

The Police and the Policed

Queer Crossings in a Mumbai Bathroom

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Armed with nothing but a few handwritten posters, a handful of outreach workers, several boxes of condoms, and a plastic dildo, Vinod frequently enters police stations with a mission of teaching police officers about safe sex. An outreach worker with almost two decades of experience, Vinod daily crosses the thresholds between the worlds of men cruising for sex in public and the police responsible for safeguarding public morality by catching men engaged in public sex. Under the auspices of HIV prevention, he organizes regular sessions with rows of police officers lined in formation and standing at attention. These meetings are framed as being relatively straightforward. And yet, as I witnessed while shadowing Vinod during fieldwork in Mumbai in 2016, these interactions between Vinod, his team, and the police disorient and upend the austere space of a police station. Bawdy jokes are made, cops turn bashful during condom demonstrations, and the affective charge of these spaces turns from seriousness to play. The culprit for this shift in the energy is Vinod's dildo. Sometimes an orange, silicone sculpture, and other times a solid wooden carving of a penis, the prosthetic cock almost always produces similar responses of bashfulness, laughter, and even confusion when it is introduced.

While these visits to police stations occurred under the auspices of HIV prevention, they were also “an excuse, an opportunity [*mauqa*] to talk about LGBTQ issues.” By “opportunity,” Vinod imagines these meetings as ways to bring the queer community and law enforcement together in the same space for meaningful conversation, through condom demonstrations. In short, the dildo created an opportunity to hijack the smiles and playful energy of the space to direct conversation from HIV toward sexuality. This optimism indexes Vinod's belief that “change does not happen magically and that outreach workers must take steps to affect change.” His words also evince a certain kind of faithfulness and attachment to the police: a belief that by

attempting to play *with* police he might be able to engineer a change in law enforcement's attitudes toward queers in public. Though a playful and at times sexual undercurrent marks the interactions between Vinod and the police officers, these moments stand in stark contrast to the experiences of queers who are policed in "sex publics" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 550). In countless interviews and in numerous instances from my work with Vinod as well as NGO staff that handle crisis cases, queers narrated negative and often troubling interactions with police. Several also recounted how cops participate in the very sex that they subsequently police.

Drawing on these contrasts, this essay engages interviews and ethnographic data from ongoing fieldwork with queer-identified people in Mumbai to suggest that to encounter power queerly is to experience not only the subjecting aspects of law but also its connections to pleasure, to the erotic, to the very sexuality that it refuses. By turning to the moments of erotic play at work even in the context of policing, I point to the queer crossings between the law, its enforcement, and the policing of "illegal" sex.

I argue that these crossings paint a more capacious picture of India's battle against the anti-sodomy law, Section 377.¹ Rather than seeing queers as fully subjected by the law or even hailed by its language of criminality, this essay points to particular moments of queer emergence (as dildo play, as cruising, as entrapment) that occur *because* of the law's insistence on policing and banning consensual same-sex behavior. Thus, not only must the law name and produce the thing it sanctions, but at times it must also traffic in the very behavior it deems illegal. What does it mean for police to engage in erotic forms of play (jokes, cruising, entrapment, and sex) as modes of policing the very sexualities that are banned by law? And what kinds of queer nightlife are enacted in these moments of play and policing?

By *play*, I reference a particular kind of joking, unserious, or ephemeral disposition that can temporarily suspend and confuse hierarchy, relations of power, and perhaps even the law itself.² Anthropological treatments of play have emphasized mostly gaming or ritualized aspects of competition between groups or individuals. But rather than cordon off play as wholly "separable from everyday life," I view play as "related to a particular mode of experience, a dispositional stance toward the indeterminate" that is revealed in everyday traces and gestures that are open to be read, interpreted, and debated (Malaby 2007, 96; 2009, 208).

This essay reads the encounters between queers and police in police stations and in bathroom stalls across Mumbai as forms of play that ought to be interpreted as queer nightlife. From Vinod's dildo workshops to the

dimly lit urinals of the public restroom, these spaces tell an alternative to the well-established narratives of queer nightlife.³ Much like play is a disposition marked by indeterminacy, this essay suggests that queer nightlife is equally indeterminate in its spatial and temporal boundaries. Whether it is the riotous laughter of cops holding dildos in a police station or the wandering hands of men underneath shimmers of light in bathroom stalls, this essay locates forms of queer nightlife that are, like play, vulnerable to being read, interpreted, and debated. In thinking with the concept of play, I argue that queer nightlife is further pushed out of parties, bars, clubs, and other cordoned-off spaces and brought into a larger public milieu. This essay extends queer nightlife in a direction that imagines the porousness of urban publics and privates, and in doing so signals the capacity of queer subjects to play with the world as well as encounter the risks and vulnerability of that play becoming weaponized.

The rest of the essay is divided into two sections, one on police and the other on policing. Following Vinod and his team's sensitization work in police stations, I explore what futures are imagined through safe-sex campaigns. I argue that play makes demands of power, asking that queers be allowed to live and let live in public spaces. Thus, for outreach workers like Vinod, dildo play is invested with optimism, a promise of goodwill, exchange, and commitment to mutual respect. And yet, these commitments are often reneged in the everyday encounters between queer subjects and the law. In the second section I draw on the experiences of people who have been policed while cruising to suggest that play is also a technique used to entrap and criminalize. Police use sting operations to literally and metaphorically play with people cruising for sex in public spaces. Such moves are often justified through the language of securitizing and sanitizing public space from sexual immorality. The contradictory scenes—the hand of a cop wrapped around the shaft of a dildo, and the tumescence of an erection in a public loo—offer glimpses of the queer passages between sexuality and state power, pleasure and policing, play and violence that nightlife engenders.

DILDO OPTIMISM

I reached the police station around seven in the evening. Although our meeting with the police was not scheduled until 7:30 p.m., Vinod wanted us to arrive early “just in case there were any issues.” Armed with white paper charts with scribbles in Marathi, a small group of outreach workers greeted

me before moving closer to the station. The blistering hot summer sun sank into the sky; the other outreach workers—Raj, Ankit, and Meet—milled about as we waited. Although several of them had done these sensitizations before, we all felt a little anxious, pacing back and forth in the lane right in front of the station. We did not want to go inside without Vinod, since this whole thing was his idea, his contacts, and his plan. The station itself seemed quite out of place. A massive, brightly lit structure, bureaucratic beige. It sat at the base of a large hill that was dotted with slums, apartments, and tightly cramped alleyways. It was one of the last buildings on a main road before the paved streets ended and winding paths of stairs and slope stretched up into a sea of closely knit living quarters.

After we had waited for what seemed like hours, Vinod emerged and beckoned us to come inside. We walked down a long corridor of offices, passing lines of people filing reports and making complaints, and came to a large open room at the very back of the station. The room was empty except for a policewoman sitting at a desk covered in ledgers and notebooks. Vinod told us to wait there, as he had to go talk with one of the officers before we started. The inspector had changed between when Vinod fixed the session and now, and the new inspector was a bit confused as to why we were there. Before exiting the room, Vinod opened up his backpack and pulled out a large box of Nirodh-brand condoms and a brown phallus made out of wood, placing these items on the desk where the policewoman was working. As Raj, Ankit, and Meet began unpacking and looking for a place to tape up the NGO banner as well as other small signs and posters, the policewoman looked up and began asking questions. “He Amcha NGO Ahe,” it’s our NGO, one of the workers said, briefly explaining the sign.

Vinod soon reentered, followed by a couple of officers. He was concerned that they would not be allowed to take pictures of the session because of the new inspector. One officer came to the desk and dismissed the policewoman, escorting her out. As she got up from the desk, she finally noticed the dildo, which had been placed upright so that the erection was in plain sight. She gestured toward it with her hands as if to ask what it was, before the other police officer gently pulled on her arm, talking to her in a low voice. Both of them exited the room, smiling and laughing at the penis. Before long, more and more police entered the room, some in uniform and others in plain clothes. We had reached the station right as shifts were changing, so there was a limited amount of time to make the presentation before people either needed to start working or race against traffic to head home.

Each new entry into the room took turns casually glancing at the dildo.

The looks on people's faces ranged from shock, to curiosity, to smiles. Vinod perhaps left the dildo on the desk intentionally. He was intensely aware that if he enters a police station just wanting to talk about LGBTQ+ issues, "they won't listen and will not be ready to hear what you have to say. If I talk to them about HIV/AIDS and show them how to put on a condom, their minds will be a bit fresher. Maybe there will even be a smile on their faces. And after catching that smile I can present on LGBTQ community issues." For Vinod, these smiles function as part of a bodily exchange of signs that connote mutuality, a willingness to hear and be heard on issues of sexual diversity. He got that and much more once the room filled up. The comments from the participants became bolder, bawdier, and much more direct. A group of officers, not in uniform, picked up the dildo and began playing with it. One asked how much it costs; another asked about the material ("shouldn't it be plastic and not wooden?"); a third suggested that it was quite small and that if he were to get one he would get one much larger. "Are you giving these away?" another asked. With each curious glance, people laughed, smiled, and of course made sexual jokes and puns about the dildo on the table.

Once the inspector was ready to begin, the police made two neat lines and stood in formation. With their arms behind their backs and chests puffed up, the officers listened as Vinod and the outreach workers began asking them about how HIV is transmitted. Shortly into the lecture, Vinod lifted the brown, wooden dildo to murmurs and smiles. He asked a senior officer to come demonstrate the proper way to put on a condom. A large, heavy-set officer came toward the front. While the officer unwrapped the rubber from the Nirodh box, Vinod balanced the wooden cock on his hand so that it was perfectly straight. As the officer slid the condom on properly,⁴ the other police started to cheer. One whipped out his mobile phone and began filming. While this was happening, the other outreach workers began passing out boxes of condoms to the officers, who sheepishly accepted them. Vinod casually began mentioning that if the police see LGBTQ people, they should protect them and "not misunderstand" them. After a couple rounds of applause, some thank-yous, and many group photos, the group dispersed, the laughter and smiles died down, and the office quickly returned to business as usual. I watched as several officers slid the Nirodh boxes into their pockets. But quite a few thanked the outreach workers that had handed them out and politely returned the condoms, gracefully sliding them back into the hands of the outreach workers. The politeness of the return, the attempts to avoid offending the outreach workers, point to the intimacies forged—however fleeting—in the spaces of Vinod's workshop.

In the technical language of an NGO these meetings are referred to as “sensitizations”—encounters aimed at introducing various stakeholders to safer-sex practices and to the language of gender and sexual difference. Far beyond being some sort of queer petting zoo, these meetings are part of a broader strategy of producing new sensibilities, affective encounters between the law and its criminal other. Scenes such as this sensitization are striking because they disrupt the script of activist organizing and politicking as “serious” work or work that must perform itself through trauma, violence, or “the image of the wounded homosexual” (Suresh 2011, 469). Questions about queer life and death are recast through play, jokes, and undisciplined interaction. The dildo indexes how play evinces optimistic attachments to safe space for queers. It is also not a coincidence that the stations chosen for these sessions are located in areas known for cruising, where outreach workers hand out condoms and encourage those cruising to get tested. These demonstrations pivot on what Lauren Berlant (2011, 23) might call a “cluster of promises”—safety, respect, noninterference—that these NGO workers hope will be made possible through increased interaction with police.

This work is volatile and dangerous. In 2001 several members of Luc-know’s Bharosa Trust were arrested for passing out condoms and performing similar demonstrations. The police raided their offices and confiscated their materials (including a dildo used for condom demonstrations), alleging that the organization was a front for gay sex (Cohen 2005, 269). Similarly, as Vinod revealed, when members of his group first approached the government about getting access to dildos for condom demonstrations, government officials accused them of just wanting the dildos for sexual play. Moreover, outreach workers are sometimes harassed while distributing condoms. Or the police will collect and throw away condoms left in bathrooms and other public sites. Given the difficulty of performing the kinds of work that outreach workers do, Vinod’s visits to the police station both stage encounters between queer outreach workers and law enforcement and attempt to engineer solidarity and perhaps even compassion between the two.

What is the promise of a dildo? What kind of optimistic attachments are invested in the play that these interactions engender? Play in these moments rehearses an erotic relation that touches the limits of acceptable male homosociality but cannot fully cross it. These moments of play operate on promises to protect and serve the LGBTQ+ community that can never fully be realized. In his work on the barebacking subculture and seroconversion, Tim Dean (2009, 84) suggests that every gift is erotic in that it binds bodies to one another. Thus, to refuse a gift is also to refuse the erotic relations and even

kinship that such presentations seek to make possible. Is the refusal of these latex gifts a refusal to share kinship between law enforcement and the criminal other? These refusals of condoms may perhaps mark a limit or threshold that cannot be traversed. As Lawrence Cohen (1995, 417) has suggested, penetrative sex crosses a threshold that turns *masti* and play from idioms into boundaries.⁵ In all the police sensitizations that I observed with Vinod and his team, this refusal of the condoms among some police was a common occurrence. The denouement of these sessions, marked by this act of refusal, is striking perhaps because it signals the end of play, the return to mundane, serious order. I would not immediately read these moments as refusals of connection. To some extent the connection had already happened, the moment Vinod could catch their smiles. Rather, I would argue that these refusals of condoms were efforts to diffuse the erotics of the moment, opportunities for the police to signal their moral fortitude and not their possible promiscuity. But what stood out in these encounters was that they could also be opportunities for physical contact. In several instances, I noticed cops making small talk with outreach workers assisting Vinod or sometimes sliding the box back into the hands of the outreach worker in a handshake that held a little long.

Ultimately, these interactions between Vinod and police raise a litany of questions: How do the queer people who cruise, who go for nights out, who have sex in abandoned bathrooms, at the edges of train platforms, and behind bushes in parks experience the police and policing? When an officer in a sting operation runs his hands over their bodies does he smile like he does while holding Vinod's dildo? Does he laugh and make jokes as he accuses people cruising or engaging in transactional sex of ruining the nation? What happens to that very playfulness in Vinod's sessions when cops encounter queers cruising in trains, in loos, and in parks?

HONEY TRAPS

In August 2013, Ganesh Deshmukh, a local reporter from the Marathi-language newspaper *Lokmat*, created a furor when he organized sting operations of cruising sites in Amravati, a small city located in the state of Maharashtra.⁶ Headlines like "Samlingi Purush Sambandhacha Amravatith Deshpatlivaril Adda" (Amravati Becoming a National-Level Den for Homosexual Activities) were plastered across the pages of the *Lokmat*, which has a wide readership. Deshmukh denounced cruising and hailed it as a ruination of India and its future:

The situation is horrible. You will feel the foundations crumbling under your feet. Amravati, the cultural centre of Vidarbha, has seven commercial gay cruising sites active. One of these Gay “sites” is famous among Gay people nationwide. For many days the *Lokmat* team has roved through the gay crowd and through a sting operation has exposed it with proof. That the city of Gods also known as Indrapuri—Ambanagari has this gay commercial sex racket on such a big scale is a worrying aspect for youths. It is also fearsome and dangerous. (Deshmukh 2013)

Posing as gay men, Deshmukh and police officers led a sting operation, observing the patterns and behaviors of men meeting one another for legal, consensual, and (mostly) free sex. His article went on, “After the shocking news of a gay sex racket in Amravati, the police administration woke up and swung into action. On Sunday, in plain clothes, policemen of the crime branch spread their net. But the alerted gays did not get entrapped in the police net.” For Deshmukh, public sex represented the decaying of India’s moral, social, and cultural fabric. As his article continued, “India, with its culture and tradition, is now rapidly been eroded by Western culture of men trying to fulfill their unnatural desires. This has resulted in the city having around 3,750 to 4,250 men falling for Gay culture.” Ideas of the nation and society as being in ruin, collapse, and decay figure as powerful ways for Hindu fundamentalists, the political right, and those opposed to queers to articulate their anxieties over the inclusion of sexual minorities within state institutions of law, rights, and citizenship.⁷

But in addition to the socially ruinous imaginings of cruising, queer public sex marks the crossing of two specific thresholds in terms of India’s anti-sodomy law: sex in public places, and sex “against the order of nature.” The policing of cruising is justified as necessary to maintain a clean and respectable public. And yet, the policing of this practice is neither respectable nor wholly distant from the erotic play that constitutes cruising. From their glances, to physical exposure, to sexual acts, those who police cruising spaces often cross the same boundaries that they aspire to regulate. The law crosses into the erotic zones of play and pleasure that it outlaws; the police produce the very acts and categories that they seek to control. What I am suggesting here is that play—even under the auspices of doing one’s job—makes a temporary mess of the neat distinctions between queer criminal and law enforcement as well as between sexual desire and labor.

This particular technique of entrapping men who are cruising for sex is sometimes referred to as “honey trapping,” where plainclothes cops or male

decoys are used to apprehend people suspected of having sex (or intending to have sex) in public places, typically restrooms. In cases such as Deshmukh's sting, police use this technique to catch subjects and punish them criminally. In other cases, police, sometimes in plain clothes, use honey traps to extort men for money by threatening them with legal action or, worse, outing them to their family members. The policing of cruising spaces creates scenarios of confusion where the law and its criminal other—duty and sex, violence and play—temporarily lose certain categorical distinctions because the police do not necessarily catch men per se but rather lure, entice, and out them, succumbing to their own sexual advances in the process of naming and shaming sexual dissidents.

Shashank, a thirty-year-old, bisexual, married man, frequently visited many of the major cruising sites in and around train stations and so had developed somewhat of a rapport with outreach workers. Because he lived quite far from his workplace in town, he commuted upward of two hours every day. In the evenings, Shashank would get down at specific stations on the way home to cruise and fool around in the bathrooms. One night, during a routine stop at a station loo, he met a man who showed all the signs of being interested in sex. As Shashank retold it to me, they stood next to each other at the urinals and made eye contact. He said that the man “exposed his erection and began jerking off.” He understood this to be an invitation and replaced the man's hand with his own and began stroking. Suddenly Shashank felt someone come at him from behind, and the man whom he was stroking also grabbed him. “We are from the police,” the men said to Shashank, before hauling him to a police station nearby. There they searched his bag, threatened to tell his family what he was doing in the bathroom, and demanded a fine of 15,000 rupees.⁸ In a similar case, which Shashank experienced years after this incident, the cops used a decoy. This was akin to a larger racket reported in 2015, when the wife of a struggling actor filed a complaint against eight policemen who were using her husband as bait to blackmail men cruising in bathrooms (Vaktania 2015).

Shashank's experiences indicate that the officer's participation in same-sex sexual behavior—even if for the purposes of stopping it—blurs the distinction between policing and the queerness being policed. These moments also demonstrate that the inviting glances of a stranger occupy the threshold of a range of potential effects from pleasure to punishment; this threshold constitutes the unpredictability that is looking for sex in public. Shashank's experiences exemplify what Brian Sutton-Smith (2006, 297) has termed the ambiguity of play, that we can describe the feeling of play but have an incred-

ibly difficult time naming it. To put this in different terms: we can understand the sensations that play organizes, but it disorganizes our abilities to name and demarcate what it might actually be, and perhaps when it has transgressed into something else. In this case, erotic play is a matter of life and death for both the police officer and the queer. For the police, play—pretending to cruise and entrapping men through mild sexual advance—is a necessary tactic to securitize and reclaim public spaces from sexual deviants and derelicts. In other words, the sexual play of a honey trap becomes a way of making heterosexuality live and let die its deviant other.⁹ Conversely, queers find life precisely through the risks attached to cruising and through stranger contact, which can (at least temporarily) upend social hierarchy (Delany 1999). The condom prevention work in police stations also foregrounds a playful request for the state's respect and noninterference, a wish that often remains unfulfilled. These passing moments signal a context in which public spaces are sites of escape and flight from the heterosexuality of domestic space. Thus, cruising becomes integral to the flourishing of queer nightlife.¹⁰ Yet, such play in loos and on trains risks death, blackmail, and arrest (Gupta 2011).

During a moment of intense legal precarity, police-led sting operations, legally sanctioned exploitation and blackmail, and the erosion of civil liberties for sexual and gender minorities across India, it is perhaps counterintuitive to turn to play as a queer mode of inhabiting the world. But as this essay has argued, play gestures to moments of social indeterminacy and interruption that offer ethnographic traces of the contingencies of everyday life. Despite the precarious and dangerous times that queer subjects across India find themselves in, play signals a disposition toward the world that renders the world far more open than legal foreclosures might indicate. To reiterate, play indexes neither the transcendent resistance of the queer subject, nor the all-encompassing power of the biopolitical state, but rather modes of living, of ordinary life, that transgress the neat boundaries and narratives of subjecthood. In my broader research, I argue that, in lieu of taking for granted the fixity of subjects as defined through sexual object choice, we must ask how subjects move between multiple social positions and how movement frustrates the easily reproduced narratives of queer victims, perpetrators, law enforcers, and criminals. From queer to criminal to victim, the subjects that I have described here offer alternatives to the now ubiquitous tropes of the Global South sexual minority in need of saving via legal reform or Western aid. I emphasize this point here not to dismiss the work that transnational activism and international funding have done to spotlight issues of queer

violence and erasure. Rather, I challenge victim narratives in order to draw attention to the multiple subjectivities, and perhaps even temporalities, that are elided by narratives of Global South queer suffering. Turning to moments of play as betraying the stability of the law and its enforcement, I suggest that there are openings for thinking about the queer subjects and anti-queer laws beyond the West as living and working in unconventional ways that exceed the narrative of universal queer suffering or homophobia. These momentary lapses, twisted confusions of work and pleasure, also point to the indeterminate nature of queer nightlife (as well as the law), helping us locate nightlife's potency and possibilities beyond the bars, clubs, and dance floors. The bathrooms and police stations become their own kind of dance, with a different soundtrack. And it is the stickiness of these tense, messy encounters, be it in a police station or a restroom, that gesture to crucial points of convergence, the play, between criminal and legal worlds in Mumbai queer nightlife.

Notes

1. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC 377) prohibits carnal intercourse or sex against the order of nature. The New Delhi High Court read down (functionally decriminalized) IPC 377 in 2009, and the Supreme Court of India reinstated it in 2013.

2. Anthropological studies of play have detailed how play is a form of competition, kinship, and even ritualized eroticism; see Radcliffe-Brown (1940), Geertz (1973), and Huizinga (1949). For critical approaches on play and the erotic within studies of South Asia, see Singh (2015) on the erotics of play, Lal (2013) on female playfulness, and Katyal (2013) on idioms of sexual and erotic play.

3. Studies of queer nightlife have heavily centered on spaces like bars, gayborhoods, parties, and other social spaces as well as concerns over gentrification of gayborhoods (see Mattson 2015). More recent work (e.g., Ghaziani 2015) has suggested that increased queer acceptance has pushed queer life beyond the gayborhood. But much of the work in queer urban studies exists in spaces in which queer nightlife is cordoned off to specific sections of the city and located within traditional nightlife scenes like bars, pubs, and clubs.

4. It was not uncommon for people to put the condoms on upside down (inside out). In fact Vinod often used the frequency of incorrect condom placement to justify these sessions to the police.

5. In queer scholarship on South Asia, the terms *khel* (play) and *masti* (fun) are commonly used placeholders for erotic interactions that happen clandestinely or beyond the boundaries of social sanction. Often, *masti* names erotic relations that disrupt the lines between homosexual and homosocial.

6. In this particular context, the author expressed outrage because one of the loos

happened to be near schools and a park, thus coming dangerously close to innocent children.

7. Paola Bacchetta (1999) has written extensively about this phenomenon in the Indian context, where queers inhabit an oppositional figuration to ideas of Hindu nationalism and supremacy. Similarly, Kath Weston (1991, 25) has suggested that queers figure as a powerful image for right-wing politicians to evoke a “threat to the family” and perhaps heterosexuality itself.

8. This amount equates to approximately \$230.

9. See Michel Foucault (2005) for a larger discussion of the state’s right to make live and let die. I suggest here that his framing of the techniques of biopolitics might be useful for unpacking how heterosexuality is made to have a particular social life, while queerness, its ostensible other, is allowed to “let die” through manifold forms of policing and sanitization.

10. Though cruising is crucial to queer nightlife, it is also limited, given that queer women are not easily able to move through public spaces or lay claim to places beyond the space of home.