

Secret Publics and Subversive Erotics?

Exploring Mobility and Sexuality with Kothis in Bombay/Mumbai¹

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According to 2008 estimates, 25% of Indians or almost 300 million Indians, own a mobile phone as against the 42 million internet subscribers. IDC's Asia Pacific Mobile Phone Tracker that monitored mobile sales in India from January 2007 to March 2008 stated that 10,000 mobile phones were sold in India every hour (Saxena 2008).

Recent incidents of moral policing in Bombay/Mumbai target the expression of sexuality and romance in public spaces, citing the potential for the 'corruption' of Indian culture (Times of India 2005; Ranawana 1998). Thus the terms 'public' and 'private' and what is appropriate in each are being increasingly rigidly defined. The tensions thrown up by new media technologies recently – most notably around the 2004 MMS Scandalⁱ and links made between 'national security' and mobile phonesⁱⁱ - make Bombay a cogent location for the study of both sexuality and new media. Thus, in the relatively short span of time that mobile telephony has become popular in India the phone has already been established as a site of anxiety around the 'loosening' of female sexualityⁱⁱⁱ and in the apprehension of criminal activity^{iv} (Bell 2005: 80).

The anxiety related to female sexuality can be traced to an idea that is much discussed: that of an 'authentic' homogenous Indian culture. The tension around the changing political-economic conditions of India's liberalization in the 1990s was marked by a rash of 'bannings' – the banning of sexual content seen to de-stabilize 'old' versions of 'real' Indian culture^v. The bodies of women were (and continue to be) a primary site on which this struggle played out (Fernandes 2000:622-625). More so recently the increased role and presence of media and technology in everyday life has prompted a discourse around the hyper-sexualization of youth and their exposure to sexual content via the internet and

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mobile phones (Vasudev 2004), and to the increased sexual permissiveness in urban India that SMS (Short Messaging Service) encourages because of its private nature, giving women the space to feel bold about initiating and maintaining sexual/romantic relationships, especially the illicit variety (Vasudev 2002). Curiously, the idea of technology-aided terrorism also invokes ideas of a secure and stable India under threat from ‘anti-national’ forces who employ one of the most significant drivers of the idea of ‘India Shining’ - technology itself – towards their malevolent ends.

Much of the anxiety over media content discussed here is derived from the fact that new media technologies offer spaces that are materially ‘unreal’, or are virtual, but are ‘real’ in terms of experience and have entirely real-world implications. The tension between virtuality and reality marks both our fascination and concern with these technologies. The growth of a new media environment that enables privacy, and allows users to create and share content coincides with the increased testing of the boundaries of media representations of sexuality. In what seems to be a break from tradition^{vi}, visual media in India pop with never-before-seen representations of male and female body parts, sensuality and erotic desire. The instances of banning cited above, and the State’s recent acts of censorship indicate a concern over the violation of both legal and unwritten codes of what is considered appropriate for public display (Freemuse 2006).

I focus my discussion of technology and sexuality in the contemporary Indian urban space through an ongoing participatory project with a socially and politically marginal community of queer working class men called Kothis. I explore different aspects of how sexuality is constructed and experienced – as pleasure, violence, intimacy, relationships, sex and self-perception - through Kothis’ mobile phone use, and the implications of this virtual behaviour on the real spaces that Kothis inhabit.

Under the broad umbrella of men having sex with men (MSM), Kothis are biological males representing a shifting space of femininities, from the highly stylized to the more straight-looking. Many Kothis are married with children while simultaneously desiring and accessing male to male sexual, sensual and erotic spaces. Kothis’ sexual behaviour is

criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This section of the IPC criminalizes consensual same-sex sex and makes Kothis vulnerable to stigmatization, violence, harassment, extortion and human rights abuses by the police, and by extension, the State that does not secure their rights^{vii}. Kothis are also targeted by the National AIDS Control Program for their high risk, multi-partner, unprotected anal sex. In the past decade there has been a substantial growth of the queer movement in India as well as organizations representing Kothis in major Indian cities and in small towns, resulting in a significant sense of community and voice as evidenced through formations associated with NGOs in particular. The Kothi body therefore can exist across multiple, marginal and often contradictory spaces: simultaneously within and outside the law as the 'legitimate' married man and the 'profane' penetrated man; as a violated body, and one that seeks out pleasure; the under-class-ed body; the male body that may hide a feminized being, but which can also enjoy the social privileges that come with male bodily-ness.

These shifting corpo-realities mirror the idea of mobility that technology does – of occupying multiple locations at the same time. It is with this kernel of an idea that I began researching how the fluidly inhabiting different subjectivities intersects with the similar potential embodied by mobile telephony. I conceive of this project as the beginnings of a response to the political moment, a response that attempts to peer laterally away from the legal movements working for the repeal of 377. Simply put, what does it mean to enjoy and experience your sexuality – 'freely' - in a virtual space? What does this mean for people who, technically, are not considered 'proper' citizens, nor are representative of 'appropriate' Indian-ness?

I began this exploration with some questions:

- How does technology present a means for this marginalized sexual community to establish presence and identity? How does the mobile phone create shifts in their state of marginality, or not, and what does this mean for the expression of their sexualities?

- What does ‘being mobile’ mean to Kothis? How is their interpersonal, social and sexual behaviour influencing, and being influenced by, the mobile phone?
- Are all these spaces and experiences of mobility and movement necessarily ‘real’, and what does the virtual experience of community-formation, the publicization of sexuality and ability to establish a virtual erotic space mean for these queer marginalized people’s rights?

Locating Kothis

Understanding what the mobile phone means as a social and cultural object and idea for Kothis implies that there needs to be a richer appreciation of who the Kothi *is*. The Kothi identity began to receive attention within queer-activist and public health discourses in the 1990s as the HIV epidemic in India began to grow. Kothis’ increased risk for infection, owing to the levels of unsafe anal sex they are engaged in, became the dominant register of discussions. This was eventually central to the construction of this complex identity (Khanna 2007; Boyce 2007).

In this research I keep aside for a moment that the Kothis I am working with are in fact organized around a NGO that works on HIV prevention, care and support. Although my first interaction with this particular organization nine years ago occurred through the context of HIV prevention, in the present time I am framing Kothis as queer, lower, lower-middle and middle class, between the ages of 18 and 30 years, as consumers, users of mobile phones, as aspirational ‘global’ Indians achieving adulthood in the current context of globalization. This view of the Kothi identity attempts to use the lens of consumption as a marker of social identity, avoiding, temporarily, bio-medical discourses that frame Kothis primarily as ‘high risk groups’ to map as vectors of disease.

Irrespective of how they appear outwardly, Kothis usually refer to each other as sisters, mothers, aunts and as *sahelis*, the Hindustani term for a female friend. To many Kothis the full force of their femininity has to be reserved for intimate parties, support-group

meetings and similar spaces, considering that they have to pass for straight with families and in jobs that will not give them the space to express themselves. Vijay Nair, the program coordinator of Udaan says that Kothis are “all about display” and the point of this display is to attract panthis^{ix} or ‘double deckers’^x. Dressing up, performing a dramatic femininity, a fondness for dance, exhibitionism and hedonism form the most general and visible aspects of Kothi identity, although it is not possible to generalize this even to the group I have been talking to. The Kothi identity can be thought of as a spectrum of behaviours and performances as ‘Salim’² says about himself:

“I am a man who has the guts to be a man and the guts to be a Kothi. I am a panthi with women and with Kothis, and a Kothi with panthis.” (Salim)

Salim’s self representation indicates a certain rigid perception of the Other – the woman and the panthi - if his own positions as panthi and Kothi could be so easily navigated and switched between. Kothi gender and sexuality is largely constructed in terms of the act of being penetrated and this is evident from conversations between Kothis, of ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’. This determines who a Kothi, panthi or double-decker is, even though there are many Kothis who switch between these roles as Salim indicates. Based on observations of support group meetings, and Kothis’ self-representation, discussions about Kothi sexuality tend to centre on the opportunities for and experiences of sex with panthis. These discussions are also a vehicle for the expression of emotional ties and relationships between Kothis– friendship, care, support, encouragement, competition, aggression and jealousy, amongst others. Did my presence make them talk about sex more than usual so that they could challenge and test what looked like a Good Indian Woman? Or is Kothi identity largely based on constant articulations of sexual willingness, desire and hunger?

Some Kothis also have long term relationships with panthis. Within this context love, romance, marriage and long-term relationship stability are wistfully spoken of. There is a

² All the Kothi participants referred to here have not been identified by their given names; they have consented to be referred to by the Kothi names.

desire to be regarded as the wife or long-term girlfriend^{xi}. Even if panthis do regard them as long-term companions, not being the socially recognized ‘wife’ is a point of some poignant distress for *ariyal* (meaning ‘hard-core’ extremely stylized feminine) Kothis.

A Grounding in Theory

This research draws on inter-disciplinary approaches and methods that span cultural and media studies, technology and society studies and a ‘domestication of technologies’ approach as popularized by Roger Silverstone. This approach looks at how technological artefacts come to be imbued with symbolic power and how they become embedded in the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). I take this approach to explore how individuals and cultural contexts give meaning to technologies, thereby extending the ways in which users perceive them. Some key features of this approach:

- The dynamic interaction between the user and the object as an ongoing process of adoption and adaptation; both the technology object (here, the mobile phone) and the cultural-social-political context of its use are shaping and being shaped by the Other. The flow of impact is not just one way, a view that is best exemplified through deterministic popular discourses: ‘mobile phones are changing our society’ or that ‘television is corrupting youth by giving them more access to sexual content’.
- An acknowledgment, eventually a political one, of the complex social hierarchies and conditions in which technologies are consumed. For example, technologies are consumed and produced in highly gendered ways, but equally technologies are linked to definitions of, or changes within, individual gender identities and social relations (1992:3). The place of local and domestic cultures is crucial to recognizing the politics of consumption.

- Media and technology are quintessential novel objects in a consumer society, and are “therefore the embodiment of our desires for the new, as well as their status as transmitters of all the images and information that fuel those desires.” (ibid).

These three aspects of how to view the use and absorption of a technology into the everyday life of users are not exhaustive, nor are they defining of this particular approach. They have been shared as overarching principles useful in appreciating this phase of this project.

Methods & Methodology

This paper is a work-in-progress on the lived spaces created by and through mobile phones in the city of Bombay/Mumbai for a population of 15 Kothis who

- Attend support group meetings at a drop-in centre called Udaan³ located in a lower-middle class pocket of Ghatkopar East in the central suburbs of Mumbai.
- Are employed by Udaan as outreach workers in their condom distribution program.
- Are between the ages of 18 and 30 years
- Are Hindi/Urdu/Marathi speaking and predominantly working-class.

My primary method is the in-depth interview supported by observations through attendance at weekly support group meetings. Video-recordings of interviews are currently in progress with a view to create a participatory documentation of the research

³ Udaan works on HIV prevention through condom distribution and prevention education, and also works on care and support programs for HIV positive people and families.

process. This study aims to eventually become a participatory media project involving the members of Udaan through a process of training and development.

Larissa Hjorth notes that the mobile phone can be read as a group of social practices as well as a form of cultural production (2009:10). In that vein I explore micro-practices and micro-narratives of mobile phone use and consumption within the larger context of social, sexual and political economies operating in contemporary Bombay.

Some Preliminary Findings

More than Just a Phone: Mobiles, Capital and Consumption

The mobile phone is perceived as an announcement of one's social status and social capital. Being noticed on the basis of one's phone creates the potential for finding a wealthy, socially powerful partner, or being perceived in that way oneself. How the phone looks, its efficiency and range of features is considered more important to Kothis than the brand of the phone itself.

“I was saying that it is important to be seen with a good phone, both for Kothis and panthis. You can identify the value of the partner by the phone, you know that he is rich and has money to spend if he has a better phone. Today Kothis are looking for rich panthis. But actually Kothis and panthis are the same ... both are looking for a partner who can make their dreams and wishes come true” (Ismail)

The topography of what constitutes an urban self-articulated queer space is changing. With an increasing influx of rural, non-English-speaking young Kothis into urban areas, often in unstable work and/or sex work, with limited education, they find that their desire for men takes them into discos, parties and night-clubs organized exclusively by and for same sex desiring men^{xii}. These spaces are, by their very location in upscale pubs and bars, indicative of a higher social class, but they allow for a mingling of queer men across a full class and age spectrum, where even five years ago this may not have been possible.

The right clothes and the right phone are perceived as entry passes into this world. However, the phone is a symbol of more than just the sex that its owner can promise, it is possibly about an entire experience in social mobility, and operates equally for how Kothis advertise themselves and in how they perceive panthis. This translates into how sexually attractive or viable a Kothi (or panthi) is considered to be.

“There is a young generation that has very strict ideas about gender, coming as they do from fairly traditional rural backgrounds in the hinterland. I think what is important for them is to achieve a kind of cosmopolitanism that they associate with ‘the rich’. To the Kothi who wants to ‘make it’ in these spaces, who wants to get the upper class panthi and who wants to be noticed, he has to have something to make him look less like where he comes from. Or at least that is what he thinks. He thinks that to get sex with the best panthi, to have status, you have to be seen wearing the right clothes and carrying the right phone. Now I am not sure what ‘right’ is but I know that it is expensive.” (Aditya Bondyopadhyay, National Advocacy Task Force of MSM Organizations)

Peer surveillance also emerges as a strong theme; Kothis talk about watching each other (and phones in particular) to assess the extent of competition for a pool of panthis. A curious paradox is noticed in how Kothis operate with and through mobile phones. On the one hand there is a desire to be seen and noticed by other Kothis and panthis, but at the same time Kothis spend a considerable amount of energy being un-seen and having to hide their identities away from the gaze of family and society. The mobile phone is a key figure in this tension between display and anonymity.

In the present moment of growing middle class consumer culture, advertising plays a significant role in creating what Shilpa Phadke refers to as the ‘aspirationality of social status’ (2005:69). In this, advertising is no longer about the utility of a product but creates a flurry of images that signal how rich, enviable or sexy products will make you (feel). She goes on to say that this ‘sensual experience’ of middle class consumerism has an

equal effect on working class people who decode advertisements, and encode themselves in the process, with the aspiration to a higher class membership (70). Thus the mobile phone is part of the packaged idea of attractiveness and personal ‘success’ based on energetic consumption.

Mobile Sexual Behaviour

Mobile phone numbers are a form of currency. A cache of mobile numbers implies connectivity to wider and larger networks, even if that includes strangers whose numbers are randomly acquired. Talking to such a stranger generates anticipation about what contact will result in: it could be a friendly conversation, phone sex or enough chemistry to meet offline for sex^{xiii}. The Kothi with more mobile numbers, therefore, casts her net wider, and has the potential to access more sex. The construction of Kothi identity and sexuality rests on the idea of constant sexual availability, a high frequency of sexual behaviour, unwavering sexual desire, and multiple partners, which the phone supports perfectly.

“A number is a contact, a contact is someone who could be a sex partner. Everyone wants numbers ... you never know who is waiting for you on the other end. Kothis give out numbers all the time, and want to look at each other’s phones and pick up numbers.” (Ramiza)

Numbers are picked up from public locations such as public toilets and trains. It has become easy to establish contact with someone met in a hurried moment of travel, for example, by exchanging numbers and then following it up with a phone call or by SMS to see if it could fructify into a friendship or a sexual encounter. Casual sex is accessed through numbers left on the walls of trains and public toilets, sometimes with the rates for sex advertised. Fleeting, fast, unexpected, transient sexual experiences are common. The nature of communications technologies themselves, and the expectations we have come to have of technology - speed and brevity – make mobile connections apt for Kothi sexuality.

Kothis who have access to the internet (usually through cyber-cafes) follow up on contacts made via the mobile phone through internet chatting.

“Sometimes online is better, then you can actually see the person, do some chatting, and then see if you want to move on to chaating⁵. You don’t have to spend money to go and meet the panthi only to find that he is not good looking or is too difficult to handle. You can assess all that online easily.” (Vijay Nair)

The opportunity to download and share pornography on-the go is another common use of the mobile phone. It is for this reason that a Bluetooth enabled phone is considered ‘essential’ for Kothis. The act of downloading pornography to get potential partners excited is a common practice, as is the act of filming oneself having sex with a panthi. This is not something to be widely circulated, but is used as yet another marker of social status⁶. By showing other Kothis how attractive one’s panthi is, how long his penis is or how enjoyable the sex was, creates jealousy and competitiveness^{xiv}.

“I keep all these clips on the phone. Sometimes I’m on a train going somewhere and I see someone I like, or someone starts talking to me. I can start by showing clips of film songs, old Hindi film music or the latest hits. Some people like adventure and action clips, like stunts. But BP is the most popular. This is our code-word These are blue film clips. We refer to it as BP, like Bhurji Pao⁷ ... things like that. If I like him then I can show him some clips and even if he didn’t want to have sex with me, after seeing those clips he will become ready ...” (Kashish)

Where once physical cruising was fraught with risks of violence from the police or violent competition with other male sex workers, the mobile phone now allows Kothis to

⁵ Literally, in Hindustani refers to tasting, or licking; in this context refers to oral sex.

⁶ Ahead, I discuss this same act of filming sexual acts expressly in the context of coercion and harassment.

⁷ Bhurji Pao is actually an innocuous word; it refers to the local version of bread and eggs popular on Bombay’s streets.

cruise virtually without as many attendant risks. Salim talks of the live-ness that now permeates paid-sex; public cruising areas are scanned and evaluated for their ‘ripeness’ and the absence of competition from other sexual groups vying for the same pool of panthi clients, primarily *Hijras* and TGs (transgenders). Kothis relay information about cruising locations through codes involving missed calls and SMSes. Thus mobile phones allow casual part-time sex-workers like Salim to organize and run small-scale sex work arrangements from within her home by putting Kothis and clients in touch with each other, and in conveying information about cruising locations to Kothi networks. Such enhancement of business is not a new feature of mobile telephony and is in fact commonly seen across a range of professions (Iype 2003).

Kothi sex is about multiple partners, unexpected liaisons and sex in public places. The mobile phone has merely increased the reach that a single Kothi has to access sex, and changing the spaces available for sex.

“Any time after 6 in the evening if you go into the space between the first class and general coaches you have to make your way through men having sex. There used to be a vestibule there that was the best place to pick up someone and have quick sex. Now with these fancy new coaches that vestibule area has gone. Thank god we got mobile phones and Bluetooth and the internet!” (Vijay Nair)

The access to Bluetooth puts Kothis who want to cruise for sex in touch with similarly Bluetooth-ed panthis. What had to be done at night, in the dark, now happens more casually. Kothis have always had to use such public spaces for sex since many do not have private spaces of their own. Many live with family members, wives and children. With the mobile phone the sexualization of public spaces takes on a different dimension, as does the nature of sex itself.

“I was standing at a bus-stop talking to a panthi who got my number through someone. I started to get very aroused and excited when he was talking about meeting me and how we would have sex ... we were both getting aroused actually.

So it continued for some time but then I couldn't take it anymore. I found a public urinal close by and went in to masturbate. Thankfully I found someone there who also wanted to have sex. It was a relief.” (Bobby)

As Bobby reveals, the acts, stages and phases of sex are broken down into component parts and enacted with different people, in different spaces. It is a series of fragmented acts. Is there a whole which is larger than its individual acts? What this means for the construction of Kothis' sexuality is an interesting point that marks that fine balance between the 'voluntarism and determinism question' in the consumption of technologies – do users transform and shape the technology object, or does the nature of the technology object force human behaviour in a specific way? In the context of how Kothis' 'do' their sexuality, does the phone fragment Kothis' sexuality into these component acts or was their sexuality already fragmented and then readily replayed through the nature of the phone itself?

The second thing that comes through in Bobby's story is the way in which the Kothi actually sexualizes and even owns public space in a way that seems to contradict how Kothis in general are restricted in public. The physical male-ness that someone like Bobby embodies in this context, and how he can channel more masculine aspects of himself^{xv} in some respects bestows on him the right to use and inhabit public space in ways that women or feminine Kothis rarely can.

Mobile Love

Being mobile gives Kothis a sense of privacy, even in public, that they rarely enjoy in their homes or work spaces. This sense of privacy allows for something elusive to present itself - romance, love and long-term relationships spanning time and space. The opportunity for intimate relationships introduces a new dynamic to their erotic spaces where sex is not always the purpose of communication with partners. While furtive, quick sexual encounters have been the norm for many, and with relationships being

fleeting and illicit, the phone allows Kothis to carry sexual experiences into longer-term relationships.

“That’s how it all started. When he would call me he would talk for at least half an hour or 45 minutes, even asking me very mundane everyday questions like where I had been, what I had for lunch...And whether he was attractive to me. And I used to ask him what he found attractive. Our relationship grew so deep through the phone, we got so close just by talking!”

“When we started our relationship I never knew where the time went. It wouldn’t seem like an hour, I had no idea where the time went. The battery would die out and we wouldn’t realize it, the phone would heat up, and we would have to stop talking for a while. It was so important for me to have that space with him. I couldn’t sleep without talking to him. And it still remains that way. I need the phone.” (Ramiza)

The general tenor of discussions around relationships in the age of technology is that interactions tend to be fragmented and fleeting. With Kothis, however, whose lives are perhaps already split and fragmented at many levels, the pattern can be reversed. The functions of privacy and mobility give them a sense of stability in being able to pursue long term relationships that they would not be able to in ‘real’ spaces.

Mobile phones also allow for the easy management of relationships with parents, wives and family members through the use of multiple SIM cards. For this reason certain models of phones are particularly popular, such as the cheap Chinese-made unbranded phones, which also have Bluetooth connectivity, considered ‘essential’.

“There are two things with Chinese phones. First they are very cheap. Second, more important, is that you can put two SIM cards in it. one for the family and the other for Kothis, panthis, for personal numbers^{xvi}” (Ismail)

With many Kothis interviewed here being married with children, often living with parents or in-laws, mobility equals anonymity and escape. Hiding away one's life as a Kothi becomes even easier. Participants say, "its easier to lie with a mobile phone ... you don't have to look anyone in the eye and lie." So a weekend tryst with a panthi-lover can be easily passed off as 'workshop in Pune'. Salim talks about how he once spent a weekend with a panthi at a *mujra*⁸ at a housing estate behind the shanties where his wife and children live, but said that he was in Kolhapur, a town in the state of Maharashtra which is an overnight train journey away.

'Virtual' Harm

"I cant tell you how dangerous the phone is for Kothis. I never use MMS (multimedia messaging service). There's too much of a risk of blackmail and harassment. I use the phone only for calls." (Salim)

Kothis tend to talk about the phone ruefully, that it provides so many new opportunities for sex and relationships, but equally that it can be a vehicle for violence and abuse. Some specific situations and contexts of violence and harm that the mobile phone engenders are:

- Photographs, videos and text messages saved on mobile phones are a prime source of 'evidence' for the police and vengeful partners to blackmail and harass Kothis with. Kothis talk of having to delete messages and photographs (including pornography) that could be damning if revealed to family members or regular partners who expect sexual exclusivity. Kothis speak of never being able to leave their phones 'just lying around'. Kashish, who lives with his mother and two married sisters and their families in a traditional Indian joint family, says he gives

⁸ Traditionally, a dance performance by courtesans and women dancers that takes place over many hours, even days. The *mujra* connotes large groups of men, a few dancers and intoxication.

his family strict instructions not to touch his phone, going to the extent that he keeps his phone on silent mode when he is at home.

“I don’t want to draw any attention to my phone when I am at home even though I keep deleting the messages. Sometimes you want to save some messages forever, but I cant afford to” (Kashish)

- Kothis are harassed and blackmailed when, unbeknownst to them, they are filmed having sex. The filmmakers are spurned, angry panthis or ‘jealous and scheming’ Kothis. These videos are used to threaten Kothis with being out-ed to their families in order to extort money from them. But in a twist, Kothis who have unreliable employment, or those that rely on sex work for their livelihood, find that the phone has provided new opportunities for them to make some money on the side. For example, participants share instances of Kothi sex workers who ‘ensnare’ school-age or college-going boys into sex and secretly take photographs of them, later blackmailing them into paying money in exchange for not revealing the boys’ secret homosexual life to their families. Another version of Kothis’ use of the phone is described by Salim.

“Some Kothis get a boy’s number and using a high-pitched voice pretend to be girls and flirt a lot. Slowly, slowly they win over these boys and lure them to the Kothi field. By now the boy has become very enchanted by this unseen person he has been talking to. See this is the power of what Kothis can do. Men cannot resist what we can offer. I myself have seen boys who have become either Kothis or panthis through this kind of phone chatting.” (Salim)

At this stage it has not been possible to explore the intimate dynamics and contexts of the violence against Kothis, nor to explore how identity becomes constituted through these sexual acts, both real and virtual. They remain to be discussed as research progresses further.

'Real' Harm

With rising incomes, the increase in queer social spaces in Bombay organized by activists and NGOs and with more discussions of homosexuality in the media, there has been some coming out of MSM in the city. Gay/MSM parties in suburban farm houses outside the city have become popular. According to Vijay Nair of Udaan these become sites of what he calls 'event-based violence'. The police get tipped off about MSM parties and conduct raids with the intent of extortion rather than actually charging anyone under Section 377. MSM at these events, emboldened by their strength in numbers, tend to react violently rather than defusing the situation. Nair feels that this is an issue that needs to be carefully handled rather than aggressively reacted to. However, a mob at a party is not easy to manage and negotiate with. As a result, the police do resort to using violence leading to clashes between MSM party-goers and the police.

There has also been increased reporting of new forms of violence against and harassment of queer men. Recently there have been cases of queer men being entrapped and exploited through scams and rackets. In one case, some local Mumbai policemen were at the centre of the scam; they used a decoy to entrap queer men in sex, and then appeared on the scene threatening to book them under Section 377 unless they paid money (Andhale 2008). A Times of India report (2007) discusses how blackmailers have become tech-savvy, cruising gay chat rooms to find targets, who they develop an online relationship with and then make promises of sex, only to then arrive at a pre-decided location pretending to be plainclothes policemen and threatening to charge them under Section 377.

The most routine form of harassment that Kothis face of course remains street-based harassment and violence from the police, often even in the absence of actual cruising. Kashish talks of an experience when the mobile phone literally came to his rescue. She was stopped by the police one night at a train station after completing his first few weeks in condom distribution and outreach work. Nervous and unsure of how to extricate

herself Kashish wanted to get in touch with his boss from Udaan, Hanif. He found that his talk-time credit had run out and all he had was exactly enough to send one message to Hanif. Since incoming calls are free Hanif was able to guide Kashish and help him negotiate with the police. He remained in touch till Kashish reached home.

*“I would have been very scared without having Hanif to talk to. Moreover, if something had happened to me, no one would have known about it till much later
The mobile really saved me this time!” (Kashish)*

However, as an example of the adaptation function of the domestication of the mobile phone, Kothis discuss how the mobile phone is productively used during cruising, and even in just everyday situations, by creating a sense of ‘purposefulness’ (Phadke 2006a, 2006b). Mobile phones create a very real sense of safety and protection in situations of harassment by the police. If they are being harassed for loitering when they are actually cruising, all they need to do is to pretend to be waiting for someone by talking on the phone, or sometimes just talking on the phone distracts attention from the fact that they cruising.

Some Concluding Thoughts About Being Mobile

At the time of its invention and widespread use in the early 20th century, the telephone was charged with disrupting social relations and unsettling customary ways of dividing the private person and the family from the more public setting of the community. Carolyn Marvin reflects on this saying:

....the focus of communication has shifted from the instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation and knowledge with whatever resources are available. New media intrude on these negotiations by providing new platforms on which old groups confront each other. Old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances.” (Marvin 1990: 5).

. For the first time, young unmarried women, who had to be accompanied by a chaperone when meeting men, could now even talk to strangers from within their own homes. In the age of mobile telephones the larger social and political response seems relatively unchanged; there continue to be concerns with the effects of technology on established social codes and norms. While the mobile has no doubt opened up a number of spaces for certain social groups like Kothis, enthusiasm could be tempered with greater scrutiny of whether this results in actual change in people's lives - does it in fact make them feel confident, safe and empowered, or does it merely allow them to engage in behaviour that has little connection to an empowerment of everyday life and relationships? This becomes a useful point from which to summarize the findings presented here about this ongoing project with Kothis.

Constructions of sexuality and intimacy: Mobile phones appear to give a significant boost to the existing construction of Kothis' sexual behaviour as comprised of random, unexpected, fleeting sexual experiences. Mobile phones allow Kothis to reach out to a much wider network of potential sex partners, as well as to access pornography easily and in private. Thus the Kothi sexual space continues to be peopled with multiple sexual partners and experiences, acts of sex fragmented and experienced in parts; for example, arousal through phone sex with one person could culminate in sex with another person in an offline space.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, this age of what he refers to as 'liquid modernity' implies "the transformation of once rigid social structures into fluid and contingent arrangements and renegotiations" (in Hjorth 2009: 56). In this, networks of affection centre around the individual and allow her to move freely into and out of other people's spaces, like a 'postmodern tourist', sans 'moral responsibilities'. He specifically refers to a key feature of this present moment, what he calls 'liquid love', where intimacy is based on the paradox of technological co-presence: the struggle and competition between connectivity and real, actual contact (ibid). However, with Kothis the flow seems somewhat reversed. While their sexual spaces have always been 'touristy', now the

mobile phone presents the opportunity for more long-term and relatively stable relationships. Kothis' use of the mobile reveals multiple levels of intimacies through a range of (mostly ephemeral) emotionally/erotically/sexually charged moments.

The conundrum of the real and the virtual is a hallmark of a mediated existence, and perhaps a deeper philosophical point to consider in terms of how 'sexuality' can even be considered beyond the body⁹. What are the implications of this for a notion of sexuality that has come to be equated with bodily harm, bodily infection, disease models and public health?

The Notion of Harm: An ongoing review of research literature about the internet (APC/WNSP 2009) reveals that the idea of online and technology-related harm tends to focus on the risks for pedophilia and the inappropriate exposure of young people to sexual content. Even Japan, which has historically been one of the least regulated media environments has recently introduced controls on 'mobile filth' with the saturation of mobile phones amongst the youth demographic (Shioyama 2007). Interestingly, the major concern in Northern countries is with individual pathology online – pedophilia in particular. This has led to the formation of a strong lobby to control media spaces, particularly the internet, and police it by establishing censorship policies. The concern related to online spaces in the Southern context is one of collective culture – the loosening of cultural 'integrity' and with it ideas of nationhood and national identity, including the 'corruption' of young people who embody the future of national, cultural values. For example, in Taiwan, Korea and China there is a grave sense of concern with how young people's mobile and video game addictions are eroding their sense of responsibility and duty to their families, culture and sense of personal achievement^{xvii}. The other dominant idea of virtual danger is reflected by the mobilization of significant research (and funding no doubt) from New York City to Amsterdam to Hong Kong on same-sex desiring men's risks from bare-backing^{xviii}. The internet has become a

⁹ This is of course a powerful theoretical and conceptual point that has been discussed in depth by feminist writers like Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant. An explication of their ideas is beyond the scope of the current paper but will be referenced ahead, and is part of the theoretical foundation of this project.

significant medium for gay men to access partners online who want to bareback offline. Much of the anxiety around new media falls into a ‘dangers and delights’ paradigm, the delights referring to the joys of education and connectivity. This approach characterizes research that establishes technology as a source of either pleasure, or as a morally contentious space riddled with the potential for violence, harm and danger.

The actual understanding of what constitutes ‘harm’ exposes the political underpinnings (or lack thereof) of such research. The issue of what constitutes harm through/by technology need to be interrogated: harm to whom, and from what? The particular kinds of risks that women face from cyber stalking and cyber harassment, or marginalized sexual communities like Kothis face, are rarely discussed in policy or activism around technology.

Strategies and Tactics: The mobile phone has emerged as a strong site for the study of how technology is adapted into local contexts. Using the phone to create a sense of purposefulness when confronted with the threat of police violence, to manage multiple identities or to enhance the business of sex work present a case for how this technology has been adapted in novel ways by Kothis.

ICT4D: Having set up the idea of sexuality, and of violence, it becomes relevant then to discuss them in the context of development, perhaps the larger context where the two are often discussed together. There has been an explosion of interest in how mobile telephony can be used in development advocacy, campaigning and activism across areas of public health, humanitarian assistance, health promotion, research and information-dissemination, for interventions in domestic violence, migration and trafficking and in environmental conservation (Kinkade and Verclas 2007; Ramey 2008), and largely in the context of Africa. The use of mobile phones for development raises the now familiar critique of ICT 4 D (ICTs for Development), and of development itself, that of the resistance to integrate sexuality into a development paradigm (Cornwall and Jolly 2006; Jolly et al 2006; Jolly 2007). Unsurprisingly therefore, the development discourse on mobile activism barely acknowledges the potential to explore how sexuality rights are

(and are not) achieved through new media technologies. A significant exception to this trend is how some projects are examining women's protection from violence or trafficking, and female sex workers' use of technology to either enhance their work and business opportunities and to be safe, or for rights advocates to mobilize their constituents (Tactical Technology Collective and Gira 2007; Alajous 2009^{xix}). However, this has everything to do with how sex workers and women's rights movements are organized, and their critical mass/history. Kothi groups are not yet in this place of 'development', focusing as they do on politico-legal freedom and HIV prevention. The participatory use of media like the internet, photography, mobile campaigns, video and performance for marginalized groups to begin engaging with, articulating and understanding their constructions of sexuality and identity and sexual and personal-historical narratives could be an equally important aspect of their own development.

Mobile citizenship?: The idea of mobility and what it means to be mobile has profound implications because ideas of 'home', 'private' and 'public' tend to be very specifically defined in this particular city/cultural context^{xx}. The form and function of the mobile phone immediately disrupt notions of space and the distinctions between 'private' and 'public' collapse (Bull 2004; Moores 2004). What was once considered appropriate only in private can now confidently be conducted in public, and it is equally possible to be a part of the crowd from within the most private spaces. The idea of what is private is strongly associated with the idea of a heteronormative state and by extension, culture and nationhood, thus the 'unruly eruptions' of sexuality that the mobile affords directly challenges this ideal (Offord 2003:136; Phadke 2005:72-74).

Mobility has particular resonance for Kothis. Kothis' traversing multiple subjectivities closely mirrors the kind of movement that mobile telephony allows. This sort of mobility of subjectivities and between places implies a kind of statelessness, a sense of being free-floating and unhindered by boundaries and borders, and therefore, laws. Is it any less illegal that illegal sexualities are conducted virtually? If the law may police and punish only physical evidence of illegal sex, what does the ability to engage in illegal sexualities virtually imply for the abstract morality and values that sustain the law? What does this

mean for the exercise of sexual rights? How does it contribute to the development of the experience of sexual and gendered freedoms?

I believe that the spaces of mobility discussed here create potential for the imagination of new political assemblages and resistance, and what Aihwa Ong refers to as ‘mutations in citizenship’ (2006:499 in Hjorth 2008: 50). Mobiles give marginalized groups like Kothis the means to create their own versions of erotic and sexual experiences, spaces and relationships. The connections with this to sexual rights and for citizenship are important questions that I aim to push this research towards. What is the relationship between the ability to network and disseminate erotic speech, imagery and experiences, with citizenship, belonging and expression? That Kothis, and other queer people, populate the ether with their taboo erotic speech and imagery, is evidence of a secret public that operates guerilla-style, existing despite the laws and regulations that deny the access to rights, liberty and privacy. In a sense, the Kothis’ erotic spaces are now ‘out there’ and real in that they exist for the individual and for the group who create, circulate and access them; taboo messages, conversations, photographs and videos are evidence of resistance to the dominant order.

However the persistent niggling question remains: what is the connection between a virtual notion or experience of ‘freedom’ when it has no ‘real’ manifestations? The disconnect that remains is the old one – between the real and the virtual. The opportunity for virtual community formation and networking and to be erotic are not matched by an offline increase in access to the physical rights of housing, access to health care, to family life, to freedom from violence and discrimination.

Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg imagined a genderless utopia that could allow women to transcend the gendered and classed limitations of the body. She urged the creation of ‘new worlds’ and ‘new entities’ where something entirely different could be imagined (1985; in Wacjman 2007: 291). Criticisms aside, and there are plenty, her work has resonance for this stage of my project as Kothis create their alternate erotic realities and appear to be subverting the limitations of their everyday lives and experiencing

something entirely new for themselves. More research and development with this community is definitely required, as is a deeper exploration of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of how sexual citizenship may be experienced and achieved within these new, shifting mobile landscapes that hover in the ether above this India.

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ⁱ An incident in New Delhi exemplifies the concern that the mobile phone creates around the disruptions of these ideas of privacy and publicity. In 2004 two students of Delhi Public School were seen in an act of fellatio filmed on a mobile phone and circulated via MMS (multimedia messaging service). The CEO of the company, Bazee Dot Com an Indian affiliate of Ebay Dot Com, through which the MMS was sold, was arrested, and the incident raised questions about the “delinquency” of young people and “adolescent temptations unleashed” by new media (Suri 2004). The girl involved in the case faced the predictable: her character and morality were up for discussion, and her family and their ‘values’ were the objects of much televised public discussion. Rumours raged about the girl’s intent and role – was she a willing partner or was she a victim? The boy and his phone are still at large, it is said, in Nepal.

ⁱⁱ In the recent past the internet, wifi connections and mobile phones have been linked to the modus operandi of terrorist groups conducting attacks in Indian cities. Following bomb blasts in New Delhi, Ahmedabad and Mumbai in 2008, the police and intelligence agencies warned that these technologies need to be more carefully monitored. Wifi connections are now expected to be password protected, IP addresses were hacked into to send threatening emails warning of attacks and mobile phones have been used as detonators in bombs. See https://www.techworld.com.au/article/260722/india_wants_secure_wifi_hotspots_citing_terror_threat for more information on this. However, at the same time, these very technologies were essential in citizen journalism from the scene of the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai: <http://mobileactive.org/terror-attacks-mumbai-mobiles-and-twitter-play-key-role-24-7-reporting>

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south_asia/dk08df02.html an article which discusses the ways in which women are becoming more confident, liberated and comfortable expressing their sexuality through SMS (short messaging service)

^{iv} The government has asked mobile phone service providers to allow for the interception of mobile phone SMS-es and call logs in the pursuit of criminals and criminal activity. While all these situations are morally tenuous and threaten privacy in complex ways, the debate continues. More recently, the government has asked telecom regulators to ban and block the cheap and popular Chinese made phones that are thought to be used by terrorists since they do not come with a unique International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number, a code embedded into each phone that allows it to be tracked and monitored. These Chinese phones, many of which carry dual SIM cards, assign one IMEI number to 100 or 1000 phones, and are extremely cheap, making them popular, and impossible to track: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Business/Chinese-mobiles-to-be-useless-by-month-end/articleshow/4357526.cms>

^v From Miss World Pageants in Bangalore to Kentucky Fried Chicken to advertisements for condoms to the Fashion Television TV channel to advertisements that mimicked the famous billowing skirt image of Marilyn Monroe.

^v By this I refer to how cinema has been closely linked to ideas of Indian femininity, womanhood, the embodiment of India as ‘Mother India’. The entry of television in India was originally intended as an educational and socially conscious tool, arising from our socialist forebearers, on the ‘upliftment’ of the ‘masses’.

^{vi} Scholars of cinema and TV in India describe how these media were developed, promoted and invested with the aim of nation-building (Virdi 2003; Ninan 1995; Kasbekar 2002). The ban on showing kissing in Indian cinema came into force post-Independence and is particularly indicative of the idea that cinema is a powerful medium for the establishment of social codes and norms of ‘Indian-ness’:

“Kissing or embracing by adults, exhibiting passion repugnant to good taste, shall not be shown. Though common in Western countries, kissing and embracing by adults in public is alien to our country. Dancing is acknowledged as an art. It should therefore be preserved beautifully, in keeping with the finest tradition of our country” (in Kasbekar 2002:290). The kissing ban swiftly establishes notions of appropriate Indian-ness, Western-ness, culture, art, morality and what is considered permissible in public and in private. What would it mean to flout these guidelines – would that be considered ‘un-Indian’?

^{vii} See www.voicesagainst377.org for details of the Penal Code section.

^{ix} Panthi and giriya are words Kothis use to refer to male partners

^x The ‘double-decker’ or ‘do-paratha’ is another identity within the MSM umbrella. A ‘classic’ double decker attracts both Kothis and panthis, is both penetrator and penetrated, and does not cross-dress or display effeminate personal styles and mannerisms like Kothis do.

^{xi} It is critical to mention here that there is a much larger critical discourse thatINCOMPLETE

^{xii} Exclusive gay parties and gay nights are urban bars and restaurants are a recent phenomenon, and are the result of a large enough community of gay/queer/MSM men in Delhi and Bombay (and a few other cities) with money to spend. This is in no small way connected to the mobilization and awareness raising by the queer community, and a general ‘opening up’ of the Indian upper and middle classes to homosexuality and the queer community through increased global flows of ideas, media messages and Hindi cinema that touches on these themes.

^{xiii} Kothis have sexual and erotic spaces with other Kothis as well, not only with panthis, and there are close bonds of affection between Kothis as well. Therefore the circulation of numbers is also a way of establishing a range of new relationships, friendships and networks.

^{xiv} However, this is often mock-jealousy as well. While there is indeed aggression and competition between Kothis, there is also a sense of emotional connection, friendship and sharing that happens through discussions about sex and sexual escapades, much like it would be for teenage girls or straight men for example.

^{xv} Which is also seen in the context of being a husband and a father, two roles are traditionally understood in fairly rigid ‘male’ ways.

^{xvi} An interesting aside to the use of the dual-SIM phone is soon to come to light. The government of India is going to ban the dual-SIM card cheap Chinese phone citing reasons of ‘national security’ (see endnote iv). This has political implications at many levels. Not only is the ban and blanking out of these phones going to now make it difficult for Kothis to manage their multiple identities, but this phone is also used by a number of poor people who cannot afford the high end Nokias and Samsungs and iPhones.

^{xvii} Some recent research studies from the 2008 issues of the journal *CyberPsychology & Behaviour* include titles from Korea, Hong Kong and China such as:

Do Aggressive People Play Violent Computer Games in a More Aggressive Way? Individual Difference and Idiosyncratic Game-Playing Experience

Personality Traits and Life Satisfaction among Online Game Players

Subjective Well-Being: Evidence from the Different Personality Traits of Online Game Teenager Players

The Association between Internet Addiction and Problematic Alcohol Use in Adolescents: The Problem Behaviour Mode

^{xviii} Bare-backing is the act of willful, knowing unprotected anal sex

^{xix} Tactical Technology Collective and Melissa Gira compiled a report on how sex worker health and rights advocates and activists use ICTs and how their work could be enhanced by the further use of ICTs. They find, for example, that the mobile phone allows sex workers rights advocates mobilize their constituents through the phone, and in advocacy and networking efforts. Alajous writes on his blog about how a program in Tanzania is using the internet and mobile phones to create a system of safety for women in sex work.

^{xx} For example, an advertisement or music video can show a couple onscreen kissing but a real life heterosexual couple kissing on a street would be considered taboo because it brings private romance into the public arena