

# Being Queer Feminists in Delhi: Narratives of (Non)Belonging

---

Niharika Banerjea\*

*in conversation with*

Rituparna Borah\*\*

*The ground of urban queer activism in India is contested, shifting and informed by boundaries of class, caste, and location. Within that, queer feminist activism has a long journey, in connection with women's rights groups, feminist collectives and organizations, and queer/LBT/LGBT/trans\*collectives and organizations. Against this backdrop, the article focuses on aspects of being queer feminist academic/activists in Delhi, as a way to include the lens of emotionalities in a discussion of urban queer activism and activist spaces. With Rituparna (queer feminist activist) I, (academic-activist) reflect on our emotionalities through the question of (non)belonging. The lens of (non)belonging is used as an entry point into emerging discussions around activism, emotions and urban spaces in the everyday. The paper argues that an accounting of (non)belonging in a theorization of urban queer activism may help to understand how the doing of activism is tied up with the senses and materialities of deeply gendered spaces that go into the production of the queer feminist subject.*

*Keywords: queer feminist activism/activist spaces, Delhi, emotionality, (non)belonging*

## QUEER FEMINIST ACTIVISM, EMOTIONALITY AND DELHI

This article seeks to discuss the role of emotionalities around queer feminist activism and activist spaces. With Rituparna (queer feminist activist) I, (academic-activist) reflect on our emotionalities through the question of (non)belonging in the city of Delhi. Rituparna and I are both queer identifying cisgender women<sup>1</sup>, living and working in a city that is popularly known as 'the rape capital' of India, and a visible organizing site for activism against gender-based sexual violence and LGBTQ visibilities. I mark (non)belonging as an entry point into emerging discussions around the emotional spaces surrounding queer feminist living and activism. The ground of urban queer activism in India is contested, shifting and deeply informed by boundaries of class, caste, and location, to name a few. Within that, queer feminist

---

\* School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India, 110006. nbanerjea@gmail.com

\*\* Nazariya, A Queer-Feminist Resource Group, New Delhi, India

activism has a long journey, in connection and collaboration with women's rights groups, feminist collectives and organisations, and queer/LBT/LGBT/trans\*<sup>2</sup> collectives and organizations. Three threads emerge from a basic historicization of this trajectory. First, those identifying as lesbian, queer, gender queer and interested in visibilizing the issues of 'women loving women'<sup>3</sup> continue to work with women's rights groups to expand the category of gendered and sexual violence related to domestic violence, deaths related to dowry, and poverty. The inclusion of the specificities of the sexually dissident body into feminist discourses around gendered normativities form the focus of this connection. Second, in conjunction with queer/LBT/LGBT/trans\* collectives and organizations, queer feminist activists have rallied around the reading down of the anti-sodomy law, i.e. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (S 377) to gain juridical recognition around the question of citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Third, queer feminists form temporary coalitions around state-sponsored violence, legal reforms and the concerns of marginalized women's groups, including sex workers, Muslim women and Dalit women. The realities of queer feminist activism in urban India is therefore a complex assemblage of context and scale, existing within local, national and global specifics around advocacy and awareness practices, alliance-building, intervention efforts against violence, and funding exigencies. Against the backdrop of this trajectory, this article focuses on an aspect of being queer feminist academic/activists in Delhi as a way to include the lens of emotionalities in a discussion of urban queer activism and activist spaces. The production and role of emotions in urban queer activism has not received much attention. In a recent review paper on gender and sexuality activism, Lynda Johnston stated that "not a great deal has been written about the emotional spaces of gender and queer activism, either within or outside the academy", despite the question of emotions and activism being a thematic concern amongst geographers (Johnston, 2017, 650). Yet from the limited studies that are available, one knows that the political valence of everyday intimacies, emotions and affective imperatives is integral to the imagination of activist imaginations, ethical futures and socio-spatial relations (Dave, 2012; Johnston, 2017; Wilkinson, 2009). But the work that goes into the imagination of this world, while premised upon ideas of social justice and equity, is at the same time very specific, circumscribed by local contexts, spatial sites, as well as histories of the self. Consequently, the activist's everyday lifeworld and their activist engagements bleed into each other on a regular basis. This paper takes (non)belonging in the city as an everyday emotionality surrounding activist lives and spaces, arguing that this 'not so relevant emotion' (Wilkinson, 2009) offer ways to generate discussions about the limits of queer feminist activist practices and deepen potentials to restructure alliances within and across academic-activist spaces.

In the social science literature, belonging has been variously analysed with reference to identity, citizenship, migration, diaspora, and attachment to place, emerging as they do from the actions of nation-states and social institutions, as well as the individual act of engaging and connecting to specific places, people, non-humans and

issues.<sup>5</sup> I deploy (non)belonging as a processual socio-political project, with emotional-spatial parameters. Sites and opportunities for (non)belonging are neither linear nor straightforward, located as they are within the interstices of the academic, activist and the intimate. In this paper, I do not work with a set marker of (non)belonging, but use the term to understand what deep reflections about activist selves in everyday spaces of the city say about queer feminist activism, including its limits and potentials. To tease out the question of (non)belonging, the paper engages with selective aspects of the everyday emotional lifeworld of two queer feminists, thereby contributing to those discussions that are trying to “bring together geographies of gender, sexualities, emotion, and activism” (Johnston, 2017, 650), across territorial sites as well as academic and activist borders. I argue that a lens of (non)belonging can strengthen epistemological takes on how activists make sense of and negotiate institutional and collective based hierarchies, both of which are active sites within which queer feminist activism play out. I further argue that our everyday emotionalities in relation to Delhi holds a potential to (re)activate alliances to strategically counter violent heteropatriarchal regimes<sup>6</sup> in contemporary urban India. The ‘everyday’ and ‘everyday activism’ are thus attendant concepts in this paper, to aid in the delineation of (non)belonging. Fish et.al (2018) argue that “everyday activism” exists along with “iconic activism” that “targets the macrostructures, organisations and institutions of society” and “embody the social change that people want to experience in their lives as they are lived” (1196). Such an understanding is based on a sociological take on the everyday that draws attention to quotidian but dynamic life-worlds and diverse relationships, relationalities, and practices that social actors routinely participate in, subvert and reconfigure (Ray and Ghosh, 2016; Sztompka, 2008). Instead of seeing the everyday and activism as separate spheres, this paper has joined voices to link them together through practices of (non)belonging, as part of “sustaining movements towards social change.” (Fish et.al, 2018, 1196).

Indian cities are central organizing tropes for LGBTQ activists bringing together discrete individuals into ‘non-normative communities’ (Shah, 2015). Delhi, the urban referent in this paper, is uniquely placed, as the nation’s capital and thereby as a privileged site for LGBTQ visibility. Much like other Indian cities, Delhi hosts events around pride and protests. In addition, the city has been witnessing a significant amount of activist networking around legal reform, notwithstanding long drawn and methodical mobilisations around decriminalization related to S 377. At the same time, the locational and political privilege of the city, while allowing for visibility, also reproduces intersecting gender, caste and class inequalities within the larger LGBTQ movement. Such critiques are instantiated by citizenship claims tied to larger neoliberalising processes (Sircar and Jain, 2017) and a politico-cultural environment of homopolitism that calls selected subjects to the national fold (Banerjea, 2019). This in turn throws up critical questions around the enfranchised urban and disenfranchised ‘non-urban’ sexual subject, as well as the levels of enfranchisement within cities themselves along differences of caste, class, language and

education (Shah, 2015). Despite and because of such privileging and effacements, Delhi continues to provide a rationale as well as a site to generate queer feminist activist and academic-activist alliances around gender-sexual violence against cisgender women in public sites, for legal reform initiatives to expand the parameters of criminal law to include trans\* bodies and gender non-conforming persons, and to consolidate peer support groups of lesbian and queer identifying women. The contemporary renditions and political nature of such alliances and consolidations began to solidify in the 1980s and 1990s. Otherwise dispersed cisgender (and largely middle class) women started to creatively connect<sup>7</sup> and gather in each other's houses against the backdrop of larger critical nationalizing moments around the Babri Masjid demolition<sup>8</sup>, Shah Bano judgement<sup>9</sup>, sati of Roop Kanwar<sup>10</sup>, and media reportage of 'lesbian suicides' and 'lesbian marriages'<sup>11</sup> (Bacchetta, 2002; Chatterjee, 2018; Sharma, 2006; Vanita, 2007). Groups such as Sakhi<sup>12</sup> (former Delhi Group), Red Rose Rendezvous Group, Sangini,<sup>13</sup> PRISM, informal collectives of 'single woman'<sup>14</sup> independently, and in connection with the women's movement have all articulated concerns around heterosexual marriage pressures, overt forms of violence against women loving women, heterosexist legal codes, and institutional invisibilisations (Chatterjee, 2018; Dave 2012; Narrain and Bhan, 2005). At the same time, these groups provided crucial support and nested themselves between and across simultaneous intra and inter urban and peri-urban sites (Bacchetta, 2002). But what firmed the ground for the making of a visible community of lesbian identifying women was the film *Fire*. It is now well documented how Deepa Mehta's cinematic representation of the erotic relationality between two middle class Hindu sisters-in-law in 1996 generated lesbian identifications and was a key galvanizing moment for the production of a community of women loving women. The release of the film was met with violent protests and rhetoric by Hindu right-wing groups, from which emerged the lesbian as a public figure of resistance, through CALERI or the Campaign for Lesbian Rights (Chatterjee, 2018; Dave 2012).<sup>15</sup> This truncated and somewhat linear contextualization of queer feminist activism in Delhi does not capture the dynamic and complex ways in which the urban "generates specific experiences, discourses, agencies" (Sen, et.al. 2019, 4) for queer and lesbian identifying cisgender and cisgender appearing women. While the urban is intricately connected to sexuality politics in India (Shah, 2015), yet, there are hardly any writings around the relationship of queer subjectivities to the urban and its significance to queer feminist activism. This paper takes a step in that direction.

How do queer and lesbian identifying cisgender and cisgender appearing women in contemporary urban India move within the imperatives of gendered capital, urban development transformations, and increasing securitizations of the city? How do broader gendered geographies of differential power located within discourses of national development<sup>16</sup> play out in the everyday life spaces of queer cisgender women? When spaces within Delhi are hard to mark as exclusively queer or lesbian, evoking an imagination that lesbians are nowhere and everywhere (Valentine,

2000), where and how do queer cisgender women make life and build alliances? The rest of the paper is designed around a conversation I had with Rituparna, and my auto-ethnographic reflections around what it means to be a queer feminist academic/activist in Delhi. Rituparna is the co-director of Nazariya,<sup>17</sup> a queer-feminist resource group in Delhi. Nazariya, since its inception in 2014, works to inform a LBT (lesbian, bisexual women and trans\* assigned female at birth) perspective into issues around “gender based violence, livelihoods, education and health”, in an attempt to “impact the discourse on pleasure, desire, rights and entitlements” (<https://nazariyaqfrg.wordpress.com>). I am a faculty at Ambedkar University and also a member of Sappho for Equality, the activist forum working to address socio-political marginalization of lesbian, bisexual women and transmen in eastern India. The article, driven by narratives, is experimental in style and does not conform to the familiar parameters of an academically directed piece. While I have written this paper, I have deliberately used ‘we’ when I have felt that it is impossible to separate the act of writing from the conversations I had with Rituparna. Ultimately, the goal of this style is to critically engage with our processual queer selves and to act, speak and critically belong through everyday epistemologies and within relations of power.

### (NON)BELONGING IN DELHI: RITUPARNA

I've been living in Delhi for the last 20 years. I came to study here doing my graduation in 1999. Since then I didn't go back. And then I bought my own flat. So, there is no going back it seems... As a queer feminist activist, I feel that the city has given me a sense of anonymity and a place to practice my activism. If it was in my small village where I come from, I wouldn't have had that opportunity to talk about or to do my activism, in the way I do it right now. Anonymity because it's a huge city, it can eat up people. The city has taken many lives... Though it's a migrant city, it is a city of upper caste... The city is a dichotomy, where the city has given me a place for my activism, but the city has also begun taking a toll on my life. (Rituparna, New Delhi, November 2018)

Rituparna has been living in Delhi for about twenty years. She arrived in Delhi to study political science and then went to get personally and professionally involved in queer feminist activism. Prior to starting Nazariya in 2014, Rituparna was working in Nirantar, A Centre for Gender and Education where she was “extensively involved in planning and conducting training sessions on sexuality with organizations, collectives, rural communities, gender trainers, lawyers, students and government officials.” (<https://nazariyaqfrg.wordpress.com/who-are-we/>). As part of and outside her formal organizational sphere, Rituparna is actively involved with leadership training programs, adolescent education, queer groups and larger citizen collectives against sexual violence. When I asked Rituparna about her relation with

Delhi as a queer feminist activist, she articulated it through feelings of anonymity, opportunity, caste and location based discrimination, and the overwhelming sense of being eaten up. Anonymity, a distinctive trait of any modernizing metropolis, is typically evocative of both an opportunity to do activism and strangeness at the same time, and for Rituparna, is not limited to the streets but in everyday living spaces, including apartment and offices.

I live in an apartment. It is full of straight couples. Everyone in their apartment knows about me. Knows about my orientation and also people who come and visit. If a weird looking person comes, they are told, "oh you have to go to flat number seven". That's how you queer things, your lives around your everyday living. It's a sense of achievement also... you come into this [Nazariya's] office space and see a rainbow flag, but there is also a Buddhist flag. So it's it unlike other places where we'll have a Lord Krishna or Lord something... that's how you queer everyday lives... Everyday life is an act of activism... I also own my apartment, so that also gives me some privilege... no one can throw me out if something happens and anyone can come in stay with me... Especially for femmes and cis queer women who do not visibly transgress gender norms, we often merge in the crowd, people assume we are straight heterosexual people and people would not know we are queer in many ways, so you get hit by men, they pass comments and then come and approach you, but you don't want to tell them always get lost as you don't want to get into that conversation, you just avoid. Is this a privilege or is this invisibilization also a kind of violence? We live our lives with these dichotomies... Eating alone in restaurants, going for shopping alone, watching a movie alone, single woman going to a bar alone, where you always find couples, these are certain things that can be called queer acts. People stare at you, look at you. So doing this is an act of activism that I see doing it in an everyday level. Sometimes I don't enjoy it and sometimes I do. (Rituparna, New Delhi, November 2018)

Where does a cisgender queer woman migrant's everyday living end and activism begins in Delhi? Negotiating gendered relations of power in the city is intimately tied to one's activism. The thick layers of feelings and experiences that Delhi generates has made it impossible for Rituparna to establish clear-cut boundaries between her personal life and space of activism. Her actions, the choice of friends and guests, arrangement of home and office are not secondary to either the overt campaigns around rights based agendas, or dialogue generating advocacy and awareness programs. Operating as they do within everyday gendered spaces, they continue to shed insights into how she functions and operates as a queer feminist activist. This functioning, the act of everyday activism, takes a toll, also tied up as it is with who constitutes as the proper subject of queer feminist activism, especially in Delhi.

Queer activism has some rules. You have to be in certain ways to be called a queer activist. For instance, you have to challenge the institution of marriage, you have to challenge the institution of couplehood, you have to challenge the institutions per se. But we are also not devoid of who we are in our eve-

ryday life. So, it places a big onus on me if I am being a queer activist... it asks us to challenge normativity, institutions, irrationality to a large extent. But then what do we do with the irrationality? What do we do with the subconscious which haunts us on an everyday basis? And this is where I find a dichotomy between being a queer activist and a living human being... Delhi is a big city and queer activism is strong here, and people look to queer activism in Delhi, whatever is happening in Delhi. Delhi is huge in its vastness and the individual is lost here. There are some many collectives here, and because you want to focus on the collective, the individual is lost. Collective is important for me in many ways, but individual is also important. The individual while part of a collective is acknowledged in smaller cities. So, every time things happen in Delhi, one has to also see that Delhi's queer politics does not take away the importance of what is happening in smaller cities and towns. You also have to prove yourself in Delhi, not to be masculine, not to be taking away... because there are so many couples come running to Delhi to seek help. You have to be omnipresent all the time because they don't go to smaller cities, smaller cities come to Delhi. It means they look up to Delhi for something or the other...(Rituparna, New Delhi, November 2018)

The feeling rules (Wilson, 2009) and expectations of how to be an omnipresent dissident body is part of one's activism in the city that promises to offer support to those running away from smaller places. The realm of the irrational, the mistakes, the individual subconscious find struggle to articulate with collective doing and activism. Especially, the need and responsibility to maintain crucial links with feminist collectives, at times becomes difficult to inhabit.

This thing about feminism with its emphasis on empowerment... feminism takes a toll on many queer people's lives because many feminists are married and so they have that support system which most queer feminists do not have...I can't call my friends everyday...which would have been an ideal world but we don't live in an ideal world. We live in a setting which is very much mainstream, and Delhi is a mainstream city... You know it is an unsafe city. This is how we have built our lives ourselves...an unsafe atmosphere doesn't go away like that...It's not direct violence but the fear of being violated is also violence, the fear of harassment is also violence... which we have to fight every day alone and that I face as everyday living... If I have to travel by metro, I choose the clothes I wear unlike many empowered feminists who would say wear whatever you want to wear. I don't want to fight people on an everyday basis... And it does not mean that I am disempowered. It just means that I'm choosing my own battles and I don't want to fight. I don't want to see someone looking at me and saying look at the boobs or look at what she's wearing. I just want to choose my battles...So my queer feminism has taught me to choose my own battles in many spaces but feminism which talks about being empowered, body positivity and all that, but it does not work all the time, right? I do not look North Indian, I look distinctively different. It actually puts a lot of onus on myself to look a certain way because if I don't do that, I have to fight those battles...Of course my middle-class privilege is there too, and I acknowledge it. I have a car and my middle-class



privileges allows me to choose when I can travel in metros or not. (Rituparna, New Delhi, 12th November 2018)

Thus, Rituparna chooses her battles, but not out of a sense of complacency. Being a dissident body from North Lakhimpur, Assam,<sup>18</sup> and the continuous need to be a present queer feminist without alternative structures of support has its unique set of tensions. In such moments, the office space and friendships becomes relevant to regeneration and renewal.

... this office space provides a sense of security and safe space. So, when I was going through a really bad time my colleague asked me to take time off from work. I said no you can't take this away from for me... my earlier organization when I was going through a lot of trauma and mental health issues, asked me to take a sabbatical and I said it doesn't work for me. Work keeps me alive... That's how I cope. For me this office space, work, my friends' homes give me that comfort and being myself... I don't feel judged. When I was going through a lot I came to office and cried which I cannot do in public. For me the irrational is very important, and I don't get judged for being irrational and I don't get judged for being needy. I don't get judged for not wanting to function because I feel feminism has always asked us to function in certain ways... functionality is important, that's what many senior activists say, or even the younger lot, the kind of energy they show... I don't know how to explain it? The same thing in the friend's house... wake people up in middle of the night and just write random shit about things, like this is how I'm feeling. I was not judged. So, this space is a sense of belonging because [this] gives me the space to be who I am not in terms of my queer identity but who I am as a person.... (Rituparna, New Delhi, November 2018)

The 'person' that Rituparna is lies somewhere between her queer feminist activist location and queer identitarian self. The office and the person in Rituparna together imagine, plans, organizes, and rebuilds relations with the self. But this also separates as much as it connects with other persons.

I am staying far away from my biological family. I come from a place where there is community living. And here I do not see it. I do not find it in any circles, in any queer activist circles. I don't get that feeling... because queer activism also separates you from many other human beings who might not be queer in many things. For instance, just because I sleep with a person of the same sex or same gender does not mean that every person who sleeps with a person of the same sex or same gender will follow the same ideologies as I do. So, people may be queer in some ways when they are part of LGBT, but they may not be queer in other ways. So, my queer activism also has taken me away from those people who see me as someone who is very vocal about some issues and very vocal about politics. But I also don't know if I've truly followed those things in my life or not. And that's a question I keep on asking on an everyday basis, it is a contradiction that I am living everyday. (Rituparna, New Delhi, November 2018)



Rituparna, at times feeling disembodied and abstracted, is also bound up with place through a desire to connect and politically belong, and at the same time through the losses associated with such belonging. This is a contradiction that that she lives everyday.

## (NON)BELONGING IN DELHI: NIHARIKA

... the gaze of security guards in metro stations, touches that I feel to be inappropriate, and comments that I consider patronizing or aggressive. Perhaps I am read as carrying an ambiguous feminine presence, not woman enough that makes me so visible. This visibility emerges within a geography of fear, which includes a corrective, disciplinary gaze, touch and comment that is not objectification, but power that attempts to (re)mark attire and put a body 'in place'. (Niharika, Delhi notes, 2018)

This short excerpt is from personal notes/recordings that I occasionally make. I am living in Delhi, my 'city of employment', for the last three years, after having moved from a tenured position in a North American Midwestern university. I struggle to get used to a city through criss-crossing forms of connection and disconnection that evoke feelings of loss, anger, helplessness, and also liberation. To say that queer cisgender and cisgender appearing subjectivities have a complex relation with this city will be an academic cliché. To say that I live in a city that selectively favours certain social groups, will also be a platitude. This city, like the nation state, constantly demands homogeneity, even when differences lurk within its folds. The reality of S 377, until recently, has remained as a colonial wound circumscribing our present through an unknown fear of 'what if..?' At the same time, a certain class-coded affective presentation with a cisgender appearing body, made us irrelevant to S 377, in comparison to trans\* bodies that have been and are regularly harassed and persecuted.<sup>19</sup> As an educator I navigate the city with two important privileges, that of class and caste, which helps me sometimes counter, either consciously or by default, marginalizations that I face as queer women. At the same time, my body is differently gendered and uniquely placed within Delhi to attract attention of the gender regulators and gender policing. The unity of gender, sex and desire (Valentine, 1996) in the streets and metro stations of Delhi keeps on producing a 'proper heterosexual space' through micro aggressions, objectifying gaze and patronizing speech-acts.

The regulation of gender seeps into my university campus. The campus is largely unmarked, which is put to question occasionally by voices that carry differential marginalizations. As a faculty member, I inhabit the campus with a perpetual sense of unease and discomfort, feeling gendered and sexually normative speech in various ways. At the same time, I see the campus as framed by queer diffusion. In contrast to 'distinctively queer' that includes "all the ways in which LGBTQI peoples form

their own communities of affinity" producing "coherent, discrete and overlapping social worlds in which to belong" (Munt, 2013, p. 229),<sup>20</sup> queer diffusion or diffusely queer points to the various ways in which "the social is contested and, in one way or another, in various ways, queer." (ibid. 231). In other words, queer is always variously manifested within the social. It is on the campus therefore, I find small spaces for enabling action, to connect across academia and activism.

The office in a material sense, consists of two small rooms, one which I occupy and the other by a colleague-friend. Apart from being a place of work, these rooms become enabling spaces when at different undetermined times during the day, I along with select individuals, often gather to share stories around work, listen and strategise. This has little or no implication for my queer identity, but it has benefits for the construction of queer-feminist liveability, through its role in producing relationalities between those PAGFB [persons assigned gender female at birth] bodies that regularly experience specific forms of sexism and misogynies in their professional everyday. In here, I see myself as forging links with colleagues who have strayed from the line by either refusing the institution of marriage or struggling with forms of sexism even after they have followed certain heteronorms, but also questioning them in certain contexts. These are tenuous links but significant for my liveability, as they allow me to discuss the oppressive features of our gendered institutional lives that emerges through particular forms of sexism and misogyny that is also at times homophobic. The office space is an archive for these relationalities, difficult to objectify or measure. I would term the offices therefore as 'experiential places' produced through efforts to belong in spaces that are otherwise part of different forms of abjections. Considered as such, the office is not a place produced in opposition to the larger campus but existing through modes of living within it that encompasses micro navigations of gendered and sexist power. The professional-personal relations that keep emerging across the two offices, makes my professional-personal life in Delhi worth living. Perhaps these are my moments of freedom, understood as an ability to negotiate power relations in the larger city, including the campus. While sometimes a safe zone, the office is not only a safe zone, but central to the production of queer feminist alliances. (Niharika, Delhi notes, 2018)

In the above excerpt, I refer to two offices, one mine, and the other a colleague's. The office – as a conceptual unit – is a small place within the larger public space of my university campus. While visibly present on campus in all its materiality, the office includes an invisible border, across which I find a sense of and scope for alliance. In other words, the silences and discomforts surrounding everyday sexism and misogynies that has produced much of my sense of (non)belonging, while typically discussed in relation to spaces that produce discriminatory actions and homophobic speech, can also be deployed to make sense of the political possibilities underlying micro and ephemeral conversations that are transacted in a safe niche within a larger public campus. I see the office as an enabling space to be able to act.

The office allows for both a recognition and thus validation of marginalizing experiences as well an opportunity to strategise action.

I emerge through recognition, including misrecognition and rejection. Recognition, in either its ability to capacitate or de-capacitate life, is certainly not insignificant to the formation of lesbian subjectivities; but the potentialities of life may be present in places that are not always tied to the act of recognition. (Niharika, Delhi notes, 2018)

Everyday forms of misrecognition, contributing to my corpus of (non)belongings, allow me to continue to interrogate the academic space that I am part of. It is in the interstices of academia and activism that that I find belonging and thereby a potentiality to act.

## CONCLUSION

Queer lives are both a contradiction and a possibility, depending on spaces and places that we occupy in our everyday. I began this paper with a call to consider (non)belonging as a core analytic lens to connect emotionality to queer feminist activism. The emotionality of (non)belonging exists in everyday spaces, including clearly demarcated activist ones, perhaps as an excess that refuses to close the parameters of queer urban activism within existing norms, familiar tropes and recognizable idioms. An accounting for (non)belonging by cisgender queer feminists then in a theorization of urban queer activism may help to understand how the doing of activism is tied up with the senses and materialities of deeply gendered spaces that do not seem to recede, all the while seeping into the production of the queer feminist subject. Reading select narratives of the everyday academic/activist life worlds of two queer feminist academic/activists allows a discussion of the limits and potential of queer feminist activism. Rituparna's reflections on the normative contours of queer feminist activism and Niharika's emphasis on the potentials of queer feminist alliances at the cusp of academia and activism through the lens of (non)belonging needs to be thus read between the act of navigating one's emotionality and the desire to politically connect from the outside.

An expansive and continuing attention to the intersecting materialities and emotional realities across north-south as well as academic-activist divides will insert greater complexity in the understanding of emotionality and activism. This means extending oneself beyond the familiar boundaries of what counts as activism and paying more attention to diverse activist encounters across the temporal and spatial. The divide between "intimate lives" and "the public sphere of activism" (Wilkinson, 2009, 36) needs to be crossed in order to bring everyday navigations of activists back into a discussion of spaces of activism. The desire to reconnect emotions to the framing of activism and activist relationalities is deeply affective, driven by a

sense of ethics and to make the personal political (Cahill, 2007; Dave, 2012). When queer cisgender women 'come out' with their everyday emotions around how they navigate their personal-political selves, this can either serve to consolidate already existing dynamic, shifting alliances between feminist and queer feminist organizing, and/or to strengthen spaces of sustenance across academic and activist groups. Moving between the queer and the feminist, Rituparna and my emotional accounts highlight how regulated bodies navigate power through relationalities embedded within the everyday. Our emotionalities therefore do not necessarily emerge within the frames of the visible and permanent where 'alternative lives' can be planned. What this paper has demonstrated instead is that gender and sexual freedoms and belongings in dominant spatialities are often constructed in places that are fleetingly inhabited in the everyday.

I conclude this paper with a necessary note about the temporal and spatial turbulent context within which I am finalizing this discussion. As I write, the figure of an urban national subject – caste Hindu, heteronormative, middle to upper class, able, male – is looming large against struggles to de-militarize public university spaces and keep higher education accessible. This figure needs to be read together with everyday hegemonic attempts to keep intact the naturalized linkages between gender, sex and desire, which includes marriage and reproduction as their attendants.<sup>21</sup> In other words, our emotionalities of (non)belonging are one of many interlinked lenses that can be used to understand how a homogenous urban national subject is being produced in contemporary India. Interrogating the key norms, practices, and institutions around which compulsory marriage and heterosexuality is produced is key to queer feminist activism. But such activism is also nested within an urban national context which is replete with multiple violations across the lines of caste, class, sexuality, gender, religion, ability, and location. Hence any attempt to write queer cisgender able women's bodies in an analysis of urban activism, cannot be read in isolation but in concert with the differential material and symbolic impacts of these violations in contemporary India. Only then will the everyday navigations of queer cisgender women have a deeper political value, and its narration in this paper as a discursive resource to seek alliances across differential experiences of hegemonic and violent urban relationalities.

## NOTES

1. I use the term queer identifying cisgender woman to mean an identity that while rooted in a biologically deterministic model of the sex-gender system, is also claimed as a term to introduce a 'constitutive instability' (Menon, 2009) in its heart.
2. Trans\* in this context is used to refer to individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth.

3. The term 'women loving women' has been used within many queer feminist and lesbian identifying groups to insert the concerns of cisgender women desiring cisgender women within women's movements.
4. On 6th September 2018, the Supreme Court of India, in the Navtej case read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the anti-sodomy colonial law, in effect recognizing consensual sexual acts other than peno-vaginal ones. For a historicization the sexually dissident body's entry into law see Khanna, 2016.
5. This is not to say that belonging does not have psychological or philosophical parameters. The psychology and philosophy of belonging is beyond the scope of this paper.
6. I do not define heteropatriarchal spaces in terms of either cultural or geographical territorialisation. Such definitions carry the danger of defining the 'here' as the place of 'freedom' and 'there' as the place of 'darkness', be it through national/international or urban/rural binary markers. Instead, heteropatriarchal spaces are part of any place and relations that are governed and govern through the regulation of genders and sexualities, in intersection with caste, race, class, religion, ability, and location. For more on lesbian feminist and queer feminist takes on contemporary heteropatriarchies, see, Banerjee, et.al. 2019.
7. A rich array of manners, styles, sensibilities, newspaper ads and reportage, magazines, have functioned as connecting strategies (Bacchetta, 2002; Dave, 2012; Shah, 2015; Vanita, 2007).
8. A 16th century mosque established during the reign of Babur was demolished by Hindutva activists on December 6, 1992 in Ayodhya, with a claim that it was the birthplace of Ram, the protagonist of the epic Ramayana. This has had significant implications to understand the politics of space and communalism in relation to gender, sexuality and the state (Bacchetta, 2000; Kandiyoti, 1991).
9. In the Mohd. Ahmed Khan vs. Shah Bano Begum & Others, the Supreme Court of India, in 1985, ruled in favour of a maintenance lawsuit. For the question of gender and personal law, Muslim women's rights and the state, see Mullally, 2004; Pathak and Rajan, 1989.
10. Roop Kanwar, a 19 year old woman, was immolated in her husband's funeral pyre in 1987 in Rajasthan. For selected feminist engagements with this event in relation to sexuality and the law, see Banerjee, 2011; Kapur, 1999; Niranjana, 1998.
11. Double suicides, *maitree karar* (an agreement of friendship), marriage legitimated in Hindu temples are some ways through which cisgender women desiring cisgender women have exited life, sought recognition, love and commitment.
12. 'Sakhi' connotes an intimate women friend.
13. 'Sangini' refers to a close female friend.
14. 'Single woman' is a classificatory term to refer to cisgender women who are not married, divorced and widowed. It is also politically deployed by both heterosexual identifying and cisgender women loving cisgender women to stake

- claims to the state and coalesce around a lesbian standpoint.
15. It is important to note that several groups in other urban sites emerged around the same time, for instance, Stree Sangam, Mumbai, 1998 (now LABIA) and Sappho, Kolkata, 1999 (organizationally branching out as Sappho for Equality in 2003).
  16. For gendered geographies of power and the positionality of cisgender women in national development, see Raju, 2011; Sharma, 2008; Wilson, et. al, 2018.
  17. Nazariya roughly translates as a 'way of seeing'.
  18. Assam, a state in north-east India, is currently the object of the Hindutva nation state's National Register of Citizens (NRC), the new 'truth-machine' to consolidate the borders of citizenship (Ahmed, 2018).
  19. For an understanding of trans\* bodies encounter with the law in India, see Boyce and Dutta, 2013.
  20. My association with Sappho for Equality is an example. Based on a "familiar and localized sense of belonging", (Munt, 2013, p. 229), Sappho for Equality, even when based in Kolkata, enables the creation of queer kinships that form the major source of my activist work and emotional support.
  21. In the Indian context, compulsory marriage and reproduction binds the different components of sex, desire and sexuality together. Compulsory heterosexuality in other words, not only includes a pressure to be heterosexual practicing, but also marry and reproduce. This is a common reality that cisgender women encounter.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, R. (2018) The NRC as 'Truth Machine' in Assam. *South Asia @ LSE*. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89613/> [last accessed November 23, 2019].
- Bacchetta, P. (2000) Sacred space in conflict in India: The Babri Masjid affair. *Growth and Change* 31 (2), 255-284,
- Bacchetta, P. (2002) Rescaling transnational "queerdom": Lesbian and "lesbian" identitary-positionalities in Delhi in the 1980s. *Antipode* 34 (5), 947-973,
- Banerjee, N. (2019) A Commentary On 'Homopopulism'. *Swakanthe*. June 2019. Sappho for Equality.
- Banerjee, N, Browne, K, Ferrerira, E, Olasik, M and Podmore, J. (2019) (Eds.) *Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies* London: Zed,
- Banerjee, S. (2011) Women, muscular nationalism and hinduism in India: Roop Kanwar and the *Fire protests*. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*. 11(304): 271-287.
- Boyce, P., and Dutta, A. (2013) Vulnerability of gay and transgender Indians

- goes way beyond Section 377. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/vulnerability-of-gay-and-transgender-indians-goes-way-beyond-section-377-21392> (last accessed 9th May 2019).
- Cahill, C. (2007) The personal is political: Developing new subjectivities through participatory action research. *Gender, Place and Culture* 14 (3), 267–292.
- Chatterjee, S. (2018) *Queer Politics in India: Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dave, N. (2012) *Queer activism in India: A story in the anthropology of ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fish, J., Almack, K. and King, A. (2018) It's all right now? Re-thinking queer activism for the 21st century. *The Sociological Review* 66 (6), 1194–1208.
- Johnston, L. (2017) Gender and sexuality II: Activism. *Progress in Human Geography*. 41 (5), 648-656.
- Kandiyoti, D. (Eds.) (1991) *Women, Islam and the State*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kapur, R. (1999) 'A love song to our mongrel selves': Hybridity, sexuality and the law. *Social and Legal Studies*. 8 (3), 353-368.
- Khanna, A. (2016) *Sexualness*. New Delhi: New Text.
- Menon, N. (2009) Sexuality, caste, governmentality: Contests over "Gender" in India. *Feminist Review* 91. 94-112.
- Mullally, S. (2004) Feminism and multicultural dilemmas in India: Revisiting the Shah Bano case. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 24(4), 671-692.
- Munt, S. (2013) Queer sociality. In Feenan, D. (Ed.) *Exploring the 'Socio' of socio-legal studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 228-250.
- Narrain, A and Bhan, G. (2005) *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Nazariya <https://nazariyaqfrg.wordpress.com> (last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2019)
- Niranjana, T. (1998) Feminism and translation in India: contexts, politics, futures. *Cultural Dynamics*, 10(2), 133-146.
- Pathak, Z., and Rajan, R. S. (1989) Shahbano. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(3), 558-582.
- Raju, S. (2011) Reclaiming spaces and places: The making of gendered geography of India. In Raju, S. (Ed.) *Gendered geographies: Space and place in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 31-59.
- Ray, P. and Ghosh, N. (Eds.) (2016) *Pratyaha. Everyday lifeworlds: Dilemmas, Contestations and Negotiations*. Delhi: Primus Books.
- Sappho for Equality <http://www.sapphokolkata.in> (last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2019)



- Sen, A, Kaur, R. and Zabaliūtė, E. (2019) (En)countering sexual violence in the Indian city, *Gender, Place & Culture* DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2019.1612856
- Shah, S. (2015) Queering Critiques of Neoliberalism in India: Urbanism and Inequality in the Era of Transnational “LGBTQ” Rights. *Antipode* 47(3), 2015 ISSN 0066-4812, pp 635-651.
- Sharma, A. (2008) *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sharma, M. (2006) *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Sircar, O and Jain, D. (2017) Introduction: Of powerful feelings and facile gestures. In Sircar, O. and Jain, D. (Eds.) *New Intimacies, Old Desires: Law, Culture and Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times*,. New Delhi: Zubaan, xiii-lxi.
- Sztompka, P. (2008) The focus on everyday life: A new turn in sociology. *European Review*, 16, 23–37.
- Valentine, G. (1996) (Re)negotiating the 'heterosexual street': Lesbian productions of space. In Duncan, N. (Ed.) *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 145-153.
- Valentine, G. (Ed.) (2000) *From nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*. Binghamton: Harrington Park Press.
- Vanita, R. (2007) Lesbian studies and activism in India. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 11(3/4), 243–253
- Wilkinson, E. (2009) The emotions least relevant to politics? Queering autonomous activism. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, 36–43.
- Wilson, K., Loh, J. U., and Purewal, N. (2018) Gender, violence and the neoliberal state in India. *Feminist Review*, 119(1), 1-6.