 190) writes of “two important historical figures known to have been gay, Sultan Mehmet Fatih, the Ottoman conqueror of Constantinople (Istanbul), and Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi, who invaded India from Afghanistan.”

As we have already mentioned, Sultan Mahmud’s lifelong romance was with Ayaz, but at the same time he was also married to a woman and



has had sons like most dynastic rulers. The Western concept of homosexuality is not necessarily relevant in Muslim societies as only a minuscule minority of Muslims engaging in MSM identify themselves as homosexual and even less feel a need for Western-styled gay politics. In fact, the academic Gay International is *heteronormalizing* (Klauda 2008) the Muslim world by subjugating it under the exclusive Western binary of sexualities. Already Lindholm (1982: 224) observed that due to the impact of Western values the numbers of openly homoerotic relationships in Northern Pakistan have decreased dramatically.

One drastic example for the Western claims of universal gayness is the latest book by Scott alias Siraj al-Haq Kugle (2010), a gay American professor of Islamic studies, who converted to Sufism in India. His call for a new Islamic sexual ethics is academically made, however, it applies only to people who are exclusively and 100 % homosexual, i.e. those who cannot have sex with anybody from the opposite sex (to be sure gayness is the God given inherent disposition of the soul). As a large majority of men engaging in MSM, however, do get married at some point in life, the question of relevance has to be raised. To what degree shall – and why on earth should – Muslims consider their so-called *emergency homosexuality* a serious emergency?

Shame & slavery in social life

Newspaper discourse in the West often reduces Islam, if not to terrorism, to aspects of gender segregation and honor killings. Sexuality and shame are usually portrayed as closely connected. One absurdity this narrative produced was a US program to recruit an army of informants by portraying alleged Muslim *mujahidin* in potentially shameful sexual positions at Abu Ghraib. As common sense suggests, the program was ineffective and didn't create the loyalty military leaders hoped. Raphael Patai, in the Orientalist classic *The Arab Mind*, puts forward the thesis that just as Western societies would suffer from guilt (as their individuals had a conscience), Muslim societies suffer from shame. Patai considers sex not only to be the prime mental preoccupation in the Muslim world, but also the greatest taboo – hence shame was considered the biggest weakness in the Muslim psyche. Using Patai as their bible for the Muslim cognitive map, American neoconservatives concluded that this specific vulnerability



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of Muslims to sexual humiliation could possibly translate into political action. Hersh (2004) comments on the pictures taken in Abu Ghraib (Massad 2008: 43ff.):

“It was thought that some prisoners would do anything – including spying on their associates – to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends.” The government consultant said, “I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.” The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action.”



Producing shame by sexuality.



Shame production site at Abu Ghraib.

Modernity: a project of prioritizing self-chosen identities

Sexuality has entered the arena of cultural wars. Sexual identities are increasingly becoming more reflexive. In the new quest for unambiguously, symbolic conflicts for distinction are fought by an increasingly large and diverse body of competing agents. In the current debate about Islam, sex and gender stereotypes are increasingly reified, leading to polarizations, misunderstandings and biases. As “the politics of gender can never be divorced from politics with a capital P” (Kandiyoti 2010: 62), “the painstaking advances made by scholars working on gender and women’s rights risk being overshadowed by the effects of geopolitics on the production of knowledge.” (Kandiyoti 2010: 48).

The ground reality is much more complex and at the same time much more trivial as reflected in the current debate. In most Muslim majority countries it is not unusual that men of all segments of society engage in



multiple sexual relationships with men and women (Agha 2002; Brown 2005). Islam is a sex-positive religion (Ali 2006) – sexuality as such is not considered sinful, but God’s given foretaste for paradise within the world. The Christian concept that sexual intercourse shall only be a method for procreation is totally alien in Islamic history and civilization. Islamic gender segregation provided broad Muslim monosexual spaces, which in practice often encouraged homosexual relations. In the Islamic tradition, women and beardless boys were considered equally desirable sexual objects. This carnality was most bewildering for Western observers during the colonial period. Kremer, for example, wrote in 1875 in his *cultural history* that the homosexuality of the Muslims results from their heterosexual oversaturation (as women were way too easy) (Kremer 1875ff.; Bebel 1884). At the same time there is a high level of social control and discipline in Muslim societies, limiting individual tendencies for pleasure-maximizing and in particular public displays of syncretic colorful cafeteria-sexualities. In Pakistan extramarital sexual relationships are a particularly taboo subject and cannot be discussed openly and that might be one reason for the failure of sexual education in this country. Many youngsters have little to no knowledge about STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) about which there is a high level of misunderstanding and suspicion, and not just among youngsters. Traditional doctors, the so-called hakims, are still spreading the myth in rural and also urban Pakistan that masturbation can lead to impotence or that male-male sexuality would reduce the quality of the semen (as it would be wasted). Although many Pakistanis are not unfamiliar with the term HIV, they feel they are protected as they subscribe to proper Muslims moral values even when having unprotected intercourse (Hen-nink 2005).

Throughout South Asia there is increasing participation in Western modeled gay groups and organization (sometimes under the banner of HIV education) since the 1990’s, which strive to set up a subculture that could compare to that in the West. All these efforts have failed so far. Globalization fosters individualization, implying the staging of self-chosen identities, economization, greater mobility, translocality as well as the opening of borders and deconstruction of categories. We hear more voices calling for political participation and legal reform. Increasing pluralism, however, fosters processes of demarcation and reification of specific identities. At the same time identities are produced – and deconstructed – according to specific social, cultural and religious spaces.



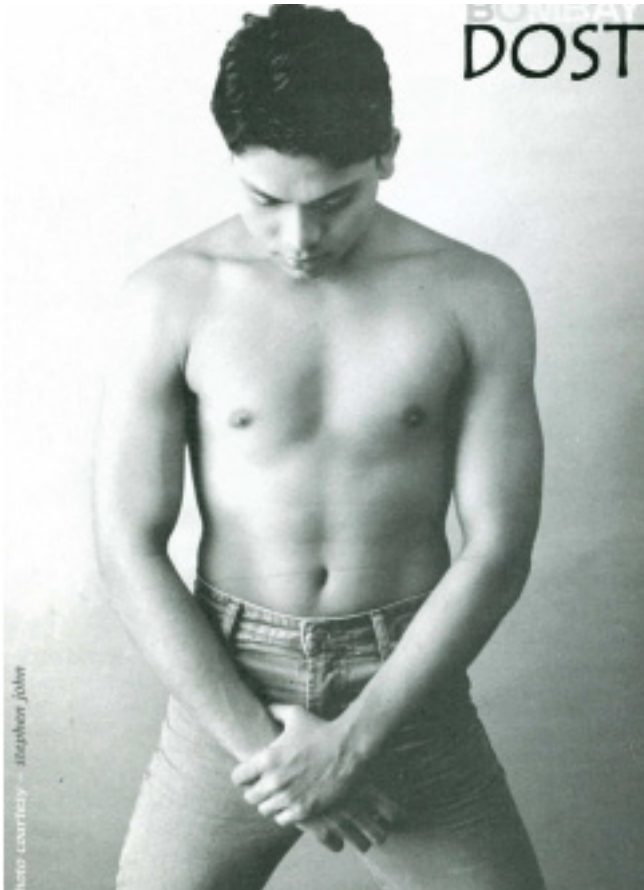
The increasing visibility and staging of homosexualities in different parts of the world and their interaction with people travelling from other parts seems to be specific phenomena of modernity. The increasing impact of Western sex tourist communities has usually a negative impact on traditional tolerance of male-male sexuality in Muslim societies. Even HIV is sometimes attributed to Western tourists and several HIV positive people refuse medical treatment as the therapy is considered to be Western in the postcolonial context.

Most of Pakistani society consists of clans of more and less connected families, organized in nuclear families built around heterosexual relationships. Heterosexuality, however, is not a genetic disposition, but a product of cultural forces and legal compulsion, constituting heteronormativity. A key element for heteronormativity is the negation and repression of homosexual elements within human sexuality. Non-normative sexualities are marginalized in public. The demographic change from arranged marriages towards love marriages starts making the question of sexual orientation more and more relevant in South Asia. If it was secondary for arranged marriages, the condition of free choice makes it increasingly central for love marriages. Homosexuality becomes a dilemma when – under the impact of modernity – marriage becomes associated with true love, more or less free choice and sexual satisfaction. But where homosexuality is criminalized by heteronormativity, it becomes a defect and *sexual conversions* become more attractive when weddings offer financial incentives too.

In the 1980's the Western-styled gay newsletters emerged in India. The newsletter *Gay Scene* started in Caclutta in 1980, but didn't run for long. In 1986 two Indian men founded *Trikone* in California (Syed) as the first LGBT group for South Asians. The quarterly magazine *Trikone: Giving Voice to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender South Asians* includes personal ads from India and the website's online video diaries advice amongst others on how to speak with parents and deal with incoming marriage proposals (WWWa). In 1988 the bimonthly newsletter *Shakti Khabar* was started in London. Other groups were founded in the West for South Asian immigrants like MASALA (Massachusetts Area South Asian Lamda Association), New York City's SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association: WWWb) etc. HIV prevention and sexual health oriented activism became increasingly important in India during the early 1990's and organiza-



tions include Mumbai-based MSM organization *Humsafar Trust* (1991) (WWWc) and New Delhi-based *Naz Foundation* (1994) (WWWd).



The cover model of the first Indian gay magazine *Bombay Dost* (2002) is displayed on the first page – not the front side.



India's first gay magazine *Bombay Dost* was started in Mumbai in May 1990 by the activist Ashok Row Kavi. In Calcutta *Pravartak* followed in 1991. Other newsletters started in the 1990's include *Friends India* from Lucknow and *Good as You* from Bangalore. Newsletters and *yahogroups* enabled the queer community organizing private parties to meet and mingle with similar minded men. *Voodoo* in Mumbai started to operate practically as the first gay club at Saturdays (the bar is usually a place for mostly Arab tourists to hook up with female prostitutes and gays decided to flood it on Saturday evenings). In 1999 a huge posh private gay party in Mumbai was raided by police forces and the party's organizer was arrested in what became known as the White Party fiasco. Although the upper-class family of the organizer pulled strings that the media would not report that it was a gay party, newspaper coverage cited the police inspector saying he could not give details on the event as "things were beyond limits of decency". Accounts of these non-Western queer experiences can be found in several readers (for example Rao and Sarma 2009; Narrain and Bhan 2005; Seabrook 1999; Ratti 1993). After Internet was launched in India in 1995, virtual spaces quickly came up providing a gay haven (Campbell 2004) for Indian men, an online parallel gay universe to affirm their identities and explore sexual desires. Starting in 1998, the first Indian *egroup* of this kind was *Gay Bombay* (WWWe; WWWf), following in several aspects the example set by the worldwide *Khush*-list founded for LGBT South Asians in 1992 in the West (WWWg; Roy 2003). Shahani (2008) provides a highly readable virtual ethnography on the online presence *GayBombay* and its list activities. Cell phones were another technological improvement that impacted dramatically on dating activities as most people engaging in MSM would not share a landline number out of the fear that family members could take the call.

The first Indian gay *pride march* was held in Calcutta in 1999 and only 15 activists are reported to have been participated in this *friendship walk*. The *Walk on the Rainbow* marches held after 2004 attracted around 300 activists (Shahani 2008: 182). Several celebrities have come out as gay in public, among them are fashion designers like Krishna Mehta, Rohit Bal or Wendell Rodricks (who registered a PACS (*pacte civil de solidarité*) in 2002 with his French partner) – and most reported: Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil from Rajpipla, who launched the Indian gay magazine *Fun* in July 2010 – after the Delhi high court decriminalized homosexuality in July 2009 in Delhi area. Only days after the Delhi



court's decision the Pakistan supreme court ruled to grant equal rights for transgenders. Members of the third sex, so called *hijras* or *khus-ras* (Jaffrey 1996; Singh 2001; Gayatri 2005; Nanda 1990, 1996), are meanwhile officially regarded as neither male nor female in national identity cards in Pakistan (Haider 2009).

The case of the Islamic Republic Pakistan is particularly interesting. Pakistan is in practice far less homophobic than its rhetoric suggests. Homosexual actions are as common as heterosexual acts – the dividing line is between marital and extramarital intercourse – and Brown (2005: 51) suggests that male sex workers are probably easier available than female prostitutes: “Indeed, there may be even more boy prostitutes than girl prostitutes in Pakistan. They work in garages, as helpers on buses, as assistants to truck drivers, or as waiters in tea shops. They are everywhere: impoverished boys between the ages of 9 and 14 who sell sex for a pittance.”

“Drag queen, darling, not extremist!”

A noteworthy public figure in Pakistan is Ali Saleem alias Begum Nawazish Ali. A cross-dresser and talk-show-master, or should we say lady. Born in 1980, the son of a senior army officer, Ali Saleem became famous for imitating Benazir Bhutto until he started his political talk-show *Late Night Show with Begum Nawazish Ali* in 2005. In his show he dresses in a sari and welcomes his guest as the upperclass lady Begum Nawazish. This role allows him – like none other before him in Pakistani television – to shoot his questions directly below the belt without his interview partners feeling insulted. An example? When there was a debate of whether the military dictator Musharraf should step back as chief of army to become a civilian president, the Begum commented: “Brother Musharraf is such a hot soldier! I so wish he would take off his uniform!”

I met Ali Saleem alias Begum Nawazish by chance in the five-star Sheraton in Karachi. The Begum was on a small stage, imitating Benazir Bhutto and performing some skits against George W. Bush and Guantanamo, making fun by portraying herself as a staunch supporter of Taliban and al-Qaida. After the show we exchanged a few pleasantries and he invited me to see his male side sometime soon. When I visited Ali Saleem in his villa in Karachi, his father, lieutenant colonel Salim



Ahmad Zafar, opened the door and welcomed me in fluent German, as he had cooperated with the Bundeswehr in Sonthofen for several years. He also works as a real estate agent, selling houses in Dubai to privileged Pakistanis. After some drinks dinner was served and Ali Saleem told me his story: He became famous through the Late Night Show on Aaj TV, through the character of Begum Nawazish, a wealthy flippant widow dressed in a semi-transparent sari. The unabashed flirting with her interview partners adds the spice to her political talk. The show has been running in Pakistan since June 2005. After 2007 the much larger offshoot *Begum* was produced in Mumbai for channel 9X for the most lucrative slot on Saturday night. Ladylike Ali explains: "And so I conquered India, brother Musharraf was not able to do it, so I had to."

To get there was an uphill struggle: After his father divorced from his wife, Salim moved from Islamabad, where he was born, to Karachi. There he joined the theater group *Gripps*. Veiled in a burqa, his first performance on stage was with *Gripps* at the Arts Council. Omar Adil, who wrote the political satire for *Gripps*, was his first staunch supporter. Imran Aslam, a friend of Omar Adil, and CEO of Geo TV, pushed Ali Salim into TV. His satirical election series "Ham Sab Umid se Hain" (Urdu: We are all full of hope) depicted Ali Salim as Benazir Bhutto in the national Pakistani TV. Imitating Benazir Bhutto, Ali Salim takes up the artist name BB (Bibi, Urdu: Miss). This role is still one of his favorite and especially after her assassination in 2007, he felt a need to keep her spirit alive by imitating her. Ali Salim explains: "Benazir is a metaphor for all that is positive in Pakistan: Democracy, hope, a liberal future and the self-confidence to stand up for political participation in male dominated Pakistan as a lady."

As political talk-master, Ali Salim talks hard. He is openly anti-American ("Anti-Americanism has nothing to do with religion, it is plain common sense!") and extremely critical of the political elites in Pakistan, who he considers corrupted by the US. His love for Benazir Bhutto has not fostered any specific sympathies for the current president of Pakistan, Zardari: "Zardari killed Benazir! He is a calculating character! He knew well that the presidency would be his after murdering his most popular wife. You need any proof? When Benazir wanted to leave Rawalpindi, he called his daughter on her mobile who was in the car with Benazir, and told her to tell Benazir that the people want to see her again and she should stand up from the car one more time. Then she was shot. Everybody knows that Zardari and Benazir were not on talking terms due



to their constant quarrels. Since then his daughter has twice attempted suicide." On air, however, he puts it more diplomatically: "The history of mankind has witnessed two miracle birthings: First the prophet Jesus, who was born to the Virgin Mary, now president Zardari, who was borne by his wife."

Ali Salim's talk is as transgressive as is the figure of Begum Nawazish. As a man he would not have been able to ask the questions he puts to his interviewees – nor even could a woman. His transsexual position enables him to formulate his questions as direct, aggressive and cheeky like nobody else can in the *adab*-minded public spheres of South Asia.

The only show in Indian TV that has somehow similar elements is *Koffee with Karan* with Bollywood celebrity Karan Johar – who himself says, he doesn't care whether people consider him to be gay or not. As film director Karan Johar had integrated the short gay kiss in the *Kal Ho Naa Ho* music clip *Kuch To Hua Hai*. Also the Bollywood mainstream movie *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* could be understood as quite critical of the institution of marriage. His latest production *Dostana* is particularly interesting as it opposes the deromanticizing of same-sex friendship that the Western import of homophobia fosters.

After Fire: La Cage aux Folles goes Bollywood

There is much to say about gayness in Bollywood and Indian independent movies (Waugh 2001; Gosh 2010; Gopingsath 2006, 2000; Henniker 2010; Holtzman 2010; Dudrah 2006 [chapter 5: Queer as Desis: Secret politics of gender and sexuality in Bollywood Films in diasporic urban ethnoscapes]). The first gay kiss on Indian TV was probably aired in the popular soap opera *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* – the Indian version of *Verliebt in Berlin* (both are versions of the Columbian telenovela *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*)– in December 2003. Just mentioning Bollywood's highly debated first gay kiss in *Dunno Y...Na Jaane Kyun* and Parvez Sharma's award-winning documentary on homosexual Muslims *A Jihad for Love* (2007), I would like to focus on in particular one big mainstream movie.

After the Canadian-Indian scandal movie *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta was released in India in November 1998, Shiva Sainiks attacked cinemas in Mumbai and Delhi for picturing scenes being allegedly "against Indian tradition". In July 2009, a Delhi Court technically decriminalized homosexuality within the Delhi area. An important sign of the seemingly



more relaxed relationship to homosexuality is the mainstream Bollywood movie *Dostana* (Friendship, 2008) produced by Karan Johar and directed by his assistant Tarun Mansukhani. The romantic comedy tells the story of two macho men in Miami, who pretend a gay love story in order to win the heart of their new roommate – a reverse Hindi version of *La Cage aux Folles*.



Escapist cinema: The ideal life of a gay couple engaging in excessive shopping with the best female friend in Florida.

Dostana is *the other* love story in mainstream Hindi cinema and it is the first major Bollywood production that deals intensively with male homosexuality. It is the story of two Indian macho hunks, who decide to pretend that they are gay and stage a relationship to get the contract for a room in a luxury apartment-sharing community. They both fall in love with their roommate and in order to win over her heart they stage their little lie with increasing pathos and dramas, to create the potential reasons for a breakup.

Miami: The two NRI's Samir (Abhishek Bachchan) and Kunal (John Abraham) wake up next to their one-night-stands in a penthouse-apartment, in which they have obviously not been before, and prepare breakfast for themselves, gabbling about their last night's girl. Samir works



as a photographer and Kunal as a nurse – both love luxury life in Florida, however, they cannot afford it. As both need a room to stay, but the conservative Indian landlady is looking for girls only – both decide to fake a gay love story. They share the flat with the career-minded fashion journalist Neha (Priyanka Chopra). All three of them become best friends, as a gay couple Samir and Kunal apply for a residence permit. Unfortunately Kunal's official notification of approval is sent to his home address in London – and received by his typically traditional mother. Neha falls victim to the new atmosphere of maximizing gay advantages too: To accelerate her career advancement she strives to partner her gay boss to one of her new friends – at least for some short-term relationship.

This sets the stage for the first major drama: While Neha's boss M. is checking out Samir and Kunal, an US immigration authority officer joins them for a surprise inspection, checking whether their gay relationship is real or fake – and when all are singing and dancing to Bollywood songs, Kunal's mother arrives from London to rescue her son. With the full support of the gay network, Neha tells Kunal's shocked mother: "Love makes one blind" – to which the big Punjabi mother replies, "But not that blind that one cannot tell the difference between man and woman!" The mother's wounds at the forced outing heal soon and then she fully supports her son in being gay, even giving her marriage blessings to Sam: "Jite raho! Phulo! Phalo! – Khair, choro!" (May you two live long and have many children! – Well, forget the latter!). But after Kunal's mother leaves, Sam and Kunal realize, that they both are in love with Neha and begin to trick each other in order to hit on Neha and spend time with her alone. Both build up an excellent system of lies: Sam complains that Kunal could never be faithful to him – and Kunal explains to Neha, that Sam is unfortunately totally impotent. The whole drama develops a new direction again when Neha falls in love with her new boss Abhimanyu (Bobby Deol), reuniting Sam and Kunal against the new competitor. At the end of course its happy endings for all and Kunal and Sam kiss each other on stage – like real men do. Escapist cinema at its best!

Dostana did extremely well on the market. Being the third biggest opener in the UK, the movie had a total worldwide box office gross of approximately 18 million USD within the first four weeks. In April 2011 *Dostana 2* will be released – this time the plot includes a real gay as well as a lesbian couple.



Homonativity or: our neo-Victorian politics of heteronormalization

Before the Gay International emerged, academic debates revolved more around the past than the present. In the current post-Gay International period highly charged interventions of the secular and religious conservative variety push an agenda of what should or should not exist in contemporary societies as well as in the past (Massad 2008: 415). The current European discourse in particular on Muslim sexualities seems to be in keeping with the nineteenth century European Orientalist ideas of shaming non-Europe into assimilation (Ibid.: 416). Authors who advertise the European concept of exclusive homosexuality for non-Europe, hereby implicitly advocating the imposition of traditionally tolerated same-sex relations under the Western binary of sexualities – reinterpreting accepted homosocial behavior like sharing a bed, hugging or kissing as homosexual – and thereby *heteronormalize* (Klauda 2008) the complex realities of everyday life, regrettably serve neither modern scholarship nor the common gay interest that they may claim to represent. As a conclusion it can be stated that the basic modes of desire of European and non-European men are in practice probably not as different as the dominant discourse might suggest.

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Endnotes

1 Several paragraphs of this comment are based on translated summaries of articles published by the author in *Gigi - Zeitschrift für sexuelle Emanzipation*. The original articles are: *Das Dritte Geschlecht im Alten Indien.*; *Koranische Früchtchen.*; *Islamische Pluralismen*; *Queer Jihad und Tugendterror.*; *Naqsh: Bilder einer Ausstellung.*; *Drag Queen, Schätzchen, kein Extremist!*; *Mamis Kleiner wählt Plan G.*; *Dubai Underground.*

2 Most primary sources are cited from Ruth Vanita's three books (2005, 2002 and 2000), which are worthy of canonical status among the literature on queer South Asia.

3 It might be noteworthy that Arjuna is associated with the term *kliba* in the *Bhagavadgita* too. When Arjuna decides not to fight, Krishna replies (2, 3a): *klaibyam ma sma gamah partha* (O son of Pritha, don't act like a *kliba*!).

4 For example Apastambha 2,6,14,1 and Vasistha 17, 53.