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INTERVIEW

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On Decolonising Queerness with Dr Sandeep Bakshi

Sandeep Bakshi is an Associate Professor in Decolonial, Postcolonial, and Queer Studies at Université Paris Cité. Co-founder of the Decolonizing Sexualities Network (<https://decolonizingsexualities.org>), Sandeep Bakshi explores critiques of eurocentric queer articulations through the lens of decolonial studies. Their current projects focus on analysing the status of equitability in queer archives, and how the reading of queer sexualities in the Global South is intertwined with the influence of colonial power structures.

We sent Sandeep Bakshi a series of questions regarding the effects of colonial practices on queer people, archives of queer literature and experiences, and the functioning of status quo queer movements.

Effects of colonial practices on queer people:

Were the eurocentric cultures introduced into South Asia during colonialism more or less accepting of queer people than South Asian cultures? How did these changes in cultural norms play out?

There have been several studies pointing to the presence of queer and transgender populations that predated the colonial encounter, even though the correct terminology would be to use people lying outside the purview of the sex/gender dichotomy of hegemonic western knowledge systems. This research has focussed in particular on first-peoples communities in the Americas and other geolocations. As an example, the term 'two-spirit' to refer to native American peoples embodying diverse genders, gender roles and sexualities was adopted in 1990. In a similar vein, it has now become widely accepted in academic and activist networks to invest the category of 'precolonial' in South Asia, especially India, rendering it amenable to acceptance of queer and transgender folk. As is well known, there is undeniable evidence of same-sex representation in cultural formations of South Asia. However, a word of caution is

necessary. There are two significant caveats to an uncritical celebration of the precolonial as a queer and transgender-affirming site. First, existence of same-sex and/or transgender representation does not by default entail acceptance or even lack of stigma. Early modern European societies included similar regimes of representation as well. And second, the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial are not neat categorisations. They may be clear temporal markers and though queer and transgender populations were not absent from precolonial / colonial times given their rich history especially in South Asia, they devolved in contact with European or even eurocentric cultures that were in a position of domination. Romanticising South Asian (homo)sexual cultures constitutes a substantive part of euro-knowledge formations and sufficient caution is required such that we do not construct a dichotomous relation between the repressive coloniser and the queer-affirming colonised. One reason we might be persuaded to draw such conclusions is the existence of the 1860 Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalising “unnatural” acts in British India and replicated across Empire. In my view, the homophobic statute comprises only one point of departure to reflect upon the legacy of homophobia in our contemporary societies. It is however erroneous to presuppose that South Asian culture was particularly accepting of homosexuality prior to colonial encounters. As we know it was in 2018, much later than the United Kingdom, that India decriminalised homosexuality. More rigorous research of the colonial period is necessary. For instance, whilst British colonisers imposed Section 377 partly as a response to what the Empire considered the moral/sexual depravity of non-European cultures, the French Empire pathologized non-heterosexual, non-procreative sexual relations as a part of the civilising mission in the colonies (e.g. Senegal, Tunisia) despite the presence of longstanding traditions of various gender and sexual combinations in the colonies, and more significantly, the absence of homosexuality as a criminal offence in *métropole* France (See, Babacar M’baye’s work). In the case of French colonialism there was absence of explicit legislation outlawing homosexuality in both the colonies and at home even though French soldiers stationed in the colonies received punishment for engaging in homosexual activity and non-procreative heterosexual acts. It is important to state that cultural contact for both peoples across the colonial divide shaped repression and response to it and both cultures co-constituted knowledge around sexuality and its cognates. Recent work on the colonial archives of sexualities is uncovering a more nuanced appreciation of colonial relations to homosexuality, queerness and transgender communities in South Asia.

How did eurocentric norms regarding the treatment of queer people ingrain themselves even after colonial powers receded?

Formal independence does not guarantee an end to cognitive coloniality nor epistemic dependence. Epistemic reconstitution becomes a possibility once cognitive decolonisation can be achieved. It is in this sense that imposition of western knowledge systems as the single-most validating system of authority requires careful rethinking and challenging. Eurocentric norms of gender and sexuality established and consolidated during the colonial periods, especially as European colonisers came into contact with their others and regimented their lives, comprise the most authoritative modality of thinking about gender and sexuality on our planet. Certainly, the erasures of local knowledges enacted during the colonial era through homophobic laws or policing

of sexuality have made it partially impossible to recover histories of non-normative sexualities. These histories continued through the colonial times and gender and sexual configurations devolved into what we know today as multifarious narratives. Additionally, as Martha Nussbaum observes, the continuation of stigmatisation of queerness in postcolonial India, for instance, followed from the elite fashioning itself on Victorian and colonial propriety. Whether it occurred as another instance of internalised colonisation seems secondary for a moment given the persistence of colonial homophobia in postcolonial India and, more significantly, since it remained firmly embedded in the legal apparatus. Departure from these received norms requires strenuous labour of not only undoing harmful forms of discourse on transgender communities and queerness across the globe but also through a critical assessment of 'what' non-normative sexualities and genders signified, precisely. One challenge to Eurocentric formations that has surfaced in the latter part of the previous century is the sustained research focus on 'other' forms of gender and sexuality configurations that escaped legibility in Eurocentric accounts. For example, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's challenge to western normative gender systems has opened newer avenues of thinking about the evident oversight of gendered taxonomic systems.

In India, outside of Section 377, were there any other policies that British colonial powers instituted that structurally harmed queer people?

Even though Section 377 remains emblematic in terms of regulating sexuality – or rather non-normative/non-procreative sexual acts – in colonial India, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was specifically introduced for regulation, surveillance and control of criminal tribes and “eunuchs” (the term was used for colonial records in British India). For the purposes of the act, the term “eunuch” referred to “all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent” (https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealed-act/repealed_act_documents/A1871-27.pdf, p. 355). The provision of the act covered the “unnatural acts” mentioned in Section 377 and went beyond its remit including strengthened surveillance of property, sexuality and bodily autonomy (ban on dancing in public for example) of those deemed criminal. The serious implications for all people who came under the scope of this law can hardly be emphasised enough. There are two points worth making regarding the Act. It was one form of control exercised by colonial authorities on sexual and gendered configurations and formed part of a larger campaign to consolidate the various administrations in South Asia. Laurence Preston notes that as early as the 1830s colonial administrators imposed restriction on property of hijras in Bombay. In addition, it was part of the racialisation project of empire that implicated gendered and sexual configurations in this Act specifically aimed at ‘criminal tribes’. This project incorporated equating caste with a form of racialised characterisation and engaging gender and sexuality along such lines of thought. Additionally, most legislation that controlled and regulated the movement of individuals in British India were bound to affect queer and transgender populations as well, rendering them further marginalised. Suffice to mention the anti-vagrancy and other repressive laws passed in the nineteenth century adversely affected communities in colonial India including queer and transgender people, since the focus was on homelessness, begging, and loitering, which curtailed the use of public space.

A lot of ethnic and religious conflicts were fuelled by arbitrary divisions made during colonialism - how have these conflicts persisted, and affected the treatment of queer people (specifically from marginalised groups)?

I believe that we need to tread with caution the dividing line of colonialism/postcolonialism. As I mentioned previously, such temporal distinctions might be helpful in terms of transfer of political power, but do not provide a comprehensive overview of how societies evolve. Religious conflict and oppression based on caste predates European colonialism in India. The idea that there was a golden age of religious harmony or that the caste system was introduced via British colonialism in South Asia is at best erroneous if not disingenuous. Factually, the colonial administrators furthered the existing disunity amongst communities based on caste and/or religion in order to consolidate their control of territory as is evident by the routine use of the phrase 'divide and rule'. Longstanding divisions (caste, religion, ...) in South Asia have traversed the colonial period and metastasised to our contemporary worlds becoming telling instances of South Asian postcolonial failures. Caste and the Hindu/Muslim binary appear now as the most visibly virulent formations of fractal division in India. The dictates of the dominant national imaginary whereby Muslims are stereotyped as homophobic frame questions of homosexuality in terms of religion whereby the Muslim minority must appear as occupying an oppositional position to the Hindu majority even though both communities police homosexuality equally. Such surveillance of (homo)sexuality appears to be at odds with how queer organisers claim rich cultural genealogies of non-normative sexuality and gender expression in Hinduism and in Islamic cultures "far from isolated cases, across Islamic history—from North Africa to South Asia—we see widespread acceptance of gender nonconforming and queer individuals." (Ali Olomi, "Contrary to Claims of Anti-Trans Muslims, LGBTQ+ Acceptance is Widespread in the History of Islam", <https://religiondispatches.org/muslims-joining-anti-trans-protests-might-be-surprised-by-the-history-of-lgbtq-acceptance-in-islam/>). The discourses follow on from colonial stereotyping of the sexual prowess of Muslims and the 'effeminate'/docile Hindu men (see, Mrinalini Sinha's work). Such examples of colonial racial/religious taxonomy have an enduring legacy in our contemporary times despite the paradoxical position Muslims occupy through literature and culture celebrating homosociality. The current 'love jihad' misnomer invokes such colonial tropes in part. Again, despite the demand of queer and gender justice organisers that queerness "compulsorily has to be anti-caste" and the fact that "the violence faced by trans communities is rooted in the caste system" (Gee Semmalar, 2017, <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/12/28/transmovements-india-caste/>), the persistence of casteism in queer subcultures and activism has been firmly sutured to frames of queer mobilisation in India. Recent research by Dalit queer scholars such as Akhil Kang and Dhiren Borisa does not elide questions of casteism and its enduring presence pre- and post-colonialism, thereby taking issue with the inherent peripheralisation of caste in queer mobilisation and research. As a result, it is no longer widely accepted to study queer movements in India without nuanced analyses of caste as a central organising site.

How did differences in methods of colonisation across regions affect the treatment of queer people then, and now - for instance, were there significant differences between methods of colonisation, and hence the treatment of queer people in South Asia and Africa?

Colonialism was both specific to the geolocations (Oceania, Asia, Africa, Americas) and a methodical manifestation of conquest (cognitive, social, territorial, economic ...) transnationally. There was an equal measure of similarities and differentiations in exercising subjugation of peoples far removed from the geopolitical west. In British East Africa, as we know, the Indian merchant middle-class created a buffer population between white colonial administrators and the local Black populations. For queer and transgender frames one significant difference occurred in the scale of imposition of Christianity in Asia and Africa. Christian missionaries in East Africa have a longstanding colonial tradition of preaching Christian values. In contemporary Uganda, as we are now aware, the Christian missionary work, especially subtended by US imperial Christian missions has been directly detrimental to queer and transgender movements that operate under the radar as colonial laws against 'unnatural acts' are still in place. The explicit warning sent by President Museveni to queer populations recently has been partly a result of conservative Christian missions which irresponsibly spread hatred against queer communities. There have been rumours that Ghana and Kenya may follow in the steps of Uganda to severely repress queerness. In India, during the time of debates on Section 377 in 2018 there were concerted efforts by religious groups to oppose decriminalisation of homosexuality. However, as we know, they were not able to garner requisite support. In sum, British colonialism legislated on non-normative genders and sexualities across their Empire in Asia and Africa, the difference being that certain colonies in East Africa upheld repressive homophobic practices through a connection with local conditions. Contemporary homophobia is a result of both colonial repression and postcolonial maintenance of it in varying degrees across Asia and Africa.

Archives of queer literature and experiences:

What does decolonising queer literature look like? What role would mainstream LGBTQ+ movements have in doing this?

When we think of queer literature as a category it is heavily invested in gay and occasionally lesbian literature written by white authors in the global north. Without denying the contribution of queer literature from the global north, I would put to scrutiny 'how' and 'why' such literature without being homogenous in nature becomes elevated to the position of the queer literary canon. Examples include Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Thomas Mann *inter alia*. Decanonising is part of decolonising literary studies. Concurrently, what is read as minority literature is often not so marginal at all. The contribution of Ocean Vuong in the contemporary literary landscape reminds us what minority voices can achieve. Akin to James Baldwin in terms of racialisation and queer intertwining, Vuong interweaves themes of war and migration with queerness in a cogent frame. Decolonising queer literary studies would entail not only understanding

the geopolitical conditions of power that enable white, global north queer literary canon to consolidate but attend to “other” literary voices in both imperial and non-imperial languages. Questions of caste, class, religion, postcolonial settler occupation, racially minoritised diasporas are not tangential to queerness but central to it. Instead of strategising inclusion of non-canonical queer literatures in the queer canon, decolonising queer literary studies advances non-canonical literatures and literatures in non-European languages as an ‘option’, as one discrete frame of reference and analysis that is mobilised without recourse to EuroUS referential systems of knowledge-making. Mainstream LGBTQ+ movements can work towards opening up avenues for non-canonical voices to become central. This comes with the realisation that queer movements are incomplete if they do not allow space for expression of *all* folks who critique relations of power. For instance, I wrote a chapter for my PhD – later an essay published in 2012 -- on R Raj Rao’s novel *The Boyfriend* (2003). I critiqued the cross-caste bond and the impossibility of oppressor caste-oppressed caste queer bonds not just in the novel but in queer literatures of South Asia. The other example was the impossibility of the Hindu-Muslim queer love in P. Parivaraj’s sole novel *Shiva and Arun* (1998). My analysis remains incomplete without reading it in conjunction with Akhil Kang’s recently published essay on queer inter-caste love (Akhil Kang [2023], “Savarna Citations of Desire: Queer Impossibilities of Inter-Caste Love”, *Feminist Review* 133, pp. 63-78). When we consider that our mainstream work suffers from a lack in scholarship, thinking or imagination, we realise that peripheral knowledges appear more central than they are given credit. It is this realisation that propels mainstream movements to dismantle power hierarchies. Decolonising queer literary studies aims to make *all* relations of power visible such that their critique serves as a point of departure for imagining newer relations based on co-constitution of knowledge. Mainstream queer mobilisation cannot be the sole participation in the construction of queer knowledge.

One of your projects is on archiving queer culture - how have archival methods changed over time? How did colonialism hamper archiving processes? Why is the current pool of archives limiting? Do they tend to be eurocentric, and if so, why?

Newer forms of archival practices have emerged particularly in relation to queer archiving practices. Even though institutional archives arrogate to themselves the power of being named the ‘official’ archives, they remain incomplete since their records conform to how archives are constructed, viewed and disseminated, ie, as written or oral records. Whilst the contribution of institutional archives is undeniable, archival practices have devolved into more exciting ventures. Community archivists have painstakingly preserved not just objects deemed ‘unarchivable’ but have created space for archiving memory. Paola Bacchetta’s work as community archivist of the anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist group of dykes called Dyketactics, founded in 1975 in Philadelphia is a prime example of the critical importance of this work of preservation. It is worth noting that, as Bacchetta suggests, not all parts of archives are made accessible to the public. This is a view that is in direct contrast to the colonial view of knowing and accessing. It is an important reminder that queer archives, especially queer of colour archives, do not serve as tools of education or knowledge consumption. It is a substantive point of departure from conventional archival methods and practices that hinged on accessibility and visibility (making archives accessible).

Archival methods and practices were directly influenced by colonialism and how colonial records became ordained as official archives. For instance, the GLBT Historical Society Museums contains scant records of queer Asian populations, despite the museum's avant-gardist foregrounding of non-conventional objects as archives. Also, decolonial archive scholars suggest that the British and French colonial officials tampered with the records, burning them wherever necessary, creating an irregular and incomplete archive. In several cases archives function as a product of colonial power since processes of extracting records without consent from indigenous populations in the Americas, for instance, constituted regular colonial practice. In terms of queer and transgender community archive in South Asia, newer forms of the memory archive are especially vital to understand the broader history of queerness. Accompanying written records, testimonies, oral histories (including songs, dance ...), extant writings, paintings, sculptures and several other forms of archives, it is imperative to construct a genealogy of the memory archive. One part of Gee Semmalar's current research orientates us in this direction of the colonial archive to comprehend the loss of histories of sexuality and their entanglement with caste systems and legal apparatus in our part of the world.

Given that the consolidation and formalisation of disciplines, as we know them today, was coeval with the high period of colonialism in the nineteenth century, a skewed and entrenched form of eurocentrism is the logical outcome. It circumscribes our archiving practices. It is best to acknowledge our own limitations in this regard as formal university training in archiving processes and practices tends to follow established eurocentric frames. However, this acknowledgement may lead us to other generative paradigms hinging on the critical significance of community archivists who have developed modalities of archiving outside the university. Queer and transgender *community archivists* are in this sense central to the project of our archival scholarship. As an example, the California-based archivist and curator Lisbet Tellefsen's archiving of Black queer and transgender communities in the US has blazed a trail in the field of queer archival practices.

Given that decolonising the understanding of queer people involves dealing with deeply ingrained structural forces, how do queer activists avoid exhaustion in the face of constant setbacks and stagnation?

Queer organisers and activists in general devise their own coping strategies in addressing exhaustion. Currently, this extreme fatigue has become a normative constant following the global Covid crisis, which is ongoing contrary to popular belief. Self-care has often been held in high esteem and rightly so. Might I suggest that community care in addition to self-care appears a necessary remedy to (co-)create our exhausted and exhausting worlds. The call to collective action and unity operates as the least common denominator for effective redressal of structural imbalance in social mobilisation. In my view, the collective as a way of recovering from isolation, exhaustion and setbacks functions as a sustaining metaphor for our movements both prior to, during, and after the call to action. It is towards the communal, our collective humanity that we must direct our attention when required. Queer and transgender communities have always maintained social kinship (chosen families) as a way of navigating life. As a means for survival and thrival our collective aspirations, failures, coalitional struggles and victories

becomes key to how we experience the world and our place in it. It is through the collective-connected that queerness gains meaning.

The functioning of status quo queer movements:

Do you think queer movements in the global north should involve themselves at all in decolonising efforts?

Queer movements in the global north are already implicated in decolonising efforts. The 'decolonising' movements in general have been present in activist circles, university student movements and in the arts in the global north for a fair period of time. Queer mobilisation in the global north is incomplete if it does not align itself to the demands of decolonising genders and sexualities discourse premised on eurocentric hegemony. Queers of colour, migrant and diasporic queers and several other gender non-conforming communities have already steered the conversations towards a recognition of the need for queer movements in the global north to consider and critically evaluate their role in reinforcing and validating hegemonic queerness. Whilst one aspect is the critique but going beyond critique one monumental task for global queer movements remains the non-participation in the erasure of queer articulations from the global south. Such erasures enacted by overbearing queer mobilisation in the global north are often dangerous for queer and transgender communities in the global south, whilst concurrently establishing/consolidating the hierarchical position of queer movements in the global north as the definer, arbiter, and imprimatur of queerness. Transnational solidarity is messy and not simply for queer and transgender community constituencies. However, extending support to queer mobilisation in the global south needs careful streamlining. Allowing space for local queer movements to lead comprises the first step of engagement in decolonising our way of thinking about solidarity. Often local grassroots organisations have a fuller understanding of what is at stake in globalised narratives of coming out, visibility, and queer/transphobia.

Has the LGBTQ+ community, both in the Global North and South, made efforts for queer people who face intersectional issues of caste, race, and ethnicity? Have they made any major strides for these communities?

Queer communities transnationally have articulated the intersections that impact their experience of queerness in terms of relations of power, or shall I say, skewed relations of power. It is through the queer communities implicated in these intersections of race, class, migration, caste and disability that a substantial body of critical work has emerged in the last four decades. Queer of colour critique has made valuable contribution to the field of queer studies pointing to its limits and engaging with the erasures. A growing area of research led by Dalit Bahujan queer scholars has appeared in the last decade or so that takes issue, rightly so, with the coloniality of brahminical homonormative supremacy in queer mobilisation in India. It is not the future of queer studies in India but it is in the 'present' moment that we're witnessing nuanced research articles, essays,

op-eds and other forms of expression which have, to a large extent, transformed our relation to what queerness signifies.

Could you give a brief overview of what queer of colour critique is? Do you think South Asian queer movements, though splintered and varied, have overarchingly added onto the field of queer of colour critique sufficiently? If not, why?

In brief - queer of colour critique may be construed as bridging “the deep rift between blackness and queerness” (Elena Keisling, 2017), it is a critical discourse that emerged in the US academy as a response to the ‘founding limitation’ in queer theory nonetheless (Roderick A. Ferguson, 2004). Forefronting the geopolitics of queer knowledge-making, it brings to the centre debates on race, migration, capitalism and imperialism within articulations of queerness, resisting its uncritical celebration. Rooting its genealogy in queer theory, Black feminism, Third-world feminism, Intersectionality studies, and Marxist and Postcolonial theorisation, to name a few, it enunciates the demand to affiliate queerness to broader thinking of transnational geopolitics with multi-focal perspectives. It is concurrently a critique and an extension of queer politics and studies. In sum, it connects gender and sexuality debates in mainstream queer theory to ‘other’ modes of difference and critical thinking.

Since queer mobilisation cannot be subsumed under standardised, single-issue discussion, Indian queer movements can borrow insights from queer of colour critique and ‘take cognisance of the fissures, the faultlines, the immediacy of social fractures as queer of colour critique has made it possible to imagine’, as I’ve observed in a previous essay (see, <http://www.graat.fr/LGBTQ02.pdf>). Whilst the opportunities for anti-patriarchal, feminist, anti-caste and trans-allied crossings have been numerous at various junctures, several missed connections have visibilised, reducing the tenor of broad-based queer mobilisation in India. Oppressor caste and English language domination, sexual violence, gender, sexual and caste justice, transgender representation amongst others are interdependent frames routinely viewed as distinct within queer activism in India. Queer of colour instructs us to reconfigure debates in queer studies to arrive at nuanced understanding of queerness. Ignoring the interconnections of the above-mentioned rubrics in the Indian context renders our analyses partial, furthering the impossibility of coalitional politics of emancipation. The work of Akhil Kang in this regard appears as one amongst few examples of reading queer of colour critique and anti-caste theorisation in a parallel frame. One possible reason that we have not been able to fully engage queer of colour critique in the Indian queer movements is how far we wish to critique brahminical heteronormative supremacy of which several of us, including myself, are beneficiaries. It is not an indictment of our politics but the contradiction that is inherent in our own work. Labouring through it means working for the emancipation for all humanity.

What are steps that must be taken in the Indian queer movement to platform the voices and stories of Dalit and Muslim queer people? How should Hindu queer activists balance touting their religion as superior, and finding solace and identity within it?

As more and more Dalit and Muslim queer communities bring their stories to the table, it is only a matter of time that the queer movements will change the manner in which they address queerness in the Indian context. Patently, this requires meticulous planning when putting events into place whereby panels, conferences and activist meetings do not advocate, what I term, “an exclusionary politics of engagement”. An exclusionary politics of engagement centres those who become the voice of the marginalised constituencies without having ‘done their homework’.

It is fallacious to believe that Hinduism was queer-affirming when we encounter the rich history of Islamic homoeroticism and acceptance of non-conforming genders and sexualities (see above). Decolonising the Indian queer movements requires a firm commitment to feminist principles, anti-caste formations and mobilisation, anti-Islamophobic inquiry of queer histories and presents, de-brahminising (queer) culture, and solidarity with transgender communities. What we notice, unfortunately so, is the opposite especially with high-profile hindu queer activists and authors being openly Islamophobic and casteist. Given the conservative push in the political spheres in India, it is imperative to refashion coalitional solidarities of various constituencies to allow for resistance with a view to emancipation for *all*.