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The Ambiguities of Recognition

Young Queer Sexualities in Contemporary India

MARIA TONINI

DEPARTMENT OF GENDER STUDIES | LUND UNIVERSITY





What does recognition mean for people whose sexuality has for a long time been criminalised?

In recent years, the status of queer sexuality in India has been the focus of legal and social contestations. This thesis analyses the everyday negotiations of young queer people living in Delhi. Focusing on a period of time where same-sex sexualities had been officially recognised for the first time, this thesis raises questions about how recognition, sexuality, and subjectivity are lived and experienced in practice in a period characterised simultaneously by high hopes and pervading insecurity.



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Young Queer Sexualities in Contemporary India

Maria Tonini



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Fossalta di Piave, 26th March 2016

*To recognize is not
only to give something a name
but to give it the very name
that was waiting for it
somewhere
as if thing and name had been
sad without each other.*

(‘Fusion’ by Rae Armantrout)

Chapter 1. Introduction

On a return trip to Delhi in the late summer of 2014, I met with some participants for an informal dinner at Prem's house, which had long been a meeting point for the young people who frequented the social group called Niral Club. We had been keeping in touch via social media since I left the field, so it was especially pleasurable to be able to meet face to face after several months.

In December 2013, the Supreme Court of India had re-instated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which makes 'sex against the order of nature' a criminal offence punishable with up to lifetime imprisonment. Section 377, introduced into India in 1860 by the British colonial administration, had been repealed in July 2009 by the Delhi High Court after an eight-year-long battle initiated by the Naz Foundation (India), an organisation working on HIV/AIDS.

But that evening I did not want to prod them on the issue of re-criminalisation, afraid that it would spoil the cheerful mood around the table. We chatted about work, family, the differences between Delhi and Mumbai, since Varun, the youngest among the participants, had just moved to Mumbai and enrolled in a different university. Mayank and Harsh, who had been together for more than two years, were planning to move to Hong Kong, where Mayank worked in the IT industry. They had managed to come out to their families and had even been living together in Delhi for a time, but since Harsh had graduated, they were looking to make a more permanent move. When I asked them about their relocation plans, Harsh answered in an exaggeratedly grave tone: 'well, we're criminals here, in case you didn't know', to which everyone else burst into laughter.

Moving abroad was indeed one of the topics we discussed at length during the evening, although not everyone saw leaving India as a desirable thing to do. One of the dinner guests was a young man called Nitin, born and raised in the US, who had recently moved to Delhi, as he wanted to try living in his family's country of origin. He had been in

India only for a couple of months and was still getting used to the cultural differences. While Nitin told me about all the things he was learning about India, Prem commented that he was getting a full immersion into the system, given that the police had already arrested him for his sexuality. I balked as I heard this; then Nitin explained that he had been involved in a quarrel with a car driver who had hit him as he walked by the street side, and had resorted to calling the police; but when the police arrived, they took him in (and not the driver) because they suspected him of being involved in ‘gay sex’ based on his appearance and ‘effeminate’ body language (in Nitin’s own words). Unable to prove who he was and what he was doing in Delhi, Nitin had to spend the night in custody until Prem arrived the following morning with his passport. Upon seeing that Nitin was a US citizen, the police released him immediately. Prem joked that the hardest thing for him, as he waited for Nitin to be released, had been to sound and act as conventionally masculine as possible. The episode was narrated in a casual tone, and soon the conversation turned to the topic of traffic and road rage, with admonitions to Nitin to never involve the police in anything. Life went on for Harsh, Varun, Prem and the other young queer people I had met in Delhi over several fieldwork periods since 2009; and while the sarcasm with which they told me about police harassment and criminal status belied a newfound bitterness and disappointment, the sense of ambiguity and hesitation in their attempts to live a ‘normal’ life was not new.

In this thesis, I take a step back to examine the complexity, ambiguities and the precariousness of the ‘normality’ in the lives of young queer people living in Delhi between 2009 and 2013; that is, in a window of time when same-sex sexuality had been recognised by the law. The questions that guide my thesis are: in what ways does legal recognition (or lack thereof) interact with the everyday life of queer people? How do young queer people relate to the idea of being recognised for their sexuality? What possibilities for recognition are articulated in the space between the official letter of the law and people’s everyday lives? And what is recognition made of, from the perspective of young queers?

I refer to the young people with whom I worked in Delhi as ‘queers’ or ‘queer people’ rather than ‘gays and lesbians’, ‘homosexuals’, or ‘LGBTQ’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer):¹ there are several reasons for this. First of all, queer was the preferred word used by the protagonists of this thesis to describe themselves as a sexual minority group; and in the case of young women, queer was also a more popular

choice than lesbian to refer to their individual sexual identity (men would most commonly use 'gay' when talking about themselves individually). Secondly, queer is the word used by Indian scholars whose work on sexualities, activism, and social justice has profoundly inspired my thesis² (see Bhaskaran 2004; Dave 2012; Gopinath 2005; Narrain and Bhan 2006; Narrain and Gupta 2011; Puri 2008, 2016; Vanita 2002). Finally, the term queer invokes a questioning of the binary opposition between heterosexual and homosexual, destabilizing the fixity of sexual identity categories (Butler 1990; Halperin 1997; Jagose 1996; Rosenberg 2008; Sedgwick 1990).

With this research, I hope to be able to add new dimensions to the existing literature on sexuality issues in India, focusing on the ways in which young people between the ages of 18 and 25 live with the ambiguities and ambivalences that their sexuality engenders in various social contexts. Through an ethnographic approach, my research engages in a dialogue with theoretical debates about subjectivity, sexuality, and recognition (Berlant 2007, 2011; Butler 1997a, 1997b, 2004b, 2015; Fraser 1995, 1997) by providing a situated view of how young people navigate different social spaces, perpetually negotiating the terms of their recognition as sexual subjects.

Since my research has been for the most part conducted between 2009 and 2013, and considering that same-sex sexuality has been re-criminalised at the end of 2013, I focus on a period, a window of time in which official recognition had been granted - enabling collectivities to emerge and issues to be debated with a greater degree of openness - only to be revoked, pushing queer people's sexuality back into criminal status. Not only does this temporal snapshot illustrates the precariousness and ambiguities with which individual, collective and political recognition is imbued; it also offers a unique account of a period when it was possible to imagine a queer future, and sheds lights on the dynamics informing the everyday negotiations that young queers engaged in while constructing that future.

By focusing on young queer people living in the capital of India, with higher education degrees and /or working in the advanced third sector, I am looking at a minority of young Indian queers who could be defined as a privileged elite group in social and economic terms. While my sample is ethnographic and thus limited in number, it does provide an in-depth analysis of a particular group which, while minoritarian in demographic terms, wields significant social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu

1986), being often portrayed in popular discourse as the ‘face’ of the innovative power of 21st century India (Lukose 2009; Mankekar 2015). Nonetheless, it is important to note that their ideas, hopes and struggles are in many respects different from those of queers living in rural areas, queers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or queers from other regions, given the geographical, religious, linguistic and social diversity of India.³

Spaces of Recognition

Through an analysis of ethnographic material from my various stays in Delhi, in-depth interviews with young queers as well as representatives of organisations, and legal documents, I examine how queer people seek to stretch the norms that regulate the status of their sexuality in different spaces; in particular, I highlight the many tensions and instabilities between the desire to be recognised and the desire to be ‘normal’. My data illuminate the complexities and the contradictions that emerge once the notion of recognition, understood in this context as the positive acknowledgment of a person’s sexual identity, is transferred to the domain of everyday situated practices and experiences. Recognition, in my study, thus emerges as a cluster of possibilities operating at more than one level: while hopes, imaginations and investments attached to the possibility of being recognised legally and socially construct recognition as a future horizon, in their daily lives young queers participate in a variety of social spaces where recognition needs to be negotiated against a host of other values and attachments (Berlant 2011; Butler 2015; Puri 2016).

For young queers, social and discursive arenas such as the law, the family and social networks constitute spaces where recognition needs to be constantly negotiated. For my discussion, I understand space not as a neutral dimension but as produced by power (Foucault 1982, 1986); also, following Doreen Massey (1994), I see gender as one of the main axes regulating space and place (see also Datta 2012). Feminist geographers and scholars focusing on sexual geographies have pointed out that homosexual relations are spatialised against a heteronormative backdrop; public as well as private spaces are conceived for, and dominated by, heterosexuals (Adler and Brenner 1992; Hubbard, 2000; Johnston and

Longhurst 2010). Heteronormativity refers to the institutionalisation of the belief according to which heterosexuality and all its derivatives are the norm, confining different sexual and gender expressions as unwelcome ‘others’ who are excluded, punished, stigmatised, and in the case of India, criminalised (Berlant and Warner 1998; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Jackson 2006; Puri 2012; Wieringa 2012). In the Indian context, the persistence of patriarchal social norms and a legal apparatus that criminalises non-heterosexual and non-procreative sexual acts accentuate the compulsory and institutionalised character of heteronormativity (Jackson 2006; John and Nair 1998; Menon 2012; Seidman 2009).

Heteronormativity is expressed spatially through norms that regulate how spaces and places enable or disable specific types of sexual and social relations on the basis of a binary conception of gender and sexuality (Boyce and Khanna 2011; Doan 2010; Osella and Osella 2006). Young queers, as I will highlight in this study, must enter multiple negotiations as they try to gain meaningful access to these heteronormative spaces, in order to live a ‘liveable life’ (Butler 2004b:1). A ‘liveable life’ is understood as the possibility to live meaningfully despite socially prevalent norms and institutional frameworks that mark them as deviant and criminal.

Sexuality and sexual identity in India, as anywhere else in the world, are part of discourses circulating in official, mediated and social spaces. Particular constructions of sexuality result in specific ways of dealing with sexual minorities, at times displaying a willingness to recognise them (i.e. treat them as equals, with respect for their sexual orientation), other times acting against that recognition through, for example, rejection, disowning or homophobic violence (Goltz and Zingsheim 2015; Murray 2009; Rydström and Mustola 2007; Weiss and Bosia 2013). The everyday perspective I favour in my thesis sheds light on the personal and interpersonal interactions and relationships with people, institutions and spaces, and on the ways these interactions significantly rely on norms of reciprocity where recognition - and particularly the way it is perpetually negotiated – plays a crucial role (Lindquist 2009; see also hooks 2009). Thus I explore the implications of the possibility that people might not want to be recognised as queer at all times and in all contexts, but that they might instead navigate in much more ambivalent and ambiguous ways between social and discursive domains, seeking at once

to be recognised and to be able to live as ‘normally’ as possible (Berlant 2007; Yau Ching 2010; Åkerström 2006).

Desiring normality in tight spaces

As I will show, the young people at the fore of my study perceive their queerness as hardly compatible with the social and cultural norms that sustain and enable their participation in a host of social spaces. However, rather than asserting their queerness through alternative spaces and communities that openly challenge the heteronormative order of society, such as activist groups, they struggle to achieve social inclusion, imagining futures where their queerness could be as ‘normal’ as heterosexuality. Their non-oppositional proclivities might suggest that they veer toward homonormativity, understood as a complacent mode of queer subjectivity that does not challenge existing structures of oppression, but actually serves to reproduce and reinforce them, creating new exclusions in the process (Duggan 2003; Hashemi Yekani, Kilian and Michaelis 2013; Puar 2007; Santos 2013). Yet, notwithstanding the problematic implications of homonormative normalisation, it is important to examine the context in which young queers’ desire to access ‘normality’ emerges (see Brown 2012; Oswin 2014; Podmore 2013).

In what ways is young queers’ sexuality at odds with the socio-cultural milieu in India? How can we understand their desire to be recognised, yet also seen as ‘normal’? And what constitutes the space of ‘normality’ in India’s social dynamics?

In the spring of 2010, I took part in a workshop organised by a LGBTQ organisation at the University of Delhi. The focus of the workshop was on understanding the discrimination faced by sexual minorities in Indian society. Mohan, the activist in charge of the workshop, began his lecture by drawing a circle on the blackboard, then a tiny dot in the middle. The circle represented ‘Indian society’ and the dot represented perfect social acceptance: to be right in the middle meant that you did not suffer from any discrimination. ‘Who would the person occupying the tiny central dot be?’ Mohan asked. Several people tried to shape an answer: a male, a Hindu, a middle class man, upper caste, heterosexual, employed, married...

Mohan then asked us where we would position a homosexual person: how far from the middle? We all agreed that it would have to be quite far out. ‘Do you think that a homosexual woman would be in the same position as a homosexual man?’ asked Mohan. Oh no, we immediately countered: the lesbian would be way farther out than the gay. ‘But what if we have an upper caste lesbian and an *adivasi*⁴ straight woman, where would they be with respect to the dot in the middle?’ Again, we had to reconsider our previous placement.

The questions and answers continued for the whole duration of the workshop, and the dots kept being repositioned in the circle with each question. We did not arrive at any conclusive diagram, but the messy blackboard at the end of the day was an effective visual demonstration of the fact that ideas about discrimination, acceptance and recognition could not be framed solely on the basis of sexuality; on the contrary, factors such as caste, class, gender, language, education play a critical role in constructing hierarchies of difference and belonging.

Sexual minorities in India are often referred to as ‘alternate’ or ‘alternative’ sexualities to distinguish them from what is generally considered ‘normal’ (i.e. heterosexuality) (Garcia-Arroyo 2010; Gopinath 2005). However, as Aweek Sen (2007) points out, the borders between what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘alternative’ are not only constituted through the binary division between hetero- and homosexuality. In the socio-cultural context of India, variables such as religion, gender, caste and class are all at play in defining and re-defining which sexual relations fall outside the accepted norm. Sen succinctly delineates what a ‘normal’ sexual relation could consist of:

[T]he older bread-winning protector-husband, the younger, pliant, dependent wife, the missionary position and the two (male if the gods are smiling, at least one if not both) children quickly conceived out of it, the proud compliance with conjugal-heterosexual morals that see sex as sticky, icky bedroom business ratified by and in heterosexual marriage alone (Sen 2007: xiii).

The space of sexual normality, in other words, is extremely narrow and unstable, easily susceptible to several disruptions which would immediately cast a person out in the realm of the abnormal. Notwithstanding, or maybe because of its ineffability, this space of normality was chased, imagined and desired by young queers; imagining a future of queer normality becomes important particularly if we consider

that at the time of my fieldwork, they were speaking from a uniquely ambiguous position of both hope and insecurity, since their sexuality had been legally recognised for the first time, but the effects of that recognition had not materialised.

Policing the space of normality

The juridical travails regarding Section 377 from 2009 onwards have resulted in a surge of discursive visibility of LGBTQ Indians. The media in particular has covered homosexuality extensively, reporting in detail on court proceedings, LGBTQ demonstrations, politicians' opinions and scientific/medial research; the lives of gays, lesbians and transgender people have become the subject of documentaries, reports and popular talk shows, some of which will be discussed in this thesis. While this has facilitated the work of LGBTQ activist groups and more generally opened up spaces for discussing issues of sexuality, identity and rights, the backlash has been quick and dramatic. After the Supreme Court judgment in 2013, the National Crime Records Bureau announced that it would begin registering data about offences related to Section 377; in 2014 alone, there have been 587 arrests and a total of 778 recorded cases pertaining to Section 377.⁵

India's government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party,⁶ has not embraced the cause of sexual minorities, even though some ministers did hint at the possibility of repealing Section 377; however, party leader Subramanian Swamy, claiming to represent his party's official view on the matter, stated that homosexuals are 'genetically handicapped'.⁷ Institutionally, India has expressed a negative stance on same-sex relations and sexualities even at the international level, by abstaining from voting on a UN resolution against discrimination of LGBTQ people in 2014, and voting in favour of resolution proposed by Russia that sought to deny benefits to same-sex couples in 2015.⁸ Recently, the government of the state of Gujarat retracted its standard policy of conceding tax exemptions to all films produced in Gujarat in the case of a film based on the story of Manvendra Singh Gohil, known as the 'gay prince of Rajpipla'.⁹ Adjudicating on the matter, two judges of the Supreme Court rejected the claim that refusing tax exemption was an attempt to curtail the director's freedom of

expression, arguing that some sections of society perceive the subject of the film (homosexuality) as ‘social evil’.¹⁰

Such incidents need to be seen in the context of a growing wave of reforms aimed at ‘purifying’ India from foreign influences and establish a notion of national identity¹¹ where there is little room for freedom of expression, dissent and diversity: foreign funded NGOs (such as the Indian chapters of Greenpeace, ActionAid and Amnesty International) have been accused of serving subversive anti-national agendas;¹² a BBC documentary about the gang-rape of a young woman in 2012 has been banned all over the country as it was seen as an attempt to defame India’s image;¹³ there are further plans underway to thoroughly revise educational curricula and oversee cultural productions.¹⁴ The possibility to be ‘different’ yet part of the citizenry is thus threatened by political manoeuvres at work to impose notions of morality that further restrict already narrow space of ‘normality’ with regard to gender and sexuality (Altman and Symons 2016; Stoltz et. al. 2010).

Studying young people

The young people who are the focus of this thesis are well educated, have excellent command of the English language, and are from middle class backgrounds. The majority are Hindus, many belonging to Brahmin castes;¹⁵ their fathers work in white-collar jobs (as civil servants), in the military, in academia or in the advanced third sector. In some cases, their mothers also work. Since the end of fieldwork, those who have completed their studies are all in employment, mostly working in the advanced tertiary sector (such as IT consultancy, marketing, recruitment) or research (academia or organisations). While they encounter misrecognition because of their ‘despised sexuality’ (Fraser 1995), their socio-economic status is not low.

The reasons why I focus on young middle class people in this study on non-heterosexual sexuality and recognition are several. Firstly, young people are intensively targeted by programmes about sex education, sexual health, and family planning. In India, the sexual practices of the youth have been monitored particularly in connection to the HIV/AIDS crisis (Abraham 2002; Jaya and Hindin 2009). Youth is often seen as an inherently at-risk category (Tait 2000), and as such generates

programmes of prevention, control, as well as recurrent moral panics (Parker et al. 2000; Rydstrom 2003, 2010; Stivens 2002, 2010) about their embrace of values and practices that clash with the national moral imagination. Very often these values and practices generate panic precisely because they have to do with sex. Secondly, young people are also targeted by market forces, the fashion and music industry, and increasingly the Internet, all of which profit from the increasing disposable income of middle class youth by promoting an equivalence between youth-as-identity and certain lifestyle choices attainable through consumption (Liechty 2003; Lukose 2005, 2009). Since the turn of the century, part of the Indian gay community (i.e. the young professionals living in cities) are also being courted by the market as a new emerging segment of potential consumers, and the expression 'pink rupee'¹⁶ has gained some currency (Shahani 2008:191).

With regards to issues of sexuality, young people's perspectives shed light on how gender hierarchies, heteronormativity and patriarchy constitute the framework within which they try to find recognition for their sexual desires, with complex and nuanced results. Since the choice to focus on young people stemmed from the 2009 judgment that decriminalised homosexual sex and, by extension, homosexuality, the people who are at the fore of this study 'came of age' after the decriminalisation. They are the first generation of people who could – at least in theory – call themselves gay or lesbian without fearing harassment from the authorities or criminal punishment: as such, the ways in which they experience their being gay or lesbian differ substantially from the experiences of previous generations of older queer subjects (Dave 2012; Narrain and Bhan 2005). In particular, many of these young people have not experienced or taken part in the activist struggle to repeal Section 377; and those who are engaged in LGBTQ activism take the decriminalisation of homosexuality as the starting point for their claims, rather than as a result of a collective struggle. Listening to their stories and experiences provides a fresh approach to issues of recognition and sexual normativity, which partly deviates from, and is not fully dependent on, universalizing 'gay liberation' narratives and discourses about exclusionary normalisation (Duggan 2003; Hawley 2001; Hoad 2007; Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Lind 2010; Puar 2012).

Chapter 2. Situating sexuality among multiple hierarchies

Even though sexuality is at the centre of this thesis, it is important to consider that it is only one among the many variables along which demands for recognition, justice and equality are articulated, advanced, and hindered. Of course, the fact that different social categories intersect in producing patterns of social stratification is not exclusive to India, as theorists of intersectionality have shown (Crenshaw 1991; Lykke 2010; Yuval Davis 2006). On the other hand, it is important to consider India's specific social dynamics if we are to understand the contradictions and ambiguities of the politics and practices of sexual recognition that emerge from my data.

India is the second most populous country in the world (according to the latest census from 2011, India's population is around 1.2 billion people) with a history that goes back some 3000 years before Christ (Thapar 2004). The country has been a colony of the British Empire between 1757 and 1947, when it obtained independence. Since independence, India has been a federal parliamentary democratic republic. It is a highly diverse country in terms of linguistic and religious groups. While Hindus are the majority (about 80% of the total population), there are significant minorities of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jainists and Zoroastrians.¹⁷ It is difficult to estimate how many languages are spoken in the country: according to the 2001 census, there are 122 official languages currently spoken in India;¹⁸ however, a recent linguistic survey counted 780 languages.¹⁹ India is also extremely diverse and polarised in terms of wealth distribution; while the country is within the top ten worldwide for number of millionaires, about 300 million people live below the poverty line.²⁰

The people in my study inhabit several social identity categories, the combination of which must be taken into account to understand the ambiguities that inform their experiences. One of these categories is

caste. The caste system, or caste order, is often understood as the positioning of different groups and communities along a hierarchical scale based on decreasing degrees of ritual purity.²¹ According to sociologist Surinder Jodhka (2012), the attention that caste has received from scholars since colonial times has been partially misguided by a Hindu-related bias toward an abstract, essentialist view according to which caste represents an immutable hierarchical system of systematised social inequality centred on the basic division between ideas about purity and impurity (Jodhka 2012: 15).

That a concern for 'purity' and the necessity to classify people and groups in 'degrees of purity' are the foundations of India's social stratification system was the main argument in Louis Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1970]). In it, Dumont posited that India was essentially different from western societies because, as a result of the caste system, in India power and status are separate entities. As an example, Brahmins, who occupy the top of the hierarchy, enjoy the highest status in society but do not necessarily wield the most power in terms of material wealth and influence.

A view such as Dumont's rests on the assumption that the caste system is primarily a 'state of mind' (Gupta 2004), a conceptual understanding of pure hierarchy, which everyone in society quietly accepts, agreeing to their own oppression (a view put forward by Moffat 1979). What empirical and historical research suggests instead, according to sociologist Dipankar Gupta, is that castes need to be seen as discrete units in perpetual competition with each other, resulting in 'a plethora of assertive caste identities, each privileging an angular hierarchy of its own' (Gupta 2004: vi). In other words, power and status are not separate, nor is the quantum of power and status that a group enjoys accepted passively; caste groups compete with each other by actively reconstructing their 'official' status and by wielding the power they have at a local level in order to prevail over contiguous groups.

Even though there seems to be no unified hierarchy in the caste order, some groups are significantly more marginalised than others from a socio-economic point of view. Recognising the deep inequalities within society, the Constitution of India (1950) officially outlawed discrimination based on caste, at the same time prescribing specific welfare programmes aimed at the most vulnerable groups (Banerjee 2013). Such groups, known as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), benefit among other things from affirmative action measures

known as reservations. Notwithstanding the state's efforts to curb caste-based inequalities, castes have often contested their official classification and ranking: the fundamental dynamic of modern caste relations, according to Gupta, is one of conflict and reciprocal disavowal; caste politics today are a question of 'self over others and not self in relation to others' (Gupta 2005:414), where different groups make different claims in the hope of securing better opportunities in education, employment and political power.

The historical presence of disenfranchised groups who have achieved official recognition and have been the target of welfare schemes is not unrelated to the plight of sexual minorities; in 2014, the Supreme Court of India recognised the transgender community as being unfairly discriminated on the basis of their gender non-conformity (*NALSA vs. Union of India* 2014). The judgment has meant that the transgender community can now benefit from affirmative action measures similar to those available to Scheduled Castes and Tribes.²² The issue of classification and minority rights has also been discussed in the judgments about Section 377, particularly in the 2013 Supreme Court judgment (*Koushal vs. Naz* 2013); there, the court established that, even though the sexual practices of homosexuals categorize them as a class, LGBTQ people are not numerically 'enough' to constitute a minority worthy of special protection by the state (see Chapter 5 for an in-depth discussion).

While the relevance of caste as a category of social stratification has undergone significant changes in recent decades (Beteille 1991, 2012), Sonalde Desai and Amaresh Dubey (2012) show that according to the latest census, caste continues to play a critical role in forming hierarchies of social stratification and inequality, particularly in regards to education and employment (see also Deshpande 2011). Far from disappearing as a meaningful identity category, caste in today's India blends and intersects with other categories such as class, assuming the role of a cultural marker that conceals its lasting power (Natrajan 2012). It is therefore necessary to understand caste in its relational capacities even when, as in the case of my participants, it is not openly discussed; whatever the case, it is important to consider that hierarchies have a resilient presence in India's social fabric, even when these hierarchies are spurious and contested.

The Indian middle classes

In the last twenty or so years, the debate around class in India has centred on one particular class position, that is, the middle class. Both in popular and scholarly discussions, defining and analysing what the Indian middle class is has become so pervasive that André Beteille (2013) concludes that the middle class is treated ‘as if it exist[ed] in and by itself’ (2013: 86), rather than in relation to other classes. Part of the discursive hegemony of the middle class as a topic of scholarly analysis and popular narrative is due to the fact that what is known as the middle class has grown rapidly in the last twenty years, and its composition is extremely heterogeneous; this makes the middle class both an interesting phenomenon and one that lends itself to endless analyses.

But who are India’s middle classes? The rise of the Indian middle class as a significant social category is associated with the profound changes in politics, economy and culture brought about by the liberalisation of the economy (Bhaviskar and Ray 2011; Fernandes 2006; Mazzarella 2003; Sridharan 2011; Varma 2007). The term liberalisation refers to the complex of economic reforms undertaken by the Indian state in the early 1990s. Burdened by unsustainable debt, in 1991 the Indian government under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao initiated a series of reforms aimed at liberalising the economy by removing some of the high taxes and restrictions that had characterized the developmental economic model put in place by Jawaharlal Nehru since India’s independence in 1947. Some of the reforms included opening up some public sector institutions (such as banks, airlines, education, electricity, petroleum, cellular telephony) to the private sector and foreign investors; allowing Indian companies to invest in foreign markets; decreasing corporate tax and cutting excise duties. With liberalisation, India left behind the socialist-inspired economic model and embraced a neoliberal course, which contributed significantly to the country’s integration into the global economy (see, Corbridge and Harris 2000; Lakha 1999). Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (2011) however argue that the role of the state in regulating the national economy has not diminished, but rather changed towards political decentralisation (i.e. devolving more power to individual states). As for social welfare policies, Partha Chatterjee (2008) notes that the period after the liberalisation has been accompanied by a surge, rather than a diminution, of state-sponsored

welfare programmes aimed at the poorer sections of society; the reason for this, Chatterjee argues, is that the state needs to try to curb the worsening economic situation of a large number of people who are left out of a system premised on capital accumulation as a result of liberalisation policies.

On a socio-cultural level, the effects of liberalisation could be seen in the growing flow and circulation of products, ideas and media images - domestic and foreign - to which an increasing number of people had access (Appadurai 1996; Mazzarella 2003, 2004; Rajagopal 2001); consumer products such as home appliances, clothes, mobile phones, vehicles for example, but also new cultural and mediated products (thanks to cable television and the Internet) became available to a greater number of people. The material economic change marking post-liberalisation India is accompanied by a change in the way the country imagines itself and project this imagination both domestically and internationally.²³ Critics (Gupta 2009; Kaur 2013; Sharma 2008) have noted a certain disproportion between the discourse around liberalisation/globalisation and the actual reach of these socio-economic changes; the idea of an 'India Unbound'²⁴ and the narratives of growth, prosperity and success have sparked the imagination of millions of people, providing them with the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004) to a better, wealthier, more modern²⁵ lifestyle, even though the benefits of globalized capitalism have improved the wealth of only a minority of Indians (Gupta 2009) and neoliberal²⁶ policies seem to have all but widened the gap between the rich and the poor (Kaur 2013).

The main beneficiaries of India's economic ascendance are what some scholars (Fernandes 2006; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009; Lange and Meier 2009) call the 'new' middle class, to differentiate them from the old middle class that emerged after India's independence and which consisted of government employees and bureaucrats. The 'new' middle class is by contrast defined by and through a combination of occupation, income level and consumption patterns, which are all primarily effects of the liberalisation; in other words, the 'new' middle class works primarily in the private sector, earns enough to take care of the basic needs and can spend money on consumer goods and services. However, even within the same occupation group, there are large disparities in income and position; nor is income alone an indicator of middle-class status (see Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery 2011), and indeed the internal differentiation of the

middle class is one of its most salient characteristics – hence it is more accurate to speak about middle classes in the plural.

Rather than viewing the middle classes as a comprehensive category synonymous with modernity and upward social mobility, is it thus more productive to consider its function as an unstable category within a matrix of multiple hierarchies. While patterns of consumption and lifestyle are indicative of middle class status, they do not grant any solid status stability. Anthropologist Christiane Brosius (2010) approaches the study of the contemporary urban Indian middle classes by highlighting the fact that class positions and social status are dynamic entities. In focusing on the practices and imaginations that inform the middle classes, Brosius argues that one defining feature of the middle classes in India is that they are caught in an unstable middle, as they need to distinguish themselves both from those below and from those above.

Since class status is dynamic, middle class-ness is never a stable entity: middle class lives are in large part constituted around desires and fears that must be managed in different spheres of social life, from education to consumption patterns to relationships. On the one hand, Brosius argues, there is the fear of falling down or behind and of losing one's middle class status; on the other hand, there is the desire to move up the ladder and join the 'elites'. At the same time, as upward social mobility is presented as a result of the liberalisation of the economy, middle class people seek to prevent access to lower-class people while at the same struggling themselves to get access to the upper social strata of society, who are equally protective of their status.

According to Leela Fernandes (2006, 2011), the tension between social mobility and status preservation is constitutive of the middle classes more than consumption patterns, income or occupation. For Fernandes, one key aspect that defines India's new middle classes is the reproduction of inequalities, despite the prevalence of discourses about social change, fluidity and mobility that are often associated with middle class identities and practices. Fernandes's focus on how inequality, social hierarchies and 'the status' quo are maintained by the new middle classes adds an intersectional perspective to the exploration of the role of the new middle classes, and in particular stresses the role of caste in determining the composition of the middle classes. Research in the occupational sphere shows that, despite numerous efforts on the part of the state to enforce affirmative action policies that would allow lower caste people to access

white collar jobs, such positions are still predominantly held by people from a high caste background (Jodhka 2012; Sheth 1999).

Additionally, since the desirability of public sector jobs has somewhat declined after the liberalisation, given the greater economic dividends promised by a market-driven private sector (Sancho 2012) and since the state cannot enforce affirmative action politics in the private sector, the latter's caste composition is even more skewed. Caste privilege comes into play in subtler ways, as people aiming at joining the technology or management sectors need to have social and cultural competences, as well as networks, that very often come with a high caste background (Fuller and Narasimha 2008; Lakha 1999). Satish Deshpande and Yogendra Yadav (2006) note how, in the year 2000, while Hindu upper caste people were about a third of the total urban population, they were about two thirds of all professional and highly educated people. In relation to occupational patterns, Carol Upadhyia (2011) shows how the IT sector, considered the 'flagship industry of India's new economy' (Upadhyia 2011: 169), tends to reproduce established middle class dynamics rather than opening up to individuals from lower social strata.

As Beteille (2013) argues, access to middle class status is precluded for millions of people, even though India's institutions are formally secular and democratic. According to Beteille, we cannot look at the middle classes in India without considering 'the continuing hold of hierarchical values that proliferated to an unusual degree in traditional Indian society and remained in place for a very long stretch of time. It is tempting to view the peculiar preoccupation with distinctions of status within the Indian middle class as a carry-over from the meticulous attention paid to hierarchical distinctions among Indians for centuries' (Beteille 2013: 92). It is helpful to think about how the new middle classes are at once characterized by porous borders and by strong attempts to reproduce patterns of inequality for understanding the ambiguous relationship that my informants had with their own privileges, and how these privileges were experienced also as obligations, as will be clear in the following chapters.

Young in the new India

In part, the conflicted relationship with privilege that the young queer people in this study expressed can be seen as a result of ideas about self, self-realisation and individualism, which circulate prominently among middle class young people. The changes brought about by globalisation are experienced significantly in terms of generational shift (Kabeer 2000), so that the values that used to inform young people's parents' generation are sometimes seen as out-dated by younger generations (Lukose 2009; Platz 2012). Values such as autonomy, self-reliance, independence and entrepreneurship are all-important in determining young people's chances to be successful (Gooptu et al. 2013; Mankekar 2015; Sancho 2012). While (material) success emerges as a prime life goal for entrepreneurial middle class people (Gooptu 2013: 73), it is necessarily accompanied by fears of failing. Brosius notes how 'the option to choose among a wide variety of material goods, lifestyle designs, relationships, is not only promising but also threatening and in fact highly risky, with responsibilities taken and borne by individuals. [...] In this context, the production and circulation of moral narratives of risk and rise is crucial in order to negotiate and legitimize what is socially accepted and what is not' (Brosius 2010:21).

The young queer middle class people in Delhi, born during or after the liberalisation years, are part of a group that is particularly targeted by the aspirational narratives of the 'new' India (Mankekar 2015). As Nicholas Nisbett shows (2007; 2009), this is the first generation that lives and embodies the new possibilities and the new ambitions afforded by globalisation and rapid growth. Nisbett's study is set in Bangalore, the city in southern India where a burgeoning IT sector developed over the last fifteen years, and that is sometimes referred to as the 'Silicon Valley of India'; he examines the complex negotiations over ideas of belonging, identity and modernity that young people undertake in their everyday lives. Despite high salaries and the wider availability of consumer products and services, Nisbett argues that the significance of India's younger generations cannot be reduced to their identity as consumers, and foregrounds instead the ways in which they try to articulate a new moral discourse that allows them to participate meaningfully in cosmopolitan lifestyle practices whilst retaining a sense of 'Indian-ness' (Nisbett 2007).

While Bangalore is perhaps the Indian city where the socio-cultural transformations brought about by globalisation/liberalisation are most evident, the profound changes and the tensions in the everyday practices of urban youth are visible in smaller cities too. Teresa Platz (2012) explores the hopes, thoughts and aspirations of young middle class people who like to spend time in the urban cafes of Pune, Maharashtra. According to Platz, consumption practices centred on leisure, fashion and peer sociality are not only a marker of middle class-ness, but are also ways in which young people work to shape a cosmopolitan self which is attentive to local cultural and moral idioms while at the same time participating in a series of practices that characterize 'youth' all over the world (Platz 2012:69).

What distinguishes 21st century Indian young people from previous generations, argues Platz, is a desire to break free from traditional constraints - in terms of wealth, religion, kinship structures - and to construct a new lifestyle that manages, nonetheless, to remain Indian. Ritty Lukose (2005; 2009) also examines how people born during and after India's liberalisation articulate their identities, but in contrast to Nisbett and Platz, she focuses specifically on their consumption practices. Whether it is about buying clothes or spending time at trendy urban cafes, young people attribute a high symbolic meaning to practices of consumption, in that these practice indicate a precise lifestyle predicated upon the enjoyment of products and services embodying a new way of being Indian. Cautioning against seeing young people's consumerist attitude as a sign of their commodification and depoliticisation, Lukose argues instead that the different ways in which middle class young people spend their time and money are 'an increasingly important axis of belonging for negotiating citizenship' (Lukose 2009:7) in an era characterized by profound changes in the meanings of political participation, social equality and gender roles.

A similar argument is developed by Mark Liechty (2003) in his work on social change and modernity in Kathmandu, Nepal. Liechty shows how young people struggle to find a balance between the desire to be 'modern' and the equally pressing desire to embody a 'suitable' Nepalese middle class identity; consumption is one of the critical loci where the tensions and contradictions of having to embody a 'suitably modern' subjectivity emerge. Young people, in Liechty's study, emerge as a particularly salient group for the study of South Asia's changing social dynamics because their lives are marked by ambivalent

dispositions and contradictory demands. Liechty writes: ‘they must pioneer a new social identity that forces them to reconcile images of themselves and their futures according to state and commercial narratives of progress and abundance on the one hand, with the real world of scarcity and precarious claims to social standing on the other’ (Liechty 2003: 209).

While the people in Liechty’s study are confronted with anxieties deriving from economic and social precariousness, similar dynamics can be observed, as will be shown, even among young people whose socio-economic status is stable, even privileged. The narratives of young Delhi queers are permeated by anxieties and aspirations about the future because, as I argue in the following chapters, the new possibilities for leisure and consumption that young people are afforded are constantly balanced against a host of pressures coming from the family, the state, the economy and global culture; as anthropologist Purnima Mankekar argues, the modalities of self-realisation encouraged by neoliberal narratives of aspiration and growth have not replaced other ‘constructions of agency’ based on duty and reciprocal obligations (Mankekar 2015: 226). This is particularly visible in the case of middle class youth, who are given great opportunities by their parents through sacrifices and economic investments, and are expected to fulfil those investments accordingly (Dickey 2002; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Kumar 2011).

The family as institution

Middle class struggles over belonging, status and morality are played out primarily within the family. In India, the family represents a cultural, economic and moral institution whose role within society is hard to underestimate. Despite historical, regional and social changes, the family as an institution continues to be a critical site for the analysis of Indian society (Derné 1995; Madan 1989; Nimkoff 1959; Patel 2005; Schlesinger 1961; Shah 1998; Sonawat 2001). Beteille summarizes as follows the centrality of the institution of the family as a seminal category in India: ‘the family has been and continues to be one of the strongest institutions of Indian society, in all regions, among all communities and in all social classes. This is not to deny the very great range of variation in family types in India, but only to draw attention to its continued

strength as an institution in and through which the individual acquires his capabilities and orientation as a member of society' (Beteille 1991: 17).

In trying to categorize the Indian family, a basic division can be made between extended or joint families and nuclear families. Extended or joint families are said to be families where two or three generations live together: husband and wife, their children, and one of the spouses' parents (usually the husband's) and even other kin, such as the husband's brother and his wife and children. Nuclear families consist of the married couple and their unmarried offspring. Broadly speaking, the nuclear family has often been associated with modernization and urbanity (Gore 1968). The nuclear family has often been rhetorically described as an alien and corrupting familial arrangement leading sometimes to worries about the 'disintegration' of the joint family and subsequently, the loss of traditional Indian values (Uberoi 2005); however, as early as in 1974, research has shown that the joint family model was far less prevalent than imagined (Shah 1974).

In recent years, urban areas have seen an increase in the nuclear family structure. In Delhi, according to a 2011 report by the state government,²⁷ the percentage of households occupied by one married couple (indicating a nuclear family type of arrangement) was 76%. Of the participants in my study, all of those who lived with their parents had a nuclear type of household arrangement. The division between extended and nuclear families is useful for demographic and urban planning purposes; what it does not show, however, is how kinship relations continue to be strong and influential even between nuclear families. The fact of living in a separate house does not automatically result in a severing or loosening of the affective and economic ties that bind relatives. The interviews and observations from my fieldwork support the opposite argument, that is, the strength and influence of kinship networks continue to play a central role even in an urban nuclear family, particularly when it comes to planning and securing the future of children.

According to Beteille, reproducing social inequalities is the main function of the family-as-institution, particularly with respect to the occupational work sphere. The fact certain high-rank professions such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and academics are not accessible to every citizen equally is due, Beteille argues, to strategies enacted by families, rather than by caste obstructions (Beteille 1991). As the participants in my research can all be said to belong to the urban upper middle classes, Beteille's reasoning can shed some light on the processes and the

relational dynamics shaping family life for the people at the centre of my project. Considering the strength of the institution of the family in guaranteeing the reproduction of the status quo, and having seen how middle class families inhabit an ambiguous moral space that relies on notions of respectability, appropriateness and suitability, we can begin to understand why the struggle for recognition of young queers plays out in the family domain in a conspicuous way.

Thus the idea of having a queer child in the family can compromise not only the vague notion of 'family honour', but also cause a fall in social status which, as Brosius and Liechty show, always looms at some distance especially for India's 'new' urban middle classes. The disruptive power of queer sexuality within the middle class family becomes tangible as it clashes against one of India's core social institutions: marriage.

Family affairs: marriage

As we will see, the difficulties experienced by young queer people with their parents are closely related to the issue of marriage. By 'coming out' as gay, they would undermine the prospect of marriage, which remains a critical event for the overwhelming majority of Indians across caste, class and religion. Analytically, marriage occupies a central position in the understanding of kinship and family in India, informing ideas about culture, citizenship and identity (Palriwala and Kaur 2013). Marriage is also the institution through which heteronormativity in social relationships is enforced and sanctioned, as Jyoti Puri suggests:

'Heteronormativity is the corpus of social institutions, structures and cultural discourses that are shaped by and reinforce the reasoning: human beings are made up of males and females; heterosexual intercourse is elemental to the perpetuation of society; the continuation of societies requires that heterosexual intercourse be institutionalised through marriage, family, property rights, education, religion, the state etc.; and that the man-woman unit is the primary and indivisible unit which give rise to family, kinship, community and nation' (Puri 2012:212).

The centrality of marriage as an institution in India can be inferred by its universality; according to the 2001 census, only less than 2% of men and 1% of women remain unmarried (Sonalde and Aldrist 2010: 675). In the

Indian context, a basic division is often operated between arranged marriage and love marriage. An arranged marriage is a marriage where the families of the prospective groom (or bride) select what they deem to be the best partner and effectively arrange for the two to be married. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the love marriage only involves the couple, who decides to get married without consulting (and sometimes against) their families. This classification might be useful as a starting point to situate marriage in India, but it is important to keep in mind that there exists a wide terrain of negotiation and compromise between the two poles of arranged and love marriage. While at first an arranged marriage seems to imply a lack of agency on the part of the prospective couple, in reality children often collaborate actively with their parents and relatives in selecting partners; similarly, marriages borne out of love do not automatically imply the exclusion or disapproval of the families (Palriwala and Kaur 2013; Säävälä 2010).

The conceptual division between arranged and love marriage mirrors to some extent the division between extended family and nuclear family; just as the extended family is often equated with Indian traditional values, so is arranged marriage; by contrast, nuclear family arrangements and love marriages are taken as expressions of modernisation - and westernisation (Uberoi 2006). Meena Khandelwal (2009) offers a critique of this narrative. She argues that the dichotomy between arranged and love marriage exemplifies an 'exaggerated cultural difference' (2009:584) that feeds into neo-colonial, orientalist discourses; moreover, the claim that love marriages are solely based on romance, passion and individual choice presupposes a view of pure agency that finds no historical or ethnographical evidence in western culture.

Considering all the variants within it, arranged marriage is still extremely popular in India. The popularity of arranged marriage cuts across gender, caste and class divisions: Mukta Sharangpani (2010) shows how the practice of arranged marriage remains a favourite even among urban 'modern' middle class women. Sharangpani is preoccupied with the apparent paradox of women who are ideally positioned to break free from patterns of gender oppression because of their class background, yet still express a preference for an arrangement that Sharangpani defines as 'a patriarchal cultural artefact intended as a controlling and disciplining mechanism' (Sharangpani 2010: 252).

In the context of middle class families, Chris Fuller and HariPriya Narasimhan (2008) show how marriages between middle and upper-

middle class families across India are overwhelmingly arranged according to the rule of endogamy (i.e. marrying someone of the same caste). They conclude that '[...] for the majority of middle-class Indians, arranged endogamous marriage remains the norm, in both preference and practice' (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008:750). What has changed over the last decades, they argue, is the value that urban middle class families place on the happiness of the married couple, which leads them to identify a type of marriage settlement that they term 'endogamous companionate marriage'. In a heterosexual endogamous companionate marriage, partners are ideally chosen within the same caste or sub-caste and according to their education and employment, in order to maximise their future happiness and compatibility. This type of arrangement, Fuller and Narasimhan argue, 'is a system that reproduces both caste and class, specifically 'middle classness' as social practice and cultural discourse' (2008:752).

Scholars also speak about 'arranged-love marriage' (Kapur 2009; Uberoi 1998, 2006), where two people meet independently from their parents, but afterwards seek and obtain approval from their respective families. Such hybrid forms of marriage tend to work in urban middle class environments as long as the prospective couple shares a similar social status in terms of caste, class and education (Uberoi 2006). While a minority of 'progressive' families may allow a love marriage (Uberoi 2006), this is still a controversial choice, because in principle it disregards class, caste, and religious background. Couples choosing to have a love marriage are sometimes forced to elope and go to live in a different city (Chowdhry 2007; Mody 2002), since it is assumed that they have brought dishonour to both families (and particularly to the family whose child 'married down', that is chose a partner of a lower caste/class). While the 'love marriage' has always existed in India, its appeal has grown considerably in the last decades as a result of new ideas about subjectivity, modernity and individualism brought about by the globalisation of culture.

Among young generations, the appeal of a love marriage based on romance and sexual attraction must be balanced against parental expectations about endogamy and suitability, as a study by Nancy Netting (2010) indicates. Focusing on upper-middle class young unmarried people, Netting highlights the existence of 'hybrid systems' where the young people try to find a partner that fulfils both their own and their parents' requirements, so that values such as equality, intimacy and

choice are not antithetical to Indian customs (e.g. going to live with the husband's family, validating one's caste/class background) (Netting 2010: 720).

While they keep their personal priorities in focus, Netting's participants do not automatically neglect their families' expectations, as they know that it is also in their own interest to fulfil the class demands. Netting's study indicates how the middle class family institution retains its strength in upholding its status and prerogatives when it comes to social reproduction; at the same time, the attitudes of the younger generations of middle-class citizens are fraught with ambiguities and ambivalences, so that the project of class reproduction is never stable or linear. I observed a similar dynamic among my participants, which I analyse in Chapter 6, although the stigmatised status of homosexuality places the terms of the negotiations under a different light.

Controlling gender and sexuality: the colonial context

The political and juridical U-turn about Section 377 can be seen as a catalysing process which brought to the fore the complexities of India's sexual politics. Issues of identity, nationhood, morality, public health, transnational non governmental cooperation, global LGBTQ narratives, the role of the state, the engagement of civil society are all involved and represented in the legal journey that has, for the moment, stalled in an unfavourable conjuncture for India's sexual minorities. To understand both the importance and the limits of this legal case, we need to consider that sexual politics in contemporary India invest not only the sphere of intimacy, but are in fact part of larger discourses concerning India's status as a modern, secular and postcolonial democracy.

The current legal framework criminalising sodomy in India is a colonial inheritance; the Indian Penal Code was passed in 1860, and was drafted with the intent of unifying the disparate social and juridical customs in the subcontinent into one single corpus, thereby facilitating the work of the British colonial rulers (Gupta 2008; Sanders 2009). Prescriptions against 'unnatural offences' such as homosexual sex must be understood in the context of a wave of 'purity campaigns' that

dominated the social landscape in Europe; campaigns for sexual purity were initiated by Christian and women's associations in an attempt to regulate or prohibit non-procreative sexual practices, including prostitution and homosexual sex (Bhaskaran 2002, 2004; Mort 2000).

A meticulous interest in issues of sex and sexuality was a common trait of all European colonial powers, and the colonised territories provided abundant material that was then used to draw comparisons between the 'wild' sexuality of indigenous populations and the regulated sexual morality of Europeans; indigenous sexuality was largely cast as abhorrent, lascivious and deviant, enabling the construction of racist imaginaries among European citizens, who sought to mark their moral (and racial) superiority by enforcing a vision of sexuality premised on control, gendered hierarchies, and compulsory heterosexuality (Ghosh 2008; McClintock 1995; Moore and Wekker 2011; Said 1978; Stoler 1995).

Ann Stoler (1989) highlights the ways the hierarchies between colonisers and colonised were significantly informed by a patriarchal gender ideology, and argues that 'gender inequalities were essential to the structure of colonial racism and imperial domination' (1989:634); with regards to colonial India, an example of this is the discourse around the supposed effeminacy of Bengali men, which was contrasted with a hyper-masculine British male for ideological and political purposes (Sinha 1995). Not only were gendered and sexual hierarchies constructed for the purpose of domination; 'deviant' sexual practices, behaviours, and even objects (such as the dildo) were catalogued, albeit irregularly, in the colonial archive, as Anjali Arondekar (2009) shows. As these and other historians (see for example Sangari and Vaid 1990) of the colonial era demonstrate, control over gender and sexuality was a central aspect of the project of colonial domination.

Gender and sexuality were not only central to the colonial project, they also informed the vision of the early independence movement in India. Partha Chatterjee (1989, 1993) argues that dichotomies such as western/Indian, public/private, tradition/modernity, female/male were not just a product of western orientalist categorizations, but were actively employed by the nascent anticolonial Indian nationalists in order to produce a national identity built around values opposed, separated and morally superior to the western ones. The family came to be seen as the primary social unit of the prospective Indian nation, and as a consequence nationalists sought to recover it from the reformist inference of the British

rulers by appealing to 'traditional' values which were recast as essential to the nationalist project (Chatterjee 1993). The domestic sphere became the preferred locus of regulated sexuality; moral virtues had to be exercised in the expression of sexuality so as to nurture the idea of a fundamental difference between the foreign invader and the indigenous population. In representing the 'inner' sphere, women were in charge of preserving the spiritual purity that guaranteed the cultural and moral superiority of India (Ray 2000; Sunder Rajan 1993). Defining the private domain, or the home, as the proper place for women can be seen in this light as an attempt to preserve an irreducible space from the predatory hegemony of the colonisers. Partha Chatterjee (1993), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990), and Uma Chakravarty (2003) among others, note how this nationalist strategy relied on, and invigorated, patriarchal values as well as religious, caste, and class divisions. In other words, as Charu Gupta also shows, the construction of feminine essential values as a moral defence against imperialism rested on, and to some extents reinforced, a hierarchical view of women and gender relations, to the detriment of India's non-Hindu population: thus, the Hindu woman was superior to the Muslim woman, and Muslim men were cast as dangerous contaminants of the Hindu purity (Gupta 2002). Much of the current discourse around sexuality, morality and obscenity in India can also be traced back to attempts during colonial times to construe a powerful Hindu identity through the establishment of markers of respectability and honour that demonized the 'other', whether it was the British colonial ruler or the Muslim minority (Das 1995; Hansson and Kinnvall 2010).

Chatterjee's argument about the inner-outer dichotomy can also be seen in a different light, as Nivedita Menon (2007) suggests: given that the Indian woman was cast as the ultimate bearer of Indian spirituality, she was not only endangered by the presence of the colonial ruler, but also by indigenous customs that might undermine the nationalist agenda. As the nationalist movement grew stronger in India towards the end of the 19th Century, indigenous elites promoted reformist agendas that ran parallel to the legal changes implemented by the British (Killingley 2003; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008; Sen 2005). The aim of the social reform movements centred, among other things, on several gender issues: education of women, abolition of child marriage and of *sati* (the Hindu ritual where a widow is expected to step on the funeral pyre of her dead husband and burn alive; see Mani 1987), remarriage of widows, abolition of the *devadasis* (low-caste women who were 'given' to Hindu deities,

resided in temples and had multiple sexual partners; see Chakravarty 1990). The principal aim of these social reforms was to eradicate customs that were seen as backward and 'low'. However, in the late 19th Century, Menon writes, 'the colonial state was no longer to be permitted to intervene in matters central to the cultural identity of the nation; the agent of reform would no longer be the legal authority of the colonial state but the moral authority of the national community' (Menon 2007:xxii). This consideration of the partial collusion of foreign and indigenous mechanisms of social regulation is important because it foreshadows caste and class-based inequalities that still influence discourses of sexuality.

Both Menon and Mary E. John agree that control and surveillance of the (female) body remain central even in post-independence India. John and Nair (1998), referring to the fact that sex is not something that is openly talked about in the Indian public sphere, argue that what they term 'conspiracy of silence' (1998:1) regarding Indian sexuality, is in fact a myth, because '...in the spheres of law, demography or medicine, for instance, sexuality enjoys a massive and indisputable presence that is far from prohibited' (John and Nair 1998:1). Sexuality is indeed central to the work of health institutions, population control organisations and the legal apparatus; in different ways and for different, but inter-related purposes, they all have mapped and classified gender and sexual practices over the last century or so. In post-independence India, the state agenda, whether driven by early developmental efforts in the first decades after independence, or by supranational concerns about raising the status of women as a marker of 'modernity' (Rao 2014), is still a pervading structuring presence in the lives of women, and continues to construct them in terms of their sexuality. Rajesvari Sunder Rajan argues: 'State-functions in relation to gendering [...] - the discrimination against, and the control, protection, regulation, and nonrecognition of the work of women - come together within a single logic that is informed by a pervasive understanding of women as sexualized subjects. In such a perception women are at once rendered as a sex and a group: as, precisely, 'a female population'' (Sunder Rajan 2003: 24). Controlling and even producing sexual subjects, by casting some as legitimate and others as deviant, is one of the instruments with which states ensure their own existence and productive functioning (Connell 1990; Kapur 2005; Puri 1999).

The state's interest in regulating the sphere of gender and sexuality has contributed to the institutionalisation of heterosexuality in a way that Stephen Legg and Srila Roy call 'hetero-sovereignty', to describe the ways in which the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1993) augments and expands the reach of sovereign powers and institutions such as the law, organised religion, family and community (Legg and Roy 2013). That is to say, the dominance of heterosexuality through discursive normative patterns needs to be superimposed and integrated with the actual coercive powers of institutions to repress and punish sexualities that deviate from the desired and required heterosexual mode, of which Section 377 is an example.

Homosexuality in the postcolony

The sphere of sexuality in India cuts across several dichotomous ideological constructions, such as tradition/modernity, Indian/western, colonial/postcolonial, masculinity/femininity. While historically it has been largely women who have had to navigate these dichotomies in search of an appropriate balance (Das 2010; Puri 1999; Radhakrishnan 2011), the ways in which homosexuality (as an identity category and as a concept) has been dealt with is also marked by several interconnected tensions, contradictions and ambiguities.

Homosexuality itself is a contested term within the field of sexualities in India. The figure of the homosexual, as Michel Foucault argues, emerged in the late 19th century, as progress in medicine and psychology started to posit sexuality as an essential element of individual identity (Foucault 1978). The western origins of the category of the 'homosexual' have been instrumentalised by conservative political forces who hold homosexuality to be an example of the moral corruption precipitated by modernity and westernisation, classifying it as a 'social evil' (Rydstrom 2006) to be fought by restoring 'original' traditional values.²⁸ This has been the case in India with the Hindutva movement, a nationalist political ideology premised on the assertion that India is essentially a Hindu nation and all 'exogenous' elements - religious and ethnic minorities, western influences - should be controlled and combated (Sarkar 1996). Homosexuality has thus been deemed a western (specifically British) import by Hindutva ideologues and nationalists; an anti-colonial position

that actually deploys the same mechanisms of ‘othering’ characterizing Orientalist discourses about the sexuality of the colonised (Nandy 1983; Said 1978; Stoler 1995). In practice, the ideological opposition to the recognition of ‘indigenous’ homosexualities has resulted, in recent years, in acts of policing, blackmail and violence against sexual minorities (Bacchetta 2013; Kapur 2000; Narrain 2011; PUCL-K 2001).

In an attempt to reclaim diverse sexual identities and practices from the violent ‘xenophobic queerphobia’ (Bacchetta 2013) of Hindu nationalists, several Indian scholars have researched and documented the existence of same-sex relations in Indian history and culture (Bhaskaran 2002; Gopinath 2005; Vanita 2002; Vanita and Kidwai 2000), thus arguing that ‘homosexuality’ has always been present in the subcontinent in various forms, and that pre-colonial India displayed a tolerant attitude, if not acceptance, of same-sex practices and behaviours. The works of Ruth Vanita and others are directly connected to the legal struggle against Section 377, in that they demonstrate how the permanence of the section, with its colonial origins and imbued with Victorian notions of morality and ‘purity’ (Bhaskaran 2002; Menon 2007; Narrain and Bhan 2005), is less representative of Indian moral values than it is of colonial - and thus foreign – preconceptions. Indeed, one of the most popular slogans used by LGBTQ activists in their protests against the 2013 Supreme Court judgment was ‘377 Quit India’, inspired by the Quit India movement, the civil disobedience movement launched by Gandhi during the struggle for India’s independence.

If the historical presence of same-sex relations and practices in India has been established, the debate remains open as to what names one should give to various sexual identities. The issue of naming carries profound epistemological and political implications: would categories such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, queer and so on apply to indigenous sexualities outside a western context? How do these terms affect our understanding of the ways in which people make sense of their sexuality in India?

While the majority of studies about contemporary non-heterosexual sexualities in India - including this thesis- use terms like gay, lesbian and queer (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007; Dave 2012; Narrain and Gupta 2011; Vanita 2002),²⁹ there have been significant controversies around the ideological import of using names that bear a western origin and potentially a foreign agenda (see also Puri 1999:175). Two important figures in the landscape of Indian sexuality activism, Ashok Row Kavi

and Shivananda Khan, both active since the 1980s, strongly disagreed on the usage of western versus vernacular terminologies. Ashok Row Kavi (quoted in Vanita 2002) pointed out that using words like gay or lesbian, even though these were not Indian terms, had greater political potential and would connect the struggles of Indian sexual minorities to those of sexual minorities worldwide; while Shivananda Khan (2001) argued that these 'global' categories would obscure the diversity and specificity of sexual formations in India, and that the latter should be spoken about and dealt with using indigenous terminologies, such as *kothi* and *panthi*³⁰ (see Boyce 2007).

According to Vanita (2002), however, focusing on the right nomenclature misses the point, since the value of researching Indian sexualities lies in recovering a common history and creating a sense of heritage and community for disenfranchised people who, regardless of what they are called or call themselves, have been discriminated because of their sexuality. Discussing the political implications of naming with regards to sexual minorities outside the west, queer cultural theorist Bobby Benedicto (2008) rejects the dichotomy between 'global' and 'local' names, arguing that both are images reflecting processes of approximation, which sexual minorities outside the 'west' engage in consciously, in an effort to position and differentiate themselves within their own minority communities.

The early disagreement between Khan and Kavi mirrors a larger, more complex contestation over sexual categorisations dominating the early activist scene in India in the 1990s, and it is critically connected to the role, importance and power of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). With respect to (homo)sexuality, the birth of governmental and non governmental organisations in India coincides with the AIDS epidemic and the subsequent efforts, undertaken at international level, to curb its spread (Gabler 2012; Nambiar 2012). Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, several international agencies prompted the Indian government to implement specific programmes to address the issue of AIDS (Jalali 2008; Sethi 2003).

In India, the first National AIDS committee was set up in 1986 (the same year the first case of AIDS was diagnosed in the country) by the Ministry of Health and Family Services. The same ministry launched NACO, the National AIDS Control Organisation, which as of today is the main national body working with AIDS-related issues. NACO received significant financial support from the World Bank from 1992 onwards

(Bhaskaran 2004:159); the several million dollars provided by World Bank, World Health Organisation and the Government of India enabled NACO to draft and implement AIDS control programmes countrywide. NACO also acts as a supervisor of NGOs working with HIV/AIDS and collaborates with various international agencies; its AIDS Control Programme is now in its fifth phase.

The involvement of multinational actors and NGOs in dealing with the AIDS pandemic in India has been widely criticised as an example of ‘NGOisation’, a process where NGOs take over the management of social issues, generating a bureaucratic, donor-dependent class of social actors who lack accountability and who grow more and more detached from the constituencies they are supposed to service (Bernal and Grewal 2014; Biswas 2006; Dave 2012; Kamat 2003; Misra 2006). Among the critics, Subir Kole (2007) highlights the links between the globalisation of the economy in India, the AIDS crisis, and the emergence of a mobilised LGBTQ community. In particular, Kole argues that the AIDS agenda brought about a westernisation of sexual categories, to the disadvantage of indigenous sexual practices and issues. In Kole’s view, the involvement of NGOs thus generates a problematic epistemological development, where in order to receive funding and carry out important sexual health work, one must first rename and reconceptualise sexual identity categories so that they fit with the accepted global (western) vocabulary of sexuality. On this matter, anthropologist Lawrence Cohen (2005) argues that even when there are efforts from state, bilateral and foreign NGOs to implement a culturally appropriate programme for HIV/AIDS prevention, thus preserving ‘indigenous’ categories of sexual identity and sexual practices, these efforts only result in ‘two competing networks of identification, capital and surveillance [...] each offer[ing] their various auditors a distinctive mapping of local categories of desire, comportment, and practice [...] and a distinctive form of moralizing against cosmopolitan inauthenticity’ (Cohen 2005: 270).

In the context of India’s early queer activism in the 1990s, the initial conflict between Row Kavi and Khan resulted in two main camps, one viewing categories such as *kothi* and *panthi* as quintessentially South Asian, the other protesting that the very same categories were being reified by foreign NGO players. Cohen’s ethnographic data show that terms like *kothi* and *panthi*, so widely defended as authentically Indian, also began to be used strategically at a specific point in time; they also became, to an extent, a categorical framework in which to fit a plurality

of sexual practices and behaviours. The purpose of this reification was clear: India's activists needed to present large donor agencies with clear categories that would deserve attention and funding. The '*kothi* framework' (i.e. a strategy focusing on targeting local indigenous communities) worked particularly well and became a best-practice prevention strategy endorsed and recognised by several AIDS-related agencies.

However, the material I collected in Delhi with different organisations points to a more complex scenario; while it is true that the health agenda dominated the establishment of NGOs in the Global South³¹ in the 1990s, and that the health imperative promoted by multinational agencies like the UNDP and WHO may or may not have contributed to the reification of certain sexual categories (see Khanna 2009), my data suggest that focusing exclusively on whether western sexual identity categories have been imposed on indigenous practices would be missing the point. AIDS-related discourses and practices worked to produce a set of specialist knowledges, often operating at the non-governmental level, which in turn opened up spaces for discussions about sexuality, society and culture beyond the epidemiological realm (Horton, Rydstrom and Tonini 2015).

The AIDS crisis could thus be seen, drawing from Kavita Misra (2006) as a 'critical event': beyond the sheer enormity of death and suffering caused by AIDS,³² its critical value is to be found in the numerous issues it raised, from state capabilities to moral values to global connections (Misra 2006:37). For India's sexual minorities, the response to the AIDS crisis and the involvement of international NGOs have been an enabling factor for the emergence of knowledges, exchanges, and networks that managed to position sexual morality and social justice as nodal issues in India's socio-political identity.

Queer sexuality, subjectivity and ambiguities

As sexuality organisations began to widen their scope from a health to a rights-based rationale, India's LGBTQ communities became increasingly concerned with their marginalisation in terms of civil and social rights; they became politicised, in the sense that they 'understood [their] marginalization to be the result of the exercise of a certain form of power, and not as part of the natural order of things' (Gupta and Narrain

2011:xxii). Through the 1990s, several groups around India began producing reports about violence, abuse and lack of rights suffered by gays (Less Than Gay, 1991), lesbians (CALERI 1997) and transgender people (PUCL-K 2003); such reports began to emphasise the critical role of Section 377 in condemning homosexual existence, and were used as evidence in the petition that the Naz Foundation filed to the Delhi High Court in 2001.

The politicisation of LGBTQ communities invites a reflection around issues of subjectivity and subject positions. Akshay Khanna (2011) and Naisargi Dave (2011, 2012) point out that in the critical moment when sexual minorities organised themselves against a repressive law, they had to constitute themselves in terms that would be intelligible by the law. This process of purposeful subjectification necessarily involved the risk of excluding groups and individuals who did not neatly fit with the 'acceptable' image of the LGBTQ individual unjustly persecuted because of her/his sexuality. An example of this is the Naz petition where, even though the prime beneficiaries are marginalised sexual subjects such as men who have sex with men and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, the arguments about rights, privacy and equality seem to suit the needs of urban, middle class gay men (Dave 2011, 2012; Puri 2013; Tellis 2012).

Alok Gupta (2005) tackles the issue of class in the context of the struggle to repeal Section 377, wondering what the effects of decriminalisation might be in practice for different constituencies. Gupta asks: 'would the end of Section 377 mean the same thing for both *kothis* and gay men? A gay man would now just have more access to clubs, bars, an openly queer social life, and may subsequently acquire political and civil recognition of his sexuality, all of which at a cost that he may be able to afford. But what will it mean for a *kothi* or a working class homosexual, who will have the right, but not the money to enjoy it?' (Gupta 2005: 132).³³

If a tension between radical progressive ideals and exclusionary normalisation is to some extent inevitable for India's LGBTQ activists (Dave 2012), we need to question whether seeking recognition from the law, the state and society on the basis of sexuality is a necessary and sufficient strategy for sexual minorities, and in what ways recognition politics intersects with queer people's everyday lives. With regards to post-colonial contexts, it is worth noting that seeking to be recognised in legal terms could be understood as a way to stabilise one group's position

in a social milieu marked by tumultuous diversity and contending hierarchies. Jean and John Comaroff (2009) argue that many postcolonial countries seem to engage in a ‘fetishism of the law’, which they define as ‘the tendency of populations defined by, among other things, faith, culture, gender, sexual preference, race, residence, and habits of consumption to turn to jural ways and means in order to construct and represent themselves as “communities”. In doing so, they strive to protect their physical, intellectual, and other property; to regulate their internal affairs; to police their boundaries; to claim recognition and redress; and to manage their relations with the world outside. In sum, they seek to constitute their being-in-the-world—in the hyphenated socio-legal sense of the term “constitution”—under the vernacular sign of “identity”’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 197).

The complexities inherent in employing the notion of identity in regard to sexuality emerge from recent ethnographic studies of India’s sexual minorities. Paul Boyce (2013) and Akshay Khanna (2007) among others show how ‘homosexuality’ as a category defining the personhood, subjectivity, and agency of people attracted to the same sex may not be applicable or even very useful to cover the range of erotic and sexual desires, identifications, practices that nonetheless exceed heteronormative³⁴ impositions. Moreover, Boyce shows that for people living in the peripheries, it might not be desirable to identify with - or demand recognition of - established sexual categories such as homosexual or gay, which invite visibility and are premised on the explicit ‘iteration of the sexual in social relations’ (Boyce 2013: 201).

Boyce goes on to argue that in the Indian context ‘it is important to recognise ways in which same-sex sexualities are socially and subjectively salient in other social contexts, and through other forms of subtle, often intangible interactions’ (Boyce 2013:201). Similarly, Khanna argues that ‘the homosexual is not a category that may be considered to be collectively recognised, outside of certain middle- to upper-middle-class urban contexts. [...] the idioms in which same-sex desire and identities based on non-heteronormative desires are spoken of, are varied. The ontologies of personhood brought into play in discussing such desires and identities are not quite the same as the ontology of the homosexual’ (Khanna 2007: 163).

If the subject position of the ‘homosexual’ is unstable and can only partially cover the gamut of sexual identities, how are we to approach instance of abuse, violence, blackmail to which sexual minorities are

subjected? Marginalisation, exclusion and violence can all be seen as instances of misrecognition (Fraser 1997), perpetrated onto sexual minorities by various regimes (authorities, social contexts, the family); but can we speak of homophobia when the categories of the homosexual and homosexuality are shown to be only partially useful? On the subject of sexuality-related violence and homophobia, Lawrence Cohen (2009) argues that in India categories such as class and gender are likely to be more important risk factors than sexual identity in determining an individual's degree of vulnerability; while arrests, rape, blackmailing and other forms of violent sexual policing of sexual minorities are widespread in India, Cohen remarks the lack of an 'organised public apparatus of homophobic punishment, interdiction and shame' (Cohen 2009: 163).

While Cohen is right to stress the importance of an intersectional approach to the issue of homophobic violence and his argument is in line with an understanding of Indian society as composed of multiple competing hierarchies of belonging and exclusion, since 2009 the LGBTQ community has become increasingly vocal and visible. Not only did the media place LGBTQ issues in the spotlight; many individuals and groups embraced the possibility to be visible as a strategy to further their demands for wider and deeper social recognition. Given the regressive legal U-turn in 2013, the heightened visibility of the LGBTQ community has become a liability. Section 377 is now a well-known statute among the police and the larger public, which has led to a sharp increase of cases being filed under the section,³⁵ further increasing the vulnerability of sexual minorities (Singh 2016). Homophobia is a global problem (Murray 2009; Weiss and Bosia 2013) which manifests itself locally in different ways and thus requires a situated approach (Kulick 2009); while in India homophobia is often conflated with, and concealed behind, forms of authoritarian control over sexuality at large, including heterosexuality (Vanita 2016), the discrimination, exclusion and silencing faced by people whose sexuality is both legally and socially misrecognised are all forms of violence which need to be explored and addressed.

Concluding remarks

From the perspective of young queer people, the socio-cultural context of contemporary urban India represents a system of intersecting possibilities, aspirations and obligations. While matters of sexuality, gender and rights have come to the fore of public policy and popular discourse, demands for the recognition of queer sexualities must inevitably contend with issues of national identity, social stratification, moral hierarchies and values. The juridical back-and-forth around Section 377 has contributed to delegitimize the right of sexual minorities to be recognised as equal citizens by the state. Furthermore, the material in this thesis suggests that the sphere of the law is only one of the many regimes through which recognition is regulated. The insecurities and ambiguities that many young queers expressed and that I analyse in this study highlight the existence of several hierarchies of belonging, where recognition emerges as an unstable and fragmented set of practices.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognisable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence? There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms (Butler 2004b:3).

Recognition can be defined as the acknowledgment of the existence of another individual, group, or entity. Being recognised means being validated in one's own existence and granted respect (Honneth 1995); failing to acknowledge and validate the existence of someone (or something) can be called misrecognition (Fraser 1997). For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be seen as a statement of recognition in the broadest of senses, prescribing that all people should be recognised as human beings and, as such, granted a number of fundamental rights. Recognition can be attached to one or more specific identities, but it can also be extended to encompass a common trait among people, humanity (Carey, Gibney and Poe 2010; Crawford 2012; Donnelly 2013; Gibney and Mihr 2014).

Since the issue of gender and sexual rights in India has been in the spotlight for a number of years, several claims made by the Indian LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer) community have been framed in terms of a struggle for recognition. The travails of Section 377, and the centrality attributed to the role of the Law both by the media and by scholarly critiques have contributed to the construction of a discourse that sees the precarious status of queer sexuality in India principally as a matter of recognition, or lack thereof.

Framing queer sexuality as a matter of recognition dovetails with analogous concerns about social justice and elevates queer sexuality to the realm of fundamental social issues defining the state of contemporary India's social and political standing. Queer scholar Rahul Rao (2014)

captures the importance of the debate around queerness and recognition when he argues that the ‘queer question’ (i.e. the question of the official and social recognition of sexual minorities) in India and in other postcolonial societies, has come to occupy the place once reserved for the ‘woman question’ as a parameter for assessing a country’s supposed modernity. Rao is critical of the ways in which investing the status of queer sexualities with the function of national civilizational compass belies an uncritical universalist (western) vision of what social justice should mean, thus failing to recognise the diversity of queer subjectivities and queer expressions in different contexts. While Rao’s analysis is geared towards a critique of national and international politics, he makes a point that I find useful for my discussion: Rao questions the extent to which the emergent ‘new queer subjectivities’ (Rao 2014: 211) that have been enabled since India’s 2009 repeal of Section 377 fit the vision of a future Indian society premised on the recognition of sexual and gender minorities, and what it would mean to imagine other queer subjectivities (see also Sircar and Jain 2012; Kapur 2012).

For this chapter, I would like to borrow from Rao’s critique of the ‘queer question’ to ask in what ways discussing the status queer sexuality as a matter of recognition might help or hinder our understanding of it. In particular, I am interested in exploring the intricacies of the concept of recognition from the vantage point of situated, contingent practices and behaviours such as those of the people in my study who, while wanting to be recognised, also desired the kind of ‘normal’ life that could be undercut by openly affirming their sexual identity. How do we account for the ambivalences in people’s experiences and narratives *vis à vis* a discourse that places recognition as an unquestionable goal? How else might it be possible to understand the notion of recognition?

Focusing on a window of time where same-sex sexualities had been officially recognised for the first time, my material raises questions about how recognition and sexual identity are lived and experienced in practice in a period characterized simultaneously by high hopes and pervading insecurity. The period of time I focus on in this thesis is of particular salience because it represents a unique moment when, potentially, the effects of formal recognition could begin to be felt ‘on the ground’; so that the word of the Law could be turned into a change in social relations that could improve the daily lives of young queers, reduce the stigma surrounding homosexuality, solidifying the status of queer sexuality as an acceptable social identity too. The 2013 Supreme Court verdict marked

the (official) end of this short period of queer recognition; but in doing so it also made it into an exceptional fragment, the analysis of which sheds light on the precarious, the contingent, the ambivalent, as constitutive features of queer subjectivity.

The data from my fieldwork do not diminish the role and importance of achieving official recognition, but suggest a more complex scenario where recognition needs to be negotiated, acted upon, navigated in a number of different social and conceptual contexts, such as the law, the family, and social spaces. Not only do we need to pluralise the concept of recognition and see it as a set of ambivalent, contrasting, ambiguous and contingent practices that people employ as they navigate different social spaces; we also need to consider people's affective investments in the norms governing these spaces of recognition. As I suggest in this chapter, young queers' desire to be 'normal' must be taken into account for the effects it has on the overall process of recognition.

From the narratives of young queer people in Delhi, recognition is experienced as a set of practices and negotiations effected within relations of reciprocity in different spaces: the law, the family, and social networks. Recognition must be understood as a dynamic, and perpetually shifting, cluster of desires, expectations and demands, in which queer individuals invest in different and uneven ways in an effort to adjust asymmetrical relations of reciprocity with the people, groups and institutions with which they interact in their daily lives. My approach to the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity draws from the argument developed by Iris Marion Young (1997). According to Young, reciprocity is central to the project of developing relations based on moral respect, which is another word for recognition (Young 1997:351). However, Young argues that relations of reciprocity cannot be but asymmetrical, since it would be impossible for different subjects to assume other subjects' perspectives.

The asymmetry between different subjects is inevitable, since each individual carries 'a particular history and a social position' (Young 1997:341) which mark her/him as different. The inexhaustible difference between subjects cannot, and should not, be reduced or eliminated in an attempt to reach conditions of moral equality; indeed, such conditions of moral equality depend precisely on the recognition on the other's inalienable difference, and therefore, on the inalienable asymmetry between subjects. Young's perspective, however partially indebted to Emmanuel Lévinas (1998), does not completely espouse his notion of the radical alterity of the other (Lévinas 1991; see also Tatransky 2008),

arguing instead that there are similarities and commonalities between subjects, and that it is possible –and necessary - to take into account the other’s perspective, even though it is not possible to assume it for oneself (see also La Caze 2008). Asymmetrical reciprocity, based on the other’s irreducible difference and the fact that it is impossible to inhabit any other subject position than one’s own, engenders a degree of ‘moral humility’ (Young 1997:354) which is ultimately what permits recognition; a point developed by Judith Butler (2005) as well.

What is especially productive in Young’s argument about asymmetrical reciprocity for this study is Young’s open acknowledgment that the irreducible differences between subjects are not just a product of different individual backgrounds and histories, but originate from different positions of privilege or oppression. Both privilege and oppression are experienced in situated and relative terms, that is, in relations to someone else and in a specific socio-historical moment. For the protagonists of this thesis, queer sexuality is an element that places them at a disadvantage with respect to heterosexual people from a similar (middle class) background; queer sexuality increases the asymmetry, further skewing an already precarious balance. So while it might be impossible to imagine ethical relations of symmetrical reciprocity since irreducible subjective differences are always already present, it is understandable that young queers try to modulate the terms of their recognition in order to maintain reciprocal relations that, while asymmetrical, permit the development of ‘understanding across difference’ (Young 1997: 354).

In order to elaborate on this account of recognition, I draw from Lauren Berlant’s work on attachment, normativity and reciprocity (Berlant 2007, 2011). The approach suggested by Berlant is employed to critically engage with, and supplement, the theories of recognition and subject formation proposed by Nancy Fraser (1995, 1997, 2001) and Judith Butler (1997b, 2004b, 2015).

Recognition and reciprocity

Over the last ten or so years, a number of queer theorists and critical scholars have begun to uncover the problematic implications of an unquestioned acceptance of mainstream politics of recognition of queer

sexuality, exemplified in western contexts by issues such as same-sex marriage, adoption rights for same-sex couples, and a related range of equality policies (Binnie 2010; Duggan 2002, 2003; Franke 2006; McDermott 2011; Puar 2007; Richardson 2005). Lisa Duggan (2002, 2003) exposes the perils of a politics of recognition geared toward normalisation, claiming that it results in 'homonormativity', defined as 'politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2002: 179). The wide appeal of homonormativity not only in terms of equality policies but also in terms of global geopolitics has been explored by Jasbir Puar (2007, 2013), who argues that LGBTQ rights have been co-opted in the service of aggressive racialised nationalist ideologies, resulting in what she terms homonationalism (Puar 2007, 2013; see also Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010). A discursive correlate of the politics of homonormativity is the 'it gets better' narrative, popularised by a series of videos made in the aftermath of a spate of suicides of LGBTQ youth in the USA, where a number of queer-identified people shared their stories, encouraging LGBTQ youth facing harassment and bullying not to give up because 'it does indeed get better';³⁶ Puar (2012) criticises the narrative as a further move to weaken the radical potential of queer existence by urging young queers to 'fold [themselves] into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves' (Puar 2012: 151).

While these critiques have come disproportionately from Anglo-American contexts, recent works by queer scholars in the Global South have also begun to investigate the spread of homonormative ideas in non-western contexts (Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco 2013; Rahman 2014; Shah 2015; Stella 2015). For example, Niharika Banerjea and Debanuj Dasgupta (2013) contend that India might well have its own version of homonormative subject, represented by the urban, educated, upper middle class gay man who aspires to belong to the national and global community and to be socially accepted.³⁷ However, as Maria Do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2011) argue, to claim that certain queer subjects located in the Global South are being co-opted by homonormative tendencies risks ignoring not only the heterosexism to which sexual minorities are exposed, but also the complex and situated ways in which they articulate their demands for justice and recognition. These critical voices inform my discussion about recognition and queer

subjectivity because the people at the fore of my study belong to the urban upper-middle classes, and because their attitude toward being recognised is significantly informed by a desire for normalcy and a preference for harmonisation rather than oppositional confrontation (see Ghaziani 2011).

The work of Lauren Berlant (2007, 2011) offers an analytical perspective that can help us better understand how recognition is conceptualised by the young queers in my study, and how recognition can be thought of as an ‘object’ that circulates within relations of reciprocity. Berlant takes issue with what seems to be a puzzling dynamic in interpersonal and socio-political relations, namely how individuals come to desire a life lived according to norms that might eventually exclude, subordinate, and damage them. Berlant asks: ‘Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?’ (Berlant 2011:2).

Thus, she wants to analyse ‘social attachment in the context of structural inequality, to see if we might find better ways of understanding how it is that forms associated with ordinary violence remain desirable’ (Berlant 2007: 279). Her insight is relevant for my analysis because it provides a theoretical ground for understanding why young queers displayed a conflicted, sometimes even reticent, disposition toward the prospect, and the effects, of having their sexual identity recognised socially.

While Berlant focuses specifically on marginalised subjectivities in western advanced neoliberal capitalism, her theorisation is applicable in the context of my research because the socio-political context in which young Indian queers find themselves is too characterised by a disjuncture between what is promised and what is experienced; the promise of a better life, achievable for queers after legal recognition, and a reality of continued stigmatisation (Goffman 1963). Yet this gap between projected outcomes and reality has the effect of reinforcing an attachment to precisely the forms, conditions and norms that keep marginalised subject at the margins (Berlant 2007). Far from seeing normative frames and values for what they are, i.e. mechanisms of exclusion, people at the margins actively desire to appropriate the realm of normativity or normalcy, which turns into an aspiration (Berlant 2007: 281). Furthermore, the kind of normativity or normalcy that marginal subjects

aspire to is not even really a very good life, but precarious, unstable, stressful; still, some people remain attached to this fantasy of a life that only exists in the imagination, and in a future that probably will never take place. Striving to comply with the norms promises not a life of fulfilment or ‘flourishing’ (Berlant 2011:1), but a life nonetheless, and it is in the power of the promise (see also Ahmed 2010) that norms exert their attraction on marginalised subjects. Berlant proposes a perspectival shift in how we understand norms, normativity and normalcy:

[Normativity is] something other than a congealed space of aspiration toward privilege. Rather, in my view, to understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, and that can best be tracked in terms of affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones (Berlant 2007: 278).

The recognition of queer sexuality can be seen as an object circulating in the affective transactions in which young queers engage; it is negotiated, modulated, at times swept aside. Rather than being the goal, or the end-result of these affective transactions, recognition then can be seen as an ambivalent object with the power to enable or disable both present and future conditions of social existence. In fact, Berlant is sceptical about the function of recognition, arguing that classing affective exchanges as instances of recognition might in fact hinder the project of achieving structural change:

Projects of compassionate recognition have enabled a habit of political obfuscation of the differences between emotional and material (legal, economic, and institutional) kinds of social reciprocity. Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity *are* necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means for making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theater of compassion is emotionally intense. Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end in itself, an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone’s intentions about maintaining political privilege (Berlant 2007: 294. Italics in the original).

Berlant identifies a trait that is apparent in my material, namely the idea that to achieve some form of intimate acknowledgment or acceptance (by

peers, by family members) would itself be tantamount to being recognised; the prospect of being able to experience that emotional event rendered all other claims, and specifically those of a political nature, secondary or even irrelevant. However, I do not see Berlant's critique of compassionate recognition as a dismissal: on the contrary, her scepticism can be a prompt to consider the reasons why people might invest more in emotionally intense experiences than in political action.

Recognition and redistribution

Berlant's conceptualisation of normativity and recognition can be brought into dialogue with the theory of recognition and social justice developed by Nancy Fraser (1997, 2001). There are relevant similarities in Fraser's and Berlant's overarching concerns: both seek to highlight the role that politics and economics have in creating inequalities and exclusions, and both agree that social justice would require a radical restructuring of both the economic and cultural relations of power that shape contemporary society. Their arguments however rest on different assumptions about the conditions of possibility for marginalised subjects. Fraser's theory is worth considering in my own analysis in that it unequivocally frames the stigmatisation of LGBTQ people as an issue of injustice. It also offers a framework for understanding the contestations over sexual minority rights that have characterized the public and legal sphere in recent years in India, a dimension that cannot be separated from the individual experiences of participants and that constitutes the discursive backdrop in which their expectations, fears and hopes could arise.

Nancy Fraser understands recognition as 'participatory parity' (Fraser 2001:25) and highlights the political and social dimensions of recognition, focusing extensively on forms of social injustice and their causes. According to Fraser, a critical approach to the issue of recognition needs to take into account the material inequalities that subtend patterns of social and economic injustice: a theory of recognition that disregards the economic and material disadvantages of large groups of people would not be 'adequate to the demands of our time' (Fraser 1997: 69). In order to develop a suitable theorisation of recognition, Fraser proposes a dual model, arguing that issues of cultural difference may be addressed by a

politics of recognition, while issues of social inequality need to be addressed by a politics of redistribution.

Redistribution concerns not only a revision of the allocation of material resources within society, but also, and more importantly, a revision of the norms and values that govern the ways in which resources are distributed. Recognition, on the other hand, deals with rectifying patterns of symbolic discrimination by working to change the negative values that are ascribed to certain individuals and groups. For Fraser, recognition measures would consist of 'upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups. It could also involve recognising and positively valorising cultural diversity. More radically still, it could involve the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change everybody's sense of self' (Fraser 1997: 73). Fraser acknowledges that, in practice, the demands for recognition and that for redistribution are inter-related, since cultural and economic discrimination feed off each other (Fraser 1997: 72); however, she maintains that it is necessary to analyse these two domains separately in order to better grasp not only the uniqueness of each, but the ways in which they intersect and produce complex matrixes of oppression.

What Fraser calls 'despised sexualities', i.e. gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people represent a group needing recognition, rather than redistribution. The reason for Fraser's attribution of LGBTQ discrimination to a lack of recognition, which has been criticised by Butler (1997a), lies in Fraser's conceptualisation of sexuality, which for Fraser is 'a mode of social differentiation whose roots do not lie in the political economy, as homosexuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society, occupy no distinctive position in the division of labour, and do not constitute an exploited class' (Fraser 1997: 77). Sexual minorities are discriminated against because of an 'unjust cultural-valuational structure' (Fraser 1997: 77). While they also suffer from socio-economic disadvantages, these are not directly related to issues of unfair redistribution (maldistribution). Hence, the remedy for sexual minorities would be a politics of recognition where their sexuality is recognised in its distinctiveness (Bosia 2014; Narrain and Bhan 2005; Waites 2009; Warner 2000).

Another reason why Fraser adopts a dualistic analytical model for understanding social injustice is that recognition and redistribution seem to respond to opposite claims. Individuals and groups demanding

recognition demand that their difference be acknowledged; individuals and groups demanding redistribution demand a diminution of group differentiation. Fraser makes an important contribution by showing how a just society needs to accommodate these two apparently opposite needs: the need for equality and the need to recognise difference. My material suggests that these two needs are often felt simultaneously by the same group of people, resulting in contradictory and even ambivalent dispositions toward the necessity of making demands for sexual recognition.

Where my data deviates from Fraser's theory is in the fact that young queer people in Delhi, while expressing distress about their inability to live as 'out' queers, did not want their sexual difference to stand out; indeed, they seemed caught in the paradox of wanting their sexuality to be recognised in such a way as to be as inconspicuous as that of their heterosexual peers. Moreover, my material indicates that these desires cannot be simply reduced to a dichotomy between a desire for difference versus a desire for sameness. Navigating a plurality of discursive and social contexts, young queer people had to calibrate the role of their sexuality vis-à-vis other expectations and demands borne out of the norms sustaining each context; but more than that, they displayed an active investment in trying to inhabit those norms, to make their queerness compatible with those norms. One could say that they were trying to find a way to be both queer and 'normal'.

If, following Fraser, the goal is changing the cultural-valuational structures that hold sexual minorities in a disadvantaged position, why are some people who should have a personal stake in effecting that change hesitant, or even unwilling, to work for it? The first objection to the view espoused by Fraser concerns her view of identity, as pointed out by Lisa Adkins (2002). To posit that a politics of recognition depends on a wide-reaching process of public rehabilitation of 'maligned groups' assumes first that sexual minorities unproblematically recognise themselves in specific identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and so on), and second that they crave and demand public recognition of those identities: something that, as even my research shows, is not necessarily the case. Such a politics of recognition would fail to include subjects who 'choose not to be made visible, who do not want to be recognised, and who disidentify with categories of identification' (Adkins 2002:34). In establishing a parallel between recognition and visibility, Fraser does not consider how other forms of recognition might be possible; moreover, reading Fraser through

Berlant's perspective, it can be argued that what counts as public, and hence visible, might take different forms, and that we must also attend to demands for recognition that are expressed in spurious, less than straightforward ways (see Hawley 2001; Oswin 2008, 2010; Phillips 2014; Schroeder 2012; Stella 2015; Tucker 2009; Yau 2010).

Berlant uses the expression 'intimate public' to refer to spaces where those who participate are expected to feel a sense of commonality, a set of shared experiences and 'fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacles that shape their historical conditions' (Berlant 2008:8); examples of intimate publics are women-only groups, and a variety of online forums (Duschinsky and Wilson 2014; Khoja-Mooji 2015; Moore et al. 2014). In privileging a commonality of feelings and life histories, intimate publics enable experiences of recognition and reflection based on 'affective identification among strangers' (Berlant 2008: viii). Berlant refers specifically to 'women's spaces' as intimate publics, but she argues that these are equally important for other marginalised people,³⁸ among whom sexual minorities. The young queers with whom I worked in Delhi placed great value in being able to communicate and share their lives and experiences among peers (see Chapter 7), thus experiencing moments of reciprocity (Young 1997) that they could not experience elsewhere. While seeking recognition in intimate publics lacks the political projectuality of influencing the public sphere, people's investment in these circumscribed spaces deserves attention, as it illuminates not only the complexity of recognition as a practice, but also the power relations that inform individuals' access to a variety of other spaces where their subjectivity is differentially acknowledged and/or constrained (Horton, Rydstrom and Tonini 2015).

Spaces of recognition

Within the realm of sexuality in India, there are multiple truths³⁹ that sustain the physical, social, and conceptual spaces in which queer people live: 'truths' about sexual identity inform the ways in which recognition can be sought and granted by the legal system, in social relations, in family relation, in cultural representations and in class politics. However, each of these spaces, as I will show, works according to certain norms that are not necessarily the same, or even compatible with one another.

Thus, for example, the legal understanding of a recognisable and recognised sexual subject does not correspond to the way in which that same subject will be recognised by her/his social network or the family. The possibilities and the demands afforded these normative spaces also need to be negotiated against the specific contextual circumstances in which people find themselves in daily life.

Consequently, individuals have to navigate between these normative spaces in order to live a 'liveable life', understood as the possibility for sexual minorities to live meaningfully despite the conventions and norms established by a heteronormative society (Butler 2004b). The needs to live, act, and engage in different social spaces and situations where queer sexuality is differentially acknowledged, invites a reconsidering of the category of sexuality as an identity marker (Connell 2014; Kulick 1998; Valocchi 2005). While the young people I met in Delhi did not question their own perception of being gay, lesbian, or queer, my material highlights a space of contradiction, ambiguity and ambivalence between the self-realisation of one's sexuality and the ways in which that sexuality was to be lived and recognised by others – be they individuals or institutions. Such a space of contradiction is illuminated by Stuart Hall (2011), who stresses how identities are always contested, and defines identity as:

[T]he meeting point, the point of suture, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which constructs us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall 2011:5-6).

Hall highlights how there needs to be an attachment on the part of the subject, an active investment in the positions that the subject is called to occupy, if we are to speak of 'identity'; however, according to him, these attachments are temporary and partial, since the subject needs to occupy different identity positions in different contexts (see Bradley 2015).

In the quest for interpersonal and social recognition, sexual identity needs to undergo a process of negotiation with other personal and social identities (see Jenkins 2014); this process of negotiation does not undermine the value people placed on their sexuality, but it sets it in a dynamic relation with other forms of attachments to other subject

positions, some of which are constructed by discourses that exclude or punish queerness (Bradley 2015). For example, in the case of family relations, participants felt that wanting to be a ‘good child’ - having an attachment to that subject position – clashed with wanting to be (and live as) queer, since queer sexuality compromised their ability as children to fulfil kinship duties such as continuing the family line (Carsten 2004; Göransson 2010; Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Tan 2011; Weston 1991).

For young queers, managing to keep these (and other) identities together was difficult, like trying to harmonise a set of incompatible subject positions, where if they managed to be recognised as queers, they felt as if they would lose the capacity to be also recognised as children. This widespread feeling of having to juggle different social identities that could not be recognised *together* calls us to further examine the norms that inform and steer recognition processes in various contexts and spaces.

The ambivalence of recognition

Judith Butler (1997b, 2004b, 2015) argues that an individual becomes a subject as a result of entering a relationship with manifestations of power. Power is what produces the subject in the first place, and the way in which power operates upon the subject, configuring the subject’s conditions of existence and her possibility to be recognised, depends on norms.

According to Butler, human beings may have a primordial desire for recognition, but even that desire depends on norms that are external to the subject, socially produced and changing. Hence, ‘to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognisably human and who does not’ (Butler 2004b: 2).

In Butler’s understanding, not only is recognition dependent on socially mandated norms, but these norms generally follow majoritarian values and hence, produce critical exclusions for minority groups. Yet, the demand for recognition operates through norms even when these norms are counter-majoritarian, as in the political mission of some Indian LGBTQ activists and thinkers: activist groups and other forms of collective organising for LGBTQ people often recognise their ideal

subject as an individual with clear political convictions, or particular backgrounds, or specific needs (Dutta 2012, 2013; Tellis 2012). People who fail to correspond to those models of recognisability, such as the people with whom I worked in Delhi, indicate that they sometimes feel misrecognised by the very institutions and communities that are supposed to support them in their daily struggles.

In trying to understand how recognition is subjected to norms, it is productive to view norms and their power as dynamic, relative constellations, keeping in mind that norms do not exist in isolation and do not contemplate an 'outside', a conceptual space where norms do not apply (Butler 2015; Wiegman and Wilson 2015). As Francois Ewald (1990) argues, a norm acquires meaning only in relation to another norm: different norms may follow different logics or warrant different values, but they obey to same organisational principle, which is to provide a common standard against which all members of a given group can measure themselves. Following this approach, we can begin to think about recognition and misrecognition as negotiable statuses, conceptually dependent on each other and, therefore, producing ambivalent attachments.

Drawing from Butler, Paddy McQueen (2015) argues that recognition can be conceptualised as a regulatory apparatus⁴⁰ whose processes take place within a matrix of norms that shape what is constituted as intelligible and recognisable. Any individual failing to conform to these established patterns of intelligibility will suffer from misrecognition to varying degrees. Yet, it does not follow that these individuals necessarily would desire to be recognised by people, groups or institutions, even though their social existence is closely tied to them. The 'unwelcome' result of desiring a recognition that is subjected to regulative norms is a social identity that will also be constrained by certain standards (McQueen 2015).

Therefore, one may wish not to be recognised, if recognition is seen as an imposition of prevailing norms that can be coercive. McQueen writes 'because all identities exert a normalizing and exclusionary pressure, our recognition of one another will be conducted within this matrix of power relations rather than offering the means by which they can be transcended. To be a socially recognisable entity is to be enmeshed by a regime of power that constitutes the terms through which the recognisable subject emerges' (McQueen 2015: 122).

In the approach developed by Butler and McQueen, misrecognition emerges not as the opposite of recognition, but as its constitutive other, given that processes of recognition work by excluding certain identities and individuals who do not fit within the terms set by a given recognition discourse. Misrecognition, in this view, is not merely the lack of recognition or an 'institutionalised relation of social subordination' (Fraser 2000: 113) that can be remedied by adjusting, or correcting, the way recognition is granted. Rather, misrecognition is always inherent to recognition itself: in the act of being included in a given category or social identity, an individual is called to exclude or disavow other categories pertaining to him or herself that do not 'fit', or that might compromise, complicate or 'muddle' his/her demand for recognition (McQueen 2015).

If we see misrecognition as an aspect of recognition rather than its opposite, recognition becomes an unstable category and an ambivalent concept. Moreover, misrecognition is not always already a negative consequence of a failed recognition process, but, as suggested by Butler and McQueen, it could be a strategy that individuals adopt in order to navigate the exclusionary trappings of different contexts and relations, and try to achieve a liveable life. In arguing this, I would emphasise that the strategy is contingent, as it is necessitated by a state of asymmetry (Young 1997) that forces the subject to enter a bargain with power. How can we conceptualize the possibilities of the subject who, at once, desires to be recognised but knows that the terms of recognition are ultimately exclusionary, as evident in my material?

Identity and subjectivity

Indian scholars working on non-heteronormative sexualities have highlighted the complexities and the ambiguities of cataloguing a range of sexual expressions under the rubric of identity (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007; Vanita 2002; Kapur 2009; Khanna 2007, 2009; Narrain and Bhan 2005). Whether they embrace terms such as queer in their political valence (Narrain and Bhan 2005), dispute the developmental rhetoric subtending the focus on identity (Khanna 2009), or prefer to speak of sexual minorities as 'sexual subalterns' (Kapur 2005, 2009), these scholars highlight how power formations such as patriarchy and

heteronormativity confine non-heterosexual sexualities to a subordinate position (see Menon 2007). Exploring the role of power in the process of subject formation is thus a central concern.

Within Butler's work on subjectivation (Butler 1997, 2004, 2015), the relationship between power and the subject is both productive and subordinating: the subject is produced by the very force that subordinates her. This implies that the subject is dependent on power for her own existence, even when that power exerts an oppressive force upon the subject. The possibility for the subject to resist power's subordinating force is thus constrained by the fact that resistance itself is made possible by power. The power that subordinates a subject is also partially assumed by that subject and may be employed by the subject to resist subordination. Butler writes: 'When conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but *in an ambivalent* way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination' (Butler 1997b: 13, italics added. See also Butler 2015). Power, in Butler's argument, is an ambivalent force, at once subordinating and producing means for resistance; and since the subject depends on power for her existence, ambivalence becomes a constitutive trait of the subject too:

If the subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of non-contradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were....In a sense, the subject cannot quell the ambivalence by which it is constituted (Butler 1997b: 17).

Within this framework, the subject is not understood as an autonomous, coherent and original agent, but rather as an unstable category. Michel Foucault (1980) has pointed out the need to reconsider the role of the subject, focusing not on finding a 'nature' or 'essence' of the subject itself, but on the processes that make people into subjects. Foucault noted: 'we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and material constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.' (Foucault 1980: 97). Indeed, for Foucault, the subject is not an individual, but 'a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals' (Foucault 1972:115). If individuals become subjects by taking up a certain position, configured and made available within the matrix of

power/discourse, how does this process happen? And how is it relevant for our understanding of the lives of young queer people in Delhi?

Butler uses the concept of interpellation⁴¹ to explore the instances where ‘the disciplinary production of the subject break[s] down’ (1997: 95). Interpellation refers to the process whereby an individual is called, or hailed, by a power authority, and responds to the hailing, thus becoming a subject. As Louis Althusser (1971) also noted, there is always the possibility that the person will fail to appropriately turn to the hailing for various reasons such as not hearing it, or thinking that it is directed at someone else, or mishearing it; in other words, as the interpellative act fails, the relationship between the individual and the power source becomes one of misrecognition. Butler sees in this a possibility for subversion, particularly in cases where the name that is called is a signifier that has several opposite meanings, such as ‘queer’. This insight is of particular relevance when it comes to the relation between India’s sexual minorities and the law, even though it is possible to conceptualize a plurality of hailing power sources who operate in different social contexts, inaugurating different spaces of recognition and misrecognition for sexual minorities. Who is calling that name? What is the intention of the power source calling that name? For individuals whose subject position is largely defined by ambivalent and partly injurious names, refusing recognition can be a conscious strategy enacted to remain unintelligible (Butler 2004b).

Another possibility for reworking the coercive force of subjectification is reappropriation, as the history of the term ‘queer’ indicates (Rand 2014);⁴² the injurious interpellation becomes a site for subversion, re-signification and empowerment. However, even by radically re-appropriating an injurious name and thus turning interpellation on its head, sexual minorities do maintain a relationship with the initial interpellating source and its injurious purpose. Butler argues that this relationship is inevitable: ‘Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially’ (Butler 1997b: 104).

The idea that injurious names such as ‘queer’ confer social existence, and that therefore we cannot reject them without rejecting our own existence, rests on a conception of subjectivity and recognition where norms and values pre-exist the individual. Identity, in this framework, can

be conferred through injury, and the co-presence of affirmative and injurious characteristics within certain identities, such as sexual minorities', illuminates a fundamental ambivalence that is experienced and enacted in multiple social contexts, as the experiences of young Indian queer people show.

In India, a large part of the debate on sexual minority rights has focused on the opposition between sexual identities and sexual acts. Since technically Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code only penalizes 'carnal acts against the order of nature', scholars, lawyers and LGBTQ activists have debated at length whether and to what extent sexual acts constitute someone's identity (see Narrain and Gupta 2011) and whether and to what extent the western identity categories that are generally used to indicate sexual minorities such as gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, transgender, intersex are applicable to India (Katyal 2011; Khan 2001; Khanna 2013). Delhi's young queer people referred to themselves as gay, lesbians or queer, and all of them placed a strong value on the fact of being able to call themselves gay, lesbian, or queer. In particular, the young participants to my study referred to the process of 'coming out' - that is, revealing one's sexuality to oneself and/or to others - as a fundamental stage in their lives. In several narratives, the personal realisation of one's sexuality ('coming out to myself') was followed by a desire to be recognised by the closest circle of people, meaning parents and siblings: but it did not go any further.

In the Indian context, my data suggests, the question of (sexual) identity, of which the 'coming out' moment is the epitome, materialises as a position taking shape at the intersection between subjective self-awareness and social interaction (Hall 2011; Jenkins 2014; Noble 2009). From this perspective, 'coming out' to oneself can be seen as an instance of interpellation into a relation of recognition: we can thus begin to see why the young queer people in my study saw the recognition of their sexual identity as a negotiable process imbued with ambiguities and ambivalences, as I will show in the following chapters.

In a way, by 'coming out' the subject is, at once, interpellating oneself and responding to a normative interpellation. The characteristic of interpellation is that it does not only name, or describe a pre-existing entity: it effectively produces it. Hence, in the act of 'coming out', the subject is inaugurating her own sexual subjectivity; but the available categories that the subject can occupy as identity positions such as gay, lesbian, and so on are themselves organised through norms which are

context-specific and, in the case of homosexuality, often steered by heteronormative presumptions. For instance, participants told me how they had no clear words to define what they felt, and only after reading about LGBTQ issues or seeing gay movies did they have a name for their sexuality. Coming out to oneself can thus be seen as a process inaugurated by a normative frame whereby an individual recognises herself in a subject identity, but that identity is framed in terms that the subject has not set herself but are structured by societal, political and cultural values that are highly contextual and specific.

Thus, the process of recognising oneself as queer (gay, lesbian and so on) is inevitably bound with the ways in which that identity position will be received (i.e. recognised/misrecognised) by others. In the very act of recognising oneself as queer, the subject is called to address the issue of the management of a host of relations of reciprocity. The contradictions, hesitations and ambiguities expressed by participants in regard to making a claim for their sexuality to be recognised in different social contexts are related to their awareness of the fact that, as queers, they would face a predominantly homophobic response. If the self-certainty with which they name their sexuality suggests that they have indeed invested in the ‘queer’ identity position, their articulation of that position is much more uncertain, since demanding to be recognised would allow them limited space for action, expose them, and especially force them to relinquish their attachments to other identity positions (and norms) which, paradoxically, enable them to demand to be recognised as queers in the first place.

The promise of normalcy

A limited but essential capacity for action illuminates the complex circumstances in which many young queer people in Delhi find themselves, and it also offers a potential entry into the ambiguity characterizing their efforts to be recognised. While Butler sees the possibility of resistance as being produced by an ‘inevitable attachment to existence’ (Butler 1997b:104) that compels the subject to accept the terms of subjection even when these only leave narrow possibilities for action and agency, she does not offer an explanation of how the ‘inevitable attachment to existence’ plays out.

In her recent work, Butler (2015) offers some developments to the idea that subjection to norms and their limitations to subjective freedom are the inevitable price to pay for acquiring an identity and securing an existence. Butler argues that norms act upon the subject by leaving impressions that ‘open up an affective register’ (Butler 2015:5). As subjects, we are formed by norms because we are already, and involuntarily, impressionable (2015:5) and dependent on both human and nonhuman others to survive (2015:7). The impressions that norms leave on us call us to respond to them, and it is in responding to what has affected us that we affirm our subjectivity: the relation between the subject and norms ‘cannot be easily denied’ without ‘destroying a social and relational world’ (Butler 2015: 12).

But what about the dynamics of the relation between the subject and the norms? Are the latter only to be accepted or resisted? Is the relation between the subject and normative impressions only one characterized by the binary logic of subordination and subversion? When young Indian queers decide to postpone telling their parents about their sexuality, or when they do not want to engage in LGBTQ activism, are they simply succumbing to the oppressive heteronormative order of society (Banerjee and Dasgupta 2013; Dutta 2012; Shah 2015)?

For my analysis, a productive way to explore the logic of people’s attachment to norms that are constraining is to supplement Butler’s (1997b; 2015) argument with Berlant’s (2007; 2011) insight on the productive power of the promise. Berlant takes issue with Butler’s take on the relationship between the subject and norms, arguing that Butler ‘reads normativity too narrowly as an authoritarian desire’ (Berlant 2007: 298) and thus ends up conflating a host of different concepts under the dichotomy subordination/subversion. Butler argues that our attachment to norms comes from childhood,⁴³ from a time when we are completely dependent on people, relations and circumstances that we have not chosen and that might even be ‘impoverished or abusive’ (Butler 2004a: 46) but they are the only ones through which we acquire a sense of ourselves - an identity; hence we grow up developing an ambivalent relation to norms and normative frames, where the eventual injustices caused by such norms are tolerated insofar as we feel that our identity is safe (Geertz 1973; Kulick 1997; Rydstrom 2003).

Such a framework could partially explain young queers’ docile dispositions towards values and practices that are informed by, and contribute to perpetuate, heteronormative structures, but it risks reducing

their complex negotiations to utilitarian strategies enacted to safeguard whatever gender, class, or caste-based privileges they enjoy. While Butler's framework is helpful to my analysis, there is one important dimension that can be better understood through Berlant's work: the orientation toward the future, and the fact that that future, as imagined by young queers, looks less like a rigid repetition of conditions already set from the beginning than a 'noncoherent cluster of desires for reciprocity, acknowledgment, or recognition, converging into a mirage of solidity' (Berlant 2007: 296).

The seductive power that norms exert on the subject is thus not only the power that oppresses or subordinates, but critically also the power that produces all sorts of positive returns in the form of promises.⁴⁴ As promises, the intimations of power demand affective investments of the part of the subject; they encourage fantasy, and for Berlant fantasy is what ultimately strengthens the subject's attachment to a normative life and turns normativity into an aspiration: 'For in order for normative conservatism to take hold in fantasy, or in order for fantasy to join ideology, somewhere in there the children learn to fantasize that the bad life that threatens impossibility or death *could* be a good life that must materialize from all this labor' (Berlant 2007: 292, italics in the original). Obviously, the 'normalcy' that the subject comes to aspire to will never really materialise, but for Berlant the point is not to experience material conditions that signify 'normalcy': what really matters is the *feeling*, which in the case of marginalised subjects, becomes a substitute for a reality that remains out of reach (see also Ahmed 2011).

The people at the fore of my study were mostly under 25 years of age, and the official status of their sexuality was, at the time of fieldwork, a recent conquest. It was a time marked by insecurity and possibility for LGBTQ people in India. The hesitations, contradictions and ambivalences expressed by young queer people in regards to their desire to be recognised, and their concomitant desires to continue to participate in relations of reciprocity emerge as expressions of multiple attachments to versions of themselves which have not been actualised yet (Berlant 2007; Yue 2016). Since it is their sexual orientation that casts them outside the realm of the (hetero)normal, turning normalcy into the promise of a feeling, recognition is then employed as an object that has to be adjusted to the multitude of affective transactions in which people invest to attain proximity, and a sense of belonging, to the worlds they wish to inhabit.

Chapter 4. Collecting data in Delhi

In this chapter, I outline the methods employed in my study. I choose two specific entry points that enable me to situate my research: first, the developments in the law regarding Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, regulating sexual practices ‘against the order of nature’; second, the perspectives, stories, and experiences of middle class young people (between 18 and 25 years old) living in Delhi, whom I interacted with and interviewed during several fieldwork periods spanning between 2009 and 2014. The first fieldwork period lasted from July 2009 to May 2010 and the second from February to late April 2012. In addition, I returned to Delhi for shorter visits both in 2013 and 2014 during which I reconnected with the people who participated in my study.

Methodologically, I move between data collected ethnographically, such as participant observation, online ethnography, and semi-structured interviews; legal documentation; and media texts. Court judgments provide a dynamic framework upon which I project the experiences of the people I have been working with and who became my research participants. A third discursive domain that intersects with both legal judgments and people’s lives is that of media; television, the Internet and print media have had a prime role in following the legal developments of Section 377, covering gay life issues, supporting decriminalisation and simultaneously constructing images about queer life in contemporary India. My study builds upon more than one periods of fieldwork and I use ethnographic data as well as textual analysis to focus on sexuality, even heterosexual, from different angles. I see this multiple approach as necessary to grasp the particular object of my research, since the different types of data I collected work as dynamic flows of ideas, practices and discourses that intersect at various points within the contested and unstable terrain of non-heteronormative sexuality in contemporary India (Amit 2000; Faubion and Marcus 2009).

The people who are in the fore of my research are not only gays and lesbians but also young people. I am speaking about a group of people between the ages of 18 and 25, belonging to the middle classes, living in Delhi, who are not married and who are either studying or in their first job after graduating. However, defining youth as a category is an uncertain enterprise. What it means to be young, and the value placed on the years between childhood and adulthood, varies greatly across societies and classes. Lenore Manderson and Pranee Liamputtong (2002), for example, note how relying on arbitrary age brackets alone does not make sense as a universal category, since young people in many countries, especially in the non-western part of the world, enter adulthood early, in terms of starting a family and joining the labour market. India is no exception: economically underprivileged and vulnerable groups tend to enter adulthood at a very early age, thus not having the opportunity to enjoy a 'careless' period of time where they can study, date, and so on before entering adulthood and the responsibilities with which it comes (Dyson 2008; Jeffrey 2010; see also Buchholtz 2002).

The data informing this thesis invite a definition of youth that takes class into account: it is not their age alone, nor the presence or absence of a partner or a job, but it is the social, economic and cultural capital derived from class status that allows the people in my study to do what they do and be considered 'young'. Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) introduces the concept of 'emerging adulthood', which refers to a period between the ages of 18 and 25:

[D]istinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations. Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world- views. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course (Arnett 2000: 469).

Arnett's definition is useful as it captures the openness and uncertainty that characterize several of the narratives I collected in the field; however, in my participants' stories, normative expectations and social roles play a significant role, creating a sharp contrast with the many

desires and aspirations young queer people had. The incomplete applicability of Arnett's otherwise illuminating definition to my data indicates that any attempt to define 'youth' consistently must take into account the specificities of the socio-cultural context under consideration.

Belonging to the urban middle classes, the young people at the fore of my study enjoy a position of relative advantage when it comes to social and economic opportunities; this is a central aspect for my research. I am interested in seeing how the regulation of sexual relationships, and the discourses on recognition as they are produced in different social spaces, are met and experienced by people who occupy relatively 'strong' positions from a socio-economic point of view, but are still limited by their young age and by the status of their self-ascribed sexual identity. The reason for this is that focusing on a 'privileged' group provides a nuanced understanding of how a socio-economic position that in today's India is associated with growth, progress, modernity and autonomy produces specific dispositions, hopes, and perceived risks with respect to the recognition of queer sexuality (Bhaviskar and Ray 2011; Mankekar 2015; Nisbett 2007).

Studying middle class 'privileged' minorities also informs my choice to examine English-language media texts, primarily. Although I speak Hindi at a conversational level and can read it, English-language media are particularly salient for this study as English is the language of the educated, urban upper-middle classes (Parameshwaran 1997; Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase 2011). Furthermore, the debates around alternative sexualities in India have found increasing popularity in mainstream English-language media over the last twenty years (Gopinath 2005); court judgments and legal commentary are in English; and the young people who are the main subjects of my research spoke mainly English with each other, using Hindi only for colloquial interjections, which I would understand.

Data collection and fieldwork consist of various methodologies and techniques, and I have first of all been observing participants in various locations in Delhi. While 'hanging around' (Lindquist 2009; Mellström 2003) offers insights about daily practices and routines of those studied and their environment, more systematized data collection methods add significant value (Rydstrom 2003, 2012, 2016). I thus conducted 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews totalling about 40 hours of recording. Out of the 35 interviews, six are with organisations/NGOs managers and professionals; the remaining 29 are with people aged from 16 to 30: 13

women, 15 men and one transgender person. All of the 29 research participants were either pursuing or had completed a university education. Those who had completed their studies were all in employment, both in the public sector (lecturers, researchers) and in the private sectors (IT engineering, media, marketing, and recruiting consultancies). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, then indexed and coded using qualitative analysis software (*Tams Analyzer*).

I also use material from the media; the material consists of about 300 articles (from newspapers, periodicals and selected websites) and 25 videos (news broadcasts, talk shows, and documentaries). Written material comes from the following publications: Daily newspapers: *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *the Deccan Herald*; Periodicals: *India Today*, *Outlook*, *Frontline*, *Open Magazine*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Tehelka*; Web magazines/Websites: *Pink Pages*, *Gaylaxy*. Videos are taken from NDTV and CNN-IBN, both 24/7 cable news channels; and *TimesNow*, a visual division of the *Times of India*. As for the material from Facebook, it is difficult to quantify the number of posts, pages and comments; using a temporal framework instead, I can say that I have been following the Niral Club Facebook page on a daily basis from the moment I got access to it (early 2012) to the end of 2014.

Since a central axis of my analysis departs from the struggle to decriminalise homosexual sexual activities, I also analyse legal documents and court material. Specifically, I deal with the Naz Petition (2001), the Voices against 377 Petition (2007), the High Court Judgment (2009), the transcription of the minutes of the Supreme Court hearings in 2012, the Supreme Court judgment (2013). All these documents are available online.⁴⁵ I will now turn to a discussion of the dispersed field I studied, followed by the various kinds of data gathered during the periods of fieldwork I carried out in Delhi.

Dispersion

Several events and circumstances connected to sexuality marked Delhi as the ideal macro-field site for my study: first, Delhi was the setting of the 2009 decriminalisation of sodomy, through the partial repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code; second, Delhi is also home to the Naz Foundation, the organisation spearheading the struggle for decriminalisation, as well as to several other NGOs and activist groups; third, Delhi has a problematic reputation in regards to matters of sexuality, gendered inequalities, and violence (Bhattacharya 2015; Marhia 2012; Puri 2006). Despite these meaningful reasons, when I arrived in Delhi in the first week of July 2009, I found myself starting my field diary by writing: ‘This place is *enormous*. Good luck finding informants, I get lost every five minutes!’

I had been traveling and even living in different parts of India for years, from my first exploratory trip across the country as an undergraduate student to the months I spent working in Tamil Nadu. But I had never been to Delhi, and the impact of my first days there, fighting the July heat in a city I did not know, disoriented me. In the first days, as I made unsuccessful attempts to reach places and people, I constantly drew nostalgic comparisons with the other cities I had learned to know: Bombay, Bangalore, the quiet idyll of Pondicherry.⁴⁶

Not only was the city unknown to me; despite many years of involvement with India, I had never been there as a fieldworker. Aside from considerations about first-time fieldwork experiences the vastness of Delhi as a field setting invites a series of inter-related reflections on how to conduct ethnographic research in a dispersed setting (Faubion and Marcus 2009; Pollard 2009). In the following sections, I tie together the different dimensions that dispersion encompasses in my study: from the temporal (separate fieldwork periods), to the spatial/geographical (the metropolis as field), to the human (locating informants), to the digital (using social media). I propose that using a multi-sited approach where the researcher enters a dynamic relationship with the field is a productive way to tackle the challenges that a dispersed set of fields entail.

A multi-sited approach

Ethnographic research relies on the researcher spending a consistent amount of time in one (or more) specific location, interacting with the locals in ways that go beyond the mere practice of interviewing a number of people. Hence, ‘being there’ (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009), plays a pivotal role in conducting ethnographic research. John Van Maanen (2011: 151), for instance, while not prescribing the precise duration of a ‘proper’ fieldwork, maintains that fieldwork should be ‘lengthy and sustained’. Fieldwork is a central method in the production of ethnographic research, as it offers an opportunity to interpret people’s lifeworlds and thereby provide a detailed in-depth account of daily life in a particular context precisely because it relies on the scholar’s participation in day-to-day routines (Atkinson 2015; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973; O’Reilly 2009; Willis and Trondman 2000).

However, just as the conditions of fieldwork have changed since the time of the foundational works of anthropologists such as Franz Boas (1962[1928]) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1978[1922]), so has the notion of what constitutes a field; scholars tend to agree that fields are never just found but constructed by the researcher, and that increasingly it is necessary to take into consideration the ‘virtual’ as well as the physical world as potential field sites (Amit 2000; Burrell 2009; Faubion and Marcus 2009; Kearney 2004; Miller and Slater 2000).

Understanding the need to pluralise the definition of what constitutes a field and the increasing importance of mobility across different locations (spatial, conceptual, social) as characteristics of contemporary, globalised times, George E. Marcus (1998) introduces the concept of multi-sited ethnography, defining it as follows:

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography (Marcus 1998: 90).

To do multi-sited ethnography would thus mean to follow the people, the thing, the metaphor, the story, the life, or the conflict (Marcus 1995). Marcus also argues that multi-sited ethnography is particularly suited for interdisciplinary arenas such as gender and feminist studies, since these

arenas acknowledge that any object of study is always ‘multiply produced’ (Marcus 1995:97; see also Kulick 1998; Melhuus, Mitchell and Wulf 2009).

My approach to investigating how young queer people navigate everyday spaces and how they try to be recognised as queers is inspired by Marcus’s insight, in that I move between different locations in order to trace and follow the various ways in which the meaning of sexuality is produced in different sites or domains. However, the multi-sitedness of my approach means that these locations are not only geographical (Datta 2012); while the specificity of Delhi is foregrounded as the main spatial site of my research, I take textual resources such as legal documents, media texts, and social media websites such as Facebook as equally important locations. Regarding locations as sites where discursive logics are produced, I also trace connections between local and global discourses that are not oppositional but rather feeding into each other. So, for instance, the language used in Supreme Court judgments is at the same time a product of global articulations of sexual rights and a manifestation of specifically Indian realities. Similarly, the use of a platform such as Facebook for sharing opinions and experiences about sexual identity in India points to a rich interconnection between local, national and supranational flows of information, media, and languages.

Temporality of fieldwork

As my data were collected over a span of time during a number of stays in Delhi, it is productive to reflect on the temporal dimension of fieldwork and on the strength of ‘being there’ at different times during critical moments in the history of LGBTQ people in India. In recent literature on ethnographic fieldwork (Davies and Spencer 2010; Falzon 2009; Faubion and Marcus 2009; Okely 2012; Pink 2009; Pole 2015), experienced ethnographers increasingly have begun to explore the advantages of new configurations of field research, which deviate from the classic anthropological paradigm advocated by Malinowski (one year in one place). Fieldwork is a method used increasingly beyond anthropology across the social sciences and has thus been taking new shapes (Essed, Goldberg and Kobayashi 2009; Hammersley and Aktinson 2007). James Faubion (2009), for instance, proposes that rather than

looking for fixed parameters for establishing whether a fieldwork period may be classed as adequate or not, the focus should be ‘the worthiness of [the research] question’ (Faubion 2009: 162) and on finding the most appropriate ways to answer that (or those) question(s).

Addressing my central research question about how the decriminalisation of same-sex sexualities was experienced by young queer people in Delhi has benefitted from a longitudinal approach to fieldwork. While in 2009/2010 I considered the issue of recognition primarily in terms of enthusiastic expectations, being able to go back a couple of years later allowed me to observe and listen to young queers’ experiences already marked by a degree of reflexivity with respect to the possibilities and limitations afforded by legal recognition.

Methodologically, the time gap between the two main periods of fieldwork also enabled me to narrow down the scope of my research from an initial concern with sexual minorities, broadly defined, to a small group of young people who were not part of the LGBTQ activist movement. The work of narrowing down the scope of my investigation was made possible through a multi-sited approach where I ‘followed the argument’ (Tomlinson 2011: 175) through its manifestations and articulations temporarily and spatially in the media, in political and legal developments, and in user-generated Internet platforms (blogs and social media). The period between 2010 and 2012 was marked by an increasing presence of LGBTQ-related issues in India’s socio-cultural landscape: from optimistic speculations about gay lifestyle in mainstream Hindi cinema (Henniker 2013), to artistic productions (Gulati 2011), to political controversies that sparked a strong response by LGBTQ activists.⁴⁷

Parallel to this was the question of the Supreme Court verdict, which had been anticipated and postponed several times. Eventually, the hearings at the Supreme Court began a few weeks after my return to Delhi in 2012, so that I was there at a critical time marked by instability, and oscillating feelings of hope and doubt. That these contrasting feelings became the primary focus of my analysis is also obviously an effect of the final verdict pronounced by the Supreme Court in December 2013, which came unexpectedly not only for the protagonists of this thesis, but for me as a researcher who had initially sought to provide a situated account of queer people’s lives after a major positive change that was imagined as permanent, but turned out not to be.

Not only was I dealing with a temporally dispersed fieldwork; the verdict had substantially changed the premises upon which I had built my

study (see Davies and Spencer 2010). I returned to Delhi in 2013 and 2014, for shorter stays where I reconnected with participants and tried to catch glimpses of what had changed since the re-criminalisation; but as much as I wanted to keep catching up, updating my findings, reaching out to more people, I had to confront the idea that my material would never be able to tell ‘the whole story’, since the story was in perpetual development. Aside from suggesting that fieldwork should be seen as only one ‘variable component of a broader process of research’ (2007:2), Marcus argues that incompleteness should be

[A] dimension of thinking about what can be said about what one has done. It is not about incompleteness in relation to the general and future unknown, but in relation to a design or research imaginary that has been thought through ethnographically but investigated only in part (e.g. the dissertation- phase of research that produces first projects). That partial knowledge, so to speak, which is the product of first fieldwork, is not partial in relation to some unknown or vaguely conceived larger whole [...] but to a known and carefully conceived incompleteness, a ground or terrain of possible ethnography that is deeply imagined as such and in terms of which the partial results of fieldwork are specifically argued (Marcus 2007:356; italics added).

Marcus’s argument reminds of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) and Donna Haraway’s call (Haraway 1988) for situated approaches to learning and knowledge, where the partial perspective adopted by the researcher needs not be a limitation to the relevance of the findings, but a strength, in that it allows for in-depth accounts of a specific social phenomenon. My multiple field trips to Delhi over the years provided me with multiple opportunities to unfold the situated dimensions of being queer, observing and registering changes and continuities in the socio-cultural construction and perception of same-sex relations (Donnan and Magowan 2010; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Ortner and Whitehead 1981).

Delhi: the metropolis as field

Conducting research in a large metropolitan area poses some challenges related to fieldwork practices, such as how to locate relevant sites, how to find and approach people, and more generally how to adapt one's expectations and research objectives to the urban environment (see Gmelch, Kemper and Zenner 2009; Kulick 1998; Leshkovich 2014; Rua and Torres 2012). There are aspects inherent in the practice of fieldwork, though, that I believe apply not only to urban settings, but are actually present in all ethnographic efforts and refer to the impossibility of observing everything, of being 'there' at all times, of knowing all about your research participants. Vered Amit (2000:14) raises the question about how to capture the social links, events, utterances that are irregular, ephemeral and episodic. Amit's questions are relevant in the context of my own ethnographic practice, particularly since I have been working within a dynamic field set in a large city, a field that was constituted each time I met my research participants, but that was never stable either spatially or temporally.

The mobility characterising a large metropolis makes ephemerality and volatility even more apparent, as even the geographical settings kept changing (Jensen 2009; Roy and Ong 2011; Verma et al. 2015). I tried to construct my fields by trying to show up at places where I knew that the people I wanted to interact with would meet: a café, someone's house, a lecture hall, the college campus. But their 'field', that is, the space where they interacted, was necessarily much bigger: how, then, to try to capture the 'episodic, occasional, partial and ephemeral social links' (Amit 2000:14) that are hardly observable when one is studying a diverse and dispersed group characterised by 'common social conditions' (Amit 2000:14) and only sporadic collective arrangements? Anthropologist Marc Anthony Falzon has argued that when the ethnographic field site is dispersed and contingent, the meaning and practice of participant observation must be rethought because:

If our object is mobile and/or spatially dispersed, being likewise surely becomes a form of participant observation [...] and, if conventional depth is hard to come by in unsettled circumstances, that is probably as things should be, in the sense that it represents the way our people themselves experience the world (Falzon 2009: 9).

As a researcher whose potential field extended for about 30 km from Jahangirpuri to the Kutub Minar,⁴⁸ the spatial knowledge I gathered was always also connected to the people I was meeting or the events I was attending; and the time-consuming, trial-and-error trips I took almost daily were attempts to construct, define, delineate fields in a dispersed context (Amit 2000; Burrell 2009; Ocejo 2012). Understanding the spatiality of the city also helped me understand the specific demands that a place such as Delhi exerted on young people trying to get to a Niral Club meeting on a Sunday afternoon and be back home in time to avoid being questioned by parents. By retracing the routes taken by my participants, or following them not only in the sense of observing their actions but actually travelling with them across Delhi, I felt I could get an understanding of the ‘broader but possible “shallower” world’ (Falzon 2009:9) they inhabited; the ‘shallowness’, though, needs not be thought as irrelevant spatial white noise, but as a constant daily component of the lives of urban young people.

Spending cumulatively more than a year in Delhi, I also learnt how different city neighbourhoods enforced particular gender norms upon various groups or populations (Bell, Caplan and Karim 1993; Datta 2012; Doan 2010; Kulick and Willson 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). This knowledge, hard to describe in general terms because it is practiced rather than talked about, gave me at least a hint of understanding into the spatial practices of my research informants, and into the specifics of Delhi life that are not immediately generalisable to other cities. One example is the metro: far from being only a means of transportation, the metro is used as a social space for flirting, getting some privacy, experiencing the relief of anonymity. Another way in which my knowledge of Delhi enabled me to make sense of people’s experiences relates to the darker side of sexuality in the city, namely the ways gender affects and organises space in a way that puts women in a dangerous position (Willson 1995).

The frequent instances of ‘eve teasing’, an expression that refers to various modes of sexual harassment (from staring to groping to actual assault; see Rogers 2008) made me more aware of and more attentive to the unwritten gendered power imbalances permeating the city space: where to go, where not to go, how to speak to whom, how to walk. These were not just tactics adopted for my own safety’s sake, but were more a kind of knowledge that I shared with the women that were part of my research; their stories about curfews, risky nights out, self-imposed

limitations acquired a certain familiarity. At the same time, I could contrast these women-centred experiences of the city space with those of gay men, who enjoyed significantly more spatial agency, but faced different sets of problems, such as the risk of violence while cruising in Delhi's Central Park. The knowledge gathered by living and moving around Delhi over more than a year was critical to understand how young people managed to navigate the space of the city and what meaningful spaces they constructed within it (Bhaviskar 2003; Vishwanath and Mehrotra 2007).

The following section deals with the relation between particular 'fields within the field' and the people I worked with during fieldwork. In introducing the protagonists of this thesis in relation to specific places, I want to highlight how sites, as spaces, are always socially produced (Lefebvre 2014 [1991]), only coming into being because of the presence of participants.

Meeting participants: on campus

During my first weeks of permanence in Delhi in 2009, which were also my first weeks of fieldwork, I spent a good amount of time sitting by a tea stall in one of Delhi's university campuses. On campus, there was a canteen serving everything from omelettes to south Indian dishes, open from breakfast to late afternoon; and a tea stall right opposite the library's entrance, which was incredibly crowded at all times and especially when they had a fresh batch of *chai* (tea) to serve. Around the tea stall there were several high trees surrounded by circular stone benches; the trees provided some welcome shade in the hot days of July and they were also zones of relative privacy within the campus area. There were always couples or small groups of students sitting under the trees, immersed in deep conversation, reading books, holding hands, smoking cigarettes - which they would not do outside the department buildings or in open spaces.

The tea stall was where all the students congregated between classes, sitting somewhere around it to chat about courses, teachers, and life in general. Yet, not all of them liked to hang around; some (invariably females) went straight into the classroom and waited for the lecture to start. Amit (21 years old) was one of the first people to introduce himself

to me and ask me questions about my life; he liked to party and meet new people, and he liked to hook up with Westerners because, as he said, they were less uptight and more ‘crazy’ than his Indian peers. Amit was a charismatic person; he always hung out with a small group of five-six other students who would later become my closest research participants and friends. Once he befriended me, it became much easier to talk to them as well.

And so I got to know Yash (20), the student who did not mind showing up unprepared for classes but always had a good story to tell about his hostel roommates; Rohit (21), gently mocked by his classmates because he was from the south and very kind, with a passion for rock music; Pankaj (22) ‘the atheist among us’ (Amit’s definition), a dedicated student with whom I spend many hours discussing our lives and plans for the future; Aditi, who wanted to know everything about my married life and long-distance relationships because her boyfriend lived abroad; Ratna, a petite spirited 23 year-old woman with remarkable deadpan humour; and Esha, 22, the daughter of an army officer, taller than most other students and often silent, often rolling her cigarettes while we talked. These were some of the people around whom my life and my fieldwork revolved during my first months in Delhi. Some of them became ‘key informants’ (Atkinson 2015; Bernard 2006; Creswell 2013; O’Reilly 2009; Robben and Sluka 2012); not only agreeing to being interviewed but sharing many other conversations and situations with me over the months I spent in Delhi.

The campus was a privileged vantage point from which to observe how gender relations were structured, how students challenged existing norms and what place gender and sexuality had in people’s socializing practices. The life on campus was to some extent a space of possibilities. Students were actively involved in initiatives to make the campus area a better place for both female and male students: they organised a campaign against sexual harassment on campus; they organised meetings and discussions about the consequences of ‘ragging’ (bullying directed towards first year students, often taking the form of unpleasant and humiliating pranks with sexual undertones, sometimes even including violence and physical torture. Ragging is officially prohibited but it still takes place as it is seen as a kind of initiation ritual). Sexuality and gender were not only discussed as issues affecting students’ safety and wellbeing; the campus was also a place that stimulated young people’s romantic and sexual desires, although signs of flirting or romance were

scarcely visible on the premises. It was only on weekends, at house parties or nights out in the city, that young people let go of their 'good student' behaviour and engaged in dancing, drinking and intimate encounters.

Queerness was not immediately visible on campuses, yet it would not be accurate to depict all campuses as enforcing the same kind of heteronormative⁴⁹ control on queer students. In particular, young queer people often talked about other campuses than their own as good places to hang out for a date. Rohit, for example, talked about the vast campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (known as JNU) as the perfect place to get some privacy with his boyfriend; but Lalit, a former JNU student, thought it was 'extremely unsafe' as he was afraid to be seen by fellow students while engaging in 'inappropriate' behaviour which could lead to bullying and threats. For some the university campus was a 'big closet', as Pavan, a 21-year-old engineering student, told me one day when we met at Delhi University's north campus. Pavan liked to visit other campuses – particularly liberal arts colleges - in his free time to meet friends and just hang out because he found the atmosphere less oppressive and 'square' than that of his own college.

The ambiguous status of campuses as sites of temporary queer presence also meant that in my fieldwork they worked as convenient places where I would meet people only to go somewhere else. Interviews were rarely conducted on campus; hence I met Anil and Salman (20 and 21 years old) in a crowded neighbourhood next to the campus, very popular as a student hangout; Sheila (24 years old) took me on a tour of a Tibetan refugee enclave, where we ate and afterwards sat on a bench in front of the Buddhist temple; Ratna invited me to her apartment so I could also meet her roommates; other times I conducted interviews in shopping malls, bars, or parks around the city.

Meeting participants: LGBTQ organisations

While campuses remained a meeting point, I relied on a network of organisations working with LGBTQ and sexuality-related issues. I contacted three organisations, namely the Naz Foundation (hereafter Naz), TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) and Nigah. Naz is a well-established Non Governmental Organisation

(NGO) working with several issues connected to sexual health and marginalised populations. Naz also had a central role to play with respect to LGBTQ rights, as it had initiated the petition that led to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2009. TARSHI is an NGO working mainly with issues of sex education and sexual health. They publish books and manuals for teachers, students and parents; they conduct workshops on sexual rights and equality across India and collaborate with similar organisation in South East Asia. As for Nigah, it is a queer collective whose members are mostly engaged in cultural production such as plays, film, art exhibitions and performances. Naz and TARSHI differ from Nigah in that they have an organisational structure, defined programs and publications, while Nigah is an unfunded activist collective.

During my meeting at Naz, I had also been given the phone number to reach Sangini, an NGO working specifically with lesbians, providing support and shelter, which I incorporated in my sample. Sangini was headquartered in a house in a residential neighbourhood of south Delhi and run by two women who have been active within the feminist and lesbian movement for several years. Being able to speak to several founders and administrators of active organisations was a valuable tool to assess what kinds of issues they were addressing and how they resonated with the people at the receiving end.

However, the sheer range of activities in which these organisations were involved, and the people with whom (or for whom) they worked, meant that once again, I was faced with the issue of dispersion, in this case, a dispersed 'research subject'. How would the narratives and experiences of middle class women living in temporary shelters be integrated with those of lower-class *kothis*?⁵⁰ And how would these personal narratives resonate with the lives of the students I spent time with on campus?

The Niral Club and its members

I had found out about the Niral Club through a web-based queer magazine called *Pink Pages*, which I consulted regularly for updates on various issues of relevance for LGBTQ communities in India. The Niral Club was a non-funded grassroots queer collective run by volunteers and

based in Delhi; their main activity consisted of weekly meetings where they offered a space to meet new people and discuss all sorts of issues related to young queer life. They had formed in 2010 and for the first months they didn't have a regular place to meet. By the beginning of 2012, they hosted their meetings at a place called Jhansi Centre.

The Jhansi Centre, funded by Naz, was located in a South Delhi neighbourhood famous for its big market; one could easily reach the centre from the nearby metro station. An inconspicuous black iron door opening onto a quiet back alley led to a basement, the centre itself. The door had no signs except two telephone numbers and a note in Hindi inviting visitors to ring the bell. The basement consisted of an L-shaped space divided by a panel at the back: behind the panel were six computer desks; the room functioned as a small office and Internet café. The front of the room was occupied by two sofas and some chairs, three tables, a small kitchen top with a fridge, and a hairdresser's station (chair, full length mirror, and various equipment). Another room opened three steps down to the left: that was the cinema/dancehall/meeting room. The centre's walls were painted in various colours and had posters hung on the walls. When I reached the Jhansi Centre to attend my first Niral Club meeting, early on a Sunday afternoon, the basement was starting to fill up. A skinny young man who introduced himself as Akash led me in and had me sit on one of the sofas, then returned to the hairdressing corner where he was applying make-up to a *kothi*. There were five of them, all young – I estimated they were all below 30. They chatted animatedly in Hindi and all seemed to know each other. Other people (young men, young women, and other *kothis*) were arriving, and soon the sofas were full.

I had barely had time to introduce myself, yet no one was paying attention to me. After some time, a few young women walked in. One of them came and shook my hand: she was Shobha, the organiser. Today's meeting was only for women, she explained. With her were two other girls, Sanya and Prakriti. We quickly moved to the meeting room, sat on the chairs and beds in circle and started off with a round of introductions. Three other young women arrived soon after. Among other things, that day we discuss the meaning of queer, the meaning of femininity, issues of violence and safety for women in Delhi, relationship with family members. Even though my position as a researcher was explicit, by being in the meeting I was also called to participate actively rather than just sit

and listen. An excerpt from my field notes illustrates how a Niral Club meeting would typically begin:

We are sitting in a circle, some on wooden benches, others on rugs spread on the floor. Noticing my pregnant state, they have given me a *charpai* (a woven bedstead) so I can lie down in case I get tired. There are 18 other people in the room, which is dimly lit and cool. The walls are painted a deep shade of red, and a long mirror covers the wall at the back. Cushions lie scattered around, together with some feather boas. As the meeting begins, Harsh, who is leading the round of presentations, asks everyone to introduce him/herself and give a short explanation of why they are 'queer'. He does not explain what he means by queer, but people start right away. Some people say: 'I'm queer because I'm gay'. 'I'm queer because I don't fit in anywhere', says a young woman. Someone else talks about being queer as refusing to be identified with a sexual preference. When it's my turn to speak, I pass and gesture to the person on my left to continue, but Harsh insists that I speak too. Still, I hesitate, and he says: 'We can guess by looking at you that you probably had sex with a man, but if you chose to come here with that (indicating my belly) and all, there must be something queer in you too'. We all laugh.

The meeting with Shobha and the young women lasted about two hours, and afterwards we walked to the nearby market to have something to eat and talk. I learned that the Jhansi Centre was open every day from noon to 7 pm, so a couple of days later I went back; on weekdays, the centre functioned mostly as a drop-in place for *kothis* or LGBTQ people who sought directions to other organisations, such as Naz. Akash, who worked there every day as a counsellor, told me that Niral Club people tended to come in on weekends for their meetings, but since the people who ran the Club did so on a volunteer basis, they tended to show up at irregular times. That day, the activities consisted of hair and make-up sessions, dance, singing and social mingling. There were about twenty people, some of whom I recognised from my previous visit. A few of them disappeared into the other room and after a while came back wearing tight dresses and make-up; they played Hindi film songs and danced; they sat together, talking, flirting and arguing in accented Hindi.

The following Saturday I returned to the Jhansi Centre for my first 'general' meeting (open to men and women). After the round of introductions where I was welcomed as 'queer' by Harsh, I thought I should officially present myself in my professional capacity as a doctoral student conducting fieldwork on queer young people, coming from the

university of Lund, Sweden. The room burst into laughter again, and after a moment, I started laughing too. ‘Lund’, in Hindi, means ‘cock’ or ‘dick’. Someone commented something like ‘well, given that you study at the University of Cock, you are in the right place!’ From that moment on, I was officially introduced, and my hilarious institutional affiliation would never be forgotten by whoever was at that meeting. As well as coming from a funnily named university, I was also visibly pregnant, a circumstance that elicited many curious questions from the participants to the meeting; this fortuitous combination of factors would be my ‘visiting card’ for the months to come (see also Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; Davies and Spencer 2010).

This meeting did not have an agenda or theme. Prem, Alok and Harsh steered the discussion and seemed to be well known by the other participants. There were also a couple of people who had come for the first time. This time, only three girls, including Shobha, were present. The meeting continued for close to three hours and the discussion was lively, touching upon issues such as family problems, expectations about the Supreme Court hearings that were supposed to start within days, experiences of coming out to friends. After the meeting, I introduced myself again to Prem, Alok and Harsh, who had acted as chairs during the meeting, and I asked if I could interview them.

I left the meeting full of positive impressions. Niral Club was as an ideal group to follow more closely: its members were young, and this would allow better integration with my previous set of data; also, the purpose of the group was to be a forum for support, discussion and friendship. The type of sociality that was encouraged during the meetings, and the broad range of topics covered, suggested the possibility of investigating personal stories and daily life experiences as central aspects of the construction of sexuality and the quest for recognition. The existence of a place like the Jhansi Centre constituted a great advantage as well, because I could use it as my core field site for observations and as a meeting place.

Dispersion: losing a field site

A few days later, I went back to the Jhansi Centre, but there was a new sign on the door saying that the centre was closed. I hadn’t met the people

from the Niral Club more than a few times, and only had a couple of phone numbers. I called Prem, who had no idea about what had happened. We started a chain of phone calls between Prem, Nikhil, Harsh and Alok, and they promised to let me know what had happened as soon as they could talk to someone. The exact circumstances of the closure were never certain, but various rumours circulated about someone having complained about the 'inappropriate' activities that went on at the Jhansi centre. The closure was a setback for the various people who frequented the centre - and even for my research. Where would people meet now? Where was I to meet people now? During the two meetings I had attended, several people had pointed out how difficult it was to find suitable queer spaces in Delhi, and how great it was to finally have a place to be. Some of the centre's activities would later be relocated to Naz's headquarters, such as counselling sessions; but what the closure meant was that Niral Club and other groups had to seek other venues to continue to meet. What I had optimistically constructed as my primary field site had become dispersed and mobile (Coffey 1999; Faubion and Marcus 2009; Utas 2004).

Obtaining the permission to use a privately or publicly owned space for meetings or regular activities can be a long process in Delhi. Since Niral Club was a volunteer-run, non-funded collective, the organisers decided to meet at a café in central Delhi instead. They chose a historic venue, which was already used as a meeting place for intellectuals and dissidents before India's independence; the place has preserved its frugal furnishings and prices are very cheap. Beside the indoor saloon, there is a large roof terrace, which is where we normally sat. The café is by no means trendy or modern, but it is very popular and has a mixed clientele; no one paid attention to our large group occupying three or more tables, even when some members showed up in conspicuous outfits.

Still, the comfort and privacy afforded by the centre was gone; plus, we couldn't book tables and at times the café was full. Sitting in a café also meant that people tended to come and go, rather than stay for the whole planned duration of the meeting. Using the café was a clever and quick solution, but it wasn't ideal and did not allow for other group activities. A couple of times the organisers managed to book a space in other cultural centres such as the Max Mueller Bhavan or the India International Centre.⁵¹ The fact that the location of the meetings wasn't fixed generated some dispersal and the number of participants varied from time to time.

Gathering insights: interviews

How does one observe the ways in which young people negotiate their sexuality in everyday life, when there is no single location from which to carry out observations and when social norms discourage the open expression of sexual desires and queer sexual identities? In my fieldwork, the combined effects of spatial and human dispersion, plus the contested status of non-heteronormative sexuality, meant that I needed to supplement ethnographic observations with personal narratives (Atkinson 2015; Bernard 2006; Creswell 2013). For both my fieldwork periods, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather information about a number of broad themes such as homophobia and discrimination; safety and danger in Delhi; dating practices; romance and love; coming out; the relationship with parents and other family members; changes brought by the decriminalisation; marriage (straight and gay).

At the same time, I was keen on knowing more about the concerns of participants and thus I invited them to share their thoughts regardless of whether these would fit with a predefined interview guide (see also Davies and Spencer 2010; Pink 2015; Robben and Sluka 2012; Silverman 2010). Interviews provided an excellent methodological means for my study because they offered an opportunity for the interviewees to narrate their wishes, concerns, problems and dreams for the future, the gathering of which was critical for my research (Atkinson 2015; Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Levy and Hollan 2015). Letting people construct their own narrative and perspective, albeit within a loose thematic frame, enriched my data with details, memories, and stories that helped delineate a subjective background in which to situate issues of sexuality.

Whereas in 2009/2010 I had had a large amount of time to get to know the people who became my participants, in 2012 I relied on the weekly meetings and on the Facebook activity to get to know people and try to reach out to possible participants. Prem was the first person I interviewed and in many ways he became my 'key informant' (Atkinson and Creswell 2013; Lindquist 2009; Okely 2012; O'Reilly 2009; Robben and Sluka 2012), introducing me to other people and letting me know about parties and other casual occasions where young queers would meet. Prem was 31 years old, like me at the time; he was glad to find out and proposed that the two of us could be 'the moral guardians disciplining the unruly young bunch', as he put it. Although he wasn't connected to activist circles, nor

was he one of the founders of Niral Club, Prem was very engaged in the activities of the group and liked to provide advice and guidance to younger members. Prem was out to his parents, who had accepted his sexuality and were happy to let the basement of their imposing four-storey house be used by Niral Club people for partying.

Prem's number one 'sparring partner' was Varun, the youngest of the group. When we met she had just turned sixteen; at the time she was going through a Goth phase, sporting a green sloppy Mohican (later it would turn orange, then blue), spiky boots and torn black t-shirts and jeans. Varun loved to provoke; she loved talking about sex and swore eloquently. Prem tried to dampen Varun's outrageous statements, and Varun would retort with mean one-liners pointing at Prem's boringness. These exchanges were made in jest and between the lines I could detect the deep affection and friendship that united them.

After my first interviews with Prem, Harsh (21) and Alok (22), I tried to schedule interviews between meetings. The regularity of the meetings had several advantages from the point of view of data collection: it allowed me to 'touch base' with the group as a collective; it worked to balance and contrast the data I was gathering through the individual interviews; finally, talking about the latest Niral Club meeting was a productive way to break the ice and ease both participants and myself into the interview, since all the people who became my project participants gravitated to different degrees around Niral Club.

Despite the wide availability of potential interviewees, and their generally positive attitude to my presence, I chose to interview people whom I met more than once, both at the meetings and in other occasions (such as Prem's house parties). When new people showed up for a Niral Club meeting and shared a difficult story about being kicked out by the parents, or suicidal thoughts, which happened often, I chose not to pry into their life further and only noted down their stories as field-notes. I was particularly interested in narratives about experiencing being gay and young in contemporary Delhi, although at times the order of topics to be addressed in the interview was partially abandoned to make room for a freer, more unstructured conversation (Bernard 2006:206; Okely 2012; Pink 2015). People like Varun had no problem entering into detailed descriptions of her sexual experiences; others, like Nikhil (20), would prefer to talk about his dream wedding. I always let participants chose the time and place for an interviews, and often they tried to fit that time with

their busy schedules as students or workers. Interviews were conducted all around Delhi, often in places such as cafes, bookstores or parks.

Logging on the field: Facebook

If adopting a multi-sited approach means choosing to follow the spatial and conceptual trajectories of an argument, an object, or people, in my case a significant help came from social media (Marcus 1995; Melhuus 2009). My initial anxiety about having lost a secure and stable field was soothed when Alok told me to sign in to a Facebook group where Niral Club members shared information about future meetings, other activities and the likes. The group has been growing exponentially, and as of 2015 has more than 900 members from India and abroad. The secret group⁵² was also a discussion platform where people could ask questions, share stories and opinions, ask for advice. It also functioned as a way to publicize Niral Club's activities and invite people to participate to the meetings.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2011) has discussed how Facebook changes people's ways of communicating, and in particular he points to the fact that Facebook has revived the 'community' as a central social entity (see also Parks 2011). This was exactly how the Facebook group functioned. Members would often express delight at having found a community of like-minded people, and displayed a high level of trust in the medium by posting sensitive and intimate issues, as well as coming out stories or examples of homophobia they experienced in their daily lives. Each time I logged on the page, I would find several new posts by members; often there would be more than twenty new posts in a space of only a few hours on the same day. Given the frequency with which members posted on the group and the engagement and liveliness of the discussions that ensued from most postings, I would consider Facebook as another kind of social space or 'field' experienced, as anthropologist Mary Gray phrases it, 'as one among several ephemeral moments of public space and belonging' (Gray 2009:15).

As soon as Alok, who acted as administrator for the page, had approved my request for joining, I introduced myself to the group, so members knew about who I was and about my research. I intervened in some threads and commented on issues that I thought interesting. I also

became 'Facebook friend' with several members – some I had met also offline, some not – so that they could access my Facebook profile, seeing and commenting on other things I posted, like photos or status updates. Jennifer Reich (2015) describes the ethical and methodological implications of conducting qualitative research on social media. Although she values Facebook as a tool to approach informants, in her own research she refrained from becoming 'friends' with them so as not to obfuscate her primary objective, which was research (Reich 2015: 399). Although I acknowledge Reich's concerns about maintaining boundaries, for me 'friending' some participants on Facebook was a way to allow them to get to know parts of my life that would perhaps not come up in interviews and conversation otherwise and to facilitate the building of rapport in conditions of geographical and human dispersion (Okely 2012; O'Reilly 2012; Pink 2015). Seeing Facebook as a field enabling several levels of participation, activity, and identity construction (boyd and Ellison 2008; Ellis 2010; Fox and Warber 2015), the choice to let participants peruse my photos or comment on a song I posted was also a way to present myself as transparently as possible and facilitate an informal approach.

Throughout my stay in Delhi, I followed the Facebook group news feed on an everyday basis and often found inspiration for future interviews and relevant issues by reading what the members were posting and discussing. This Facebook activity became a parallel way for me to conduct participant observation. Facebook did not substitute face-to-face social interaction: it compensated it (Miller 2011). In his study of young residents of Second Life,⁵³ Tom Boellstorff (2008) argues that the social interactions he observed while conducting his ethnography - based entirely in the virtual world of Second Life - were not much different from what one could observe in 'real' life. My material and experience confirm Boellstorff's findings: the exchanges and everyday interactions that took place through and within Facebook bore several similarities with those happening in 'offline' spaces: there was also a fluidity between online and offline interactions. During meetings, people would often refer to posts and discussions that had started on Facebook, and we would continue the debate; vice versa, if during a meeting someone raised a point that captured other people's attention, there would invariably be a continuation of the discussion online (Coleman 2010; Crawford 2009; Davies 2014).

There is another dimension that made Facebook another kind of field for my ethnographic research: as there was no fixed physical place where we could hang out after the closure of the Jhansi Centre, Facebook became that space. Sharing banter and jokes, not necessarily about being gay, was a way of socialising; for me as a researcher, it was a way to learn how people expressed themselves and how they formulated their opinions; I learned to tweak, adjust and direct my understanding of how they made sense of their sexual identity (see Favero 2005).

Despite the complementarity of Facebook *vis-à-vis* physical interactions, there are differences between doing participant observation online and seeing people face-to-face: it is not possible to see people, study their body language, and so on. As Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor (2012) argue, what is required to make sense of material gathered while conducting online ethnography is the ability to understand and translate the particular language that the medium employs. Utterances come in the form of written words, each sentence preceded by a beeping sound informing you that someone has commented on a thread. Yet, Facebook allows users to see, read, share and reply instantaneously; the speed with which a particularly interesting thread develops can be bewildering, very much resembling an animated face-to-face group discussion. People use ‘emoticons’ (that is, keyboard combinations such as “;”) which are then turned into anthropomorphic faces or other icons by the software) to emotionally charge what they are saying. Thus, the range of expressiveness afforded by a medium like Facebook lends itself to participant observation, albeit differently encoded. In addition, as a field, Facebook lends itself perfectly to the mobile lives of the urban, young Indian middle classes, as more and more people have smartphones connected to 3G networks, and can then access the site wherever they are (Baker 2013; Fox and Warber 2015).

Even though the words typed on a Facebook page are immediately stored by the company’s servers, so that nothing is ever lost and everything is potentially traceable, by observing the dynamics of the Niral Club Facebook group I would conclude that the constant flow of information, posts, and comments in the end becomes ephemeral. Many things are quickly read and quickly forgotten; people are most likely to read and intervene on only the latest topics. For a researcher, though, Facebook is a valuable tool, since it is possible to scroll back in time since the very beginning of a page. The Niral Club Facebook group was ‘closed’ and ‘secret’: within Facebook’s settings, this means that one has

to be admitted by an administrator, and neither the existence nor the content of the group are visible to other people outside of it. Hence, it cannot really be treated as ‘public’ information. Strictly speaking, however, whatever is posted on Facebook, belongs to Facebook: the company retains the right to review and act upon content that is considered inappropriate or offensive,⁵⁴ and it also keeps a record of whatever content is posted, even after a user deletes it. The issue of privacy on Facebook has been widely debated (see Stutzman, Gross and Acquisti 2013) since its founder Mark Zuckerberg declared that privacy was no longer a major concern for people⁵⁵, and has legal relevance too; in 2012, a US ruling declared that things posted on Facebook can be used as evidence in court.⁵⁶

Legal documents

Feminist scholarship, in India and elsewhere, has long acknowledged the law as one of the most contested domains where competing visions of recognition and gender are articulated (Fineman and Thomadsen 2013; Cossman 2004, 2007; Sunder Rajan 2003; Kapur 2005; Menon 2004). My research departs from the judgment delivered by the Delhi High Court on July 2, 2009 (*Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*), which declared part of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code unconstitutional as it infringed the constitutional rights of sexual minorities. The 2009 judgment remained the starting point for my interviews with young queers for discussing how decriminalisation had affected their lives. Taking the judgment as a watershed moment, my original plan was to investigate the ‘after’ of the new law and in so doing provide a counterpoint to the many works that had investigated the ‘before’ of the struggle for legal decriminalisation (Dave 2012, Kathyal 2011, Khanna 2011, Narrain and Bhan 2005, Menon 2007, Puri 2013).

The 2009 judgment had been immediately followed by several petitions by people opposing the legalisation of homosexuality, so that the matter passed to the Supreme Court which was expected to deliver its final verdict in 2012. The Supreme Court heard the petitioners in the spring of 2012, when I was in Delhi for my fieldwork. At the time, the judgment was expected to come soon, and there was much talk and trepidation among participants and LGBTQ activists alike. The judgment

was eventually delivered a year and a half later, on December 11, 2013: to everyone's surprise, the Supreme Court reverted the previous judgment, finding 'no constitutional fault' in Section 377 (*Suresh Kumar Koushal and Another v. NAZ Foundation and Others* 2013).

This unexpected development called for a thorough reconsideration of my study, and for an approach to the law as a dynamic force, producing official narratives that were shifting and changing over a short period of time. Indeed, the topic of sexuality has been conspicuously present in India's judicial practice over the last four years. Following the brutal group rape of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012, a special commission has been appointed to modify the sections of the Indian Penal Code dealing with sexual violence (Verma et al. 2013). The commission's recommendations were converted in record-speed into a series of changes to the Penal Code. Finally, in April 2014, the Supreme Court recognised the transgender community as a third gender, granting them the status of oppressed minority and acknowledging the systemic abuse they have suffered on the grounds of their 'unorthodox' gender identity (*National Legal Service Authority v. Union of India* 2014).

The court material that has been produced since 2009 in relation to sexuality is too significant to be treated only as a frame or a background. Instead, I see it as a discourse under perpetual configuration, vividly changing and developing before my eyes (Atkinson 2015; Pink 2015). For instance, while writing these lines, a curative petition contesting the Supreme Court judgment is being considered.⁵⁷ I conduct a comparative content analysis of the judgments, highlighting how the issues of rights, recognition and minority status have been interpreted.

Studying a vulnerable group

When I collected my data between 2009 and 2012, homosexuality was officially legal, but the Supreme Court judgment of December 2013 reversed the previous decision, re-instating Section 377 in its original form and re-criminalising sodomy, and by extension, homosexuality. Homophobia, bullying, sexual desires or relations that are met with societal disapproval are sensitive topics in research (Donnan and Magowan 2010; Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013); but when the people we work with are criminalised, it is imperative to be extremely vigilant about

their safety (see Parasuraman et al. 2009; Vanderstaay 2005; Watts 2008).

To the best of my knowledge, I have been careful to protect those with whom I have worked in my research. In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, all names have been changed. I have done this even though several of them were adamant that their real names be used. Yet, I deemed it would be safest to anonymise any individual who has been involved in my study unless it is an official representative who speaks on behalf of an organisation, for instance. Other details have been tweaked, such as the type of degree a person was pursuing, or the name of someone's hometown.

I also use pseudonyms for names of groups and organisations that are directly connected to participants: however, I choose to keep the real name of organisations such as Naz since my research does not focus directly on the work they do or on the people with whom they work. Preserving some real names of publicly recognised organisations is also a way to acknowledge the important role that these organisations have in fighting stigma, sexual harassment, and discrimination in India. Any naming strategy, however adopted for reasons of confidentiality, is ultimately vulnerable to a degree of ethical ambiguity, particularly in a time when the Internet makes searching for people, places, and facts, very easy and effective; keeping this in mind, my choices regarding the use of names aim at preserving the integrity of the local context while protecting the identities of the protagonists of this thesis (see Guenther 2009).

I only use the material I have gathered through Facebook in ways that do not expose the identity of participants. I only refer to content posted on the Niral Club Facebook page; I do not report direct quotes from Facebook verbatim as it could be possible to trace the authors; I summarise and re-phrase the content of discussions, threads and posts that I find relevant for my argument; the identity of all the people posting on Facebook is anonymised, and I do not use any information posted by members on their own Facebook profile page.

While there is a growing body of work dealing with Internet research, social media as a 'field', and its attendant methodological implications (e.g. Baker 2013; Consalvo and Ess 2011; Kozinets 2010; Postill 2008; Postill and Pink 2012), the ethical aspects of it, and in particular issues of privacy, confidentiality, consent and ownership are still contested, and there are no straightforward guidelines that guarantee a fully ethical research process. The problems with establishing a framework for ethical

research that is broad enough to encompass several disparate occasions are particularly evident when it comes to the Internet. Natasha Whiteman (2010), for instance, argues:

What are we doing when we make ethical decisions in research? Situated approaches to research ethics suggest that we not just complying with general principles or following pre-established procedures. Instead, researchers are faced with the challenge of making contextualized judgments about the best course of action that are anchored in the local contexts of research. This way of thinking about research ethics, although not unique to Internet research, has been influential in the responses of researchers to the challenges of online research practice – with a rejection of ‘one size fits all’ approaches to research ethics in favour of ethical decision-making that is ‘tailored’ to the diverse environments of the Internet (Whiteman 2010: 7).

These questions are not only of relevance for the study of Internet-related material, and I have been both anxious and vigilant when it comes to the ethical dimensions of my research. Following the legal travails of Section 377, both mainstream media and activists have been very vocal on the issue of LGBTQ recognition, putting queer people in the spotlight. While this attention has for the most part been benign and supportive, it nonetheless turned ‘gay issues’ into a hot topic. During my first meeting with Niral Club, where only women were present, I was not the only participant observer from abroad. Two other western women – a PhD student from Austria and a Master’s student from Belgium – were also in the room. On subsequent meetings and other occasions, I discussed this with a few Niral Club people.

Alok, the founder of the Niral Club, laughingly told me that there had been a lot of interest in studying young queers since the decriminalisation, and that researchers kept showing up now and then for Niral Club activities, so that people had gotten used to the presence of ‘goras’.⁵⁸ This provided food for thought as to what kind of relationship I would be able to build with participants (Atkinson 2015; Enguix 2014; Fine 1993), and in what ways the interpersonal dynamics between researcher and researched would be affected (Hume and Mulcock 2004; Miller, Strier and Pessach 2009; Rose 1997). In a way, as became evident during the course of my time with Niral Club members, the fact that they were used to being approached as ‘informants’ became itself a way to break the ice and build rapport (see Chege 2015; Riach 2009).

A month after I had arrived in Delhi for the second time, I attended a Niral Club workshop where all the participants were to work in groups, reflecting on what exclusion meant to them, and how it could be overcome. After working with the group, I sat down to take some notes while the twenty or so participants took a break. Suddenly a young man sat down beside me, introduced himself as Dhruv, and enthusiastically said to me: ‘I know you are interviewing people, and I’m gay, so I thought I’d ask you if you would like to talk to me too’. Pleasantly taken aback, I said yes, so he quickly gave me his phone number before going back to chat with some friends, saying ‘call me and let’s arrange to meet somewhere’. While not every participant was as direct and eager as Dhruv, participants generally responded positively to my presence and to my requests to interview them (see Davies and Spencer 2010; O’Reilly 2009; Robben and Sluka 2012).

However, the way Dhruv operated an inversion of the typical ethnographer’s approach by readily presenting himself as an available ‘informant’ and thus short-circuiting the process of recruitment (Atkinson 2015; Bernard 2006; O’Reilly 2009) raises important questions about the relationship between my position as a researcher and the ethical implications of conducting fieldwork among queer people. During a conversation on the Facebook page, for instance, Alok posted a request he had received from a group of researchers interested to meet ‘at least ten LGBT people’ for a small project about who gay people were and how they managed the challenges of being a sexual minority. Alok was angry, and resented the fact that LGBTQ people had become a ‘topic’. Several other people posted their comments, expressing frustration and irritation at the fact that the ‘gay community’ had become prey to the objectifying gaze of scholars and media practitioners.

Observing the exchange, I felt compelled to intervene in the discussion to ask what could be done to minimise the risk of objectifying research participants (Bhavnani 1994; Okely 2012; Pink 2009; Skeggs 2001). Many people fretted to tell me that they weren’t talking about me, and that the main problem was with journalists and what they called ‘demographers’ who were only after sensationalist answers and numbers to crunch. One person, though, answered that the best approach for a researcher would be something along the lines of: ‘Don’t pretend you care’, referring to the blurry lines between research objectives and ethical and personal concerns (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Lashaw 2013; Okely 2012; Ong and Collier 2005).

The ways in which a researcher's attempt to achieve a state of commonality and reciprocity with her participants can thus be perceived as fictional by some participants but also as real by others (Pole 2015; Robben and Sluka 2012; Visweswaran 1994). By keeping in touch with participants and considering my perspectives and understandings, I have tried to meet the critique that scholars might not care after the data have been gathered. The time I spent 'in the field' has not only been invaluable for collecting data for this study, but also to form close relationships with the protagonists of this thesis. These relationships have paved the way for friendships that are not only existing in the realm of the imaginary but in a realm founded on the premises of reciprocity and ethical commitment (Coffey 1999; Harding 1995; Huisman 2008; Okely 2012; Pink 2015).

Chapter 5: Revocable Recognition: queer sexuality and the law

This chapter traces the development of the case around Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code from 2009 onwards. I juxtapose the verdicts delivered by the Delhi High Court⁵⁹ and Supreme Court of India⁶⁰ with empirical data from the field and media texts, spanning a period of four years, between 2009 and 2014. The focus of this chapter is a contrasting analysis of the ways in which the law frames the issue of queer recognition *vis à vis* how young queers relate to the law as a normative frame with the power to enable and disable the recognition of sexual subjectivities. I show how this relation is characterised by fluctuating attachments that are emotional as well as political, and how recognition emerges as a deferred promise whose instability permeates the relationship between the law and the people whom the law targets.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has become the symbol of the battle for equality and recognition of sexual minorities in India: beyond its juridical value, it has over time acquired what anthropologist Akshay Khanna calls ‘multiple social lives’ (Khanna 2011: 175) and has become ‘a meaningful object [that] has given an intelligibility and a concreteness to experiences of exclusion, marginalization and violence experienced by Queer folk’ (Khanna 2011:175).

I approach the two judgments as dense legal and symbolic moments where the sexual subject has been recognised (by the High Court in 2009) and then misrecognised (in 2013 by the Supreme Court). The two judgments also constitute a methodological frame to my study, since I conducted most of my field research in the period in between, when homosexuality was taken off the list of ‘unnatural offences’ in the Penal Code, thus opening up new possibilities, hopes, and expectations for sexual minorities in India. The focus on this particular time frame enables

me to investigate the ways in which the possibility of recognition has been experienced in a time of precariousness and insecurity. While the 2013 Supreme Court judgment constitutes an act of misrecognition by the law, and thus marks the end of a brief time of queer recognition, the extent to which that recognition has always been precarious can be evinced in the ambiguous ways in which the young queers at the fore of my study make sense of their sexuality and try to negotiate it against a host of competing values in different social contexts, which I explore in other chapters.

The chapter proceeds as follows: I offer an account of the legal developments regarding Section 377 by focusing on how sexual subjectivity has been defined, recognised and misrecognised by the High Court and Supreme Court respectively. I pair my analysis of the legal documents with ethnographic material highlighting the reactions that the judgments generated among the people in my study and the Indian LGBTQ community at large.

Attachment to the law

The long and complex development of the struggle to repeal 377 and its outcomes has been widely discussed both by scholars (Baxi 2011, Narrain 2011, Kapur 2009, Puri 2013, 2014, Jindal *Global Law Review* 2013, 2014 to name a few) and in public discussions in the media. The significance of the two judgments goes beyond the contrasting interpretations of a penal code section to embrace issues of equality, rights, gender and sexuality, and the meaning of justice. The large number of texts, both academic and non-academic, that have been published (in print, television and online format) about Section 377 is itself indicative of the salience of the issue and of its wide appeal in terms of scholarly and public interest. The vast array of work, done both within academia and in activist and NGO circles, inspired by and directed against Section 377, is itself a sign of the power of the legal discourse to entice the imagination and mobilise people to make claims about citizenship, recognition and rights.

In the aftermath of the High Court judgment, only a minority of intellectual voices had raised their concerns with the position that the rule of law had come to occupy in regard to sexuality. Feminist legal scholar

Ratna Kapur (2009) invited academics and activists to reflect upon both ‘the strengths and the limitations of engaging with the legal system’ (Kapur 2009: 583). Queer activist and scholar Ashley Tellis (2012) asked why a movement known for its supposed radicalism had sought to be recognised by ‘the most conventional and normative institution’ (2012:150), warning that inscribing LGBTQ rights within a legal framework would result in an idea of queerness ‘damaged irreparably into domesticity’ (2012:151). By and large, however, the perceived importance of gaining recognition by an authority such as the law seemed self-evident; the media, activist groups, non governmental organisations and the majority of academics saw the decriminalisation of same-sex sexuality as a pivotal moment not only for sexual minorities, but for India as a whole. As Rahul Rao (2014) argues, the ‘queer question’ (i.e. the official status of queer minorities) has assumed a central role in dividing countries of the Global South into ‘locations of hope’ and ‘locations of phobia’ (Rao 2014:3).

The young Delhi queers with whom I worked had a particular relationship with the legal status of homosexuality, and with the impact of Section 377: they had not been subjected to the harmful implementations of Section 377 in terms of harassment and blackmail, abuse and violence; many of them did not know about the struggle to repeal Section 377 until after it happened in 2009. The legal victory in the High Court represented, for several people, not so much the culmination of years of activist organising and legal struggle as it had been for groups like Nigah (see Narrain and Gupta 2011; Dave 2010; Katyal 2011), or the symbolic end of years of abuse at the hands of authorities. Rather, the 2009 judgment was, for them, a generative moment, the beginning of their lives as sexual citizens (Richardson 2000: 87). This is because many of them were barely 18 years old in 2009, and thus had come of age as citizens (e.g. gaining the right to vote, reaching the age of consent for sex) as the very concept of citizenship, and the rights associated to it, had expanded to include sexual minorities. The regressive 2013 Supreme Court judgment represented for them a major and unexpected disappointment, and changed substantially they ways in which they viewed the power of the law to grant recognition and legitimacy to their social existence. As I will show in the following chapters, however, the recognition acquired in 2009 did not immediately result in a straightforward change in the way their sexuality affected their social life. Young queers had to navigate a host of different spaces, each with their

own set of norms, moralities, obligations and seductions; thus, to be misrecognised by the law was - at the risk of sounding reductive- only one of the many challenges they faced. What are the specificities of a sexual subject who is first recognised and then misrecognised by the same institution? When recognition becomes a revocable object, how do young queers inhabit their sexual identity *vis á vis* the power of the law?

Revocable recognition results in ambiguous and ambivalent dispositions in the relation between sexual identity and social interactions, but also between the sexual subject and the power authority (in this case, the law) that is supposed to grant her recognition. In other words, while revocable recognition generates insecurities that are observable in the daily life choices of the people in my study, it also results in a loosening of the identification of the subject with his or her juridical status. In the face of instability, the significance of legal recognition becomes itself ambiguous: it is highly important for the livelihoods of people and at the same time it fails to capture completely the complexity of people's lives and their many attachments, obligations and desires.

Section 377: a chronology

On July 2nd, 2009, the High Court of Delhi delivered a judgment that partially invalidated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Said section, enforced in 1860 by British colonial authorities, criminalises 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature':

377. Unnatural offences: 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 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 offense described in this section.⁶¹

Section 377 would remain valid in the case of minors, but as far as consenting adults (i.e. 18 years of age or above) were concerned, any sexual acts beyond heterosexual penile-vaginal penetration carried out in

private would not be punishable. The decision of the High Court came after several years of legal battle. In 1994, a non-governmental association called ABVA (AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan) working on HIV/AIDS prevention filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to the High Court, asking for the repeal of Section 377; ABVA's argument was that Section 377 severely hampered efforts to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, and that the stigmatised status of homosexual sex resulted in harmful measures towards people at high risk of contracting the virus. A case that sparked the ABVA petition was the refusal to distribute condoms to the inmates of Tihar Jail (South Asia's largest prison complex, located in Delhi), a decision which prison inspector general Kiran Bedi motivated by arguing that distributing condoms would only facilitate the spread of homosexuality.⁶² The ABVA petition was heard only in 2001, but by that time the organisation had dissolved and the petition was dismissed.

The Naz Foundation (hereafter Naz), another NGO working on HIV/AIDS and sexual health, filed a similar petition at the end of 2001, using an argument similar to ABVA's. Naz's petition was initially dismissed by the High Court in 2004, since according to the judges Naz had no *locus standi* on the matter (Naz, being an organisation and not an individual, could not claim that it was personally affected by Section 377). Naz appealed, and in 2006 the Supreme Court mandated that the High Court consider the matter. Once the petition was finally going to be heard, it received support in the form of affidavits⁶³ from the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and from Voices Against 377, a collective of activists, academics and NGO workers: NACO confirmed Naz's claim about the detrimental effects of Section 377 on HIV prevention work, while Voices Against 377 argued that the section violated the fundamental rights of LGBTQ people. Oppositional affidavits were filed by a conservative politician and another NGO, who both claimed that Section 377 had to be retained since homosexuality was immoral, and repealing the section would only result in an increase of HIV/AIDS infections.

The petition was heard in 2008, and a year later, on July 2nd 2009 the verdict (*Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, hereafter *Naz*⁶⁴) was delivered. The Delhi High Court, presided by Justices A.P. Shah and S. Muralidhar, declared Section 377 to be violative of articles 21 (right to life), 14 (equality) and 15 (non discrimination) of the Indian Constitution; in so doing it decriminalised homosexual sex between consenting adults.

Even though the judgment was delivered by a state court, its jurisdiction would extend to the entire country.⁶⁵

Five days later, on 7th July 2009, the first petition challenging the High Court verdict was filed to the Supreme Court of India⁶⁶ by an astrologer named Suresh Kumar Koushal (whence the name *Koushal v. Naz*). Koushal's petition was followed quickly by fifteen other petitions filed by various religious organisations as well as private persons. The arguments advanced by the petitioners centered mainly on the immorality of homosexuality and the idea that homosexual sex is 'unnatural', meaning not leading to procreation. Over the next two years, a range of interventions in defence of the High Court judgment were also filed, coming from health professionals, academics, activists and parents of LGBTQ people (see Narrain and Gupta 2011).

The Supreme Court began hearing all the petitioners in the early spring of 2012. By the end of March, the hearings were concluded and a final judgment was expected by the end of the year. However, it took one more year for the Court to deliver its verdict, which came on 11th December 2013.

The Supreme Court, consisting of a two-judges bench⁶⁷ (Justice G.S. Singhvi and S.J. Mukhopadhyaya) declared that Section 377, in their view, did not 'suffer from the vice of unconstitutionality' (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 97⁶⁸) and was therefore restored in full. This decision resulted in a de-facto re-criminalisation of homosexual sex. The Supreme Court added a recommendation that 'the competent legislature shall be free to consider the desirability and propriety of deleting Section 377 IPC from the statute book or amend the same' (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 98), thereby suggesting that the law should be changed by an act of parliament. Naz asked for a review of the judgment, but it was dismissed. In April 2014, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a curative petition⁶⁹ challenging the *Koushal* judgment. The government, in the meantime, stated that it would not look into the issue of Section 377 for possible amendments until the issue is still pending in court. Until a new verdict is delivered, or alternatively, until the parliament passes a special bill against the criminalisation of sexual minorities, homosexual sex remains a criminal offence.

The core argument of the Naz petition was that Section 377, insofar as it criminalised adult consensual sex in private, violated articles 14 (equality), 19 (freedom of expression) and 21(right to life) of the Indian Constitution. Technically, both the High Court and the Supreme Court

were called to adjudicate on the compatibility of Section 377 with said constitutional articles. Rather than presenting an extensive overview of the judgments (for in-depth analyses, see Abeyratne and Sinha 2014; Baxi 2011; Narrain 2013; Puri 2013; Raghavan 2011), my analysis of both *Naz* and *Koushal* focuses on the divergent ways in which the identity of sexual minorities has been recognised and misrecognised.

The *Naz* judgment: the right to privacy of LGBTQ persons

The main claim made by *Naz* in its 2001 petition was that section 377 hampered their (and other organisations') efforts to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS because the fear of being charged for 'offences against the order of nature' pushed many people practicing same-sex sex underground and made it difficult for *Naz* to carry out its outreach activities. Further, one of *Naz*'s claims was that Section 377 in particular harmed socially and economically marginalised sexual minorities such as *kothis*, *hijras* and the so-called MSM (Men who have Sex with Men). Relying on a health-base rationale to remove Section 377 was seen as a viable strategy, given that the HIV/AIDS epidemic had been a major factor in enabling the establishment of both governmental and non-governmental organisations⁷⁰ working with sexuality issues in India (Horton, Rydstrom and Tonini 2015; Jalali 2008; Kole 2007; Nambiar 2012).

Bringing HIV/AIDS into the equation could then lend legitimacy to the issue of LGBTQ rights, but at the same time linking non heterosexual sexuality to AIDS brought about questions of morality which were debated in the judgment, and in particular about the state's role in safeguarding its people. According to a precedent set in a 1975 judgment,⁷¹ the state has the right to curtail citizens' personal liberties and privacy rights if and when there appears to be a 'compelling interest' in maintaining public safety, health and morals. By defining AIDS as an epidemic that can be controlled by curbing homosexual sex, as was the initial view of the Home Ministry, then the state would have the right to severely erode the personal liberties of people practicing (or associated with) homosexual sex. If, however, the spread of AIDS is seen as one of

the consequences of the stigma, fear and repression that homosexuals and MSM face because of Section 377, then the only ‘compelling interest’ of the state is that of guaranteeing adequate information and preventive measures for people at higher risk of contagion (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 86). The High Court accepted *Naz* and NACO’s submissions that high-risk group populations are reluctant to reveal their sexual behaviour for fear of legal consequences, discrimination and blackmailing. Figures and statements from agencies like UNAIDS are quoted at length (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 50).

The contention that legalising homosexual sex would lead to an increase of AIDS cases, made by the Additional Solicitor General of the Government (thus justifying Section 377 on the basis of compelling state interest) is refuted by High Court by quoting scientific international evidence that AIDS is not especially linked to homosexuality (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 72). As for the supposed immorality of homosexuality (and AIDS), the High Court states: ‘popular morality, as distinct from a constitutional morality derived from constitutional values, is based on shifting and subjecting notions of right and wrong. If there is any type of morality that can pass the test of compelling state interest, it must be ‘constitutional’ morality and not public morality.’ (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 79).

The *Naz* Judgment: equality, class, and identity.

In previous judgments, the Supreme Court of India had established that Article 14 of the Constitution (Right to Equality) forbids class legislation (i.e. making laws, concessions, or enforcing punitive measures only for a certain class of people), but it does not forbid ‘reasonable classification for the purpose of legislation’ (see *M.P Rural Agricultural Extension vs. State of MP and Anr* 2004). ‘Reasonable classification’ means that groups of people (or even individuals) may be recognised as ‘classes’ when they share specific circumstances or attributes that mark them as different from the majority population; classification cannot be arbitrary, but must be based on ‘intelligible differentia’ (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 88) between the group of ‘classified’ people and the rest. This may be understood better if we think of special legislation enacted in India to advance the livelihood of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the demographics

defined as Other Backward Classes (OBC) (Dirks 2001; Jodhka 2012; Yadav 2002). There is a history of sections of Indian society that have been unfairly discriminated against; special provisions that accord them a differential treatment are enforced, even though such provisions are technically ‘unequal’.⁷² One result of ‘reasonable classification’ is the reservation system (similar to what is known in the USA as affirmative action) where a percentage of seats in government institutions is reserved for people belonging to the aforementioned disadvantaged groups.

The criterion upon which classification is judged is that there has to be a rational nexus between ‘the basis of classification and the object of the statute under consideration’ (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 88). The High Court concludes that the content of Section 377 arbitrarily singles out a group of people based on their sexual activity, and therefore that Section 377 contravenes Article 14 of the Constitution. By not mentioning the issues of consent, age or harm caused, Section 377 fails to show a rationale that would justify treating LGBTQ people as a ‘class’ deserving the intervention of the state in their private lives. The High Court states ‘Section 377 targets the homosexual community as a class and is motivated by an animus towards this vulnerable class of people’ (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 91). In other words, people who engage in homosexual sex may or may not constitute a community; but the basis of this classification (homosexual activity) does not have any logical relation to criminality and, therefore, does not justify punitive treatment by the state authorities.

In these passages of the judgment lies a central point, which the High Court stresses in unequivocal terms: homosexuals are recognised as people with personal, social and sexual identities. The Court avers that Section 377, while apparently only targeting sexual acts regardless of the gender or sexual orientation of the people committing the acts, does in fact target a particular community.

It is a fact that these sexual acts which are criminalised are associated more closely with one class of persons, namely, the homosexuals as a class. Section 377 IPC has the effect of viewing all gay men as criminals. When everything associated with homosexuality is treated as bent, queer, repugnant, the whole gay and lesbian community is marked with deviance and perversity. They are subject to extensive prejudice because of what they are or what they are perceived to be, not because of what they do (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 94).

In the above passage we see how sexuality is recognised as being more than the sum of one's sexual activities, and how Section 377 functions as an injurious interpellation whose force goes beyond the acts that it purportedly addresses; an interpellation that 'continues to force itself upon you, to delineate the space you occupy, to construct a social positionality' (Butler 1997b: 33). In its conclusive judgment,⁷³ the High Court highlights the themes of inclusiveness, diversity and dignity as being central to India's Constitution and reflected in society. Discriminatory attitudes toward LGBTQ people are seen as 'popular misconceptions' that should not taint the idea of justice enshrined in the Constitution and in the Penal Code.

The 2009 judgment shifts the focus from a health-base rationale (employed by Naz in its petition) to a consideration the suffering of sexual minorities as a result of the application of Section 377 as an instrument of threat, abuse and blackmail (while it had resulted in very few trials and convictions in court). The court then acknowledges that Section 377 has the effect of rendering particular populations especially vulnerable before state authorities: the force of Section 377 exceeds its court/legal aspect, creating conditions where people could use it to threaten other people, even though it was unlikely that the matter would ever end up in a court of law, as the few cases brought before India's high courts between 1860 and 2009 testify.⁷⁴ The section has been used to categorise an individual, constituting him as a criminal subject even when there was no tangible proof of the act being committed. While it always only criminalised an act and not a person, the function of section 377 is that it hails a particular subject as especially likely to be involved in the 'carnal acts' mentioned in the section.

The agency of the subjects to negotiate with abusive authorities should not be dismissed, as Khanna (2011) shows in the case of sexual minorities who could fend off policemen and goons by paying them; still, often extortion was exactly the purpose for deploying Section 377 in the first place. The High Court, by acknowledging that Section 377 harmed sexual minorities and subjected them to abuse, blackmail, extortion and harassment, recognises the constitutive power of the law in interpellating people and making them into criminal subjects. By declaring Section 377 incompatible with the values expressed in the constitution, what the High Court does is to remove a source of injury that had cast sexual minorities outside of the relations of reciprocity between the subject and the law/state: people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or

queer were bound to the rule of law as every other citizen, but were not guaranteed in return the same rights and protection as everyone else. The repealing of Section 377 gave sexual minorities access to a relationship with the law in which they could begin to negotiate the terms of their recognition.

Reactions: legally gay

Both judgments have been accompanied by intense focus in the media and public debate. In 2009, the decriminalisation judgment initiated an explosion of media coverage (news dailies, periodicals, television and Internet) that lasted for several weeks. Coverage of issues of LGBTQ rights was resumed periodically between 2009 and 2013, especially in connection with politicians' controversial statements and with court proceedings: during the Supreme Court hearings in early 2012, newspapers reported from the court daily, often on the first page. The ample coverage given to the issues of decriminalisation and LGBTQ rights has been central in shaping many young queer people's experience of achieving legal recognition, and in some cases even in inaugurating an awareness of sexual subjectivity that, before the news of the judgment broke out, was inchoate, at least in terms of citizenship, rights, and the relation between sexual identity and the state.

The 2009 *Naz* judgment was met with emotional responses that the media captured by interviewing people celebrating on the streets of Delhi and other major Indian cities.⁷⁵ Young people wearing colourful costumes and masks, rainbow flags invading the central avenues of Delhi; even expert commentators summoned by the media to give an analytical opinion on the judgment could hardly contain their joy and excitement. Anjali Gopalan, director of *Naz* and in many ways the public face of the legal struggle against Section 377 talked about the decriminalisation being a 'huge step forward'.⁷⁶ That 'buzz' of conquered freedom permeated newspapers and televisual accounts, lending the general atmosphere a sense of possibility and hopefulness that even I could sense, arriving in Delhi for the first time only days after the judgment. In reality, the High Court judgment was never final, and counter-petitions appealing against it began to appear within days of the judgment. Yet the prevalent atmosphere, captured by strongly supportive English-language mass-

media, suggested the opposite: that a major and irreversible step had been taken, not only for sexual minorities, but for India as a whole. For example, the daily newspaper *Times of India* framed the judgment in evolutionary terms with the headline ‘Gay Ruling: ‘Now we’re really in the 21st Century’;’⁷⁷ similarly, journalist Venkatasubramanian Venkatesan spoke about the judgment as a turning point in India’s evolution as a modern, forward-looking nation, wedded to the principles of substantive equality, non-discrimination and an inclusive right to life and liberty’ (Venkatesan 2009).⁷⁸

The sense of surprise and elation is well captured in an opinion piece written by Sibi Mathen (2013) where he recalls his reaction to the good news: ‘Something I assumed I wouldn’t see in my lifetime had just happened, I remember not being able to wipe this big grin on my face, and I claimed to have an emergency at home to run away to celebrate with friends! That’s the day we found the self-belief that things we only dreamt about is (sic) very much achievable. It was a beginning of a new era’.⁷⁹ Anthropologist Akshay Khanna (2014) paints a vivid memory of the way the Indian queer community experienced the legal verdict in 2009. Khanna writes that in the immediate aftermath of the High Court judgment the atmosphere among LGBTQ people was one of ‘disoriented delirium’. Relating the optimism that the judgment had brought, he writes: ‘having now had a taste of this “freedom”, this sense of being “full citizens”, it seemed, from here on, there was no going back’ (Khanna 2014: 6).

Reactions: a retroactive awareness

Some of the participants of my study did not know about the contested legal status of homosexuality, nor about the struggle to repeal Section 377. Radhika (20) for example recalled how she did not know that same-sex sexuality had been a crime until after she read the news:

Well honestly, to be very honest, I never really paid attention about it and I didn’t really know that it was illegal in India. When I read about it in the paper I was really shocked, like ‘oh my god, it was a criminal act before!’ -- I didn’t know that. So now, great! Thank god during my time, when I’m actually growing up it’s fine.

Ashok, 25, had moved to Delhi a few months before July 2009, and while he had already realised his attraction to men, he did not know about the legal status of homosexuality. Similarly to Radhika, he too recalled how startled he was when during a news broadcast, the presenter started interviewing people about gay rights, debating the morality of homosexuality and the entitlement to non discrimination that LGBTQ people had been granted. While some participants like Radhika and Ashok found out about the existence of Section 377 only *ex post facto*, for those who had been following the final stages of Naz's legal battle, the High Court judgment represented a defining moment of burgeoning possibility. The 2009 judgment reached people through the media, suddenly defining them as 'subjects of rights' (Narrain and Gupta 2011: xi) and producing a discourse around sexuality that was not present before. Aside from meaningful considerations about the effectiveness and limitations of a law in safeguarding the rights of sexual minorities (see Menon 2004; Vasudevan 2014), what the *Naz* judgment did was to make (homo)sexuality visible as a discourse. Twenty-year-old college student Nikhil explained:

When the judgment was passed, immediately after that there was a sense of conversation in groups, in colleges, in tuition centers. So I could actually discuss about homosexuality, about being gay to other people. I could help remove the stereotypes. What I, what 377 did for me was that it brought the idea of homosexuality into conversation. That is how it actually helped, because I never actually had any sort of police harassment, so I never had to use it as such, it helped making conversation.

Nikhil points to an aspect that has often been used to criticise the extent to which the partial repeal of Section 377 would benefit the people who suffered the most harm because of it, namely lower class gender non-conforming people such as *kothis* and *hijras* (Puri 2013; Tellis 2009). The main reason why the *Naz* judgment was important, for Nikhil, is connected to the ways in which it has been widely talked about across media and public discussions so that it became a possible topic of conversation. Wide media coverage of the issue of sexual minorities' rights did not only facilitate conversations about sexuality, but it also critically articulated the rights of LGBTQ people as something that a High Court had warranted, thus conferring a particular legitimacy to the community, as Pallavi (23) pointed out:

For the first time that issue was being posited like in public media, commercial media, as something that was situated within a human rights frame, which acquires a certain legitimacy, right? For the first time you have a positive court ruling, so then people also feel that OK, clearly an important Indian court thinks that this has to be, this section needs to be read down, and they are giving a positive ruling, in the favour of these people...so obviously it is an issue that gains legitimacy in their minds.

For others, such as Chandra, a 22 year old student, the significance of the High Court judgment was that it established the very existence of sexual minorities in India: 'Of course it has had an impact and now I think very few people can say with a straight face that there are no gay people in the country for example'. Among the participants to my research, it was generally agreed that the fact that the order to decriminalised homosexuality had come from a court of law was a positive thing because, as Alok (22) said, it would 'inculcate the sense of equality in a lot of people' since according to him 'in India things won't change before laws change'. He then added that the authority of the court had given the issue of homosexuality 'credibility' before the general population. More inclusive laws were the wish that many participants expressed when asked about what they envisioned as 'the next step' after the *Naz* judgment, given that many people felt a sense of uncertainty about what protection the 'reading down' of Section 377 would in fact afford. Pavan, a 21 years old engineering student, told me:

I strongly believe that we need laws [...] we have to have something, you know, something to say that yes, no one can attack me, no one can hurt me. If someone hits me, if someone is rude to me, [if] someone tries to blackmail me, I'm going to take you to court, I'm going to make your life as bad as you try to make mine, you know. But I don't know if, if there's this guy who starts someday, tries to blackmail me, like 'give me this much money or I'll tell' and everything...I don't know if there's a law that could protect me against this. It's very difficult to change the society, it's difficult to change other people's mind-sets, I think it's easier to first, it's not easier but more practical to first have laws and then create an environment that makes people understand that it's ok to be gay.

While young queers acknowledged that changing societal attitudes towards homosexuality would be a process requiring much more than a legal verdict, they nonetheless saw the latter as essential to enable subtler changes in other contexts, precisely because those contexts (such as the family, the workplace, public spaces) were perceived to be governed by

conflicting values that the queer subject had to negotiate simultaneously in her/his daily life.

The reliance on law expressed by participants reminds of the argument by Jean and John Comaroff (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 23) about the stabilizing role that the law comes to play in the face of social instabilities. They talk about a ‘fetishism of the law’, defined as a tendency ‘to emphasize the rule of law and the primacy of rights, even when both the spirit and the letter of that law are violated, offended, distended, purloined’. According to the Comaroffs, turning the law into a fetish confounds the abstract level and the concrete, projecting onto the ‘rule of law’ powers and properties that are conceived as manifold, so that the law becomes ‘a more or less effective weapon of the weak, the strong, and everyone in between’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:33).

Pavan’s belief in the necessity of laws and his simultaneous doubts about the existence of a law that could protect him from blackmailing exemplify a process that I could observe among other participants: after the 2009 verdict, the law became the object of a plurality of projected hopes and expectations, rather than a solid base offering safety. People’s attachment to the significance of the 2009 verdict can thus be understood by considering the power of the law as a promise (Berlant 2000): the promise to constitute the sexual subject as a subject of rights, substituting the injurious interpellation of ‘criminal’ with one that invokes citizenship and inclusion; the promise to inscribe the figure of the queer individual within a stable discourse that had institutional force and public intelligibility.

The *Koushal* judgment

On 11th December 2013, I set my alarm earlier than usual. The verdict from the Supreme Court was expected in the morning, and I logged in to Facebook instead of waiting for news websites to report on the judgment, as I knew that it would be shared first on social media platforms; and as the bad news started to fill Facebook’s newsfeed, consternation and disbelief were the most common reactions. Of the hundreds of people who posted on Facebook that morning, no one said they had expected a negative verdict. While the possibility of the Supreme Court upholding

the validity of Section 377 had always been there, none of the people I spent time with in Delhi gave it credit.

During the time I spent in Delhi in 2012, as the Supreme Court was hearing the petitioners, I had frequent conversations about potential outcomes, and while I registered a subtle preoccupation, there was a shared assumption that Section 377 needed to be repealed for good, and that only then other laws protecting sexual minorities could be drafted and implemented. Participants described their expectations about the legal outcomes in terms of ‘when’ rather than ‘if’, even though they were aware of the fact a certain degree of arbitrariness was involved and that much could depend on ‘the mood of the judges’, as Harsh (21) put it.

Reflecting on the dismayed surprise that the 2013 judgment generated, Akshay Khanna writes, ‘we had, in this period, imagined all kinds of outcomes and scenarios. And even if the complete reversal of the High Court decision was always a possibility, it had, in honesty, simply been fuel to the perverse enjoyment of imagining the worst case scenario, possible only because such an outcome could not really happen’ (Khanna 2014: 07). Scholar and activist Gautam Bhan (2014) also notes: ‘the battles that led up to 2009 that spilled outward as the judgment’s words travelled outside and beyond the courtroom, it felt impossible to believe that after this one could move – even though still hesitantly – anyway but forward. That morning on December 11th, 2013, no other verdict seems possible. It was.’ (Bhan 2014: 20). The Supreme Court bench consisting of Justices G.S. Singhvi and S.J. Mukhopadhyaya, ruled:

In view of the above discussion, we hold that Section 377 IPC does not suffer from the vice of unconstitutionality and the declaration made by the Division Bench of the High Court is legally unsustainable. [...] While parting with the case, we would like to make it clear that this court has merely pronounced on the correctness of the view taken by the High Court on the constitutionality of Section 377 IPC and found that said section does not suffer from any constitutional infirmity. Notwithstanding this verdict, the competent legislature shall be free to consider the desirability and propriety of deleting Section 377IPC from the statute book or amend the same (*Koushal*, paragraph 54, 56).

The Supreme Court did not pronounce itself on the values of the Indian Constitutions, deciding instead to focus, in the last concluding paragraphs, on the applicability of foreign judgments to adjudicate on the constitutionality of an Indian penal code statute:

In its anxiety to protect the so-called rights of LGBT persons and to declare that Section 377 IPC violates the rights to privacy, autonomy and dignity, the High Court has extensively relied upon the judgments of other jurisdictions. Though these judgments shed considerable light on various aspects of this right and are informative in relation to the plight of sexual minorities, we feel that they cannot be applied blindfolded for deciding the constitutionality of the law enacted by the Indian legislature (*Koushal*, paragraph 52).

The Supreme Court cites previous judgments on capital punishment and arranged marriage where the courts had declared that legal decisions must consider the existing social norms of the country in which they are applied rather than be ‘blinded’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 53) by foreign sources. Reading it against *Naz*, with its emphasis on equality and diversity as the foundation of Indian society, the *Koushal* judgment presents an opposite reading of the implications of Section 377. While the *Naz* judgment emphasized the social consequences of the existence of Section 377, namely the discrimination and exclusion of people based on their sexual orientation (*Naz* 2009, paragraph 52⁸⁰), the *Koushal* judgment narrows its scope to examine much more closely the content and meaning of Section 377, arguing that the consequences of its enforcement are not inferrable from the section itself: ‘Respondent no.1 (i.e. the Naz Foundation) attacked section 377 IPC on the ground that the same has been used to perpetrate harassment, blackmail and torture on certain persons, especially those belonging to the LGBT community. In our opinion, this treatment is neither mandated by the section nor condoned by it and the mere fact that the section is misused by police authorities is not a reflection of the vires of the section’. (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 51⁸¹).

The Supreme Court thus separates the literal content of the section from its operationalization. Eventual misuse of the law does not imply, in the eyes of the Supreme Court bench, that the law itself is wrong. If, then, the text of the section in itself does not ‘condone’ discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ people, other evidence needs to be produced to verify the claims made by *Naz*, NACO, Voices Against 377 and the wider rights movement that had mobilised against Section 377.

The *Koushal* judgment: a quantitative approach

In *Koushal*, the Supreme Court adopts a quantitative approach to the issue of discrimination and stigmatisation of sexual minorities, and deems the proof and figures produced by the various health and rights petitioners ‘wholly insufficient’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 40).

This quantitative approach is applied to both the health-based claim according to which Section 377 contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS, and to the rights-based claim that the section contravened basic human rights safeguarded by the Constitution. The Supreme Court defines the Naz petition ‘singularly laconic’ in that ‘it miserably failed to furnish the particulars of the incidents of discriminatory attitude exhibited by the State agencies towards sexual minorities and consequential denial of basic human rights to them’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 40). The figures submitted by the Dept. of AIDS Control listing the percentage of high-risk group people at risk of contracting AIDS are also considered ‘wholly insufficient for recording a finding that homosexuals, gays, etc. are being subjected to discriminatory treatment either by State or its agencies or the society’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 40.). The Supreme Court would require not only more cases of open discrimination, but also quantitative data showing that a significant number of homosexuals are at risk of contracting HIV. The figure provided by the petitioners (around 5% of the total population) is deemed inconspicuous.

The quantitative approach to the issue suggests that the Supreme Court does not entertain the connection between Section 377, HIV/AIDS and homosexuality as a valid basis for repealing the law; but critically, it also frames the status of LGBTQ people in ambiguous terms. The minority status of LGBTQ people is abased when the Supreme Court calls them ‘a miniscule fraction of the country’s population’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 43) implying that, contrary to other recognised minorities – such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes - they do not constitute a critical mass for Section 377 to be considered unconstitutional. The relatively few prosecution cases (about 200, as reported in the judgment) in the history of Section 377 are also considered too few. To grasp the full extent of the Court’s interpretation, the disparaging comment about the ‘miniscule minority’ and more generally the logic of numbers used to judge the validity of the claims made on behalf on LGBTQ people, need to be seen in conjunction with

the Supreme Court's treatment of the issue of equality and classification. I have discussed above how the High Court had determined that homosexual activity could not constitute a rational basis for classifying homosexuals as a 'class' deserving special (in this case negative) treatment by state authorities. The Supreme Court, by contrast, offers a completely different reading of what constitutes 'reasonable classification', to which I will now turn.

The *Koushal* judgment: a different class

The Supreme Court's interpretation of Article 14 of the Indian Constitution in relation to section 377 is one of the most controversial points of this judgment. Where the High Court had seen no rational relation between sexual preferences and criminality, the Supreme Court goes on to state:

Those who indulge in carnal intercourse in the ordinary course and those who indulge in carnal intercourse against the order of nature constitute *different classes* and the people falling in the latter category cannot claim that Section 377 suffers from the vice of arbitrariness and irrational classification (*Koushal 2013*, paragraph 42, emphasis added).

Constituting people practicing same sex into a class enables Section 377 to operate while avoiding the accusation that it targets gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people, since what is punishable is a carnal act, not a sexual identity. 'The order of nature' becomes the watershed between the two 'classes'. It is, however, never completely clear what the order of nature really is, nor do the previous judgments quoted shed any light on it. It appears that the meaning of order of nature, and whether or not it has been violated, can only be established case by case, according to context: but given that Section 377 does not mention consent, nor gives any specific indication as to what kind of 'penetration' is considered, establishing whether or not the order of nature has been observed becomes at best an arbitrary judgment.

While the High Court spent several pages enumerating previous judgments and declarations (mostly foreign or international) about sexual orientation and gender/sexual identity, the Supreme Court does not deal with this aspect. What it does instead is quote several judgments (Indian)

in which Section 377 was used (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 37). All these judgments go into detail as to whether the incriminated sexual act could be judged ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ – as per the wording of Section 377. In so doing, the Supreme Court shifts the focus from an evaluation of whether a certain sexual identity is criminalised, to investigating which particular carnal acts are covered by the section.

In other words, it leaves questions of identity aside to concentrate on the literal exegesis of Section 377, and concludes that the criminality of certain carnal acts can only be determined case by case. In stark contrast to the High Court judgment, the Supreme Court declares: ‘It is relevant to mention here that Section 377 does not criminalised a particular people or identity or orientation. It merely identifies certain acts which if committed would constitute an offence. Such a prohibition regulates sexual conduct regardless of gender identity and orientation’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 38). The Supreme Court interpretation and verdict makes it explicit that what is at stake is the degree to which a particular carnal act can be considered criminal, and concludes that the legality of sexual acts needs to be determined on a case-to-case basis. In so doing, it divorces the subject committing the act from the act committed.

Sexual minorities end up being, as it were, subjected to a potential classification that does not have any stable criteria other than a vague and undefined notion of ‘order of nature’. That homosexuals are more likely to be associated with sexual activities ‘against the order of nature’ because ‘nature’ is often equated with procreative sex is not entertained by the Supreme Court. By not recognising the linkages between LGBTQ sexual identity and non-heterosexual sexual acts, the Supreme Court is de-subjectifying sexual minorities and placing them under an ambivalent and unstable sign, that of ‘class’, which would only apply to them to prosecute them. By divorcing the subject from one of the qualities that define its very subjectivity, what the reasoning of the Court also does is cover up the issues of stigma and discrimination: there cannot be particular forms of hatred directed at the sexual minority subject, since there is no such subject.

If we see the law as productive, rather than only repressive or prohibitive, then the *Koushal* judgment implies that Section 377 is incapable of producing a criminal subject (the homosexual), since it argues that the validity of the section only concerns acts. On paper, the sexual subjectivity of homosexuals and LGBTQ people is left untouched and unexamined. However, in highlighting how the LGBTQ community

constitutes ‘a miniscule fraction’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 43) and phrasing their demands as ‘so-called rights’ (*Koushal* 2013, paragraph 52), the Supreme Court actively disregards the existence and the entitlements of sexual minorities because they are not recognised as legitimate subjects. In other words, by divorcing Section 377 from the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity, the Supreme Court verdict does in fact deny the subjectivity of sexual minorities, even though that subjectivity was one acquired mostly through injury (Butler 1997b).

No going back

On 11th December 2013, on the Facebook page of Niral Club (which I will consider in Chapter 7), a male member named Rohit voiced his reaction:

Every time I start to type, my eyes fill with tears. I am sad [because] I know what the decriminalising judgment by high court did for me when I was coming to terms with my sexuality...and what this would mean for thousands who at this very moment are struggling with theirs. My wall is already full of gay friends announcing their marriage, bowed down by family pressure, whatever they might be telling themselves. This, I dread, will increase that number so much more. How has this affected me? Well, I can be jailed for my existence. This is so baffling! I can hear the sound of laughter coming from the living room. Sitting and laughing there are my mom and dad. This judgement does not bother them as they do not question me or want me to change because of the verdict. And I cry because I know this acceptance is a possibility, and the supreme court has made sure so many people who might have had a chance at this do not get one.⁸²

Rohit makes a direct connection between the significance of legal recognition and the social and emotional acceptance that many gays and lesbians imagined, sought, and experienced after 2009. While it has been argued that decriminalisation alone did not result in a deregulation of sexual norms (Puri 2013) and even that the increased knowledge about Section 377 could have adverse effects on LGBTQ people, making them more vulnerable to harassment and blackmail (Boyce 2014; Khanna 2011), what Rohit expresses here is a feeling deeply felt by the participants to my study too: namely, that being able to become sexual

subjects at the time when same sex sexuality was decriminalised was a critical aspect in the way they experienced the relation between their sexuality and their subjectivity.

The 2009 decriminalisation had enabled them to take the first steps in living their sexuality in social interactions in a climate marked by optimism, hope and potential acceptance. In the words of Rohit, the 2013 judgment had a negative impact not so much on him or the people who, like him, came out during a time when the law did not punish them for being gay; but it might be destructive for younger people who were in the process of coming out to themselves or others.

After reading Rohit and others' statements on Facebook, I posted a question on Niral Club's page, asking people what they thought would happen. The answers I got are indicative. People admitted their disappointment, but the unanimous reply was that there was no 'going back into the closet'. One person said: 'now we have each other, because we found each other', highlighting how the previous 2009 judgment had allowed a community to form whose cohesion and strength was such that it would not be dispersed by a negative court verdict. Another member pointed out that life would go on as it did before, and concluded caustically that probably the only difference would be the amount of money needed to bail out gay people who could now be arrested, higher now because of all the media exposure that the issue of same-sex sexuality had generated.

'No Going Back' became the social media official slogan summarizing the reaction of the LGBTQ community across the country. In a matter of hours, many Facebook users changed their profile picture to a black banner carrying the words 'No Going Back' and a stricken-through 377. Already by the evening of 11th December, a worldwide day of protest called Global Day of Rage had been organised, entirely online; the Global Day of Rage was to be held on 15th December in different cities all over the world (see Dasgupta 2015; Shah 2015).

As the online protests continued to spread on social media, politicians and notable public personalities in India also expressed their support for the cause of sexual minorities by voicing rather direct criticism against the decision of the Supreme Court. All major political parties stood by the LGBTQ community, with the exception of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had opposed the decriminalisation since the beginning of the legal battle. Some famous Bollywood personalities spoke against the Supreme Court decision, including the popular

director/producer Karan Johar and actors Aamir Khan and Amitabh Bachchan. The intellectual establishment of India, as well as all English language media, sided compactly with the LGBTQ community.

A week after the Supreme Court judgment was delivered, the periodical *India Today* featured a reflection piece by author Vikram Seth, where he wrote about the judgment being an act of cruelty.⁸³ The cover of the magazine was a ‘mug-shot’-style photograph of Seth holding a board on which the words ‘Not a criminal’ were scribbled. *India Today*’s cover can be seen as a visual example of the refusal to acknowledge the validity of the Court’s subjectifying interpellation (criminal) while recognising its potential effects (being arrested). As such, Seth’s staged identification photograph is an illustration of the relationship between injury and identity (Butler 1997b).

Appropriating ‘injurious interpellations’ (Butler 1997b: 104) allows us to resignify them and counter their power. As these injurious interpellations ‘constitute identity through injury’ (Butler 1997b: 105), they need to be occupied and re-appropriated in order to ‘[recast] the power that constitutes me as the power [to] oppose’ (1997b:104). Vikram Seth, posing in front of what looks like a police photograph background – but where instead of height marks we read the numbers ‘377’ – is effectively occupying an injurious site; the words ‘Not a criminal’ written on his identification board, however, are a visual instance of resistance and opposition to the injurious quality of the identity bestowed upon him as a gay man by the Supreme Court.

LGBTQ organisations that had been involved to various extents in the legal battle against Section 377 reacted swiftly and strongly to the Supreme Court judgment. The Lawyers Collective, a Bangalore-based law firm specializing on human rights cases who had been critically involved in supporting the Naz petition, held a press conference immediately after the verdict was declared. During the press conference, long-time activist Gautam Bhan addressed the audience by saying that the LGBTQ community had not been defeated, since the rights of LGBTQ people derived from the Indian Constitution, not from any institution, including the Supreme Court. Asked by a reporter whether the prospect of challenging the highest court of law felt daunting, Bhan replied: ‘Do you know what’s daunting? It’s that moment when you’re fifteen years old and you are terrified of who you are. If we have survived that, the Supreme Court does not know what fear looks like’.⁸⁴

When Bhan contrasts the fear generated by a verdict of the Supreme Court with the fear felt by many young people upon realising their homosexuality, his argument is analogous to Rohit's emotional outpouring, so that overcoming one's own insecurities and fears, finding stability and strength in one's sexual identity becomes a source of power and courage that, in Bhan's view, the Supreme Court cannot defeat, because it cannot understand it. What seems to be the point of Bhan's speech about 'what's daunting' is a declaration of the belief that subjectivity - the inhabiting of a subject position that makes it possible to survive - proceeds much more from a process of self-recognition than from identities bestowed by power authorities. In this line, the years that had passed between the two judgments are seen as foundational for the building of a community feeling where people could find themselves and others: where the signs under which they were cast (as homosexuals, as subjects) carried inspiring connotations. To be then cast as criminals again by an act of law would not, in Bhan's wish, diminish that strength.

As the months passed, and the last attempts to redress the Supreme Court judgment were made in the form of review and curative petitions, life in the LGBTQ community continued. To this day, Pride parades are being held regularly in several cities and have actually expanded beyond the major metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai; activist groups and NGOs continue their work; workshops on LGBTQ equality are organised by cultural centres and universities; mainstream media has not abandoned the issue of sexual minorities.

As for the young people at the fore of my study, they vented their disappointment, fear, rage, and anxiety on Niral Club's Facebook page for a few weeks, but soon they started filling it again with everyday updates, asking who was around, if anyone wanted to go see a movie; they posted pictures of sculpted torsos of Bollywood actors; they wrote about yet another argument with parents. Just like during my fieldwork, the preoccupations, aspirations, hopes and anxieties of young queers veered from the political to the personal, as if they were trying to restore a sense of 'normality' amidst the confusion and uncertainty that the Supreme Court judgment generated. Niral Club had suspended its face-to-face meetings for some months because they lacked a stable venue, but the online activity was as frequent as ever; meetings were resumed at the end of 2014 and the group still has about a thousand members online.

Notwithstanding the possibilities of re-appropriation and opposition as illustrated by Vikram Seth's photograph, the question remains of what

successive different interpellations do to the sexual subject. How do these interpellations accumulate upon the subject? What traces do they leave behind, and how are these traces dealt with and re-worked by the people caught in a precarious relation with the law? Was recognition granted and then revoked, or had it rather been a ‘cluster of promises’ (Berlant 2011) to which queer people had attached a host of expectations and hopes of a better future?

Concluding remarks

On a bright winter day in January 2014, I took the metro to meet up with some participants for a quick coffee and a chat. Nishta, a 23-year-old economics student, was waiting for me near the metro exit. As we walked toward a nearby café, I asked her how she felt about life after the Supreme Court judgment. She replied, matter-of-factly: ‘well, the Earth has not changed its orbit around the Sun’. Nishta then continued to talk about her plans regarding work, her new flatmates, whether moving to Bangalore would be a good idea or not.

Nishta’s curt reply to the issue of recriminalisation epitomises an attitude I could often observe on my trips to Delhi after 2013 among young queers; it is an attitude that could be plainly defined as ‘life goes on’, characterized by the bitter awareness of a reinstated criminal status and by the necessity to carry on living: avoiding the police, brokering with parents, planning futures at home or elsewhere, trying to have a good time. The change in legislation had affected the daily life of these people, but over time it had acquired a certain everydayness, even in the ways in which it was spoken about (or briefly dismissed). The everyday, ‘normal’ negotiations that young people faced give a new meaning to Gautam Bhan’s defiant words where he promoted the idea no court judgment could defeat the strength of the LGBTQ community.

Bhan, and the people involved in the No Going Back protests, meant that such strength had been built through activist organising, practices of solidarity, and everyday individual efforts; a court verdict, however regressive, could not undo years of work. In other words, recognition, understood as a positive acknowledgment of a subject’s identity that can be experienced at a practical level in everyday interactions, is not something that can be single-handedly given or taken away; it is a

process and a possibility that needs constant working and re-working. From this perspective, even during the 2009-2013 period, recognition had never ceased being but a precarious project whose value rested in its unfinished 'work-in-progress' nature.

Bhan's impassioned refutation of the importance of the law, and participants' desire to go back to 'normality' could be seen, I suggest, as expressions of a wounded attachment to the promise of recognition. While young queers' attitude toward the Supreme Court had been one of cautious hope, the *Koushal* judgment brought about a loosening of the relationship between the subject and the power authority conferring identity to the subject. Having been excluded from the possibility of a reciprocal relation with the law (Levinas 2001, Young 1997), young queer people must focus on other relations where they can hope to achieve forms of recognition that allow them to live a 'liveable life' (Butler 2004b, 2015). So while it becomes harder to imagine a future of expanding possibilities grounded in a legal framework of recognition, the aspirations, hopes, and investments that queer people had developed are not erased, but redirected to more contingent and quotidian relations and spaces.

Chapter 6. Keeping it all together: queer sexuality and family relations

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which young queer people negotiate their sexuality with their families. Their experiences of family life are rife with ambiguities and ambivalent dispositions, as they perpetually need to consider how to endure family norms and expectations about how to live a ‘normal’ life. Shifting tensions between desires for ‘coming out’ and obligations towards one’s family are expressed in particular ways within urban middle class life in India; I thus start from that place of tension to consider how desires for family acceptance are constantly negotiated with ideas about sexual recognition, and how young people try to mitigate the disruptiveness of queer sexuality *vis à vis* the interplay of duties, obligations and attachments that shape family relations.

Drawing from ethnographic material, I focus on two interconnected axes that regulate the ways in which acceptance and recognition can be obtained within the family: marriage and career achievements. I highlight how young people’s homosexuality potentially disrupts the life trajectory imagined and actively supported by parents for their children, and focus on the ambiguous ways in which young queers try to maintain the balance between familial bonds and sexual subjectivity. ‘Coming out to the parents’ emerges as a cluster of expectations, fears and strategies simultaneously at play as young queer people confront the limits of family acceptance.

As the first generation to be born after the liberalisation of the economy, they had access to information, media, ideas and culture from

all over the world since their childhood, thus being ideally positioned (class-wise) to reap the benefits of India's economic expansion on the global scale. Moreover, having come of age after the decriminalisation of homosexual sex, they had, at the time when I collected data in Delhi, the possibility to imagine a future where their sexuality would not preclude them from achieving the life they wanted, at least in terms of legal status. They were trying to forge sexual and social identities according to what they perceived to be important values for themselves, like independence; but having no forerunners, they felt the pressure of having to be the first to break with traditional ways of organising family life. Young queers' experiences, rife with contradictory attachments, reflect how values around subjectivity, sexuality and gender are under reconsideration in contemporary India.

Coming out

The term coming out and its significance for the establishment of homosexual identity has received much emphasis as being a stage in a developmental process that leads ultimately to the acquisition of a 'full' gay identity (Troiden 1989; Rhoads 1995). Also, the individual process of coming out has acquired widespread political significance within the discourse of gay liberation as a necessary step for the acquisition of rights (Armstrong 2002). Yet, as Eve K. Sedgwick has reminded us, coming out can never be a finished process, since the 'deadly elasticity of the heterosexual presumption' (Sedgwick 1993:46) forces queer people to calculate if and when to reveal or conceal their sexuality in a multiplicity of social situations.

Jason Orne suggests that we approach the process of coming out as a matter of 'strategic outness: the contextual and continual management of identity in which people are never fully 'out' or 'closeted' (Orne 2011: 698). Seeing coming out as a strategic and situated negotiation allows for different disclosure strategies, motivations, and affective relations to be included in the analysis. Viewing coming out as a negotiable and contextual strategy also makes it possible to understand the ambiguities in young queers' narratives as attempts to negotiate sexual identity in the face of multiple value systems. Finally, approaching coming out as a strategy of identity management enables us to disassociate 'coming out'

from the ‘evolutionary rhetoric’ (Hoad 2000) of western narratives of gay identity to focus instead on context-based social realities (Aggleton, Boyce, Moore and Parker 2012; Canfield 2014; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Kulick 1998).

Studies of same-sex sexualities by scholars such as Carlos Decena (2011), Bic Ngo (2012), Chris K. Tan (2011) and Francesca Stella (2015) show that the meaning and the importance of coming out to the parents vary greatly in different social contexts, and that the family is a socially constructed category. What is common, though, across socio-cultural differences are discussions about homosexuality and family relations: how the relation to one’s family is negotiated when coming out is a major concern for young queers regardless of place. In their study on homosexuality and stigmatisation in urban India, Sanchita Srivastava and Purnima Singh note that all the gay and lesbians participants who had come out to their parents reported being excluded from the family network, or being invited to live their life as heterosexuals and ‘change their orientation as soon as possible’ (Srivastava and Singh 2015: 134). As for the way homosexuality was regarded by the heterosexual respondents, who also were included in their study, they said that they could accept a homosexual as a friend or colleague, but not as a family member (see also Horton and Rydstrom 2011).

Not unlike what I see in my own findings from India, Lisa Rofel (1999, 2007) observes in her study on sexualities in contemporary China that her queer informants’ concerns about revealing their sexuality to their parents should be understood in a context where the status of the family works as a ‘boundary that articulates the self in social life’ (Rofel 2007: 102). A similar concern is present in Tom Boellstorff’s studies (1999, 2005) of Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi*⁸⁵ people. Boellstorff argues that homosexual subjectivities in Indonesia are ‘archipelagic’, that is, ‘composed of multiple subjectivities constituted in, rather than ontologically anterior to, social relations’ (Boellstorff 1999:940). Being open about their sexuality is important with respect to other gays and lesbians, but people do not consider it relevant to uniformly ‘come out’ to the wider world, including the family.

Restrictions and affections: the family

Even though the 2009 High Court judgment had galvanized the Indian LGBTQ movement and opened up avenues for claiming sexual rights, most queer people maintained that it would take many years before societal attitudes toward homosexuality could change for the better regardless of any formal recognition. In particular, the people in my study were caught between conflicting norms and ideals regarding family life and sexuality.

When speaking about the family, I refer to a complex unit of relatedness tied together by affections and kinship relations (genealogical and/or social). Regardless of whether a family is nuclear or extended (see Uberoi 2005) it would typically revolve around a heterosexual couple and be patrilineally organised (Carsten 2004; Palriwala and Kaur 2013). As a social nexus, a family provides a space of both practical and emotional commitments but is also a site of hierarchies, powers, and contestations. A family is thus more than a harmonious and intimate site of procreation and socialization (Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako 1997; Rydstrom 2003, 2016); it is also a socio-political player with profound implications for society. As summarized by Diane Singerman (2006:2; see also Yuval-Davis 1997):

Families are intimately and extensively involved in almost all realms of social, political, moral, and economic life, such as educating children, childrearing, securing employment, negotiating the bureaucracy and the political elite, establishing and maintaining businesses, saving money, promoting morality and status, distributing resources and information, securing credit, organising migration, policing sexuality, etc.

Creating a space of acceptance within the frame of the family is a process fraught with tensions because of the ways in which the family is 'able to command the loyalties of its individual members who should be prepared to sacrifice their interests, at least to some extent, to secure its well-being and continuity' (Beteille 1991: 24; see also Eklund 2011; Göransson 2010; Rydstrom 2003).

My material suggests that the insecurity pervading young queers' efforts to be recognised by their parents and other family members is informed by their awareness of how the identity they wish to affirm is likely to be obtained through injury (Butler 1997b; Berlant 2007); an

injury not only to the image of the ideal family but even to parental love and support (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2007; Rydstrom 2006). Their precariousness in regard to the process of coming out further destabilizes the asymmetrical relationship characterizing the parent-child relation (Lévinas 1998; Young 1997).

While an asymmetrical relationship between parent and child could be seen as constituted on the grounds of parents' ethical responsibility to their child, this asymmetry might not only be fortified but even fractured in its very foundation when young queers refuse to accept that their sexuality is being rendered invisible within the realm of the family (Beals 2007). At the same time, the child-parent relationship is saturated by expectations about a certain kind of reciprocity (Berlant 2007). Parents envision first of all that their children grow up and build a 'normal' family (that is, heterosexual), thanks to which the line can be reproduced; secondly, that the children achieve a good education which will bring pride to the family; and thirdly, a prestigious job which will guarantee a wealthy life for all members (Carsten 2004; Eklund 2011; Göransson 2015; Kabeer 2000; Kumar 2011; Miller 2007; Strathern 2014).

Coming out to one's family represents a demand for the recognition of a sexuality at odds with the normality represented by the family. Rather than breaking with their family, young queers struggle to find a space within its normative order; an order that is structured by heteronormativity as well as love, care, responsibility, and duty. Because the family is a critical site of recognition for young queers, they try in various ways to balance the appreciation they receive as children with the recognition they are longing for as queer subjects.

The hardest thing

The majority of participants were not out to their families *tout court*: some had come out to their siblings, others to their mother only on condition that she didn't tell anyone else; others still had not uttered the words but were convinced that their mother sensed something; some were completely 'closeted'.⁸⁶ My material is in line with Parmesh Shahani's findings among the gay community in Bombay, where he observes that 'although respondents had shared information about their homosexuality

with their friends to some extent or another, most equated coming out with coming out to their families' (Shahani 2008: 224).

Participants wanted come out to their families eventually. They believed in the value of being open about their sexuality, seeing it as a necessary step towards being recognised by the people to whom they were closest. There was, however, a disjunction between the desire for recognition and the parallel, but conceptually different, desire to be accepted. Consequently, they felt that even though an official framework for recognition was in place after the 2009 High Court judgment, this would not affect the way their families would deal with their sexuality.

Even though none of the participants had experienced extreme reactions from their parents, several stories circulated about people who had been thrown out physically and/or rejected emotionally; or even worse, they had forcibly been taken to a psychiatrist in an attempt to 'correct' their homosexuality. The possibility of having to face total rejection and harsh consequences was not only echoed in third-person stories, but a reality. When I talked to the administrators of Sangini, an NGO focusing on women attracted to women,⁸⁷ they described how the families of young women who escaped from their homes because of their sexual orientation often reacted by involving the police, private detectives and lawyers to try to get their daughters to return home, even though they had left voluntarily.

The violence faced by lesbians in particular is documented by Bina Fernandez and N.B. Gomathi (2005) who show how homosexual women suffer psychological and physical violence primarily within the family because 'the family [is] the critical domain for the enforcement of coercive control over a woman's sexuality' (2005: 160). In her study on heteronormativity in India and Indonesia, anthropologist Saskia Wieringa highlights that women who love and are attracted to other women are reduced to silence and isolation (Wieringa 2015). Their homosexual desires are coded as deviant, and censored, from an early age; yet the strength of the heteronormative values structuring family life is such that the homosexual women in Wieringa's study still hold 'traditional' family values such as love, support, and harmony in high esteem, and try to reproduce them in an attempt to access an idea of 'normality' and respectability.

While homosexual women are at a double disadvantage in a patriarchal, heteronormative society as their sexual identity clashes not only against institutionalised heterosexuality but also against prevalent

notions of feminine gender identity, young gay men could also experience violent reactions (see Deepa V. N. 2005; Bhaskaran 2004; Hawthorne 2007). Once I was at Prem's place, having a coffee, when the doorbell rang and a tall young man, who introduced himself as Siddhart, rushed in. As he sat down, he told me, staring at the table in front of him, that he had been kicked out of the house after his parents had found out that he was gay, and he had no place to go. Prem offered that he could stay at his place until a more permanent solution was found with the help of LGBTQ activists in the city.

With ejection from the family home being a possibility, it is not surprising that many young people were afraid to let their families know about their sexuality. However, fear of rejection worked on another, subtler level too. People's hesitation and preoccupation was also a result of the fear of disappointing their parents, as if not being straight meant letting the family down. In this regard, the act of coming out to the family and its consequences are imagined and constructed as instances of success and failure: hopes of becoming a success in life and anxieties about failure thus underpin young people's narratives both in relation to themselves and with regards to their family and their parents in particular.

Responsibility and reciprocity

Success and failure appear as opposite poles of a complex scenario where subjectivity consists of different relations, not always compatible. What is at stake in the decision to come out to the parents is the realisation that to succeed in affirming their sexuality unequivocally could correspond to a failure in other arenas that define one's social worth within an urban middle class environment, such as career fulfilment and marriage. By refusing to live a 'straight' life where career and marriage are adjusted to the family's wishes, a young queer person would also fail to reciprocate the affective and economic investment undertaken over the years by the family, thereby compromising its social respectability and, to a degree, its 'normality' (see Frederiksen and Dalsgård 2014).

Young queers presented their families as typically urban and middle-class: fathers worked in the public or service sector; some mothers also worked; older siblings were all employed in the advanced sectors, some working abroad (for example Australia, United Arab Emirates) (Brosius

2010; Ray 2011). They lived in nuclear-type households (see Gore 1968); some had their own car. Apart from the anxiety generated by the prospect of coming out, life at home was described in positive terms; people recalled going clothes-shopping with their parents, mentioned vacation trips, described typical everyday skirmishes such as their mothers complaining about messy bedrooms and the likes. Mothers, and to a somewhat lesser degree, fathers, were described as ‘cool’, ‘best friends’, and ‘progressive’. While talking about their home life, young queers described a condition of privilege, of which they were aware, accompanied by a sense of pressure and a lack of agency to develop their own lives.

Dhruv (21) for example, had been able to get his parents to pay for a student accommodation on campus, since he felt he needed more ‘independence’ and loathed the long commute through Delhi. After a while, though, he started to miss the more ‘luxurious’ life he had at home, and had decided to go back and live with his parents.

We’re not really affectionate, but it’s like - my parents, they’re cool [...]. I get along very well with my mom. I sort of get angry and annoyed and irritated with my dad for small things. Because he treats me like a kid. He fetches me water as soon as I come back. He does things for me and he tells mum: “here, do this for him, do that for him”. Treating you like that is not something that a teenager will take well. He should know, I tell him where he goes wrong but that’s part of his nature.

The feeling of being excessively coddled and not treated like an adult was also bothering Lara, a 22 years old woman who wanted to take some time off after her studies to ‘figure out things’, but was sure her parents would disapprove.

Till a certain age [...] your parents cocoon you, right? And after that you just have to launch into becoming you know, this ultra-responsible person, but you’re still not given that kind of credibility [...]. Some kids are given like a car, and all that, to take off, but still you’re never considered as an adult, you know, you never... I can’t take off and say “mom, dad, I want to go traveling, I’m just going to explore the world” because I myself would not feel that I’m capable enough of doing that. It’s more about what society has planned for me right now to do, and what does that mean? That I need to study, and I need to be good at that, and then do my work and then come out [of university] and have my plans straight out.

Lara, who described her family as ‘middle class, like middle, middle class’ felt restricted by the fact that she could not try to find out what she wanted to do with her life and instead had to be still dependent on her parents for economic support, which also turned into a kind of emotional dependency.

I know I need to still depend on my parents right now, that’s why I can’t just go say “alright I’ll just take off a year and go travel”. You need to depend on them, and you need to do your responsibilities towards them.

To depend on someone already denotes a condition of need; hence Lara’s phrasing, where she explicitly talks about the ‘need to depend’, indicates the presence of norms of asymmetrical reciprocity whereby children are expected to be in a relation of dependency towards their parents even when they could find ways to gain a degree of autonomy. Children’s need to be dependent - that is, to receive – is accompanied and justified by the parallel need to fulfil their filial responsibilities, which in Lara’s and other participants’ case means to follow the educational (and life) trajectory encouraged by the parents.

Discussing the ways in which an economic logic of reciprocity informs family relations, Naila Kabeer (2000) argues that family relations tend to be contingently arranged around inter-generational contracts whose terms depend on the social, cultural and economic circumstances in the family.⁸⁸ Inter-generational contracts are about the balance between parental investments in their children’s future and the expected returns. The nature of inter-generational contracts within families is characterized by instability, since parents can only hope that the children will they care of them when they grow up. Kabeer points out that ‘inter-generational contracts within the family are likely to be strongest in contexts where families are the dominant welfare institutions, and where the possibilities for adult children to secure their livelihoods and ageing parents their survival and security independent of family support and community networks, are largely absent’ (Kabeer 2000: 465; see also Göransson 2010, 2015).

Participants felt that it was their duty to reciprocate the support they had received through the years. One Niral Club member posted his dilemma on the club’s Facebook page: he was sure that his parents would never accept his homosexuality and was convinced that he would have to move out of the city, live his life somewhere else and cut all ties with his

family. This was preferable to the inevitable rejection and exclusion that he would face if he came out.

At the same time, he felt caught in an impossible situation because, as an only child, there was no one else who would take care of the parents. His dilemma generated several dozens responses from people in similar circumstances. They saw fulfilling their life in keeping with their queer sexuality and caring for their parents as irreconcilable prospects. And yet, they were aware that their generation was among the first to grow up in a society where advanced capitalism was an established reality and notions of filial duty were losing grip, at least for the educated urban middle classes. Alok (22) explained:

It's basically a generation thing. You have to understand our generation, at least in India, is the one which is more independent. You can call it western influence, you can call it our own personal philosophy, but you know this whole ideology of "I am an independent person and I need to be independent before I can have someone relying on me". That feeling comes to us.

For our parents, they were, you know always looking after their parents. Their parents were looking after their parents. It was never that the parents were looking after the kids. The parents treated the kids badly and that "I am your father so you must do it" and the kids gave back respect that gave them back. We treat them with respect but we can't give it back to you unless I am fulfilling my own things and I need to take care of my kids also. So the thing is that from taking care of your parents, our generation is "I'm going to take care of my kids".

And suddenly what basically happened is that our parents' generation, they got screwed over from both sides! Their kids don't care, and they have to look after their parents also. No one is caring for them! And the basic problem is that they are yet to understand the fact that once their kids are independent and they are sure that they can help them, that's when they're going to do it. But expectations of course are the same, you know I did for my parents why are you not doing it for me? So again, you understand, when people are getting screwed over from both ends, they're like "why should I do that? Why should I give you the freedoms when my father did not give me the freedoms?" That's how they equate it.

Alok voices an argument also developed by sociologist Jyotsna Kapur (2014). Kapur argues that one of the social effects of the liberalisation of the Indian economy is a compartmentalisation of time and generations,

where the youth (those born during or after 1990) is seen as radically different than any other previous generations in that they are supposed to be the driving force in India's global ascendance. This generates a desire for 'independence' and at the same time an anxiety about how to deal with time-honoured norms of reciprocity, now that 'fulfilling [one's] own things', as Alok puts it, comes before the obligation to take care of the parents. However, while Kapur maintains that the neoliberal turn embraced by India since the early 1990s has produced a 'calculating, amoral subject' who will 'use the family and discard it when it appears to be a burden' (Kapur 2014:13), the predicament in which Alok and his friends find themselves is much more ambiguous.

In her study on youth and café culture in Pune, anthropologist Teresa Platz (2012) highlights the contradictions shaped by India's globalised cultural economy and how they reflect on the daily life of young people, focusing in particular on consumerism, pleasure-seeking practices, focus on the individual, and ideas of success. As a younger generation, their values differ from those of their parent's generation, but they still seek to reach a compromise: 'The young adults sought more freedom but continued to appreciate a process decision-making that did not put all the burden on one person. They realised themselves not only by reinforcing or subverting but also by performing, inhabiting, experiencing, aspiring to and reaching for social roles and expectations' (Platz 2012: 265). Situating family relations as contingently produced and challenged by a changing socio-economic context makes it possible to understand how pressures, desires and obligations intersect with sexuality, producing ambivalent narratives.

Prospects for the future: education and career

Fulfilling parental expectations was felt as one of the primary duties of children, but socio-cultural and generational changes, together with a stigmatised sexuality gave rise to ambiguous feelings regarding how to properly fulfil one's duties while at the same time protecting the integrity of one's sexuality. The two key arenas where duties, expectations, hopes and individual desires intersected and generated ambiguity and uncertainty among young Delhi queers are the professional sphere (education and career) and marriage. The two are inter-related, to the extent that a suitable education and a successful professional life are important elements in spouse selection.

The pressure to succeed in education can be gruelling,⁸⁹ and middle class parents can push their children to study subjects such as medicine, engineering, law or management despite the children's own inclinations, since these are considered highly prestigious and leading to successful careers (see Aggarwal, Kapur and Tognatta 2012; Kapur 2014). Having the 'right' educational credentials is not only necessary for individual success; it also plays a big role on the dating and marriage marketplace (see Yakaboski, Sheridan and Dade 2013). For middle class families, the 'right' marriage not only ensures the continuation of kinship networks, but validates and sediments the family's class belonging (Ingraham 1994; Radhakrishnan 2011). When I discussed family pressures with young queer people, career and marriage were considered to be inseparable elements of a life trajectory where first came a suitable education and a desirable career, then marriage.⁹⁰ Ravi (21), for instance, explained these intersections by saying:

In terms of my studies [my parents] really want me - I have been working for the past year and I will work for another year. In India, with only a graduate degree you don't really earn that much so although the work experience I'm getting is very good [...] when it comes to the long term, my growth or the money that I'll be earning, that comes after the post-graduate MBA. So study-wise they are putting pressure on me to quit my job and go for higher studies and all that. Because you know they are also working, they will retire in another five-six years so they want me to finish my studies and that by then.

All the people in my study were pursuing or had completed university degrees; moreover, the majority of them studied at prestigious

universities such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) or highly reputed comprehensive universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) or Delhi University. Those who had completed their graduate studies were working in IT companies or other highly specialized sectors. Some of them, such as Ravi, were thinking of going back to school to pursue an MBA (Master of Business Administration), as they knew it would give them even further advantages career-wise.

My interlocutors belonged to the highly competitive, highly motivated youth for whom a career in the global economy was an attainable option (Nisbett 2007, 2009); they were successful for their age, and fitted well the ideal of the well-educated youth who can aspire to prestigious jobs, thus raising or consolidating the social status of their families (Brosius 2010; Kapur 2014; Lukose 2009; Mankekar 2015). Ravi's parents exemplify the logic of trying to maximise the expected returns on their investments: they'd wished he studied further until their retirement, so that he could be able to better provide for himself and for them later on. The pressure of educational and career expectations, however, could also turn into an escape and an anchor for some young queers, 'rescuing' people in the eventuality of rejection and enabling them to live independently, as Dhruv's case illustrates.

Dhruv was stressed because his parents had found a SMS in his phone containing a gay sex joke. They got alarmed and questioned him about his sexuality, but Dhruv decided not to tell them the truth because he feared their negative reaction. Dhruv had made plans for the best time to come out to them:

I know for certain [that] my parents won't take it well [...]. The reason why I went for architecture and not finance was [that] I needed a stable profession. I can't really rely on anyone else but myself. I was hoping that after I have finished college, then I would probably tell my parents [about being gay].

But his parents discovered the text message with the gay joke:

It happened unexpectedly for me [that the parents found about his homosexuality]. But they're like every parent I know [and] they will be in denial, so I'm leaving it at that. When they have been in denial for a long time, I don't think it [i.e. homosexuality] will come up; not until I bring it up. I don't think it's immoral for me to be strategic with my family, I think it's something that is needed.

Professional development was a necessity for those, like Dhruv, who expected to be rejected if they decided to come out to their parents. At the same time, focusing on studying or working was also the only available strategy young gay people could use to postpone the unavoidable moment when their parents would start pressuring them toward getting married.

Getting married, getting a ‘normal’ life

Familial involvement in marriage arrangements is still the norm in India, where according to a 2005 survey,⁹¹ only 5% of marriages are arranged without the involvement (or consent) of the parents. Recent studies point to a growing trend toward what is called ‘love-cum-arranged’ or ‘arranged-love’ marriage (Uberoi 1998, 2006; Kapur 2009), that is, a marriage borne out of a love relationship where the prospective couple seeks family approval (Platz 2012; see also the introduction). Nikhil, a 20-year-old student and aspiring activist, belonged to a large family where everyone - uncles, aunts and cousins - got actively involved in the search for suitable matches for their children and nephews. In his family, even the idea of a love marriage was a ‘taboo’, he said; he was planning to study further after finishing his science degree, and possibly applying for a PhD abroad afterwards. Nikhil nonetheless admitted that he couldn’t go on studying forever. For most participants, the prospect of marriage, whether imminent or not, was imagined as inevitable. As Ravi explained:

Marrying and all that right now... no, because 21 is frankly young so that even if in my neighbourhood there are families who, like, wed their daughters as soon as they are 21 or something, in my family – I have cousins who are girls, a cousin of mine is turning 29 this year but she’s not married so they are quite liberal like that, so yes I don’t think, thankfully no pressure there.

According to the latest available survey data, only less than 2% of men and 1% of women remain unmarried in India (Sonalde and Aldrist 2010: 675). As Rajni Palriwala and Ravinder Kaur (2013) argue, marriage remains a fundamental life event for Indians across caste, class and religious affiliations, occupying a central position not only in the understanding of family and kinship, but also deeply informing ideas about culture, identity and citizenship.

Focusing on developing a successful career is not sufficient to diffuse parental pressure to get married, as in Ashok's case. Ashok, 25, had moved to Delhi from the south of India and had been living and working independently for three years. His father kept sending him pictures and profiles of desirable candidates, and Ashok kept trying to postpone the discussion by claiming that he was too busy with work, but he felt the pressure growing, especially since he was the only son. He admitted to not having definite plans other than trying to buy himself time.

The perceived inevitability of marriage also instilled heterosexual expectations in young queer people. Shiv, 20, remembered how he felt attracted to other boys already at the age of five. Eventually he accepted that he was gay but knew that neither his family nor society might be willing to accept him as such. As he grew up, Shiv had planned to marry a lesbian to keep up appearances to the outside world and have children through In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). He had since changed his mind and when we spoke he expressed his intention to live openly as a gay young man, but he was ambivalent about whether to tell his family about his homosexuality.

Right now I cannot come out to them [i.e. the parents], they'll take me to some preacher or *baba*⁹² or doctor but yes, I am very sure about this one thing that I will come out to them. As soon as they start trying to get me married, I will have to tell them [that] I can't marry because of this gay thing. I'll educate them and reason with them and I'll do more than my best to help them feeling comfortable about my sexuality. But if they end up disowning me, I'll be ready to face it because I have my sister's support.

For Shiv, as for others, confronting marriage was the breaking point when sexual identity had to be disclosed to parents and family members. Shiv struggled with the ambivalences imbued in simultaneously wishing to live up to his parents' expectations of being an ordinary son in terms of complying to established norms and thus being 'normal', on the one hand, and a strong urge to stand up as a son who also happens to be gay, on the other.

Recognition in the family thus is a fragile and perpetually negotiated process marked by emotional as well as economic insecurity, as one might end up excluded from a pervasive institution critical for the organisation of social life (Beteille 1991; Kinnvall and Hansen 2010; Uberoi 1993). The tensions expressed by Shiv and other young people

indicate that family relations restrict the possibilities of being recognised as queer and accepted as a ‘normal’ child. The ways these relations work also place young queers in a dilemma regarding their subject position, since inhabiting two identities (sexual, as queer, and social, as a son/daughter) at the same time seems impossible.

Daughters and sons; lesbians and gays

For lesbians, the pressure to marry takes different routes because of the differential values that are placed on the role of women in society at large and the patriarchal view according to which daughters are an economic burden that shifts from the parental home to the marital home (Bennett 1982; Fruzzetti 1993; Lindberg 2014). Lesbians would not uncommonly be forced into marriage, as studies conducted by Paola Bacchetta (2002), Bina Fernandez and N.B. Gomathi (2003) and Ruth Vanita (2009) have shown. Young women’s opinions about marriage are less conspicuous than those of males in my material. None of the young women in my study expressed any desire to get married at all (even to a woman): some young women like Pallavi (23 years old) and Shobha (22) were engaged in LGBTQ politics and activism, and refused the idea of marrying, for emotional, sexual and ideological reasons.

Others told me that they weren’t especially preoccupied with it, and that their parents were leaving them alone because they were ‘still young’. Since both men and women on average were in their early 20s, and given that women are expected to be a few years younger than their spouses, the reported lack of marriage-related anxiety on the part of young women can be explained in terms of the intersection between gender and class.

Ratna (23), Mira (18), Radhika (20) and others came from solid middle class families that they defined as ‘liberal’; they were studying at prestigious universities such as Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University and, in contrast to their male peers, had not been directed by their parents to study engineering, law, or medicine, but were left free to pursue their academic interests (among the participants, some young women studied history, literature, film studies, social sciences). Their relative ‘freedom’ can be traced back to the middle class project of raising young ‘modern’ women (Fernandes 2006; Lukose 2009;

Radhakrishnan 2011) who can focus on developing their independence and their career, in contrast to lower-class women, who are perceived to be more closely tied to their gendered roles as wives and mothers (Belliappa 2013; Palriwala 1994).

The fact that young gay men were more anxious than women about how to avoid getting married illuminates the different expectations bearing on young women and men when it comes to marriage. On the one hand, it is more acceptable for men to postpone marriage, and in some cases to live as bachelors, especially if they, like my participants, can claim access to prestigious and competitive careers. At the same time, the marriage of a son is seen as the most important event for a family, in social and economic terms: marrying a son, and marrying him well, significantly increases a family's status because it guarantees the continuation of the kinship lineage (at least in patrilineal kinship systems, which are the majority in India) (see Dube 1988, 2001; Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Rydstrom 2003, 2006; Shah 1998; Vatuk 1975).

Young gay men's anxiety about marriage, I would suggest, represents another instance of the ambiguities produced by sexualities that deviate from the institutionalised heterosexual order (Butler 1990; Jackson 2006; Rubin 1993). In a patriarchal social system like India, young men are positioned favourably by virtue of their gender identity, but in the case of participants, their sexual identity turns the gender-related privileges into anxiety-generating problems. In this regard, my findings resonate with Tom Boellstorff's research on gay sexualities in Indonesia. He discusses the 'mystery' of gay-identified men who see heterosexual marriage not only as imperative to fulfill familial and social roles but also desirable as a confirmation of their gender identity (Boellstorff 1999). Similarly, the lives of the young queers in Delhi are partly structured by values (promoted and enforced by state authorities) that place the family as a constitutive unit of the nation (Chatterjee 1993; McClintock 1993; Ngo 2012). The shape, composition and social class of the ideal family changes over time, and in today's India – much like in Boellstorff's Indonesia – the ideal family is now represented by the professional middle class family (Beteille 2001).

Having been raised and educated so that they could fulfil and succeed in creating an ideal middle class family life for themselves, participants' anxiety about how to escape marriage is at the same time fear of exclusion, fear of disappointing, and fear of failing. Young people's doubts, and the common strategy of buying time, are indicative of the fact

that as long as a person acquires moral and cultural citizenship only by subscribing to one and only one model of social existence - premised on heterosexual marriage - alternative lifestyles and alternative family relations remain an unsuitable choice.

While marriage per se was not an urgent preoccupation according to the young women in my study, their experiences of coming out represent another instance of the complicated intersections between sexual and gender identity, and the norms that govern them. The majority of my female interlocutors were out to at least one parent. This is a noticeable difference compared to male participants.

Mira (18) had moved to Delhi during her childhood. Her parents were originally from Tamil Nadu, in southern India and lived in an intra-religious love marriage, which was considered controversial since both her mother (a Christian) and father (a Hindu) came from Brahmin families.⁹³ Mira's parents displayed an open attitude toward discussing sexuality, including homosexuality; it was through her mother that Mira found out about the existence of the LGBTQ community in India, so that when she started wondering whether she herself may be gay, she had a reference point. Mira had not come out to her parents through what Orne calls 'direct disclosure' (Orne 2011) but she thought that they must have known that she was not heterosexual:

We talked about the whole queer⁹⁴ identity so I think my parents would definitely think of me as a queer child [...]. They may have known, because they didn't enforce stereotypical girl behaviour upon me, they didn't say "Oh God! You're supposed to do it like this". They just said "do whatever that you feel would be comfortable" [...]. So my mom has kind of known for a while that I may be a lesbian and she's very "OK fine", now she doesn't have to worry about me getting pregnant. That's one thing. [...] So she's fine, she's like "you get a job, move in with a girl it's fine, it doesn't matter too much, I'm not worried about what the neighbours will say or anything", she's not that kind of person. My dad is a very traditional Indian but since he is in this house with two very dominant females I think he's like "OK it's your life, what can I do? I've said what I have to".

Twenty-year-old Radhika came out to her mother immediately after she came to terms with the fact that she was homosexual. She did so because her mother was 'her best friend' to whom she could tell 'absolutely everything'. Radhika's mother reacted by pointing out that it was

probably just a phase, and there had been no conflicts in the family after the revelation.

I think she [i.e. mother] hopes it is a phase because it's not that she doesn't like gay people, it's just that she doesn't want my life to be as difficult as it would be, facing a society, you know [...] there's lots of things [...] yeah, I think it's all about what the society will think and how they will deal with you, how they would look at you, they'll talk behind your back. You'll be ridiculed. So all those notions [about what society would think], that's what gets her [...]. You could say the same about having a teenage pregnancy. I would put them on the same scale because [it] is all about what people would say.

While both Mira and Radhika paint a picture of relative privilege in their family life, there is one element that complicates their narratives. The references made by both Mira and Radhika to unwanted, premarital pregnancies highlight the hierarchical complexity of sexual recognition in India. Pregnancies resulting from premarital relationships are heavily condemned as they confirm beyond any doubt that a woman is no longer 'pure' in terms of being a virgin (Abraham 2001; Kumar 2002; Viswanath 1997).

A homosexual child, like a pregnant unmarried daughter or a child who is married against family/caste/religious norms, is thought to bring disgrace to the whole family (Abraham 2001; Chowdhry 1998; Viswanath 1997). The idea that shame spreads from an individual to her/his kinship group is powerful and not uncommon in the Asian context, including India (see Kinnvall and Hansen 2010; Rydstrom 2003, 2006). In urban, middle class settings, this idea works in tandem with the necessity to perform and project respectability and morality, which is crucial in the maintenance of the balance between appropriately modern and appropriately Indian social identities (Liechty 2003; Radhakrishnan 2011).

The female students with whom I spoke all agreed that an unplanned pregnancy was the greatest risk feared by young women when thinking about premarital sexual relations with the opposite sex. Irrespective of the liberal upbringing Mira and Radhika had experienced, when it came to sexuality they had to contend with heteronormative values of modesty that are associated to the image and behavior of the ideal Indian woman (Puri 1999; Thapan 2009).⁹⁵

Chandra (22) was out to her brother, but not to her parents. She had not experienced any pressure from her family related to marriage yet; instead, she framed her parents' expectations in terms of responsibility:

My parents are pressuring me to what they call a more responsible way of living, in the sense that it should be more acceptable - maybe not acceptable but more like a life that is heading somewhere. If I ever were to come out to them, I think they would see it as one of my many irresponsible ideas. They probably won't react that badly but then again they wouldn't be happy about it.

[Marriage pressures] will be in maybe another seven, eight, nine years... right now I'm making more space for myself. My roommate is 28 [...] and her family is pressuring her to get married. She doesn't really want to get married but she probably will do it because she sees it as the right thing to do. She says "you will also get to that stage, when I was your age, I also thought that I wouldn't want to get married but then when you see all your friends getting married [it changes]". The only alternative is to have a community, like a support group. If I have [such a group] I will be able to live by some of my choices.

Priyadarshini Thangarajah and Ponny Arasu (2011) argue that lesbian sexuality poses a particularly 'serious threat' (2011:328) to the heteronormative social system in India because lesbianism challenges not only the heterosexual order, but patriarchy and the role of the family as well. Yet, compared to the narratives from young queer men, young women experienced or expected mostly anti-climactic reactions from their parents. Chandra imagined that her sexuality would be seen as an 'irresponsible idea' related to her young age; Radhika's mother similarly dismissed her daughter's coming out as 'just a phase'.

The apparent absence of anxiety in these young women's narratives is in sharp contrast with the available literature on the violence faced by lesbians in India (Fernandez and Gomathi 2005; Khaitan 2004; Sharma 2006) and with the stories that the managers of the NGO Sangini told me about middle class parents ready to hire professional criminals to kidnap their daughter after she came out to them and moved out to live with a partner. The nonplussed reactions that participants expected or reported can thus be seen as an unwillingness to recognise the existence of female homosexuality, and a tendency to see it instead as a deviant (but temporary) version of heterosexual female sexual behaviour.

Affection and closeness

In what ways does revealing one's sexuality to the parents threaten the reciprocal dynamics operating within the family? The disruptive power of coming out is not only a destabilising factor affecting the social and economic reciprocal bonds that hold the family as institution together; in participants' narratives, the family's reciprocal affective relations are most susceptible to being disrupted by the revelation of a child's homosexuality, and yet they are also capable of providing certain forms of recognition.

Nikhil had come out to some of his friends and felt it had been a 'liberating' experience. He was strongly convinced about the necessity for gay people to come out in order to bring awareness about homosexuality in India. Nikhil had joined the Niral Club in its early days, and since then he started getting involved in various activist campaigns. He was helping a noted senior activist with collecting stories about gay relationships, stories that would be used to defend the case of LGBTQ people during the Supreme Court hearings that would begin a few weeks after I interviewed him. Nikhil was out to his mother, who was 'not really cool about it'. However, she had promised not to say anything to Nikhil's father. He had no difficulties coming out to his friends because:

You don't have to spend your life living with them [...]. You can choose them. But with parents it's like you have to live with them, so - at least till you're earning, so it matters what they think and I'm quite close to my mum, like really close to my mum so - I didn't see a point hiding somehow.

Parental opinion is at the same time both a burden and a valued resource as also described by Harsh, 21. Harsh saw his parents as 'very supportive' because they let him study architecture, which he was passionate about, instead of business, which would have been the preferred path according to his community background.⁹⁶ Harsh wasn't out to them yet. He described his relationship with his parents as open and characterized by closeness. He acknowledged that his parents would need time to accept him, just as it took him years to come to terms with his own homosexuality.

I want to [come out to them] because I feel, I do not like to lie to my parents, and I tried not to as much as possible, but then there are certain, certain areas of my life which people say “it’s perfectly alright that you are not supposed to tell your parents everything”, but then I have a relationship that I feel much more comfortable when my parents know what’s going on in my life.

And I’m not able to share a large part of my life; there was one point in time when I started feeling disconnected with them, so I asked him [Prem], you know, that I’m feeling very disconnected with my parents, so what should I do? He’s like “ok now it’s time you know, you should tell them”, but then stuff happened and I could not tell them, there were like larger issues happening in my family, so I’m just waiting for it all to calm down and then I’ll stir the pot again, it’s like “hey I’m gay”. So, yeah, it will happen eventually, that’s decided. And ‘when’ is again a question mark, I don’t know, but yeah, I have to tell them.

Harsh’s moral dilemma was echoed by several other people included in my study: coming out was important, but it risked spoiling a close relationship. Harsh did not want to lie or feel ‘disconnected’ from his family because of his sexuality; he recognised that his relationship with his parents was close and therefore precious. He wanted to prepare and educate his parents as much as possible, by ‘throwing hunches’ at them about scientific facts on homosexuality, so as to minimise the potential shock of the revelation. It is possible that Harsh’s parents already had an idea about their son’s sexuality, since they were aware about his involvement in Niral Club and other LGBTQ circles; by informing them about his engagement with sexual minorities’ issues, Harsh could test his parents’ general opinion about such issues and tweak his coming out strategy accordingly.

What emerges from Harsh’s account is a double process: while he was gearing himself up to finally tell them that he was gay, he was spending considerable effort preparing his parents to receive the news in the least harmful way for them. Thus, in Harsh’s coming out project, the desire for sexual recognition is not separate from, not superior to, the affective bonds that keep the family united. Concerns over the potential loss of closeness with parents remind of the inner conflicts described by Kath Weston (1991) in her work on families of choice. Weston argues that coming out to the family puts familial love to test; the reaction to the confession reveals the quality and strength of the familial bonds. In addition, Weston argues, coming out is an act that could have ambivalent

effects on the relationship, either creating or destroying ‘closeness’; these contrasting possibilities are at the source of the mix of fear and hope that Weston’s informants, much like the participants in my research, expressed. ‘Real’ closeness (based on an idea of authenticity and intimate knowledge) with one’s family can only be realized if they accept you for who you are. At the same time, deciding to pursue the kind of closeness that comes with full disclosure might destroy another type of closeness, that which comes with day-to-day interactions and the fulfilment of one’s role within the family dynamics.

Family acceptance is important not only because it is a precondition for maintaining closeness. For participants, the family acts as a protective shield capable of defying wider societal disapproval of homosexuality. While there is a dearth of ethnographic studies on parents of LGBTQ individuals in India, one common narrative reiterated in media representations was that of the ‘family closet’, that is, parents who had accepted their children’s sexuality but would often refrain from telling anyone else; an opinion piece reflecting on the changes in attitudes toward homosexuality in India phrased this secretive reaction as ‘the whole family [going] into the closet with you’.⁹⁷ Yet the protectionist attitude of parents had invaluable strength, as 23-year-old Manish explained:

Because if the family is with you, will not care about society, because your family is supporting you. It would be, ‘my son is this [i.e. gay] and I support him the way he is’, so he will not think about society or others because he has got help.

As the cases of Harsh and Radhika indicate, young queers understood their parents’ difficulty at accepting a queer child, which they interpreted as a sign of loving care and legitimate worry about society’s homophobic attitude. The stigma surrounding homosexual sexuality could not be dispelled by a legal verdict, nor defeated by simply being ‘out and proud’; but it could be alleviated by parental love. To be accepted by the parents was important for young queers because it would provide them with a safety that they knew would not be there had they chosen to come out and possibly sever the ties with the family. Radhika sympathises with her mother’s worry about ‘what people will say’; Nikhil comes out to his mother on condition that she doesn’t tell anyone; Harsh prefers to wait until his parents are ready: the attitudes and choices of these young queer people suggest less a demand to be recognised than a compromise-

friendly mentality and a willingness to settle for something quite different from an unquestionable affirmation of one's identity.

However, it would be unproductive to view young people's accommodating attitude simply as a form of subordination to the power of heteronormativity; instead, drawing from Saba Mahmood (2005) I suggest that young queers' apparently ambiguous stance is a form of agency that works with, and within, the norms and values that sustain queer people's social relations. If family is what produces and reproduces social identity and gives it value, and if by losing the family one is not only left vulnerable to homophobia, but also isolated as a child, then trying not to break the affective circuit of reciprocity is not simply a convenient option: it is an investment in the daily work of persuasion, it is a struggle that does not manifest in spectacular outcomes but in the maintenance of a delicate balance (see also Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2007).

For the young gays and lesbians in my study, however, this balance is skewed and precarious because their sexuality precludes them from being able to fulfil the expectations that their roles as children require; namely, the continuation of the family line. In addition, a sense of uncertainty about the future pervades many narratives; not only is the choice to claim recognition through 'coming out' difficult because of the emotional consequences it could unravel in the family, but also because young gays and lesbians have no idea about what their future 'out' life would look like. Ravi, who was steadfast and confident in his career plans, didn't have the same confidence about what coming out would entail in the long term. While he wanted to live his life without giving in to his family's pressures, he was 'disappointed' when he realised how unstable homosexual relationships seemed to be.

I haven't seen people who are living together like for long. They are very promiscuous people, they have short-term relationships, they are dating ten people at a time so - which I don't have any problem with it, I am not judging people for it [...]. But when you are 40, let's say ten to twenty years down the line, how will you manage? What will you do then, if you don't, like, find someone? [...]. So yes, I was somewhat disappointed and now I'm really unsure of what I'll actually do ten years down the line. What I want to do, whether I want to move to another country, whether I want to be living in this country and not getting married or whatever.

The ambiguous ways in which Ravi and others deal with their sexual identity and their family, choosing to postpone the moment of coming out

as much as possible, is importantly related to the perceived lack of alternative lifestyles. The prospect of facing rejection and losing the only affective network available was too big a risk to take for many. The family thus emerges as a powerful regime where the demand to be recognised has to be weighed against a host of mostly negative outcomes. At the same time, though, the family emerges also as the central nexus through which queer sexuality can be somehow validated.

Representing the family

The family and family-centred narratives dominate the ways in which the discourse around queer sexualities has been articulated in the domains of media and public culture. Mainstream media such as English language newspapers (*Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu* to name a few) and television channels started systematically covering the issue around the time of the High Court judgment; since then, articles and news pieces about the coming out moment have appeared regularly in the press especially,⁹⁸ most coverage has been positive if slightly dramatized, highlighting the emotional toll that coming out exerts on both parents and children. Television programs capitalised on the controversial issue of LGBTQ rights by coding it in a way that would appeal to viewers at home, airing special broadcasts about parents of gay children and talk shows with high emotional overtones.⁹⁹ Websites more specifically focusing on LGBTQ issues also cover family relations regularly, leaving more room for personal narratives and focusing on providing online platforms for support and discussion within the LGBTQ community.¹⁰⁰

Human rights campaigns have also highlighted the pivotal role of family acceptance as a vehicle to equality in India. At the end of 2012 the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched a campaign called Born Free and Equal, whose aim was to promote equal rights for LGBTQ people through different media, from publications to audio-visual material. As part of this campaign, the OHCHR produced a Bollywood-style musical video.¹⁰¹

In this particular film, an Indian family prepares to meet their child's fiancée for the first time. Lavish festive decorations are shown, and the members of the family, parents, brother, in-laws and the mandatory grandmother are all dressed up, nervous and expectant. When the young

man exits the car accompanied not by a woman, but by another handsome man, the anticipation turns to shock and disbelief in the faces of all the family members. The grandmother, in particular, is visibly shaken. She walks toward the couple and gives a long, questioning look at her grandchild's male partner. After a moment's uncertainty, her face opens up in a smile; she blesses the couple and in the next scene the whole family is singing and dancing.

The tensions generated by a young person's homosexuality within the family have been addressed in cinematic representations too. The people at Niral Club especially referred to two movies that epitomized their anxieties about coming out to their parents. *Summer in my veins* (1999) by Nishit Saran and *I am* (2011) by Sonali Gulati are documentaries dealing with the parent-child relationship and the ambivalences imbued in confronting family members with what is felt as one's authentic self. In *Summer in my veins*, Saran comes out to his mother on camera. Sonali Gulati on the other hand never came out to her mother and after her death, Gulati returns to India to interview a number of families of lesbian and gay people, in an attempt to evoke and imagine what her life could have been if she had come out.

I cite these two films not only because I was repeatedly told to watch them, but because they both present a particular type of family (and family situation) which resonates with my participants' own circumstances. First of all, both the authors/narrators, Saran and Gulati, had been living abroad for a period of time (in the US specifically). Secondly, they both centred around young protagonists: Saran had just graduated from Harvard while Gulati, though older at the time of narration, chooses to work with her own youth memories, which she contrasts with stories of younger gays and lesbians. These two movies 'spoke' to my participants because they illustrated poignantly a situation they felt they could identify with: educated, middle class parents who had been proudly following their children's successes in education; prestigious degrees obtained abroad, which some of my participants also had (and many others were considering); and finally, the way in which coming out coincided with the critical period after graduation, when children enter the realm of work and transition to adulthood.

Petitioning for recognition: families as societal agents

The importance of family acceptance as a sine qua non for the recognition of queer sexuality can be evinced also by looking at how the issue has been framed in the legal struggle to repeal Section 377. As I discussed in Chapter 5, soon after the High Court ‘read down’ Section 377 in 2009, a host of petitions were submitted to the Supreme Court of India by people who were against the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The case had to be re-examined, and as of the end of 2011, the LGBTQ community and several NGOs working with equality, sexual health and rights were preparing their documentation to be submitted to the Supreme Court, in order to strengthen the argument put forward in the Naz Foundation petition.

Among the pro-decriminalisation petitioners was a group called Minna Saran and Others (Parents of LGBT children) and described as ‘parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons from different professional, socio-cultural backgrounds and different regions of India’ (Koushal 2013: paragraph 15). In the petition, the group claims that their children ‘will suffer irreparable harm and damage as criminalisation not only affects the LGBT persons but also their families. Their struggles of having to understand sexuality at odds with Section 377 have resulted in accepting their children’s sexuality and they are acutely aware of the social stigma prejudice, myths and stereotypes that surround the subject of homosexuality in India’ (Koushal 2013: paragraph 15).

The group had formed in the beginning of 2011 and consisted of 19 parents who had decided to actively stand up in support the 2009 High Court judgment from their particular standpoint as parents. Minna Saran, the lead signatory of the petition, is the mother of Nishit Saran, the director of the documentary *Summer in my veins*, mentioned above. After the death of her son in a car accident in 2002, Minna Saran started the Nishit Saran Foundation, whose mission is to support LGBTQ youth and their families in the country. While the petition submitted to the Supreme Court by the Parents of LGBT Children is structured according to the parameters of jurisprudence (i.e. by quoting past decisions in support of their plea), the group affirms its representativeness by citing the diverse social, occupational and regional background of its members,¹⁰² so as to

fend off potential accusation of partisanship. The legitimacy of the group in intervening is argued as follows:

The applicants submit that they are all united by one common factor as parents of individuals who have come out to them as being either lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender/*hijra*. As parents of LGBT individuals, each of the applicants has experienced the personal struggle of having to understand a sexuality at odds with what Section 377 prescribes. A detailed table listing the different professional qualifications and backgrounds of the different applicants and their LGBT children is annexed. (Annexure V) It has been the experience of the applicants that Section 377 has affected the quality of family life making communication between parents and children difficult and also impeded the right to peacefully enjoy family life, making entire families vulnerable to the fear of arrest and prosecution of the applicants children under Section 377. Section 377 has also been an affront to dignity by tainting the Applicants children with the mark of illegality and by implication their families (*Minna Saran and Others* 2010: 4-5).

In the text, the ‘personal struggle’ that each parent had to face presented as a direct result of the existence of Section 377, rather than as coming from individual homophobic beliefs. Section 377 is accused of hindering the ‘communication between parents and children’, thus damaging the ‘quality of family life’. Importantly, Section 377 cast not only LGBTQ people, but also their families, as illegal. Such a statement seems to suggest that sexual identity is not only an individual trait, but something that concerns the whole family; LGBTQ people are configured here not as autonomous individuals but in relational terms, primarily as someone’s children, and the ideal of a ‘family life’ that should be ‘enjoyed’ but is instead ‘impeded’ is foregrounded.

The word of the law is, in this statement, brought within the sphere of the family: by speaking as parents, and by speaking of LGBTQ people as their children, the petitioners seek to humanize the targets of a repressive piece of jurisprudence by inscribing them into a narrative of the ‘ideal’ Indian family (see Uberoi 2006) whose life and harmony should be respected and protected. The petition is supplemented by a list of the petitioners’ professions, given as background information: it mentions ‘scientists, teachers, government employees, private sector employees, lawyers, artists and home makers’. The list aims at presenting the group as an inter-class, cross-regional cohort, thus dampening doubts about the perceived elitism (upper class bias) of the families involved.

An article in the newspaper *Indian Express* dedicated to the petition¹⁰³ gives some examples of the professions of the petitioners' children: some lived abroad (in Europe or the USA) and were in high-status careers. Minna Saran's son Nishit was a Harvard graduate; filmmaker Chitra Palekar's daughter is an academic; other professions cited in the article are college lecturer, software engineer, film director. These are all recognised broadly in India as respectable professions, signalling success and a well-adjusted career path.

The presence of the list of professions seems to suggest something else other than the diversity of the petitioners' backgrounds: in fact, the list can be seen as a way to buttress the argument by publicly stating that these families belong to the respectable middle classes, and that their children are fulfilling the demands for professional success and prestige. The only element straying from this picture-perfect characterisation is their sexuality. The message conveyed to readers could sound like: 'despite my child's sexuality, he is an engineer, he has a degree from the US, his partner is a doctor'.¹⁰⁴

Such attempts of normalising and de-dramatising homosexuality should be seen in the light of the ways in which homosexuality is stigmatised in Indian society as a 'deviant' or 'perverted' sexual practice (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1991; Narrain and Chandran 2005). The attempt to re-inscribe homosexuals into the sphere of normality, as ordinary, yet successful (middle class) people's children, appears as a critical if not the only entry into the possibility for the recognition of homosexuality as an acceptable identity within India's contemporary society; and it is the middle class family who retains the power to negotiate moral boundaries and incorporate alternative narratives, as long as those speak to typical middle class ambitions about educational and socio-economic prosperity (Appadurai 2004; Brosius 2010; Dickey 2002). Being recognised as homosexual by the middle class family, and according to its standards, is not unconditional but framed by expectations about societal success, maybe even to a greater extent than if one was heterosexual.

The narratives of young queer people and the statements articulated in the legal petition can be seen as complementary parts of a discourse where the recognition of queer sexuality is not configured as a standalone necessity based on an understanding of an individual's right to equality; rather, queer sexuality can be recognised insofar as it is incorporated into the circuits of reciprocity that inform family and social relations (Kabeer 2000; Lévinas 1998; Young 1997). Thus, young people's anxieties about

reciprocating the support of their families relate also to the awareness that it is the family who wields the power to act on behalf on their children, defending their wellbeing against societal disapproval and possibly championing further recognition demands. The family emerges as the prime agent of recognition, at once both separate from, and constitutive of, the social collective: it is the site endowed with the power to operate the shift from recognition as emotional support to recognition as defence of rights and dignity in society at large (see Fraser 1997; Honneth 1995).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have analysed the instabilities and contradictions characterizing young queer people's relationships with their families. I have shown how queer sexuality emerges as a destabilizing element in the already asymmetrical reciprocity between parents and children, and how the recognition of queer sexuality is constantly negotiated against the deeply felt desire to be accepted as 'normal'.

Young queers' sexuality can potentially disrupt the life trajectory imagined by parents for their children in terms of marriage and career, thus compromising young queer people's ability to successfully participate in the affective and economic circuits of reciprocity informing family relations.

Given the scarcity of resources for forming alternative communities and relations, and the fact that people who break from the traditional gender and family structure are still viewed with suspicion by society at large, it is not surprising that the young queers in my study are hesitant about coming out, and if they do, they pre-emptively expect a future of isolation. At the same time, both in legal statements and in the media, the prevalent discursive strategy tries to equate recognition with acceptance, or even to obfuscate some of the aspects of recognition under the protective mantle of family acceptance. Statements such as those made by the Parents of LGBT Children, popularized by mainstream media, convey the message that familial acceptance is the most important issue, well beyond whatever recognition the law could afford lesbians and gays. Social progress in relation to issue of sexuality is thus mediated crucially through and by the role of the family, which emerges as the primary agent through which recognition can be articulated and granted.

Chapter 7. The Niral Club

It was Dhruv (21) who voiced a common feeling about the Niral Club. The Club was, as he summarised ‘the best, loveliest thing’ that had happened to him. Dhruv described it as a meeting place for queers, a space where he could talk with others who shared his experiences of being gay and enjoy their friendship.

In this chapter, I consider the Niral Club, the grassroots ‘queer’¹⁰⁵ youth group whose activities and members¹⁰⁶ are in the fore of my study. The group’s founders, the administrators as well as the members, all agree that Niral Club is a ‘safe space’ where you are allowed to ‘be yourself’. The questions I address in this chapter are: what does it mean to ‘be yourself’ for a queer young person in India and how does the Niral Club meet such needs?

I unfold the forms of collective organising that address insecurity, self-abjection and need for friendship and solidarity. The chapter highlights how the preoccupation of participants with these issues rather than with radical politics of resistance must be seen in connection to larger socio-political power structures and the ways in which they inform young people’s access to social existence. Privileging non-political positions, egalitarian solidarity and leisurely activities, the Niral Club offers its members a space for more symmetrical relationships shaped by ‘solidarity between identity and difference’ (Marsh 2005:5). As I will show, the Niral Club is appreciated by young queer people in Delhi as a meeting place where they feel recognised through practices of friendship that suspend judgment and embrace ambivalence.

Niral Club addresses the needs of young people whose desire for recognition is fraught with ambivalences and precariousness. Young people who are studying and whose lifestyle choices are limited by material and symbolic constraints by virtue of their age and lack of economic self-sufficiency are particularly exposed to normative institutions like family, school and workplace and their attendant pressures, from family expectations, to peer pressure, to academic

performance and career anxieties. The Niral Club thus provides respite from the isolation that many young queer people feel as a result of institutionalised heterosexuality in other spaces such as home, college or the workplace (Jackson 2006; Rubin 1993; Schmitt, Gustavson and Malmquist 2013) It is also a space not defined by overt political agendas or political assertions of sexual subjectivity.

The club emerges as a kind of ‘heterotopia’(Foucault 1986), a counter-site where the value-laden rules sustaining social spaces are reproduced, but also contested and inverted. It challenges an ‘ontological insecurity’ (Giddens 1991; Kinnvall 2004) by providing a feeling of ‘safety’ experienced as the outcome of reciprocal practices of friendship based not on overt resistance against heteronormativity, but on the recognition that being young and queer in India means continually dealing with ambivalent feelings towards one’s own sexual subjectivity.

In the following sections, first I situate Niral Club as a safe space within the spectrum of LGBTQ organisations in India and in Delhi; I then explore how Niral Club can be considered a heterotopia by singling out the normalisation of queerness as its peculiarity. Afterwards, I examine how Niral Club openly embraces a non-political agenda, following a vision according to which sexual identity should not be a totalising element of subjectivity. I compare and contrast it with Nigah, another non-funded Delhi-based collective also catering to LGBTQ individuals. I then examine the ways in which Niral Club enacts a normalisation of queerness through a focus on leisure activities rather than oppositional mobilisation. Finally I analyse how Niral Club members articulate the quest for recognition and normality.

A safe space

The safety provided by Niral Club and highly valued by its young members must be understood as the possibility of being comfortable about one’s discomfort with one’s own sexuality through the presence of other queer people (Myslik 1996). This understanding of safety also enables people to ‘be themselves’; but while a significant component in the idea of ‘being yourself’ has to do with not having to hide one’s sexual identity and being able to talk about it openly and safely, Niral Club does

not encourage people to claim recognition of their sexuality outside of the Club's space. As Alok (22 years old) explained to me:

[Niral Club] is a safe space, it is like the space where queer people can just be, they don't need to talk, they don't need to express, they don't need to go out and, you know, shout slogans or something -- it is just a safe space where if you want you can just listen, if you want to just be around queer people you can just be around queer people. You want to ask, you want to help someone...totally... we do not say that, you know, you need to go out and, you know, campaign with us or something. It's a personal thing...it's a safe space.

Within Niral Club, queer sexuality is recognised not as coextensive with someone's individuality, but as one of its aspects, and one that doesn't necessarily need to be expressed, talked about, or revealed in the 'outside world'. In responding to the needs of young queer people for emotional safety, peer solidarity, and a sense of normality, a space like Niral Club provides an example of the ways in which it is possible to understand subjectivity and agency outside the dichotomous frame of oppression and resistance.

Normality, as my data shows, relates to the ability to participate in social systems even when these impose norms of oppression; to feel normal means to feel safe through inclusion, even the kind of inclusion which is conditioned and exclusionary (Agamben 2003; Butler 1997b; Rydstrom 2012). Yet, as Saba Mahmood argues, to be subordinated to norms does not automatically mean to passively accept their power; rather, we 'inhabit' (Mahmood 2005:15) norms which allow us to exercise various degrees of agency in order to attain a 'liveable life' (Butler 2004b:1). As the sexuality of India's queer people continues to be labelled 'unnatural' by the law and widely stigmatised within society (Narain 2004), the desire for a sense of normality expressed by Niral Club people is the result of a continuous bargaining process between young queers and the heteronormative cultural order of Indian society.

William Schroeder (2012) and Robert Phillips (2014), working on China and Singapore respectively, offer relevant insights as to how various forms of collective LGBTQ organising may embrace strategies that privilege harmonisation and normalisation rather than overt resistance and antagonism (see also Ghaziani 2011). While normative institutions of power such as the state and the family produce patterns of exclusions for sexual minorities, these institutions are not simply

passively endured by young queers. Like for any other group anywhere, for the young queer people in my study it is critical to relate to and negotiate the norms of established institutions in order to feel included and participate in the sociality of society. Through such negotiations, young queer people in China, Singapore or India might be ‘reinscrib[ing] what appear to be “instruments of their own oppression”’ (Mamood 2005:8).

Living one’s homosexuality openly in the Indian context would mean to take a risk, understood here following Mary Douglas as ‘not only the probability of an event, but also the probable magnitude of its outcome’ where ‘everything depends on the value that is set on the outcome’ (Douglas 1992:31). The outcome of being an ‘out’ homosexual includes open threats or dangers or subtler forms of discrimination, blackmailing and stereotyping that might undermine young people’s opportunities. These middle class, urban young people have grown up when (metropolitan) India was already significantly integrated in the circuits of globalisation; in cultural terms, this means that they have grown up surrounded by images, ideas, information and cultural references coming from everywhere. The rapid economic growth of India since the 1990s has brought them opportunities of professional and personal fulfilment unknown to previous generations (Mankekar 2015; Nisbett 2007).

Yet teenagers and people in their early twenties have not gained a socially or financially independent status; whether they live with their parents or not, they largely depend on their family’s economic support. Being unmarried, they are expected to fulfil parental expectations regarding partner choice while at the same time working hard to build the foundations of a successful professional life, as I have shown in Chapter 6. Young men and women thus are not only caught between several dependencies, but also not ‘taken seriously’, having to justify and defend their decisions before family, peers and colleagues. However, the socio-historical junction in which they live holds great promises of change and emancipation in terms of sexuality too.

The young people who participate in my study have come of age after the repeal of Section 377; they have benefited from activist struggles but not taken part in them; they can look things up on the Internet, learn about LGBTQ movements in the US, make friends with other gay people abroad before they even knew another gay person in their own city. Yet the advantages brought by being legally recognised (albeit temporarily) haven’t dispelled the stigma associated with homosexuality. Young

lesbians and gays are caught in a conflicted predicament where they need to find a way of expressing their sexuality that does not expose them to further marginalisation. Niral Club emerges as a space where such circumscribed, 'safe' recognition becomes possible.

LGBTQ activist groups in India

Niral Club emerges as a unique space for young queer individuals in Delhi; a space that is free from heterosexual assumptions and repressions as well as from the 'queer politicism' (Schroeder 2012:120) characterizing some of the other organisations and grassroots collectives in Delhi. In order to better understand why participants stressed the singularity of Niral Club *vis à vis* other organisations dealing with gender and sexuality issues, I offer a brief overview of the developments of India's LGBTQ organisations.

Even though the presence and leverage of sexuality NGOs and movements in India has increased considerably after the Naz petition (2001), such groups have been present in the subcontinent since the 1980s. They were, however, more like small networks of friends and like-minded people rather than formally structured organisations (see Dave 2012).

Not all the groups forming in the 1990s had sexual rights as an explicit agenda. Some gay and lesbian groups were mainly about meeting up and creating a space (physical and virtual) for homosexual people; others provided information and resources about sexuality and health; others still were more vocal in fighting AIDS-related discrimination (see Ramasubban 2004; Ranade 2015). The organising around issues such as decriminalisation and legalisation became more explicit around the period when the Naz petition was filed.

ABVA (AIDS Bhedhav Virodhi Andolan, translated as Campaign Against AIDS Discrimination), a Delhi-based collective founded by activist Siddhart Gautam was the first organisation to openly protest against the damages of Section 377, when in 1992 they staged a demonstration in front of the Delhi police headquarters. ABVA also compiled a seminal report on the condition of homosexuals in India, and were the first to file a petition for the repeal of Section 377 in 1994. One of the key people who pioneered the LGBTQ organising in India is

Ashok Row Kavi, who came out publicly in the 1980s and in 1989 started *Bombay Dost*, the first Indian gay magazine. In 1991, he would then move on to found the Humsafar Trust in Mumbai, an NGO focusing on health advice and counselling for male homosexuals. A different kind of network – also catering to male homosexuals - based in Mumbai was the *Gay Bombay* group, started in 1998 and consisting of a website, a mailing list, cultural and leisurely events held in the city, and fortnightly meetings (for an in-depth account of *Gay Bombay*, see Shahani 2008).

With respect to lesbian movements, in 1990 Giti Thadani founded the Sakhi Collective in Delhi, the first lesbian organisation in India; she opened a P.O. box to which women could write and reach out to each other. Sakhi's address was publicized mainly through *Bombay Dost*. Thadani's house became the physical meeting point, where women could stay for short periods, accessing resources and sharing experiences. In 1997, Betu Singh, a lesbian activist and friend of Thadani's went on to start Sangini, another organisation focusing on lesbian issues which is still operational. The Mumbai answer to Sakhi and Sangini was Aanchal, founded by Geeta Kumana; Aanchal was the first lesbian organisation employing professional counsellors in order to provide support to women in difficult situations.

In the 1990s, LGBTQ issues were beginning to be discussed at conferences and similar events as well; the Humsafar Trust and Naz Foundation organised the first meeting of LGBTQ activists in Mumbai in 1995; in 1997, the Bangalore National Law School of India authorised a conference on gay rights; and since the beginning of the new millennium such events and conferences have grown in size and international scope.¹⁰⁷ The 1990s saw the beginning of LGBTQ public demonstrations and Pride parades as well. Not only did ABVA organise a protest before the police headquarters in Delhi in 1992 but the first Indian Pride march also took place in Calcutta in 1999.

Since the turn of the century, and particularly after the Naz Foundation filed the petition to repeal Section 377, India's LGBTQ activist movements have consolidated their presence in the country and increased their collaboration with respect to issues of LGBTQ rights. One of the most important moments is the joining of forces in 2006 and forming the collective Voices Against 377 (grouping several grassroots organisations, Non Governmental Organisations and Civil Society Organisations working with rights, sexuality, health and gender issue; see Misra 2009), which supported the Naz petition and contributed to organise awareness

campaigns and workshops, as well as gather favourable media coverage, all over India.

Normalising queerness: Niral Club as heterotopia

While Niral Club is part of a larger movement of LGBTQ organisations operating in Delhi, some of which I have outlined above, there are a number of factors that mark it as a unique kind of space: first, at the time of my fieldwork it was the only organisation founded after the 2009 partial repealing of Section 377; second, it specifically targets youth (who are in the fore of this study); third, contrary to most other LGBTQ organisations, it is not tied to only one sexual identity (i.e. it aims at reaching gays, lesbians, transgender people, bisexuals and even heterosexual people who want to question prevalent sexual norms),¹⁰⁸ fourth, it is the only organisation to hold frequent and regular meetings as well as having a continuing online presence; fifth, Niral Club does not engage in activism or political mobilization. These characteristics, taken together, mark Niral Club as unique within the spectrum of LGBTQ organisations in Delhi.

It was Alok (22) and Shobha (22) who came up with the initial idea of starting a group in 2010, when they were both engineering students. As young queer students, they had no places to go to meet other people and thus envisioned a ‘support centre for youngsters, for campus issues, campus ideas’, as Alok explained. The club should target students because the campus environment, and especially engineering colleges, were places where a queer person could not come out and had no one to talk to for support. College campuses were places where the people in my study spent most of their time every day. Campuses have been described as spaces of silence and invisibility (D’Penha and Tarun 2005) where ‘coming out’ or ‘being out’ was not an option for most people. For those who worked, the office was not a place where one could share details about sexual preferences. This cultural logic of silence, coupled with the impossibility of coming out to the parents at home, made the daily life of young queer people characterized by isolation and ‘closeted-ness’, most of the time.

Niral Club, Alok and Shobha explained to me, started with the explicit purpose of providing a space where various issues of importance to the

lives of young people – study pressures, family issues, love, hobbies, worries - could be discussed in an egalitarian and friendly environment where the sexual identity of participants was, for once, not a stigmatising attribute (Goffman 1963) but the ‘norm’ – albeit a contingent and temporary one. The temporary and circumscribed reversal of the meaning of sexual normativity effected by Niral Club qualifies this space as heterotopic. Heterotopias refer to spaces that, contrary to utopias, exist in reality but enact a subversion of the rules of reality: heterotopias are, in the words of Michel Foucault (1986:24) ‘counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopias in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’.

A heterotopia is a space constructed in response to socio-cultural values that impose a separation of certain conditions (death, menstruation, extramarital sex, disease) from mainstream spaces; but it also operates an inversion of the parameters regulating mainstream spaces. For instance, in cemeteries, cited by Foucault as a perfect example of heterotopia, the fundamental inversion rests in the fact that, contrary to all other spaces, cemeteries are inhabited by the dead. Within Niral Club, the fundamental inversion rests in the normalisation of homosexuality. One of the defining traits of heterotopias is that they are not spaces isolated from the outside world: Niral Club mirrors and represents reality by positioning itself as a space of socialisation for young people but, unlike other similar spaces, it operates an inversion of the value ascribed to homosexuality.

Heterotopias appear as ‘sites of alternate ordering’ (Hetherington 1997:38) characterized by uncertainty and ambivalence; in such spaces, Kevin Hetherington observes, ‘margins become centres, centre becomes margin, and the meanings of centres and margins becomes blurred. Those who see themselves as marginal see such places as socially central to their alternative values and beliefs’ (Hetherington 1997:39). Thinking about Niral Club as a heterotopia thus enables an understanding of the fundamental ambivalence underpinning young people’s simultaneous search for recognition and normality. While heterotopias, by virtue of their alternate value structure, facilitate the ordering of otherwise marginalised identities, they do not constitute permanent alternatives to society; rather, they are produced by the same powers whose exclusions they expose.

The first Niral Club meeting took place in June 2010, with about eight people present. At that point, they were the first campus-youth-specific

group existing in Delhi. The early members relied on each other for getting the Niral Club up and running, since they had no funding and no administrative support from other organisations. In particular, they lacked a physical space to meet, so in the first six months they asked around for available spaces and met at a bookstore, a café or a foreign embassy cultural centre. Eventually, they got in touch with the Naz Foundation, which allowed them to use one of their properties called the Jhansi Centre for their meetings. They advertised their presence through the Naz Foundation, by distributing leaflets during LGBTQ events in the city, and on the Internet through blogs. Later on the Jhansi Centre was suddenly closed and Niral Club went back to having itinerant meetings, often in a central Delhi café.

After seeing the successful growth of Niral Club in Delhi due to the enthusiasm and sense of ownership of the members, Alok started working to expand the idea to other campuses in other Indian cities, like Pune and Bangalore. Despite relying only on volunteers and lacking a clear organisational structure, Niral Club managed to hold regular meetings, which took place twice a month on Saturdays or Sundays, between 3 and 6 pm. Later on, women-only meetings were added on alternate weekends. The timing of the meetings was scheduled so that young people could attend with ease; young women did not have to worry about being out after sunset which, as discussed by Phadke (2013), and Viswanath and Mehrotra (2007) might compromise their safety; students staying in hostels did not need special permissions.¹⁰⁹ In short, people could come to the meetings without anyone knowing about it.

People came to Niral Club with different motivations and different attitudes. Since they wanted to provide a safe space without imposing any obligations on members, Niral Club administrators did not require that anyone attended the face-to-face meetings with regularity. This meant that the composition of the group at any given face-to-face meeting was different every time. On average, any meeting would have about twenty people attending, but beside a core group of five or six regulars, all others were new. Some people would return now and then, while others remained connected only through Facebook.

The constant presence of new people meant that the topics of discussion were both varied and to a degree repetitive. While the administrators tried to structure the meetings so that there would be a variety of topics discussed, the presence of several new people meant that a large part of the meeting would be spent trying to get to know the new

people. The round of introductions was enough to get the debate going; while explaining why they had come to Niral Club, new people talked about problems at home, at work or at college; some were struggling with accepting their sexuality and had questions; others were curious to meet other gay people for the first time. Other times the topic of a meeting was set and advertised beforehand on Facebook – for example: bullying, the importance of physical appearances and beauty ideals, queer romantic relationships. The people moderating the meeting were good at keeping the atmosphere comfortable and uplifting by encouraging people to also talk about entertaining anecdotes, Bollywood-related gossip and similar ‘lighter’ topics.

Nowhere to go

Niral Club’s student-friendly time policy also allowed young queer people to meet other people and ‘hang out’ in a city where spaces of queer socialisation are few and hardly accessible. In the urban environment of a globalised city such as Delhi, the regulation of space along heteronormative power lines is increasingly expressed through how leisure spaces are organised and accessed. As far as leisure spaces are concerned, Delhi offers a number of opportunities and venues for socialising outside work or family; places like parks, shopping malls, some central neighbourhoods are teeming with young people ‘hanging out’ every day of the week. Stylish cafes are ubiquitous in central Delhi, and are very popular among middle class youth (see Platz 2012) for socialising and dating. These are also the places frequented by participants in their free time. Access to spaces of leisure and socialisation is a defining element of what it means to be young, middle class and modern in today’s India; practices such as going to the cinema, ‘hanging out’ in malls and cafes, going to parties are constitutive elements in defining young people’s social identities (Lukose 2009; Platz 2012).

As Sharon Zukin (1996) notes, however, city spaces are produced according to norms about who and what should be visible or invisible in specific spaces, so the ability to access a space and the agency over it are not equally distributed; gender and sexuality norms (as well as other axes such as class and race) tend to curtail the spatial agency of certain groups,

such as women and homosexuals (Skeggs 1999). In urban India, seeing young couples having intimate romantic encounters in urban cafes, parks and bars is not rare anymore, but they are invariably heterosexual couples. On the other hand, male-only or female-only groups are free to socialise, given that homosocial relations are preferable to mixed-gender ones in a culture where gender segregation is widely practiced as it is seen as an antidote to undesirable premarital sexual acts (Agarwal 1994). This leaves some room for homosexual socialisation in public spaces, but only as long as no visible signs of erotic intimacy are displayed (Horton, Rydstrom and Tonini 2015).

In Delhi, the only places where homosexual socialisation is allowed are venues such as some bars and nightclubs, where participation is directly tied to consumption; and for men, parks and/or certain streets at night become cruising areas. In contrast to what has been observed in other cities outside the (geographical) west, such as Beirut (Merabet 2014), Cape Town (Tucker 2009; Visser 2003), Singapore (Phillips 2014), Hong Kong (Tse-Shang Tang 2010), Delhi does not have a 'gay neighbourhood' where LGBTQ people tend to congregate. There are no clusters of queer-friendly bars, with the exception of *Peppers* (formerly known as *Pegs 'n Pints*), a nightclub attached to a hotel, which has been hosting a gay night every Tuesday since the early 2000s. *Peppers* is located near the diplomatic enclave, quite isolated from the city areas where most commercial and leisure venues are. Some bars might host special gay nights, which are often advertised as private parties so as not to arouse suspicion or invite police raids (Gupta 2007); otherwise, LGBTQ people go to 'regular' clubs, and the knowledge about gay-friendly events or venues is passed by word of mouth (or Internet forums). Reflecting on the absence of a dedicated 'gay scene' in Calcutta, Paul Boyce (2007) argues that homosexual spaces in urban India are interstitial, enmeshed in the heteronormative spatial fabric of the city rather than discrete and identifiable. Neither clubs nor public areas such as streets and parks were popular choices among the people in my study since the former catered to an older (and wealthier) clientele, and the latter were seen as potentially dangerous. In addition, not everyone was allowed to stay out late at night.

Tom Boellstorff observes similar dynamics in regard to Indonesia (2005). In the absence of dedicated 'queer' spaces, gay and lesbians create their own spaces 'on the margins of the *normal* world' (Boellstorff 2005:126. Italics in the original). These spaces-within-spaces are by

necessity volatile and constituted through temporary presence, but they nonetheless signify a desire to gain access to mainstream spaces and, through them, to a sense of normality. Among the members of Niral Club, the desire to participate in the use of 'normal' spaces was accompanied by the awareness that those spaces were heterosexual (see Valentine 1995) and thus not safe for queers.

Some examples illustrate this point. While I always made sure to let the participants choose where we would meet for an interview, sometimes even the blandest place, such as a fast-food joint, could make people uncomfortable. For instance, once I met Ravi (21) in a busy milkshake parlour next to a metro station in South Delhi, where he wanted to meet. Most customers ordered to-go drinks and snacks; loud pop music blasted from the speakers. As we began to talk, Ravi lowered his voice so much so that I had trouble hearing what he said. I asked him if my questions were making him uncomfortable in some way; he replied that he was 'totally fine' with the questions I had, but was afraid that some people could be hearing our conversation and that 'things could turn ugly', as he put it, meaning that customers with negative views about queer sexuality could question, harass, or even attack him.

University campuses were generally considered hostile environments for queers; in fact, college students rarely talked about anything to do with sex and sexuality while on campus. Even though many campuses had a variety of spaces, like lawns and cafeterias, where students hung out between and after classes, in the several months I spent drinking *chai* (tea) in campuses around Delhi with participants and other students, topics such as love, romance, dating and sex were almost never brought up, even during our many casual gossipy chats.

No one wanted to be interviewed anywhere on campus; 'Let's go somewhere else', people would tell me, and suggest Chinese restaurants, nearby parks, or the vast, crowded expanse of Connaught Place as good places to talk. The campus environment seemed unsuitable not only for discussing sexuality issues, but more generally in terms of what students were willing to talk about or how they felt they ought to behave.

I had always enjoyed talking to Ratna (23) while on campus; she was quiet and reserved, but at the same time witty, interested in social issues and feminism; we often discussed readings from her course syllabi and current news. Hence I was surprised when, the first time we met with a few other students at a bar in Connaught Place on a Friday afternoon, she immediately called the waiter and ordered two rounds of beer and shots

of sweet liquor for everyone, downing her shots as soon as they arrived. ‘We must do it this way before the happy hour ends’, she informed me matter-of-factly before ordering more shots and telling the waiter to keep our beers in the fridge for a while. The afternoon turned into an evening of talk, laughter and gossip about everything from disappointing sexual encounters to fending off engagement proposals. No doubts the drinks may have had something to do with the outburst of frankness in the conversation, but Ratna’s commanding assertiveness had more to do with being in a different environment, as I learned from further nights out when alcohol wasn’t involved. Back at college the following week, Ratna would be her usual self, notebook in hand, stopping by to chat a little about the week’s workload before going off to the library. Campuses, in other words, exerted a pressure on young people to perform as ‘good students’, leaving their personal lives, and to an extent their personalities, outside.

The quest to find a space of sociality where it is possible to be safely ‘yourself’ relates to the need to meet other people not only through, but also beyond, a shared sexual identity. While several established LGBTQ organisations in Delhi addressed individual concerns and provided avenues for discussing sexuality and gender issues, what didn’t exist when Niral Club was founded was a space to meet up, hang out and talk about the many different things happening to young people in their everyday lives, their worries, doubts, interests and future plans.

Social media

Social media constitute another venue for the creation of a space of socialisation, inclusion and mutual recognition by peers. In 2011, Niral Club opened a group page on Facebook, and since then the online membership has grown to about a thousand people, with members from all over India and abroad. Niral Club’s Facebook page¹¹⁰ has been administered by the same people since the very beginning.¹¹¹ As I highlighted in Chapter 4, the Club relies as much on its online presence as on face-to-face meetings and the two dimensions are integrated, so that topics that spark a discussion on Facebook are taken up during meetings, and vice versa. During a period when, for lack of available venues, the face-to-face meetings were suspended, all Niral Club activity happened

online. This, according to one administrator, was crucial for the survival of the Club.

The Facebook page of Niral Club constitutes to an extent the life and soul of the group; after obtaining approval by the page administrators, members can post text, pictures, links to documents and other websites. As with all social media, for Niral Club the purpose of having a Facebook page is for people to be able to connect and share; and people do share consistently, posting several entries every day, mostly to seek advice on how to handle difficult situations like family life, coming out to friends, instances of homophobia at college, etcetera. In keeping with the versatile nature of Facebook activity (Miller 2011), members also post links to YouTube videos of Bollywood songs, *selfies*,¹¹² pictures of cats and puppies, or mundane status updates about food, shopping and the likes.

Even though sharing pictures of cute pets might appear trivial, this is part of the process of enabling a connection to ‘normality’; the casual use of Niral Club’s Facebook page reflects the desire to create a space where sexual identity can coexist with the assorted banalities of everyday life and, by association, become ‘normal’. In this respect, the club’s Facebook page can be seen as a digital heterotopia where queer people can attain ‘social centrality’ (Hetherington 1997) thanks to the alternate ordering of cultural logics that the medium affords. Robin Rymarczuk and Maarten Derksen argue that Facebook represents a heterotopia: the regulated access to it, the manipulation of time, the possibility to get on Facebook irrespective of one’s physical location, the blurred lines between private and public, qualify Facebook as ‘une espace autre’ that can be furnished in specific ways, but is always different from regular spaces’ (Rymarczuk and Derksen 2014).

At the same time, being able to connect with other LGBTQ people on a daily basis on a ‘safe’ platform (the secret character of the page ensures invisibility) contributes to strengthen a sense of community where people are able to do what anthropologist Mary Gray (2009: 92) calls ‘queer identity work’. Discussing the use of online websites by LGBTQ youth living in rural USA, Gray argues that new media technologies enable young people to counter the heterosexism that limits their access to public space in contexts where it is impossible or undesirable for them to leave their communities. The young people in my study were also aware of and constrained by norms that limited both their access to spaces and the expression of their sexuality, and were able to partially circumvent these challenges by using the Internet. The Club’s Facebook page can also be

seen as an option to access a space of queer normality for those who could not attend face-to-face meetings.

Queering normality

Niral Club addresses the needs of a generation of young queer people who benefited from the victories of the Indian LGBTQ activist movement (above all, the repeal of Section 377) without needing to be part of it. Of course, since the 2013 Supreme Court judgment the atmosphere has changed significantly: most Niral Club members acknowledge the need to protest against the re-criminalisation of same sex relations. However, as the core of my field research with Niral Club took place between 2009 and 2012, here I focus upon a period where recognition of same-sex relationships was at least legally a reality, and people had high hopes for the future. However, active engagement in queer politics was not a high priority for them.

This sets Niral Club apart from other comparable LGBTQ groups, such as Nigah. Nigah defines itself as a ‘queer collective’ engaged mainly in cultural activities with a focus on non-normative sexualities. The mission of the group states (from their blog): ‘Nigah begins and furthers conversations, thoughts, debates, diatribes, rants, plays, art, protests, hissy fits and any other form of expression on issues of gender and sexuality. Virtually and on the ground in New Delhi, it is an effort to create inclusive and queer spaces that imagine new languages of cultural resistance and celebration around sexuality’.¹¹³ Stating explicitly their queer orientation, Nigah tries to include male, female and transgender perspectives.

Nigah shares some similarities with Niral Club. It is a non-funded not-for-profit and it is run by its members on a volunteer basis. It was formed in 2003 by a small group of friends who felt that queer people needed more spaces in the city where to meet, discuss relevant issues and form friendships (see Katyal 2011). Through the creation of social spaces for queer people, they also aimed at contributing to Delhi’s cultural scene, rendering more visible those issues about sexuality that would not normally find avenues (physical or discursive) of expression. As it formed at the height of the mobilisation against Section 377, however, Nigah has furthered an openly activist agenda through advocacy,

lecturing, writing in large circulation newspapers. Some of Nigah's members are academics with a solid knowledge of feminist and queer theory; through their interventions in public culture and education, they have strengthened the links between academia and activism and contributed to placing LGBTQ issues within a larger debate about equality and social justice in India (Sharma and Das 2011; Menon 2007; Srivastava 2013).

In its first months of existence, Niral Club relied on renowned and experienced activists for its meetings and events; these activists, some of them connected to Nigah, were invited to share their experience and insight, inform people and provide theoretical foundations to the claims for LGBTQ equality. This activist 'imprint' did not vanish, since people like Alok, Shobha and Nikhil were also engaged in other activist circles; but it remained confined to a few people, not the majority of Niral Club regular members. While groups such as Nigah aimed at visibilizing non-heterosexual sexuality and making space for it within broader socio-political debates, Niral Club eschewed such a vision.

Two of the first Niral Club members I met were Prem (31) and Harsh (21). I had noticed them during the first meeting I attended, and we had agreed to meet a few days later. We met at a large shopping mall in South Delhi and wandered for a while trying to find a quiet place to talk. In the end we decided to sit on the floor between the shelves of a bookstore. I had left my first meeting with the impression that the Club promoted an open and positive vision of queer identity, and I asked them whether my impression was correct. Prem answered:

Ah, there has to be something more to life than being gay. You can't just pour all your energy into being gay. Being just one single part of who you are and ignore everything else, and that's the problem! I come across people, that's one of the reasons why I don't get along with people who are my age who are gay [Prem was 31], because either they are in the closet and they are married and they're having, you know, sex on the side, which — NO! ...or they're so completely involved with the lifestyle that they...

Harsh filled in by saying: 'They have no room for other things' and Prem concluded: 'there's no growth anywhere, they're just gay'. Having lived for a few years in the US, Prem recalled how things were different there, where no one paid special attention to his sexuality. He found Niral Club people easier to be friends with, since they did not frame their sexual

identity as the totalising aspect of their personality. I asked him what he and Niral Club were trying to achieve, in terms of equality. Prem elaborated:

A positive outcome would be that you tell people — that people see you for who you are. And then being gay is incidental. As: “oh! You have all of these things and there’s the little quirk that you’re gay!” How cool is that? That means you can be all of these other things and gay at the same time, that’s what’s going to change people’s minds. [...] In the ideal society you wouldn’t even need to come out, you’d just be like, “oh I’m dating a guy, I’m dating a girl, I’m experimenting” and nobody’s saying “oh, you belong to this part”. There’s no distinction.

Harsh joined the conversation and highlighted how a neutral opinion on homosexuality could be the key to equality:

The coolest thing would be for me when our society would be in a state when the relatives are coming [and saying] “Your son has grown, he’s 29, let’s look for a girl!”...then the parents say “oh no, but he is gay”; “uh-oh, let’s look for a guy then”. And you know what is happening? Since more and more of this homosexuality has been depicted in media, in news, everywhere it’s visible, what’s happening is that our society is getting divided into homo- people who support homosexuality and people who do not. The people who are neutral about it, who just don’t care enough to make a comment, I think that’s what we need because, you know? You’re gay, move on! It’s a personal choice. OK, it’s not a personal choice but then it’s a personal coming to terms with yourself. Once you are there you don’t need people to come to terms with that fact. Probably your parents, but not everyone.

In the end, they summed up their shared views as follows:

Harsh. We don’t want a gay community.

Prem. We want a community.

Harsh: We want a society, and then you can have communities based on literature, music, arts, whatever, but please don’t have a community based on sexuality. That’s just stupid.

Harsh and Prem voice an important concern when they speak of wanting not a gay community, but a community. Same-sex preference becomes a detail of little relevance when gay people are recognised as being much more than their sexuality and, as such, can be part of different

communities not necessarily based on sexuality. Such statements recall a point made by Butler, who has discussed how an identity marker like homosexuality is a term 'which not only names, but forms and frames the subject' so that anything that the subject says or does will be 'read back as an overt or subtle manifestation of [its] homosexuality' (Butler 1997b:93). In participants' accounts of what it would mean to be equal, an awareness transpires of the stigmatising character of homosexuality, whereby, as Goffman has argued, the whole identity of a person carrying the 'deeply discrediting attribute' (Goffman 1963:3) is reduced to only that attribute, despised, and separated from the 'normals' (i.e. people not carrying the stigma, in Goffman's use of the term).

Thus, in wanting 'a community' without the 'gay' qualifier, young queer people acknowledge the ways in which their sexuality works as an impediment to social inclusion and social recognition; and the most successful way to overcome the exclusions produced by a heteronormative matrix is to 'trade' one's sexual difference in exchange for the possibility of a broader social acceptance. Just as in the case of family relations, young queers' willingness to downplay the assertion of their sexuality can be seen as a way of bargaining with a complex of social norms that continue to exclude queers; a strategy enacted to carve out spaces where it is possible not only to survive, but also to interact and participate to social life. Harsh and Prem express to an extent what Lauren Berlant has called 'aspirational normativity' (Berlant 2007), that is, a longing to belong, even when belonging means conforming to a social order that draws its existence precisely from the exclusion and stigmatisation of the subject desiring inclusion - in Berlant, the economic subaltern in late capitalism; in my context, sexual minorities.

These normative aspirations might result in 'social conservatism' (Berlant 2007:278) and a reluctance to actively challenge the heteronormative order; yet we cannot see Prem and Harsh's desire for normality as an abdication of agency. What is expressed in their words is rather an understanding that social inclusion is governed by a logic of reciprocity which, even as it demands a relativizing (not an overt denial) of the role of sexual identity, is still imagined as allowing a degree of positive agency, as when Prem explains 'you can be all of these other things and gay at the same time, that's what's going to change people's minds'.

Against a sexual identity that is seen as reductive ('They're just gay'), Prem and Harsh prefer the possibility to be normalised to the point of

going unnoticed. They argue that only when gays will be recognised for more than their sexuality, then people (i.e. the straight majority) will accept them, and even include them in social practices like arranged marriages.¹¹⁴ Male participants' wish to see relatives suggesting prospective grooms instead of brides can be seen as another sign of 'aspirational normativity', and it is indeed an assertion of the desire to access normality and social worth which, in the Indian context, are best accessed through the institution of marriage (Palriwala and Kaur 2013).

However, such normative desires have to be evaluated while keeping in mind the scarcity of alternative recognised forms of social belonging, as I have discussed with regards to family relations. Moreover, the utopic prospect of having relatives accept a spouse of the same gender would certainly involve a fair amount of work for young queers, given the difficulties they experience even just in communicating their sexuality to their parents (see chapter 6). Yet, the possibility of a same-sex arranged marriage is imagined as an ideal future scenario, which leads me to argue that 'desiring sameness' (Richardson 2005) is not necessarily the easiest way. Young queer people such as Harsh and Prem would rather work to stretch the boundaries of existing social norms than call themselves out by proclaiming their radical alterity; their vision is one where queerness can find a place within established systems of reciprocity, and where participating in those systems is essential for further practices of recognition to take place.

Framing sexual identity as only one – not the main – of the individual and social identities that a subject ascribes to him/herself invites a reflection on the relationship between the sexual subject and the different social and cultural contexts in which he or she operates, and which impose specific sets of norms that regulate the conditions of existence and the possibilities for recognition. Robert Phillips (2014) in his study on LGBTQ movements in Singapore, noticed a similar tendency among some gay and lesbian activists to downplay sexual identity. The people in Phillips's study placed their sexual identity after other identity markers such as family role, profession and nationality. According to Phillips, this approach indicates a desire to be seen as 'the same' as any other citizen; rather than framing their homosexuality as a signifier for an oppositional confrontation with the heterosexual majority, Singaporean queer people adopt an integrative 'us and them' approach. Phillips' study is relevant for my own analysis in that he stresses the importance of a perspective that takes into account the socio-political context in which LGBTQ

people live. In the case of Singapore, LGBTQ people and activists have more to gain by framing their demands for rights and recognition within, not outside, the broad values that inform social life.

Phillips argues that the character of Singaporean activism is informed by a logic of ‘illiberal pragmatics of survival’ rather than underpinned by notions of individual rights and civic liberties such as those animating the gay liberation movement in the US. Living in a socio-political environment marked by illiberalism, Phillips’ informants see the western LGBTQ activism model, based on openly challenging authorities, as ‘impractical’ in the Singaporean context, preferring instead ‘an LGBTQ subjectivity that included cultural references, focused on maintaining social balance and looked beyond the homosexual/heterosexual binary’ (Phillips 2014:48).

While India, at least theoretically, supports constitutional democracy to a greater extent than Singapore, the context from which Prem and Harsh wish for a society where homosexuality is ‘a quirk’ is a society that heavily polices gender and sexual nonconformity and where confessing to be gay to family and close friends more often than not results in harassment, exclusion and abuse. This was the case at the time of my fieldwork – when same-sex sexuality was legally recognised – and it is even more pressing now that authorities can once again invoke Section 377 to persecute homosexuals and sexual minorities.

The struggle is real

Leaving queer politics outside and refusing to promote ‘outness’ at all costs were framed as success factors for Niral Club. Prem remembered how a prominent Indian queer activist had been positively surprised by the fact that Niral Club had managed to reach out to engineering students; engineering students were considered the hardest to reach because of their isolation from other students and campuses.¹¹⁵ The reason for this wide appeal was, according to Prem, that in order to join Niral Club ‘you don’t have to be *gay* gay! You just have to be “oh, I just want a place where I can be a full afternoon”’. Niral Club did not demand an assertion of sexual identity as political subjectivity from its members, nor did Niral Club members judge people for their views, even when such views were

not in line with the shared belief about accepting oneself. An incident that occurred during one of the club meetings I attended is illustrative.

As we were completing a round of introductions, Amar, a young man who was attending for the first time, all of a sudden burst out saying that he could not accept his homosexuality. Unable to come out to anyone, he said he felt disgusted by himself. Amidst a stunned silence, he asked all of us present whether homosexuality could in fact be unnatural: how could it be otherwise, if it was the source of so much pain? The twenty or so people in the room were moved and seemed shocked. After a few seconds, several people started to react, wanting to counter Amar's opinion, but Harsh stepped in to the centre of the room, telling everyone to be silent and let Amar finish what he had to say. Amar continued, in a lower voice, staring at the floor. He wanted to find a cure; he wanted to know if everyone else at the meeting was really, actually happy about being gay; he didn't think it was possible.

The discussion that followed was gentle. Everyone was encouraged to share their own doubts and struggles. Amar's confession was valued by the meeting participants for its honesty, and many people said they could relate to his feelings. It also led to a discussion about the detrimental effects of homophobia and isolation, with several people admitting to also feeling scared, isolated and 'wrong' from time to time. Amar in a way represents the young person Niral Club tried to reach out to: a person who is still confused and conflicted, who feels isolated and has not reached a sense of stability in relation to her/his sexuality.

When I later discussed the incident with Harsh and Prem, they explained to me that with people like Amar, a more radical/political approach where sexual recognition is predicated as a *conditio sine qua non* could be perceived as alienating, even as a form of 'bullying'. Thus the avoidance of queer politics and activist discourse becomes important as a way to reach out to people without silencing them or discounting the feelings of inadequacy and self-abjection generated by the stigma surrounding homosexuality. Acknowledging the realness of stigma and its effects without expressing moral judgments about them was a shared practice within Niral Club meetings, a practice that, I argue, had the effect of fostering a sense of safety. Niral Club was a 'safe space' because it allowed people to recognise their own ambivalence toward being queer. Commenting on Amar's confession and the long discussion it generated, Harsh told me plainly: 'Let's face it, no one in their right mind would choose to be gay at this point in history'.

Harsh's admission might sound paradoxical if we consider that the time we had this conversation (the early spring of 2012) was, at least officially, a good point in history for people like him and groups like Niral Club, who could exist and operate without fearing criminal punishment. In spite of the legal status, however, Harsh here is pointing at the state of confusion, hesitation and fear that he encountered in many people who approached Niral Club. Hence, he and others chose to tackle the sense of precariousness from within, trying to normalise the ambivalence with which many young queers viewed their sexual identity.

In this light, the way in which Niral Club enabled people to 'just be themselves' does not refer to a solid, liberated, 'proud' queer identity, but rather a place where self doubt, insecurity and even fear are recognised as central aspects of what it means to be young and queer in India.

A leisure space

The disavowal of politics is expressed not only through the absence of direct political activist mobilization on the part of the Club's administrators, but also among the members, through a tendency to view larger issues through a personal lens, to reflect on the personal and emotional impact of larger societal and political changes, rather than the opposite. Before the Supreme Court re-instated Section 377, the ground was fertile for thinking and speculating about what a definitive decriminalisation could bring to the LGBTQ community. Would it be possible for queers to get married? What policies would have to be implemented in workplaces to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation? What would the future hold for lesbians and gays in India? What would the next step to take in order to advance the cause of equality and recognition? These issues, while present in queer-friendly media and among activist circles, were rarely discussed within Niral Club, whether at meetings or on Facebook.

Research participants not connected to Niral Club mentioned the political ramifications of the decriminalisation; for other queer groups, such as Nigah, queer politics continued to be a priority; some members of Niral Club also had parallel engagements with activist politics and non-governmental social justice movement. Politics was not completely disavowed as the individual level. However, politics was conspicuously

absent from Niral Club's activities as a whole; there was rather a tendency to highlight the personal aspects of political issues, so that a question about, say, marriage equality often resulted in a personal narration of wishes and hopes of finding true love.

Niral Club meetings and related activities (offline and online) favoured a climate of togetherness, camaraderie and informality. Sukesh, a gay activist in his late twenties and loosely connected to Nigah, remarked to me how he found Niral Club very different from a LGBTQ group he used to be part of when he was younger. He reckoned that Niral Club was charged with 'a good energy' that enabled members to 'get into the groove of things' and make friends easily. According to Sukesh, the positive 'vibe' was due to the young age of most members, who had 'almost nothing to think about except the eventuality of coming out to their parents'.

In fact, the young queer people who joined Niral Club had quite a few pressing things to think about, such as bullying, isolation and fear of parental rejection; the 'upbeat' climate informing the Club's activities was thus a deliberate choice and a response to the demand for alternative spaces of socialisation, togetherness and solidarity.

As well as focusing on collectively discussing the problems in young queer people's lives, the type of support that Niral Club wanted to offer was also expressed through social activities (such as pic-nics, film screenings and house parties) and meetings where the discussions drifted away from people's problems and focused instead on light, even mundane topics. For example, one of the first thematic meetings I attended centred on superheroes and role models: participants were invited to think about a superhero or a celebrity from popular culture that they were inspired by. The intention of the organisers was to enable a discussion about values, inspiration and finding strength. As we sat around a row of tables on the terrace of a central café, the meeting started on a serious tone, with several people trying to think of a superhero who embodied valuable inner qualities.

As it turned out, most participants referred to characters from American comics such as Superman, Green Lantern or the X-Men. Some had read the comics when they were younger, but most people had only seen the movies. Hence the conversation quickly turned to a discussion about movie plots, costumes and special effects. Actor Heath Ledger received many praises, both for his role in the film *Brokeback Mountain* (for several people, the first cinematic representation they had seen of a

same-sex relationship) and for his looks. Singer Lady Gaga dominated as a favourite celebrity: everyone at the meeting knew the lyrics of her song 'Born this way'. A fictional character acclaimed as a superhero was Harry Potter, whose adventures everyone had read. It was a fun meeting, with little or no focus whatsoever on issues like homophobia, discrimination, or family problems.

This kind of meeting was not an exception, and in fact almost every time the Niral Club met there was ample time left for casual talk and joking; similarly frequent were the post-meeting hangouts at cafes, markets or parks. These informal occasions were an important part of Niral Club's identity in that they enabled people to make new friends, and they can be seen as a way of temporarily defining and appropriating spaces of normality. Comforted and strengthened by the presence of other club members, young people could not only access leisure spaces, but enjoy them in the company of people who recognised their sexuality, and from whom they did not need to hide it.

How can we understand such a devotion to keep interaction light and avoid discussions of political issues and strategies? The function of leisure and recreational activities in LGBTQ groups has been discussed by William Schroeder (2012) who studied the recreational activities of the *gay* and *lala* (i.e. gay and lesbian) communities in Beijing; his participants met in the weekends to practice yoga, sing karaoke, roller skate in parks and other socialising activities devoid of political undertones. Schroeder argues that such moments of participation and 'fun' were important for *gays* and *lalas* to counterbalance the pressures and silences they were subject to in their daily life; the affective dimension of meeting up and doing something leisurely together was far more appealing than furthering a queer political agenda.

The desire to have a good time together, Schroeder argues, needs to be seen as a subtle way of working through the heteronormative social relations that otherwise dominates the everyday lives of queer people in Beijing: 'participants construct relationships based on assumed common sexual orientation not validated or celebrated by their parents, employers, or the state, and they protect and nurture these relationships in the spaces and times provided by the recreational groups in which they take part. Thus, play allows *gays* and *lalas* to enact and develop desires for an alternative sociality' (Schroeder 2012: 114). Similar to Schroeder's *gay* and *lala* communities, Niral Club focused on providing enjoyable sociality even while at the same time there was room for deeper

discussions about issues affecting members' lives. The fact that the two dimensions (the confessional and the fun) were weaved together, with no discernible rupture between them, is indicative of a need to see sexuality as one of the many components of a person's identity, possibly demystifying it and rendering it 'normal' in the process.

The disavowal of what Schroeder calls 'queer politicism' (Schoeder 2012 120), i.e. a way of steering individual as well as collective feelings of marginalisation and alterity towards political mobilisation 'through antagonistic social or political resistance' (Schroeder 2012:108) can be understood as a correlate of a fundamental ambivalence underlying young lesbians and gays' relationship to their sexuality and the way they wished for it to be recognised. What Niral Club did was to provide a 'safe space' where no one would feel the pressure to 'go out and shout slogans', as Alok put it; a space where it was acceptable to feel bad about being gay; and a space to have fun. Taking the political dimension out, acknowledging people's ambivalent relation to their sexuality, and privileging leisure were central aspects to the project of creating a sense of normality. Equating 'normality' with an absence of political positioning can be seen as an attempt to construct queerness *not* as an inherently resistant identity category, where political awareness of discrimination and a willingness to combat it are foundational for the articulation of one's sexual identity; the 'normality' constructed (albeit temporarily) by Niral Club consists of the things that make up the daily lives of heterosexual young people, who do not necessarily need to question themselves on the political implications of their sexual orientation. Imagining a queer sexual subjectivity that is lived as 'normally' as a straight one responds to the felt need to find a way to be recognised in ways that do not expose young queers to the risks they perceive in their daily lives outside of the 'safe space' provided by Niral Club.

Are there any normal gays out there?

All the young people who joined Niral Club had one thing in common: they had been looking for other young queer people for a while. Being able to browse the Internet for signs of gay communities was a significant help, and yet, since the majority of LGBTQ Internet communities are

based abroad, young queer people had a hard time believing that there could be other gay people living in the same city. Shobha recalled how she was startled when she met a gay man from Mumbai on a US-based gay Internet forum: 'I thought he must be the only other gay person in my country'. Testifying to the role of the Internet and social media, the majority of Niral Club members found out about it online, through forums or Facebook connections.

The difficulties experienced in reaching out and finding communities of peers do not mean that participants were unaware of the existence of an underground world of sex and dating opportunities. They knew about, and used, gay dating sites such as the popular *Planet Romeo* (called 'PR'); but these connections remained sporadic, and they were kept private. I often heard jokes about *Planet Romeo* during meetings and other social occasions. Varun, a 16-year-old trans told me that *Planet Romeo* was an 'open secret' of gays all over India yet 'no one wants to admit they use it but they are all there looking for a sex partner'. Varun explained that Niral Club was different to *Planet Romeo*:

[Niral Club] is for your sexuality from scratch, so it's about realising your sexuality, it's about talking to people, who have the same sort of views about sexuality -- it's about realising that you're not the only one, there are more people like this, there are more intelligent people like this and it's not that difficult.

The different character of Niral Club was apparent also for Dhruv. Although he was initially wary of what kind of people he would meet and he hoped the Club was not another gay dating service, upon his first meeting Dhruv felt immediately comfortable, stressing the fact that he felt treated very differently from what he referred to as 'the other world', meaning his home, school or neighbourhood. Ravi shared Dhruv's curiosity about finding other gay people:

At that time [i.e. before joining] I was apprehensive about stuff, what are the people like, are they like for real or whatever? Because [...] I hardly knew anyone like other people, normal people who were homosexual; because I always thought, you know, people with alternate sexuality exist, but they are all in the shade and hidden and doing all this -- you know -- Not openly, but hiding from their families or whatever. So I did join Niral Club to really observe people, and how are they, and are they normal people and all that?

When saying that he wanted to meet ‘normal people who were homosexual’ Ravi makes a point that emerges as a central element in narratives about Niral Club. The quest for what might be called ‘normal queerness’ is especially urgent for young people who feel that they lack the connections and the experience that older LGBTQ people might have.

Perpetually being interpellated, or hailed (Althusser 1971; Butler 1997b, 2004b) as homosexuals by a variety of sources such as the law, the family, other people, and media’s narratives about homosexuality, young gay people have an awareness of the negative social consequences of occupying the homosexual subject position: to respond to the ways in which they are interpellated as homosexuals would mean to take on the stigma that comes with it; and yet it is impossible not to hear the hailing. Hence, they look for references of the existence of spaces of ‘normal queerness’, spaces where sexual subjectivity does not preclude social existence (Butler 2015). In participants’ accounts, gay dating sites offered instant gratification, but they did not offer the possibility to talk, share and develop a common understanding of one’s sexuality, when the process of defining it was still in progress. Nor did more established communities of older queer people, as Chandra’s experience shows.

Chandra, 22, was a college student living in a rented apartment with another girl. She had participated in every Delhi Pride parade since the first in 2008, but had not been impressed by the people she met there. Describing the atmosphere at the first Pride parade, She said: ‘it left me with a bad taste, it left me with the idea that I don’t want to belong to this kind of people’. She had a hard time finding a space where she felt she belonged:

It is a little difficult for me to really fit myself into an identity role because I see few people like me. There are a lot of gay men, there are for example -- I don’t see young women like me who simply don’t - for example - who don’t identify as heterosexual but live by it anyway. [...] But I’ve seen very few people like me, they’re either very academic, *la-di-da* [i.e. pretentious, snobbish] type people, or people who identify as a certain type of lesbian and I’ve often felt like I don’t quite fit, that’s all.[...] I have never felt that sense of belonging – it’s always been either a little inaccessible or just no other people like me, and so then you feel insecure or you don’t care.

Chandra referred to herself as ‘queer’, but it was only thanks to space like Niral Club that she felt safe to do so. She was out to her closest friends

and to her brother, but not to her parents or her roommate. Conscious of the ways people look down on homosexuals, she was afraid of facing discrimination if she were more open about her sexuality:

As a young person, my choices are somehow less legitimate so even if I, for example -- I see that people with more accomplished or more--even just older than me, are more secure in their identities ... and I'm sure that comes with a lot of what one does and goes to, but I don't know if I am supposed to arrive at a more fixed identity... but I see that other people seem to get it more so I don't really know. What I want to do is just to be open to more things, more questions.

Chandra expresses in clear terms a discomfort that many other participants also had experienced; a disconnection between the available sexual identity categories and their own ability to recognise themselves in them. This disconnect has been explored by Paul Boyce (2014) who argues that the project of recognition on the basis of sexuality might obscure other ways in which people establish relations of affect, identity and belonging. According to Boyce, marginalised sexual subjects might even feel limited by the identification with a given identity category, since the everyday processes through which they negotiate stability and social existence escape and exceed the limits of categorical definitions.

The majority of people approaching Niral Club were searching tentatively for a community of peers who also shared the doubts and insecurities of a young person who is coming to terms with her/his own sexuality. The confession from Amar I described above is a case in point. This search was punctuated by ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, young people yearned for their sexuality to be recognised and not judged negatively. On the other hand, they feared the judgment that they knew to be inherent to the recognition they sought. To remain hidden and isolated was to yield to the subordinating power of institutionalised heterosexuality in which they lived their daily lives. But to decide to be 'out and proud' would be to accept the full burden of the subject identity they were assigned, and all its consequences.

Ambivalence lies at the core of the process of subject formation because the power that subordinates the subject is also the power that constitutes it, and agency, thus, is always informed by the power which it tries to challenge (Butler 1997b). Our ability to resist the oppressive aspect of power is thus undercut by the fact that it is the very same power that constitutes ourselves as subjects in the first place. In dealing with the

ambiguities of subordination, Niral Club members have to act within dominant social categories because, as Butler points out:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination (Butler 1997b:20)

In this light, there is no possibility for total resistance,¹¹⁶ nor for unconditional, unambiguous recognition. By acknowledging that subordination is the price of social existence, the desire to be recognised will invariably be confronted with the pragmatics of survival: recognition then needs to be located in and understood as an ambiguous set of practices, rather than assumed as an unfailing goal.

Concluding remarks

Within this frame, Niral Club, as we have seen in this chapter, enables its members to experience moments of recognition by rendering homosexuality an inconspicuous ‘quirk’, as Prem said, rather than a totalizing aspect of one’s personhood. This act of relativization and normalisation of homosexuality is precisely what makes Niral Club a heterotopia, as I have discussed. However, the normalisation of homosexuality is only possible within Niral Club; the remaining social spaces which young queer people navigate, by and large mark homosexuality as abnormal, and this contrast is ever present not only in member’s narratives and experiences, but also in the club’s very methodology.

What is accessible through Niral Club is not the heterosexually defined ‘normality’, but *a sense of normality* (Berlant 2007:287). This distinction marks the predicament of sexual minorities in today’s India, whose inclusion into the dominant heterosexual sociality remains conditioned and dependent on affective bargains thanks to which young queers can carve out spaces of recognition as they inhabit exclusionary social worlds.

Chapter 8. Conclusions: between law and life

As I set out to write these concluding reflections, in the early spring of 2016 the Supreme Court of India accepted a total of eight curative petitions submitted by the Naz Foundation and a range of civil society organisations.¹¹⁷ Curative petitions are the last legal resort for citizens to contest a court decision, and they are a recent addition within the Indian juridical system, having been introduced in 2002 (see Shankar 2011). The objective of a curative petition is to ask the Court to assess whether a given previous judgment was just and to amend a potential 'gross miscarriage of justice' (Supreme Court of India 2010:17).

In the case of Section 377, another bench of the Supreme Court will re-examine the *Koushal* judgment; but this time it will be a bench consisting of five judges, a so-called 'constitutional bench'. A five-judges bench is a rare occurrence nowadays, as noted by Pratab Bhanu Mehta (2006:167), and it is only booked for cases involving fundamental questions of constitutional interpretation (Robinson et al. 2011). Human rights groups, LGBTQ organisations, and the people of Niral Club have welcomed this legal development, as it opens up the possibility of achieving justice and recognition after a much-criticised regressive verdict. It seems as if the trajectory that I tried to trace in this thesis is not yet complete, at least from the perspective of the law. The journey of and toward recognition continues, and once again plenty of hope and expectation is placed in the hands of the judges of the Supreme Court.

In this thesis I have sought to unpack and analyse the multiple layers that constitute recognition from the perspective of young queer people. I have investigated young queers' ambiguous ways of negotiating recognition as they were manifested over a period of about four years when their sexuality had been officially decriminalised; my focus throughout has been on highlighting the contradictions and the ambiguities that are inherent to the idea of recognition when the official

word of the law is translated into the domain of the everyday. My analysis has been guided by the following questions: In what ways does legal recognition (or lack thereof) interact with the everyday life of queer people in contemporary urban India? How do young queer people relate to the idea of being recognised for their sexuality? What possibilities for recognition are articulated in the space between the official letter of the law and people's everyday lives? What is recognition made of, from the perspective of young queers?

In addressing these questions, I have suggested how the sphere of the law interacts in ambiguous ways with the daily lives of young queer people. As I have shown in this thesis, legal recognition occupies a central place in young queer people's lives, experiences and imaginations. However, foregrounding the centrality of legal recognition does not imply that young queers experience the law as having the power to validate and stabilise the status of their sexuality. What my findings indicate is rather the persistence of the idea of legal recognition as a horizon of possibility that accompanies young queer people in their daily lives; but a horizon that is shifting, unstable, and ambiguous. While the recognition granted through the Delhi High Court judgment in 2009 generated enthusiasm and ushered in the expectation that queer sexuality would be recognised socially, the protagonists of this thesis did not directly experience tangible and unquestioned benefits, finding themselves busy navigating the many spaces where recognition needed to be negotiated on a constant basis.

Legal recognition was an important platform on which young queers could stand, but it lacked the bridges that could help people connect their newfound legal status to the plurality of social spaces that mattered in their daily lives. What I have analysed in this thesis is the work of building these bridges, with all the challenges and hesitations that this work involved. The choice to focus on a limited number of people, mostly between 18 and 25 years of age, living in the capital of India and belonging to the middle classes, has allowed me to identify a number of relevant social spaces that young queer people wanted to access and inhabit, and which I have termed spaces of recognition. In doing this, I have shown how recognition emerges as an object that needs to be negotiated differently in different spaces; given that these spaces are inhabited simultaneously on an everyday basis, I have argued that it is not possible to arrive at a unified definition of what recognition is in practice, but that multiplicity and ambiguity are constitutive of its very fabric.

Ambiguous recognition

The data emerging from this thesis contribute to theoretical debates about subjectivity and recognition, building upon some of the arguments put forward by Nancy Fraser (1995, 1997, 2001), Judith Butler (1997a, 1997b, 2004b, 2015), Lauren Berlant (2007, 2011) and more generally by scholars within the field of queer studies.

The ethnographic material collected in Delhi over several fieldwork periods spanning about four years shows that the relationship between queer sexuality and subjectivity is constantly in a process of negotiation, depending on which discursive and/or relational space the subject interacts with. Being able to go back to the field at different times also enabled me to observe and analyse changes in young people's challenges and dispositions, even unsettling my own initial understanding of the issue of recognition. Young queers, just like anyone, inhabit different social identities in different contexts, and must therefore negotiate the degree to which their sexuality can be made compatible with other desirable or expected identity positions, such as that of a child, a student, a citizen, and so on. Hence, Fraser's claim about misrecognition being a status injury needs to be complemented by an understanding that sees 'status' as made up of several interconnected identities, none of them stable; moreover, the experiences of the young people in this study indicate that fighting to have the status of one's sexuality recognised at all times is not always the most productive strategy for managing to live a liveable life on a day-to-day basis.

Against the view according to which recognition is a normative end, the findings my data suggest that recognition can be thought of as an object that is circulated, modulated, customised in order to enable the functioning of relations of reciprocity, and to minimise the inevitable asymmetries in these relations. By analysing young people's awareness of the risks inherent in the idea of being fully recognised as queers, I have argued that misrecognition is not the opposite of recognition, but another aspect of it. At the same time, while recognition works as a fragmented and even exclusionary process, as highlighted by Butler (2004b), the findings in this thesis point to the existence of another dimension in which recognition operates: the dimension of attachment, promise, and futurity. Recognition thus, while exercising contrasting effects in the present, always exists also as a future projection, engendering in the

process imaginations, expectations, and attachments (Berlant 2011). And while it is necessary to maintain a critical position toward the seductions of recognition-as-promise, in this thesis I have tried to show that the everyday negotiations and compromises of young Indian queers cannot be simply reduced to examples of failed agency (Mahmood 2005) or capitulations to homonormativity (Duggan 2003; Richardson 2005).

The ambiguities of legal recognition

In Chapter 5, I have shown how the law produces different constructions and understandings of the sexual subject, and how these different understandings are received and experienced by the people in my study. By tracing the development of the legal case against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code both through textual analysis and ethnographic material, I have shown the intricate intersections between the power of the law in framing queer recognition, and young people's relation to the law as a normative frame.

What is relevant in my material is the fact that the people with whom I worked in Delhi were the first generation of queers to come of age around or after 2009, so that the decriminalisation for them was a generative moment rather than a hard fought victory, which would have been the case for previous generations of activists. Having been able to observe the shifts and developments in the legal status, I have highlighted how the dynamics that subtend the relation between the law and the people whom the law targets have highly affective, as well as political, undertones. Thus, the relationship between young queers and the law is one of asymmetrical reciprocity, where recognition emerges as moving object, an unstable promise that is first granted and accepted, then revoked and re-signified.

At the level of legal discourse, the case around Section 377 illustrates the inherent instability of the idea of recognition; while the 2009 judgment recognised that queer people were subjects, and as such were entitled to rights that were being denied to them because of persistent stigmatisation, the 2013 judgment denied the existence of a queer subject, instead categorising disparate individuals as a class whose only identifying feature would be the 'unnaturalness' of their sexual practices.

This profound difference in the interpretation of the relationship between sexuality and subjectivity speaks to theoretical debates that have clear political implications (Butler 1997a, 1997b, 2004b); but what I have sought to highlight in Chapter 5 is how such a move between recognition and misrecognition deeply destabilises the affective attachment that people have toward the law and its productive power (Berlant 2011; Butler 2015). The young queers in this thesis felt significantly empowered by the positive 2009 verdict, and counted on the power of the law to continue to expand the range of rights and entitlements afforded to sexual minorities; legal recognition was important to them as it gave them something to stand on while facing daily experiences of stigmatisation and isolation. Hence the reaction to the regressive judgment pronounced by the Supreme Court was one of rage, disappointment, and even disbelief; significantly, however, queers responded to the Supreme Court verdict by rejecting its act of misrecognition and refusing to 'go back in the closet'. This refusal can be understood both as a gesture toward a politics of activist mobilisation that will continue to fight for legal recognition, but also, as I have shown, as an expression of awareness of the difference between formal recognition and day-to-day negotiations. The work undertaken by queers to carve out spaces of recognition in everyday situations exists somewhat independently of what the law prescribes: beyond a modicum of bitterness, to state that 'life goes on' as many participants did after the 2013 judgment means to expose the limits of the law's power to set the terms of what recognition means.

Viewing the sphere of the law as a space where recognition needs to be negotiated, the relationship between young queers and the law is characterised by an ambiguous attachment that results in an equally ambiguous acceptance of the law's subordinating power. The legal back-and-forth that the participants to this study have experienced first-hand constitutes a space where young queers negotiate the meaning and the terms of their recognition: in other words, they begin to question whether the terms under which they are interpellated, recognised and misrecognised are acceptable, and what the limits of those interpellations are (Butler 1997b).

Recognition, acceptance and the family

How are demands for recognition articulated and negotiated at the level of the everyday? The data from my research indicate the presence of a complex cluster of ambiguous and ambivalent dispositions on the part of young queer people. On the one hand, they believed in the necessity and in the value of recognition; but on the other hand, they primarily wanted to be able to be seen as ‘normal’, where normality is understood as the ability to participate fully in the kinds of social interactions available to their heterosexual peers. At play in the ambivalent attachment to recognition expressed by participants is the unresolved conundrum between subjectivity and social existence, the persistent desire to participate in relations of reciprocity even when these relations are governed by norms that exclude, penalise, and silence difference (Berlant 2007, 2011; Butler 2004b, 2015).

In Chapter 6, I have focused on the family as a space where powerful norms about what constitutes a ‘normal’ life are articulated. I have analysed in particular the specific normative demands of the urban, middle class Indian family and sought to highlight both the continuities and the changes within the middle class family as a powerful social agent in the Indian context. The family emerges as an institution and a critical social site providing material and affective support, but also exerting demands that show the interplay of power, hierarchies, and contestations.

For the young people in my study, managing family relations was a central concern not only because in the vast majority of cases queer sexuality was met with disapproval and various degrees of stigmatisation, but also because my participants belong to a generation charged with the potential of fulfilling the hopes and ambitions of a globalised, successful and prosperous India. Pursuing higher education and prestigious jobs was essential, and a way to reciprocate the significant economic and affective investment made by the parents over the years. Parallel to the pressures of education and career choices, young queer people had to negotiate the pressure of (heterosexual) marriage, conceived as a cornerstone of kinship relations and a further marker of ‘normality’. What my data show is also how marriage expectations were clearly gendered, with young gay men expressing a higher degree of anxiety than young women; on the other hand, though, young queer women’s sexuality was often

misrecognised and re-signified according to gendered views on morality, purity, and stereotypical feminine respectability.

As such, young queer people had to perpetually negotiate their sexuality in the face of a multitude of expectations and constraints. Being queer placed them in a difficult situation, and coming out to the family was seen as an event that could disrupt and irreparably damage the parent-child relation, casting them outside the realm of a normality they strongly wanted to belong to. Queerness was seen as a disruptive element and something that, if asserted through definitive acts such as coming out, would sever the circuits of reciprocity and render young people unable to fulfil their duties as children. At the same time, though, the protagonists of this thesis felt that they belonged to a different generation who valued autonomy, independence, and a degree of individualism; they felt a strong pull toward trying to decide over their own lives, and yet they could not ignore the fact that parental influence was not only a constraining interference, but also, and importantly, something precious and valuable. Young queers confronted the risk of spoiling the closeness between them and their parents; but they also understood how the family could act as a protective mantel against the societal disapproval of same-sex sexualities.

Consequently, gaining acceptance was more important than demanding recognition. Young queers thus chose to modulate and customise the ways in which they wanted to be recognised as queers, so as to minimise the disruptive potential that their sexuality had within the heteronormative context of family relations. The strategies enacted to achieve recognition were therefore ambiguous; recognition was thus not an end in itself, but rather one of the elements of a bargain with a cluster of norms that, while inimical to queerness as a mode of subjectivity, could guarantee acceptance and safety. In analysing the ambiguities and even ambivalences in young people's accounts, I have suggested the possibility to move beyond the dichotomous frame of oppression and resistance (Mahmood 2005) and to show how young queers tried to widen the space afforded by the normative infrastructure of the family in a social and institutional context where the family retains a pivotal role in constructing and governing social existence.

Spaces of reciprocity: the Niral Club

The apparent contradiction between wanting to be recognised as queer and wanting to be ‘normal’ is a theme that I also explored in Chapter 7. The ethnographic data collected with the people who frequented the Niral Club show that they did not always associate the idea of recognition with the possibility of demarcating their right to be different; rather, they eschewed such an association, preferring instead to construct contingent spaces of symmetrical reciprocity based on friendship and solidarity, where queer sexuality could be temporarily seen as ‘normal’.

Niral Club represented a space for queer collective organising that did not rely on political or activist engagement, but addressed instead issues such as isolation, insecurity, and need for peer solidarity and friendship. One of the most important achievements of Niral Club was, in the words of the people who administered it and those who frequented it, the feeling of safety, articulated both as respite from stigmatisation and heteronormativity, and as comfortable acknowledgment of the difficulties of being queer in India. Indeed, one of the core ideas behind the Niral Club was the open acknowledgment that being queer in India is an inherently ambiguous subject position, rife with insecurities and ambivalences: and it is these insecurities and ambivalences that Niral Club managed to recognise.

Within Niral Club’s ethos, being queer did not need to be a totalising aspect of one’s personality. Just like in the case of family relations, the young people who frequented Niral Club preferred not to assert their sexual difference in ways that challenged the heteronormative structure of wider society; queerness was normalised within Niral Club’s discussions and activities, but this normalisation was contingent, temporary and circumscribed, underwired all along by the awareness of the permanence of stigma surrounding sexual minorities in India. I have argued that the contingent normalisation of queerness can be seen as an instance of circumscribed recognition, and that that Niral Club can be understood as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986), a ‘different space’ where social norms are mirrored and inverted, meanwhile exposing the exclusionary structures of regular spaces.

Young queers interacted with a range of everyday spaces, from the college environment to the workplace to Delhi’s bars and cafes, but these were regulated by heteronormativity, so that queers could not afford to be

a visible presence; the lack of welcoming spaces was compounded by the fact that Delhi does not offer much in terms of 'gay neighbourhoods' or similar spaces of sociality and fun for young people without much disposable income and limited freedom of movement. Therefore, leisure was a central component of what Niral Club provided. When discussing the function of leisure in the context of queer sociality, I have shown how the marked preference for 'fun' activities such as house parties and picnics, rather than activist engagements is a strategy adopted by Niral Club administrators in order to create an inclusive space for young people whose relation with their sexuality is marked by conflicting feelings and self-doubt. Other queer collectives that presupposed a clearer identification between queerness and political engagement could be perceived as patronising, or even exclusionary, for younger, less political queer youth.

Through a *modus operandi* that privileged leisure as well as intimate, personal conversation, Niral Club sought to create moments of reciprocity that allowed people to feel accepted, included, and 'normal' in their difference. Thus, as I have shown, it was precisely the impossibility of being considered 'normal' (by parents, friends, colleagues) that drew people to Niral Club, where they could experience a sense of normality (Berlant 2007), find temporary respite from experiences of exclusion, and build long-lasting friendships.

Situated approaches to sexualities and recognition

The findings from this thesis add to the growing body of knowledge about sexualities outside the Anglo-American context while engaging in a theoretical and empirical dialogue also with studies produced in the academic 'west'. Studies of queer sexualities, especially of the anthropological/ethnographic kind, have progressed enormously since the beginning of the 21st Century, re-focusing scholarly attention on issues of social justice and highlighting the importance of a situated approach that takes local struggles and local actors seriously, thus enriching our understanding of 'globalised' sexualities (see Aggleton et al.2012; Cruz and Manalansan 2002; Lewis et al. 2014).

The material in this thesis points to the necessity of further research about the specificities of queer people's struggles and lives at the

everyday level. In the Indian context, the tumultuous development of the legal struggle against Section 377 has resulted in a number of important studies that have unpacked the complexity of issues such as sexual rights, social justice politics, feminism, the role of the state in matters of sexuality, activism and civil society (Dave 2012; Gupta and Narrain 2011; Menon 2007; Narrain and Bhan 2005; Puri 2006, 2016). However, the complex cluster of ambiguities and ambivalences I have analysed calls for further investigations that go beyond the understanding of recognition as a right; whilst I do not discount the importance of establishing an institutional framework that recognises sexual minorities, queer people such as the young participants of this study need instruments to be able to overcome the widespread stigma that their sexuality is subjected to in Indian society.

Whether it was fear of parental rejection, the isolation experienced at school and at work, or a criminalised legal status, the people in my study were facing multiple challenges in their quest to find viable ways to live, meet friends, fall in love, study and work according to their wishes and interests. They were trying to find ways to stretch the norms governing the idea of what a good son or daughter, a good citizen, a good peer or colleague is, so that they too could be part of a community. The hesitation and the ambivalence they expressed in relation to making bold claims for their recognition are, as I have shown, a result of the acute awareness that, as Harsh said to me, ‘no one in this day and age would choose to be gay’. Thus, what needs further investigation, in the Indian context but also elsewhere, is how the stigmatisation of sexual minorities works, what ramifications it has, what it produces, where, and how (Kulick 2009).

Research that is ethnographic in method and thus adopts a situated, focussed perspective, can illuminate the complexities of the matrix of exclusion and the hierarchies of belonging that continue to dominate the Indian socio-political environment. This type of research also seems particularly urgent at the present moment when India’s democratic infrastructure is being shaken and eroded by right-wing political forces who seem to have no qualms about crushing dissent and establishing a strongly exclusionary majoritarian ideology. At the same time, ethnographic research is needed to challenge all-encompassing assumptions that pit power versus powerlessness and dominance versus subordination, instead uncovering the plurality of ways in which

marginalised people continue to make sense of their lives in conditions of constrained agency.

While my thesis has departed from an analysis of recognition as constructed by and through the sphere of the law, I have chosen to adopt a situated perspective, trying to see what recognition looks and feels like in practice from the point of view of young middle class queer people. The choice of adopting a situated perspective, however, should not suggest that there is a separation between the word of the law and the experiences of people. When young queers struggle to be accepted in the family, or enjoy the circumscribed recognition provided by Niral Club, their difficulties certainly point to the gap between an official juridical status and its effectiveness in everyday life. Yet, what I have suggested is that the relationship between people's lives and the law is never severed, or irrelevant; on the contrary, I have shown how a decriminalised legal status has enabled conversations to begin and communities to emerge, and how the shifting dynamics of the law powerfully resonate in people's own unstable negotiations.

The instability of the legal status queer sexuality, testified by the now revived possibility of a positive legal outcome in the future, profoundly affects the terms through which recognition can be negotiated and obtained. As I write these lines, the decision of the Supreme Court to review its 2013 judgment invigorates the hopes and expectations of queers all over India who continue to struggle to obtain recognition as a basic principle of justice. The legal journey is not over, and we can only hope that the appointed judges will realise that without a clear and stabilised legal status, people's already difficult negotiations in everyday life are compounded by a further level of insecurity that needs to be dispelled, if the work of creating spaces of recognition that young queers engage in on a daily basis is to have any lasting effects.

Endnotes

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- ¹ While ‘queer’ is the term I employ to refer to the participants at the centre of this thesis, I do use LGBTQ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in general.
- ² For an insightful analysis of the confluences between queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory in the Indian context, see Cossman 2012.
- ³ At present, there is a dearth of ethnographic research on everyday queer lives outside urban areas, and in particular on young people. A partial exception is Maya Sharma’s work (2006) on working class lesbians in northern India, where Sharma addresses the specific concerns affecting women who suffer from several axes of marginalisation (poverty, gender oppression, sexual discrimination).
- ⁴ *Adivasi* is an umbrella term referring to a range of ethnic and tribal groups that constitute the aboriginal population of India. According to the 2011 census, *adivasis* make up 8.6% of India’s total population. From a socio-economic perspective, they occupy an extremely marginalised position. Recognising the conspicuous socio-economic disadvantage *adivasis* live with, the Constitution of India listed them among the Scheduled Tribes, i.e. groups who need to be targeted by specific welfare measures to ensure their development and progress. The vast majority of *adivasis* live in rural areas and are exposed to increasing economic exploitation; in particular, industrial development projects such as the destruction of forests and the building of large dams are a constant threat to their livelihood (see Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011).
- ⁵ Singh, Sukhdeep. ‘600 arrests under Section 377 in 2014’. *Gaylaxy*, 5/01/2015. <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/600-arrests-under-section-377-in-2014/>. Accessed on 14th September 2015.
- ⁶ Bharatiya Janata Party (India’s People Party), commonly called BJP. The BJP is the political wing of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a right-wing militant Hindu organisation formed in 1925. The BJP was formed in 1980 from the fusion of a number of smaller conservative parties. In 2014, the BJP won the national elections with a striking majority.
- ⁷ ‘Homos are genetically handicapped: BJP’s Subramanian Swami’. *India Today*, 30/06/2015. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/homos-are-genetically-handicapped-bjp-subramanian-swamy-sadananda-gowda-section-377-same-sex-marriages/1/448056.html> Accessed on 14th September 2015.
- ⁸ Haidar, Suhasini. ‘India vote at UN not antigay, explains government’. *India Today* 26/03/2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-vote-at-un-not-antigay-explains-government/article7032970.ece>

Accessed on 14th September 2015.

- ⁹ Manvendra Singh Gohil is a gay man and the son of the Maharaja of Rajpipla in Gujarat. Even though the government of India does not recognise princely dynasties, the social status of Maharajas is still highly respected. Manvendra was 'outed' by a doctor after undergoing treatment for depression. His family responded to the revelation by disowning him. His story has been reported by various media internationally and Manvendra has since become a spokesperson for the rights of sexual minorities in India. He currently runs a non-profit association for the support of LGBTQ people in Gujarat.
- ¹⁰ Anand, Utkarsh. 'Supreme Court effectively shelves Gujarati film, says homosexuality akin to social evil for some', *Indian Express* 19/09/2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/supreme-court-effectively-shelves-gujarati-film-says-homosexuality-akin-to-social-evil-for-some/>. Accessed 02 March 2016.
Fear of so called social evils is a well-known phenomenon throughout the region of Asia. For further discussion see Rydstrom (2010); Stivens (2010).
- ¹¹ Writer Pankaj Mishra sees parallels between India, Russia and China in the ways the state tries to assert itself as the ultimate defender of national identity against the rising inequalities caused by global capitalism. See: Mishra, Pankaj. 'The State Asserts Itself in India, China and Russia', *Dawn*, June 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1189427>. Accessed 22 September 2015.
- ¹² 'Foreign-funded NGOs stalling development: IB report', *Times of India* 12/06/2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Foreign-funded-NGOs-stalling-development-IB-report/articleshow/36411169.cms>. Accessed 02/03/2016.
- ¹³ 'India Court refuses to lift rape film ban'. *BBC* 12/02/2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-31846050>. Accessed 02/03/2016.
- ¹⁴ 'Modi government, RSS plan to cleanse India of western culture, roadmap to be prepared', *DNA India*, 09/09/2015. <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-modi-government-rss-plan-to-cleanse-india-of-western-culture-roadmap-to-be-prepared-2123479>. Accessed 02/03/2016.
- ¹⁵ Brahmins are placed at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy. In ancient Hindu texts such as the Vedas, Brahmins represent the religious elite whose task was to administer rituals and sacrifices. Over time, the role of Brahmins in Indian society has changed, but their social position of symbolic and economic dominance remains (see Dupont 1970; Gupta1992; Srinivas 1994).
- ¹⁶ 'Pink rupee' is the Indian equivalent of the 'pink dollar', a phrase used to define the growing purchasing power of the (middle class, white) gay community, who are seen as having more disposable income since they supposedly do not have children (see Guidotto 2006, Riggs 2010).
- ¹⁷ Census of India. http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/religion.aspx. Accessed 02/03/2016.

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- ¹⁸ Census of India.
http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement1.aspx. Accessed 02/03/2016. The data from the 2011 census has not been made available.
- ¹⁹ Lalmalsawma, David. 'India speaks 780 languages, 220 lost in last 50 years – survey', *Reuters*. 07/09/2013. <http://blogs.reuters.com/india/2013/09/07/india-speaks-780-languages-220-lost-in-last-50-years-survey/>. Accessed 02/03/2016.
- ²⁰ The World Bank Poverty and Equity.
<http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND>. Accessed 02/03/2016.
- ²¹ According to the *Rigveda*, a Hindu religious text, mankind has been created in the image of the original cosmic body (the *Purusha*). From the *Purusha*'s head came the Brahmins (priests); from his arms the Kshatryias (warriors), from his thighs the Vaishyas (merchants and artisans); from his feet the Shudras (labourers). (*Rigveda* 10:90). These four original classes (called *varnas*) are the antecedents of the modern castes (*jatis*). The *Dharmashastras*, a large corpus of religious and legal norms, prescribes detailed measures for the maintenance of separation between *varnas*, as well as ritual remedies for restoring purity.
- ²² It must be noted that the rationale behind the Court's judgment was based on a primarily socio-economic assessment of the marginal status of transgender people; considerations about their sexual practices were absent from the judgment. While I do not take the NALSA judgment into account in my thesis, since it exceeds the scope of my study, I would emphasize the contradictions it results into, in terms of recognition: while transgender people have had their unique gender identity recognised, their sexuality is still criminalised. See also Dutta 2014.
- ²³ The India of the 21st century had been characterized, since the early 2000s, as a 'rising superpower' and a critical player in what has been called 'the Asian century' (Kohli, Sharma and Sood 2011). Much of the interest around India's new global ascendance revolves around the country's rapid GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth, which has increased annually at a rate of 8,6% on average since 2003 (World Bank data, see <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>. Accessed 02/03/2016).
- ²⁴ *India Unbound* is the title of a 2000 book by venture capitalist Gurcharan Das in which the author chronicles India's development from before the independence to the 21st century; Das sees the development of India's political and economic status as a story of capitalist success that will ultimately lead to great possibilities for India on the international stage. *India Unbound* is one among many similar publications from the early 2000s where India is depicted as an upcoming Asian 'superpower'. Other titles include *Why Growth Matters*; *India: the Emerging Giant*; *India Express: the Future of the Next Superpower*. These books were omnipresent in the bookstores and newspaper stalls of Mumbai and Delhi when I first visited India in 2002. More recently, their popularity has been surpassed by more 'technical' books about management, entrepreneurship and corporate leadership
- ²⁵ The notion of modernity applied to India has been the subject of much literature looking at politics and economics (see Gupta 2000; Jodhka 2013). Here, I use modernity as a flexible concept denoting aspirations, attitudes and practices made possible by technology, the media, urbanization, transnational diaspora and increased

consumer power (see Appadurai 1996; Breckenridge 1995; Mulinari and Sandell 2009).

²⁶ Rohit Chopra (2003) discusses the ways in which neoliberalism, understood as a political and economic conduct that favours private enterprise, the free market, and a reduced ingerence of the state in economic matters, has been embraced by India as a self-evident choice. According to Chopra, as the Indian state adopts a neoliberal course 'On the one hand, it continues to promote the privilege-as-right of an Indian elite. On the other hand, it redefines the demands made by the nation on this elite. With globalisation and liberalisation, the socialist dimension of Nehru's investment in science and technology is abandoned, even as the rhetoric of national progress and development is preserved in the equation. The objectives are deemed worthwhile, even essential to justifying policy changes warranted by India's participation in a globalized economy, but socialism as a method for realizing these objectives is rejected as a flawed and archaic ideology. In the sphere of industry and business, the Indian state has initiated the process of privatizing state-owned assets and sectors. In the sphere of education, the emphasis is slowly but surely shifting towards the acquisition of 'skills' needed to be competitive in a global economy. And, crucially, in the professional sphere, the Indian state now encourages its subjects to acquire global capital, whether by working in India or overseas' (Chopra 2003: 438).

²⁷ See: <http://delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/58d0f50045b2a85d81669fc1c1f135e9/hcpressrelease.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-28352311&CACHEID=58d0f50045b2a85d81669fc1c1f135e9>.

²⁸ See Peterson 1999 for an analysis of the connections between nationalism and heterosexism.

²⁹ While I am aware of the problems with an uncritical adoption of words such as gay, lesbian, LGBTQ and queer in a non-western setting (Hayes 2000; Hoad 2000), in this thesis I follow the terminological choices adopted by informants. Since the people informing my research were, by and large, part of a grassroots collective that defined itself as 'queer', the word queer will be used often to refer to them when I speak about them collectively. Most young men defined themselves as gay, leaving 'queer' as a descriptive adjective referring to more general or collective matters (for example, a queer agenda, a queer group, queer publications). Young women on the on the hand mentioned the word lesbian to refer to themselves much less often than young men used gay. They would rather talk about being queer women, or about being attracted to other women. My usage of the acronym LGBTQ refers to discussions pertaining to wider sexual minority communities and movements in India.

³⁰ The terms used to describe sexualities that fall outside the heterosexual norm are several. While HIV/AIDS research has popularized the acronym 'MSM' (Men who have Sex with Men) to refer to male-to-male penetrative sexual acts which may or may not also correspond to a homosexual sexual identity, in India there is a variety of terms, each referring to particular configurations. *Kothi* refers to a receptive sexual partner who might also dress in feminine outfits; a *kothi*'s sexual partner (who penetrates) is called *panthi*; a sexual partner who is both insertive and receptive is called *double-decker*; *gandu* is a pejorative slang word similar to 'faggot' but that is sometimes used within *kothi* and *hijra* communities (see Reddy 2005); effeminate young men are sometimes referred to as *meyyeli chhele* (Khanna 2009). Additionally,

it must be noted that the terminologies with which same-sex behaviours and identities are defined are different in different regions of India.

- ³¹ The Global South is an expression referring to developing countries, in contrast to developed countries which are collectively referred to Global North. The term has gained increasing currency particularly after the end of the Cold War, and has substituted the older division between first, second, and third world. For an economic overview of the North-South divide, see Raffer and Singer 2002; for a critical appraisal of the division, see Therien 1999.
- ³² The infection rate and the number of people living with AIDS have been declining in India over the last decade. UNAIDS Gap Report states that India recorded a 38% decline in AIDS-related deaths between 2005 and 2013 (see http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_Gap_report_en.pdf. Accessed 09/03/16). According to NACO, in 2011 there were about 2,090,000 people living with HIV/AIDS. See 'NACO Annual Report 2014-15' http://naco.gov.in/upload/2015%20MSLNS/Annual%20report%20NACO_2014-15.pdf. Accessed 09/03/16. Globally, AIDS has caused about 39 million deaths since the beginning of the epidemic (see: <http://www.who.int/gho/hiv/en/>. Accessed 09/02/16).
33. It is interesting to note Gupta's different choice of words to describe homosexuals from different class backgrounds. 'Gay' denotes a middle class identity and it suggests a sense of belonging to a global community of homosexual people - particularly when it comes to lifestyle, political leanings and income; by contrast, local terms such as *kothi* carry a different class baggage, denoting often lesser educated, lower class people who speak languages other than English in their daily life. The combination of class and language marks these terms as 'indigenous' as opposed to the 'import' of the word gay.
- ³⁴ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define heteronormativity as follows: 'By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations – often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548). It is important to note that heteronormativity does not only privilege heterosexuality at the expense (and the exclusion) of homosexuals; heterosexuality is also subjected to the regulatory power of heteronormativity (see Jackson 2006).
- ³⁵ Singh, Sukhdeep. '600 arrests under Section 377 in 2014'. *Gaylaxy*, 5/01/2015. <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/600-arrests-under-section-377-in-2014/>. Accessed on 14th September 2015.
Dore, Bhavya. 'How Section 377 Is Being Exploited By The Police and Blackmailers To Extort Men', *Caravan Magazine* 03 November 2015 - See

<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/how-section-377-became-payday-extortionists-and-police-alike#sthash.eENIFcTs.dpuf>. Accessed 09/03/16.

- ³⁶ The *It Gets Better Project* was started by author Dan Savage in 2010. According to the official website, it now consists of more than 50,000 user-created videos. The project has developed into an international network with affiliate chapters in 14 countries. India is not one of them. www.itgetsbetter.org. Accessed 11/03/2016.
- ³⁷ Banerjea, Niharika and Debanuj Dasgupta, "States of Desire: Homonationalism and LGBT Activism in India", *Sanhati*, 06 June 2013. <http://sanhati.com/articles/7185/>. Accessed 12/03/16.
- ³⁸ Berlant uses the expression 'nondominant people' to refer to, among others, sexual minorities. While I understand her terminological choice as an attempt to describe individuals who do not occupy positions of privilege and domination in a heterosexual social matrix, I find the word 'nondominant' potentially problematic, in that it could obscure hierarchical power relations which operate even within marginalised groups.
- ³⁹ Michel Foucault spoke about 'regimes of truth' to indicate systems of knowledge production which shape 'grids of intelligibility' (Foucault 1975/1976: 164) about what is accepted as truth within a given society. Foucault states: 'Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.' (Foucault 1980: 133).
- ⁴⁰ Apparatus is the English translation of the word *dispositif*, used by Foucault to refer to 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' (Foucault 1980: 194).
- ⁴¹ Butler draws on Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation (Althusser 1971) to explain how individuals are called to recognise themselves in specific names (both actual names and social categories), thus becoming subjects. Althusser developed the concept of interpellation to illustrate how ideological apparatuses (such as state institutions) make us into subjects; interpellation is the act through which the force of ideology invests us in a seemingly non-coercive way. In a vignette, Althusser describes a casual passer-by who hears a policeman on the street calling 'hey, you!', and without knowing exactly why, the passer-by turns toward the hailing. In the act of turning, the passer-by has accepted the interpellation: the passer-by has recognised that the hailing was directed at him. The passer-by has been made into a subject to the power of law by the act of hailing. There are several possibilities as to why one would respond to the hailing: had the passer-by committed a crime? Had he seen someone committing a crime? And so on. The force of Althusser's vignette is to show how a casual individual would recognise the calling of an authority as possibly having to do with him. As law-abiding citizens, we feel interpellated by the authority of the law even when we have done nothing to cause the hailing and are not forced to turn to it. We turn, not because we know why we are being hailed, but because we are fundamentally vulnerable and open to the power of the law to define us; and what drives us to turn to the hailing is a desire to be defined or, in other words, a desire for identity.

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- ⁴² See also Queer Nation's 1990 leaflet 'Queers Read This'. Available at: <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this>. Accessed October 2nd, 2015.
- ⁴³ For relevant studies exploring different dimensions of children's socialization, see Horton 2012; Rydstrom 2002, 2003; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986;
- ⁴⁴ Berlant argues that Butler overlooks the promises that power produces: 'Butler's theoretical stance about 'power' in relation to the law, normative authority, values normativity, and structural privilege underdescribes the number of internally contradictory promises (of acknowledgment, amelioration, protection, retribution, balancing, delegation, discipline, and enabling to thrive) that its activity represents.' (2007:297).
- ⁴⁵ Links to downloadable PDF versions of the relevant documents are provided in each chapter.
- ⁴⁶ While it is understandable that I would miss the peacefulness of Pondicherry, a coastal town with a population of less than 300,000, cities such as Bombay or Bangalore are as hectic as Delhi, but having visited them several times in the past, they evoked feelings of familiarity and comfort. After many trips over the years, I have come to regard Delhi as a familiar place too.
- ⁴⁷ 'Azad clarifies on "gay sex-is-unnatural" remark', The Hindu, 5 July 2011. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/azad-clarifies-on-gay-sex-is-unnatural-remark/article2161747.ece>
- ⁴⁸ Jahangir Puri is a neighbourhood in north Delhi; Kutub Minar is the site of the famous Mughal pillar and architectural complex in south Delhi. Both are also metro stations.
- ⁴⁹ See supra note 34 for Berlant and Warner's definition of heteronormativity.
- ⁵⁰ *Kothis* are a heterogenous group of biological males who, in same-sex sexual relationships, adopt the passive role. See also note 30.
- ⁵¹ The Max Mueller Bhavan is the Indian name of the Goethe Institut, whose purpose is to offer a broad range of cultural activity for the promotion of German culture in the world. The India International Centre is a non-governmental institution with the purpose of fostering exchange of ideas and culture. Both are located in central Delhi.
- ⁵² On Facebook, groups can be created by any user and can be set as open, closed, or secret. In an open group, anyone can see the group's members and what they post. A closed group enables everyone to see that the group exists, but not its content. In a secret group, only members see the group, who else is in it and what people post.
- ⁵³ Second Life is a 3D virtual world developed by a software engineer and release on the market in 2003. Users are able to construct their characters (known as avatars) and interact with others, work, play, buy and sell property and goods within the online virtual world. www.secondlife.com
- ⁵⁴ Recently, a controversy erupted after Facebook's decision to remove images of breastfeeding women, on the grounds that their nipples were visible. <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/02/breastfeeding-facebook-photos/>

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- ⁵⁵ Johnson, Bobby. 'Privacy no longer a social norm, says Facebook founder', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy>
- ⁵⁶ United States of America vs. Joshua Merigildo et al., 11 cr.576 (WHP), 2012.
- ⁵⁷ Krishnadas Rajagopal. 'Five-judge Constitution Bench to take a call on Section 377', *The Hindu*, 3rd February 2016. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-refers-plea-against-section-377-to-5-judge-bench/article8183860.ece>. Accessed 18/02/16.
- ⁵⁸ *Gora* is a Hindi word meaning 'white'. It is used, sometimes pejoratively, to indicate white people.
- ⁵⁹ The full text of the judgment is available at: https://www.escribnet.org/sites/default/files/Court_daecision.pdf. Accessed on 29/09/15.
- ⁶⁰ The full text of the judgment is available at: <http://judis.nic.in/supremecourt/imgs1.aspx?filename=41070>. Accessed 29/09/15.
- ⁶¹ Indian Penal Code. <http://chddistrictcourts.gov.in/THE%20INDIAN%20PENAL%20CODE.pdf>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁶² Friese, Kai. 'Safe Custody? Tihar Jail Bans Condoms', *India Today* 31/05/94. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/tihar-jail-bans-condoms/1/293411.html>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁶³ The Oxford Dictionary definition of affidavit is: 'A written statement confirmed by oath or affirmation, for use as evidence in court'.
- ⁶⁴ I follow the convention of referring to case law judgments by using the first name as it appears in the judgment. The full citation of the *Naz* judgment is *Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, 160 Delhi Law Times 277. In order to avoid confusion between the judgment and the NGO, when referring to the judgment I use Italics (*Naz*).
- ⁶⁵ The juridical structure of Indian courts places the Supreme Court as the highest court in the country. Supreme Court verdicts have federal validity. The jurisdiction of High Courts normally extends only to a state, but a previous Supreme Court order from 2004 established that a verdict arising from a writ petition questioning the constitutionality of a Parliamentary Act would have federal validity even when issued by a state court. See: Mitta, Manoj. 'Will Delhi HC gay order apply across India?', *Times of India* 03/07/09. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Will-Delhi-HC-gay-order-apply-across-India/articleshow/4731089.cms>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁶⁶ The Supreme Court of India does not only re-examine judgments from lower courts. Any citizen of India can in principle turn to the Supreme Court directly, for a variety of issues. The extreme accessibility of the Supreme Court is a peculiar feature which differentiates India from many other countries in the world. For a useful review of the structure and function of the Supreme Court of India, see Nick Robinson 2013.
- ⁶⁷ Robinson (2013) explains how the Supreme Court of India is 'polyvocal' (Robinson 2013:113), meaning that it consists of separate panels (also called benches) usually

composed of two or three judges. Appellants therefore sometimes try to direct their case to a specific bench, depending on that bench's previous record. The polyvocality of the Supreme Court generates a degree of uncertainty, since different benches can give different interpretations of doctrine (Robinsons 2013:114). As for the relevance of the size of different benches, in principle a bench cannot question the verdict of a larger bench. If a case is disputed and needs re-examining (as is the case with Section 377), the case will be reassigned to a larger bench. This is precisely what happened with the Koushal judgment. After the Supreme Court accepted the curative petition in February 2016 (see below, note 11), the case has been assigned to a five-judges bench for re-examination. This development is important since the larger the bench, the weightier the judgment, both in terms of precedent and in terms of authority in the public sphere. A five-judge bench is also known as 'constitution bench': the Constitution of India (Article 145) states that substantial questions of law and constitutional interpretation must be discussed by at least five judges (see Robinson et al. 2011).

⁶⁸ Full citation: Suresh Kumar Koushal and Another v. NAZ Foundation and Others (Civil Appeal No. 10972 of 2013)

⁶⁹ A curative petition implies that a court re-examines a case it has previously adjudicated on when gross miscarriages of justice have been caused by the court's verdict. It has been established, as an extraordinary measure, in the Indian legal system in a 2002 judgment.

See: R.S. Alika. 'Section 377: the way forward', *The Hindu* 01/03/14.

<http://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/section-377-the-way-forward/article5740242.ece>. Accessed 28/03/16.

For the argument framing the curative petition, see Lawyers Collective, 'Naz Foundation files Curative Petition challenging the Supreme Court judgment on Section 377', 31/03/14. <http://www.lawyerscollective.org/updates/naz-foundation-files-curative-petition-challenging-supreme-court-judgment-section-377.html>. Accessed 28/03/16.

⁷⁰ The birth of organisations dealing with sexuality issues in India and Vietnam coincided with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the subsequent efforts undertaken internationally to curb its spread. Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, several international agencies prompted the Indian government to implement specific programmes to address the issue of HIV/AIDS. The first reported cases of HIV in South India in 1986 led the Ministry of Health and Family to establish the first National AIDS Committee, followed by the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) in 1992 (Gabler 2011; Nambiar 2012; Sethi 2003). With development assistance credit from the World Bank, in 1999 NACO implemented the First National AIDS Programme (NACP I), which focused on targeted interventions aimed at perceived high-risk groups (Bhaskaran 2004; Nambiar 2012). The vast funding made available by the World Bank and channelled through NACO saw a huge increase in the number of registered NGOs involved in targeted HIV/AIDS interventions, with NGOs with little or no previous experience in dealing with HIV/AIDS shifting focus or adding HIV/AIDS to their list of focus areas (Misra 2006; Nambiar 2012; Raj 1998). The numbers of NGOs involved increased with each subsequent NACP, with NACP II running from 1999 to 2006 and NACP III running from 2007 to 2012, with some more established NGOs losing their funding (Nambiar 2012). By engaging in

work with HIV/AIDS, a vast array of organisations was able to gain the necessary credibility and funding despite doing little towards HIV/AIDS prevention (Nambiar 2012). In 2007 NACO withdrew its support for a large number of organisations working with HIV/AIDS in the wake of allegations about their misutilisation of funding and a new FCRA was enacted in 2010 that allowed greater government regulation of organisations (Nambiar 2012). A number of NGOs, including the more established Naz Foundation and the Lawyer’s Collective, have been included in NACO’s planning of the fourth National Aids Control Programme (NACP IV) as part of NACO’s Technical Resource Groups (TRGs) (Nambiar 2012; UNAIDS 2012).

⁷¹ Govind vs. State of Madhya Pradesh (1975) 2 SCC 148.

⁷² Quoting the Special Courts Bill (1978), the Supreme Court argues that: ‘By the process of classification, the State has the power of determining who should be regarded as a class for purposes of legislation and in relation to a law enacted on a particular subject. This power, no doubt, in some degree is likely to produce some inequality; but if a law deals with the liberties of a number of well—defined classes, it is not open to the charge of denial of equal protection on the ground that it has no application to other persons. Classification thus means segregation in classes which have a systematic relation, usually found in common properties and characteristics. It postulates a rational basis and does not mean herding together of certain persons and classes arbitrarily’.

⁷³ ‘If there is one constitutional tenet that can be said to be underlying theme of the Indian Constitution, it is that of ‘inclusiveness’. This Court believes that Indian Constitution reflects this value deeply ingrained in Indian society, nurtures over several generation. The inclusiveness that Indian society traditionally displayed, literally in every aspect of life, is manifest in recognising a role in society for everyone. Those perceived by the majority as ‘deviants’ of ‘different’ are not on that score excluded or ostracised. Where society can display inclusiveness and understanding, such persons can be assured a life of dignity and non-discrimination. [...] In our view, Indian Constitutional law does not permit the statutory criminal law to be held captive by the popular misconceptions of who the LGBTs are. It cannot be forgotten that discrimination is antithesis of equality and that it is the recognition of equality which will foster the dignity of every individual.’ (*Naz v. Govt.* 2009, paragraphs 130 and 131).

⁷⁴ According to Alok Gupta (2002) cited in Jyoti Puri (2013: 154), since the enforcement of the Indian Penal Code in 1860 there have been 46 cases involving prosecution. Of these 46, 30 of them dealt with sexual assault on minors.

⁷⁵ ‘Legally gay and busy celebrating’, Times of India 12 July 2009. See: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/events/delhi/Legally-gay-and-busy-celebrating/articleshow/4753082.cms>. Accessed 28/09/ 15.

⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMXXmcCibMw> Accessed 15/04/15.

⁷⁷ ‘Gay ruling: now we’re really in the 21st Century’, *Times of India* 03/07/09. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-07-03/india/28182660_1_gay-ruling-gay-men-gay-couples. Accessed 18/10/15.

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- ⁷⁸ Venkatesan, V. 'Defining moment'. *Frontline* 25(15), July 18-31 2009. <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2615/stories/20090731261502900.htm>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁷⁹ Maten, Sibi. 'My tryst with Section 377' *Apcom.org* 11/12/13. <http://108.174.147.101/~apcomorg/my-tryst-section-377-0>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁸⁰ Paragraph 52: 'the criminalisation of homosexuality condemns in perpetuity a sizable section of society and forces them to live their lives in the shadow of harassment, exploitation, humiliation, cruel and degrading treatment at the hands of the law enforcement machinery'
- ⁸¹ Paragraph 51: 'respondent no.1 attacked section 377 IPC on the ground that the same has been used to perpetrate harassment, blackmail and torture on certain persons, especially those belonging to the LGBT community. In our opinion, this treatment is neither mandated by the section nor condoned by it and the mere fact that the section is misused by police authorities is not a reflection of the vices of the section'.
- ⁸² In accordance with ethical standards about protecting people's anonymity, I have re-phrased Rohit's statement while keeping the overall meaning intact.
- ⁸³ 'Vikram Seth on Section 377 and gay rights in India', *India Today*, 20/12/13. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/vikram-seth-on-gay-rights-homosexuality/1/332025.html>. Accessed 28/03/16.
- ⁸⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqCfviKW1EQ>. Accessed 13/04/15.
- ⁸⁵ *Gay* and *lesbi* are the Indonesian terms used for gays and lesbians. See also Boellstorff 2005.
- ⁸⁶ My usage of the term 'closeted' reflects the way the word was used by participants themselves.
- ⁸⁷ Sangini's official description uses this expression rather than the word 'lesbian', and I follow their choice.
- ⁸⁸ Kabeer writes "The essence of the inter-generational contract is that parents look after their children when they are young and expect to be looked after by them in their old age: 'looking after' in this context extends to emotional as well as material support.[...] The contract therefore requires an act of faith on the part of parents who sacrifice current consumption for future security that their children will survive, will become economically productive and, most important, will be willing to honour their side of the contract when parents have become old and dependent(Kabeer 2000:465).Kabeer's use of the concept of contract is productive for my analysis because it highlights how both economic/material factors and moral values inform and constitute family relations.
- ⁸⁹ A recent article published in *The Lancet* found that the highest percentage of suicides in India interests youth (15-29 years old). Among the causes of suicide, the report highlights changes in socio-economic structures and increasing pressure to succeed. Patel et al. 2012. 'Suicide Mortality in India: a Nationally Representative Survey', *The Lancet* vol. 379, no. 9834. [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(12\)60606-0/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(12)60606-0/abstract). Accessed 18/03/2016.
See also:

Ghosh, Palash. 'Suicide rate soaring among India's young, well-educated'. *International Business Times*, 22/06/2012. <http://www.ibtimes.com/suicide-rate-soaring-among-indias-young-well-educated-703928>. Accessed 18/03/2016.

Patel, Vikram. 'Invisible health-risk that stalks India's youth', *The Hindu* 23/06/2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/invisible-health-risk-that-stalks-indias-youth/article3555531.ece>. Accessed 18/03/2016.

⁹⁰ While the average age at marriage in India has not increased substantially (see Desai and Andrist 2010), people belonging to the urban middle classes and possessing higher education qualifications are expected to marry later than previous generations within the same socio-economic segment (Prakash and Singh 2013). A high level of education and a degree of financial stability are valuable assets when it's time to look for a suitable partner; recent research shows that in matrimonial advertisements and websites, education level (and/or profession) figures prominently as a key criterion for choosing a prospective partner, even though it must be noted that categories such as religion and caste have all but disappeared (Sharangpani 2010; Kaur and Dhanda 2014). Anagraphically, this means that men are expected to get married by the time they are 30 years old; as for women, while being educated is definitely a plus and improves marriageability, being over-educated (for example Master's level or above) may in fact make it harder to find a suitable match (Kaur and Dhanda 2014); also, requirements about having a stable job are not as strict, since it is not so widely expected (or even encouraged) that a woman will continue working after marrying and having children (Radhakrishnan 2011). Female participants stated that marriage plans started to get under way at around 25 years of age.

⁹¹ India Human Development Survey. <http://www.ihds.info/partnerchoice>. Accessed 21/03/2016.

⁹² *Baba* is a Hindi honorific word normally used for elders or wise men. Several Hindu gurus are known as *Babas* (ex: Satya Sai Baba, Swami Ramdev Baba).

⁹³ Further into my fieldwork I learnt from Pallavi, who was also from a Tamil Brahmin family, about the status of Tamilian Brahmins. Pallavi spoke of the "TamBrahm" community as a "Special upper caste identity" dominating the social sphere in Tamil Nadu. While their origins are rooted in Hinduism, over the generations some Tamil Brahmins have converted to Christianity (The south of India, and in particular Tamil Nadu, has higher percentages of Christians than the north). Tamil Brahmins have long occupied positions of power: according to Washbrook (2009) they played a big part in leading the 'modernization' of South India since colonial times. For a comprehensive though concise background of Tamil Brahmins, see also Fuller and Narasimhan 2008.

⁹⁴ The majority of participants used the word 'queer' (in English) often. Generally speaking, they used it when referring to the social movement or to the general (abstract) sexual identity construct. When referring to themselves, to name their own sexual identity, they tended to use 'gay' or 'lesbian' (although the latter less so). The fairly widespread usage of 'queer' is, I would conclude, an effect of the existence of the Niral Club and other activist organisations that popularized the use of 'queer' beyond its deconstructive, post-structuralist theoretical underpinnings.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that the ways in which sexual moralities are gendered are not an Indian prerogative, as works by scholars focusing on gendered moralities show (see

Rydstrom 2003 on Vietnam, Stivens 2006 on Malaysia, Hirsh, Wardlow and Phinney 2012 on Mexico).

⁹⁶ Harsh belonged to the Marwari community. Marwaris are an ethnic group originally from Rajasthan, in north-west India. The Marwari community has gained a reputation for being a business-oriented community. Among them are the Birlas and Mittals, two of the most powerful business families in India and worldwide. See Khaitan, Abhilasha 'Power of the Marwari business community', *Forbes India* 17/03/14. <http://forbesindia.com/article/marwari-power/what-makes-marwaris-thrive-in-finance/37369/1>. Accessed 21/03/2016.

⁹⁷ Roy, Sandeep 'Is coming out passé?', *Firstpost* 23 November 2011. <http://www.firstpost.com/living/gay-or-not-is-coming-out-passe-138381.html>. Accessed 21/03/16.

⁹⁸ See for example: Sawhney, Anubha 'How do I tell you about him?', *Times of India* 22 July 2012. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/parenting/How-do-I-tell-you-about-him/articleshow/5452733.cms>; Accessed 21/03/16. Debroy, Lachmi 'Mamma, I'm gay', *Times of India* 13 February 2015. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/man-woman/Mamma-Im-gay/articleshow/42452367.cms>; accessed 21/03/16.

⁹⁹ The network channel CNN-IBN aired a special documentary called *My Child Is Gay*, where a number of parents from different social classes were interviewed and told about the moment when their children came out to them. Despite the theatrical staging of the coming out moment, the show tried to highlight the possibilities for harmonic resolutions and acceptance. It must be noted, however, that in shows like *My Child Is Gay*, queer children are eventually accepted because they are someone's children and despite their sexuality. A talk show that tried to generate a dialogue about the unfairness of the stigma toward sexual minorities – as well as highlighting the objective emotional hardship for families, was the third episode of *Satyamev Jayate (The truth alone prevails)*, a talk show broadcasted on the public channel Doordarshan, produced and hosted by Bollywood actor Aamir Khan, who in recent years has engaged in various social issues.

¹⁰⁰ See for example: *Gaylaxy* <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/page/2/?s=coming+out&submit=Search>. Accessed 21/03/16. *Orinam*, <http://orinam.net/resources-for/lgbt/coming-out-2/coming-out-stories/>. Accessed 21/03/16.

¹⁰¹ 'The Welcome: United Nations Free and Equal'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lihVCIFamb0>. Accessed 29/03/16.

¹⁰² In the petition we read: 'The parents of LGBT persons come from different professional, socio-cultural backgrounds and different regions of India. The parents of LGBT persons who are applicants before this Court also come from a range of professional backgrounds being scientists, teachers, government employees, private sector employees, lawyers, artists and home makers. The states the applicants come from traverse the diversity of India and include Maharashtra, Delhi, West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala'. (*Minna Saran and Others* 2010:page 4). The full

text of the petition is available at: http://orinam.net/377/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SC_ParentsOfLGBTChildren_WrittenSubmissions.pdf

- ¹⁰³ Rajagopal, Krishnadas. 'In defence of their gay children, 19 parents go to SC', *Indian Express* 09 February 2011. <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/in-defence-of-their-gay-children-19-parents-go-to-sc/747835/1>. Accessed 21/03/16.
- ¹⁰⁴ In another article about the petition, one of the parents interviewed jokingly tells the reporter that they still managed to get a doctor in the family despite her son's homosexuality. See Ravindran, Shruti 'My son is gay, and I'm proud of him', *Indian Express* 20 February 2011. <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/-my-son-is-gay-and-i-m-proud-of-him-/752229/0>. Accessed 21/03/16.
- ¹⁰⁴ Queer in this context means a person whose sexuality does not conform to the heterosexual norms. It thus includes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sexual categories. Queer was widely used to describe the Niral Club's activities and mission; the popularity of the term among young gays and lesbian people is also due to the rather widespread use of the word by other NGOs and activist groups, as well as by books about sexuality and law in India.
- ¹⁰⁶ Becoming a member of Niral Club is an informal process; to be a member, it is enough to show up at a meeting and/or join the Facebook page of the Club.
- ¹⁰⁷ For example the 2004 International Conference of Sexualities, Masculinities and Cultures in South Asia, held in Bangalore.
- ¹⁰⁸ For example, people who don't embrace monogamy, or women who affirm their right to a sexual life before marriage.
- ¹⁰⁹ In several students hostels connected to universities in Delhi, there are restrictions on evening activities: students are expected to be back at a certain time. The rules are different for males and females. In some women's hostels, one would need a signed paper from parents certifying that they allow their daughter to go out at night. The number of times one can go out at night each month is also limited.
- ¹¹⁰ Niral Club's Facebook page is in English, but people are free to post in other Indian languages too (the most common being Hindi); in case, another member or an administrator provides an English translation.
- ¹¹¹ The Facebook group is set as 'closed' and 'secret'. This means that people have to receive approval by an administrator before they are admitted to the page; also, all content posted on the page cannot be seen by anyone who is not a member, and does not appear on Google searches or similar search engines.
- ¹¹² A selfie is a self portrait taken normally with a smartphone or a tablet by activating the front camera.
- ¹¹³ See: <http://nigahdelhi.blogspot.se>. Accessed 01/04/16.
- ¹¹⁴ Same-sex marriage was a topic we often discussed. While people did not elaborate consistently on the possibility to achieve legislative changes that would allow for same-sex couples to marry, many participants had positive and rather romantic views on marriage. They dreamed of big ceremonies, fancy celebrations, honeymoon trips, configuring their ideal wedding scenario as very similar to the heterosexual ritual.

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- ¹¹⁵ Engineering colleges are for the most part separated from other colleges, both physically and in terms of social interaction. Several participants with engineering backgrounds spoke about feeling 'out of touch' with their peers from other faculties. The curriculum was also described as mono-disciplinary, which means that engineering students felt that they had no fora to discuss issues other than mathematics.
- ¹¹⁶ I am in agreement with Saba Mahmood's argument about the fact that often liberal feminist scholarship has tended to locate and emphasize resistance as a 'politically subversive form of agency', thus 'ignor[ing] other modalities of agency whose meaning and effects are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse' (Mahmood 2005:153).
- ¹¹⁷ Rajagopal, Krishnadas. 'Five-judge Constitution Bench to take a call on Section 377', *The Hindu*, 03/02/16. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-refers-plea-against-section-377-to-5judge-bench/article8183860.ece>. Accessed 17/03/16.

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