



## Sex in the city: Privacy-making practices, spatialized intimacies and the environmental risks of men-who-have-sex-with-men in South India

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### ABSTRACT

Employing community-based approaches, the spatialization of sexual risk among men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) at local cruising spots was explored in South India. To move beyond individualistic and structural deterministic understandings of sexual risk the study examined how erotic associations and networks formed and dissolved as social actors connect to each other through their material world (which includes other bodies). Crowding was important for safely establishing intimacy in public but also created contexts of discrimination and violence, particularly for feminine-acting males. Risk itineraries drawn by MSM anticipated fluctuating levels of risk, enabling them to avoid dangerous situations. Although sexual typologies connected gender nonconforming males to HIV prevention networks, they reinforce the exclusion of men who did not identify with sexual minority identities. Future work must therefore address the HIV prevention needs of men whose identities cannot be readily separated from “the general population”.

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### 1. Introduction

In southern India, where the heart of the country's HIV epidemic lies, intervention specialists mobilize particular notions of space in their management of risk among those deemed to be the most vulnerable to infection. Based upon the mapping of key locations where people pursue sexual partners (defined as epidemiological “hotspots”), public health practitioners have set up networks of specialized spaces and clinics to attract communities of female sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM)<sup>1</sup>—“subpopulations” that are characterized by an HIV prevalence well above the national average of <1% (Pandey et al., 2009). As part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-sponsored India AIDS Initiative, known as *Avahan*, these “most at

risk populations” have been recruited to mobilize their peers at hotspots, with the expectation that these communities will become better connected to prevention and treatment services for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV infection (Verma et al., 2010).

Although sexual minority rights development projects in India have engaged in targeted HIV prevention work since the early 1990s, it was only after 2000 that public health scientists began to acknowledge the extreme vulnerability of MSM to HIV infection. Alarming high HIV prevalence rates among MSM have been reported in Andhra Pradesh (20.9%) and Maharashtra (11.3%) (Brahmam et al., 2008). In the southern state of Karnataka, where this study is focused, HIV prevalences as high as 30% has been found in MSM communities in some districts (Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, 2009, unpublished data). Public health research that attempts to explain the HIV vulnerability of MSM and informs the *Avahan* intervention, has tended to follow two directions: the first is the study of individual-level characteristics, including sexual practices (consistency of condom use and frequency of unprotected anal intercourse) (Go et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2010; Deb et al., 2009; Dandona et al., 2005); sexual partners (average number and type of sexual partner) (Kumta et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2006); sexual identities (Phillips et al., 2008; Chakrapani et al., 2008); and selling sex (Newman et al., 2008; Dandona et al., 2006). The second line of research examines the broader structural factors

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper it is important to note that we employ the term, “MSM”, with the understanding that its appearance in public health discourse tends to proffer a false coherency and universalism, suggesting that “MSM” exists as a discrete group that can be objectively identified and made comparable across cultural contexts (Young and Meyer, 2005). We use this term with the recognition that sexual intimacies between males in South India display unique variations, ambiguities and complexities that are important to understand for HIV prevention (Boyce, 2006). We certainly do not use the term in an attempt to further reify it as a “culture-free”, epidemiological risk category.

that inhibit condom use and health service utilization such as poverty, sexual violence, legal codes, stigma, and discrimination (Chakrapani et al., 2007). While the former approach tends to over-emphasize the intentionality of individuals, which inadvertently places responsibility on those who make “unsafe” decisions, the latter points to larger forces that often appear beyond the individual and the immediate reach of those running interventions on the ground. Both approaches, we furthermore contend, tend to hinge on typological notions of sexual identity that are “temporally dislocated and culturally static” (Boyce, 2007: 198).

Drawing upon the findings from a community-based ethnographic field-note writing project, our aim in this study is twofold. First, we (re)locate the sexualities of South Indian MSM in time and space, drawing upon the relatively recent work in human geography that recognizes how sexualities are “tied in very complex ways to socio-cultural and political-economic processes that have real spatial effects and affects” (Del Casino, 2007: 46). Second, by carefully considering the relation between sexual subjectivity<sup>2</sup> and place, we seek to re-orient understandings of sexual risk beyond both individualistic and structural deterministic understandings. Treating these two registers of understanding symmetrically, we examine how erotic associations form and stabilize or dissolve as social actors connect to each other through their material world (which includes other bodies) (Murdoch, 1997). This focus on the “middle ground” between structure and agency brings into view the *corporeal experiences* of sexuality and the “spatial tactics” (de Certeau, 1984: 91–101) that MSM enact to create privacy in places they perceive as risky. From this perspective, “sexual risk” is better understood as reproduced through erotically charged spatial arrangements and embodiments, what Gavin Brown has referred to as the “[affective] potential resulting from the interaction of bodies in place” (2008: 917), rather than as resulting from *external* “social factors” that enable or prohibit ‘rational’ decision making.

### 1.1. Public sex

Since the celebrated reception of George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994), scholars have continued to emphasize the importance of public cruising spaces in the everyday makings of intimacy, community solidarity and sexual dissidence. Public cruising in parks, streets, toilets and transport stations in urban locations, subverts the moral boundaries of what may be considered socially acceptable behavior in public (Brown, 2008). In fact, public cruising unsettles the very notion of a distinct divide between public and private realms (Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Leap, 1999; Matejskova, 2007). Such transgressions not only challenge the ordering strategies of the state and the resulting heteronormativities it imposes (Hubbard, 2001: 54), but also “queers” public space, transforming it in ways that exceed the intent of original urban planners.

Chauncey writes on how the bustle of streets in urban centers in pre World War II New York creates protective conditions for sexual dissidents to move about freely and forge intimacies with one another as such spaces were less easily regulated than residential or business areas (Chauncey, 1994: 179). Similarly, Turner describes how men pursue sex in public and are able to recognize each other through their own unique signaling—“a process of walking, gazing and engaging another (or others)”

(2003: 60). Scholars reminds us, however, that while public crowding may offer protection from the society’s gaze it can also create the condition for public exposure, shame, harassment and even violent assault, particularly for those who are gender variant (Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; Johnston, 2007). The *privacy making practices* that MSM in South India enact to cultivate intimacies in public, which we will demonstrate, similarly displays the tenuous nature of privacy for many MSM as “something that can be had and lost” in public places (Matejskova, 2007: 138–139).

While the discussions above greatly inform our analysis of public cruising in South India, there are important ways in which the constitution of public space in South India differs from these accounts. First, public space in India is quite visibly male homosocial (Khan, 1994). Open physical displays of affection such as handholding, intertwining of arms is socially sanctioned (Asthana, 2001). Thus cruising practices, erotic signaling and sexual network formations take place alongside other kinds of intimate affections that men openly share with each other.

Public space in India is also centered on accommodating and validating the conjugal unit, often dividing unmarried men and “families.” To illustrate this point we provide an example of public eating areas. Most restaurants at our three urban study sites in Karnataka in fact separated male (“bachelor”) sitting areas and those of “families” (couples, parents with children or women only groups), sometimes providing the latter with better décor and amenities such as air-conditioning. Other public spaces, such as small bars or pubs where alcohol is consumed and busy traffic intersections where snacks are sold, are noticeably male dominated and therefore tend to afford men a degree of privacy from women and certain freedoms from the mores of acceptable conduct. However, such public freedoms are considerably more restricted for women who are more tightly held to cultural norms of “decency”.

Particularly in the evening, public space becomes the domain of men, allowing them to openly pursue an array of intimate connections, conversations and enjoyments of vices (such as cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking and the consumption of non-vegetarian food)—behaviors which would be considered unsuitable in the presence of “respectable families” or “decent women”. Thus the “legitimate” public sphere in India is often defined by the presence or absence of family figures (heterosexual couples, women and children). Male cruising in South India merges with broader homo-social contexts that already in some way reside outside the bounds of ideal public space and morality.

Another distinctive characteristic of the public sphere in South India is the regular (and therefore normalized) ‘interruption’ of everyday life by Hindu religious rituals, festivals, and processions that often emanates from temples and flows out onto the streets. Although Karnataka, particularly Bangalore and Mysore, has undergone rapid global economic transformations in the last few decades, the expansion of urban space has certainly not diminished such public spectacles; it has actually intensified the expression of ritualistic devotion and celebration (Srinivas, 2001). Larger religious festivals also provide opportunities, especially for unmarried young men, to be away from home for extended periods of time. Festival crowding is ripe with erotic possibilities for men searching for and selling sex, as will be discussed later in the paper. During times of festivals, however, police increase their vigilance by removing and arresting sexual dissidents (MSM and FSWs) from neighboring cruising spots.

Feminine acting men (*kothis*) endure the burden of public harassment at the hands of police and local thugs (known as *goondas* or *rowdies*). Although their discrimination in public space parallels the “gender tyranny” (Doan, 2010) that transgender people encounter in Western cultural contexts, it is important to note that the wider social view of gender nonconformity in

<sup>2</sup> The concept of “sexual subjectivity” helps us to move beyond the notion of sexual self-experience in terms of sexual identity—as resulting from a fixed property of the individual. Instead sexual subjectivity refers to an awareness of sexual self-hood that emerges (and vanishes) as MSM move across various erotic landscapes.

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