

Out!

STORIES FROM THE NEW QUEER INDIA

Edited by
Minal Hajratwala

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www.queer-ink.com

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Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company?

ZoraNealeHurst

What we really care about matters more than what other people think of us.

JawaharlalNehru

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introduction

On a Friday afternoon in December 2010, I landed in Mumbai and that very evening was whisked off to a party in a Juhu hotel. A DJ spun Bollywood and Western tunes on a souped-up Macbook, fragrant biryani emerged from the kitchens at midnight, and sixty or seventy people laughed, smoked-drunk-danced, and shouted to each other over the music. It might have been any typical Friday night — except that the crowd was all women.

The party was for lesbians and bisexual women. A sprinkling of heterosexual friends, cousins, and sisters had come along to provide a legitimate cover story for a girls' night out, or just to dance free of the male gaze and "eve-teasing."

I wondered aloud to a new friend how I had missed this vibrant queer scene before. Had I been too wrapped up in family and work on previous visits to India? She asked when I'd last visited. Ten years ago, I said.

"That's why," she told me. "You couldn't have found us. Back then we would spread the word by phone to meet at such-and-such a restaurant at such-and-such a time. Then we'd each show up with a red rose, so we could find each other."



From hiding to pride, from passing to what some dismissively call flaunting, the shift in visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives in India over the past several years is nothing short of revolutionary. It began, perhaps, with the creation of an HIV infrastructure for India in the 1990s and the public controversy over the film *Fire* in 1996.¹ It gained momentum over the next decade, as activists built organisations and publications, and the community gained a collective confidence. The most significant indicator of its progress may have been the July 2, 2009, ruling of the Delhi High Court in the landmark case *Naz Foundation v. Union of India*. The court ruled that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code — a Victorian-era piece of legislation imported by the British that effectively made consensual adult homosexuality a criminal behaviour in India — was unconstitutional. In a broadly worded decision that quoted Jawaharlal Nehru on equality, the court wrote:

If there is one constitutional tenet that can be said to

1 Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*, which depicted two women in an intimate relationship on India's silver screens for the first time, was met by right-wing riots.

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be underlying theme of the Indian Constitution, it is that of “inclusiveness.” This Court believes that Indian Constitution reflects this value deeply ingrained in Indian society, nurtured over several generations. The inclusiveness that Indian society traditionally displayed, literally in every aspect of life, is manifest in recognising a role in society for everyone. Those perceived by the majority as “deviants” or “different” are not on that score excluded or ostracized. Where society can display inclusiveness and understanding, such persons can be assured of a life of dignity and nondiscrimination. ... It cannot be forgotten that discrimination is antithesis of equality and that it is the recognition of equality which will foster the dignity of every individual.

As we take this book to press, an appeal against this ruling is pending before the Supreme Court of India. Regardless of the legal outcome, however, it seems the genie has been let out of the bottle — and the closet. In the wake of the *Naz* decision, an Indian who loves someone of the same gender is no longer a criminal, for the first time in nearly 150 years.

Celebrations, public and private, erupted after the decision. The media took note: Queer lives were suddenly newsworthy, with journalists seeking interviewees on the difficulties of coming out to parents (Times of India’s *Crest*, and many other lifestyle magazines), workplace issues (*Forbes*), and heated morality debates (CNN-IBN). Legalisation accelerated the trend towards greater visibility, as people could now gather in private parties and public spaces without fear that the police would raid them. Underground organisations could make their work more visible, community businesses could emerge, events could be publicised — in short, the closet door could be cracked open. Today, in every Indian metro, thousands of people march annually in LGBT rights parades.

This trajectory has had its fits and starts, and its critics, both within and outside the community. Transgender and hijra

people, for whom the luxury of passing may be unavailable, suffer the daily consequences of deeply rooted prejudices, official harassment, and targeted violence. Meanwhile most lesbian, gay, and bisexual people still keep their secrets in at least some sphere of their lives, be it family or workplace, concealing the identity or even existence of their life partners. The persistence of these closets, their endless deepening crannies and shadows, takes a toll on relationships and individual psyches; perhaps there is no oppression more profound than the internal policing we do of each other and of ourselves, the damage that comes from a lifetime of failing to acknowledge the truth of our desire.

And yet, the closet is not only compromise; it is also comfort and protection. For some, the desire to keep their intimate lives under strict lock-and-key is a privilege to be defended. Whether from the outside world or from our own colonised consciousness, we often hear the niggling question, *But why do you have to talk about it?*

The stories in this book talk about *it*. Some unfold from deep inside the closet, while others declare themselves out, loud, and proud. Most, however, manoeuvre the tricky boundaries between in and out, safety and risk, compromise and freedom. You hold in your hands the first collection of queer Indian stories written for a general audience since the decriminalisation of homosexuality. These pages brim with the delight of a community that is discovering and celebrating itself, even as it continues to face profound challenges.

We follow, of course, in the footsteps of others. Writing has been vital to the LGBT movement in India from the beginning: stapled photocopies of lesbian poems and art; protest petitions and letters to the editor; meticulous research that mines the subcontinent's rich history for proof of same-sex love in centuries past — decisively refuting the argument that *it* is a Western import. The rich and varied body of writing that has been emerging in India includes a number of earlier anthologies and studies; regional periodicals, the vast blogosphere, and a

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small but growing list of novels and autobiographies round out the bookshelf.² The word has always been a vital element of the cause.



This is the first book for a general Indian audience that aims to be truly *queer* in the broadest sense: It encompasses stories of gay men, lesbians, bisexual men and women, and transgender and transsexual people, as well as the heterosexual characters who fill — and fill out — our lives. The people at the centre of these stories do not live in a magical gay ghetto, as it sometimes seems with queer fiction in the West; their lives are populated with mothers and fathers, grandfathers and great-aunts, children, neighbours, and sometimes-unlikely allies. Here the queer encounters the mainstream at every turn, and vice versa. The perceived borders between “gay” and “straight,” or even “man” and “woman,” are revealed as wholly artificial. There is no separation, and in these frequent brushes against each other, all of the actors are transformed.

Nor are the writers and their characters limited to standard definitions; they claim identities such as gender-fluid, dyke, queer, lady-boy, FTM, and kothi, as well as decline-to-state. They are teachers, executives, Dalits, villagers, Sikhs, sophisticates, Brahmins, journalists, Christians, doctors,

² Among the earlier anthologies are those edited by Rakesh Ratti (1993), Ashwini Sukthankar (1999), Hoshang Merchant (1999/2010), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000), and Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (2005). Excellent books containing specialised or academic content include Ruth Vanita's *Queering India* (2002) and Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta's *Law like Love* (2011) — the latter a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the history and implications of the Section 377 decision. Single-author books such as Parmesh Shahani's intimate analysis of gay men in Mumbai (2008), Gayatri Reddy's study of hijras in Hyderabad (2005), and Maya Sharma's oral histories of lesbians in underprivileged India (2006) provide an in-depth understanding of specific communities. For an extensive catalogue of queer Indian books, as well as links to blogs and websites of contributors to this anthology, please see www.queer-ink.com.

engineers, Muslims, lawyers, dreamers, students, strugglers. Most stories came to us in English; one is translated from the Tamil, another from the Oriya. We are pleased to have established writers of multiple books, such as R Raj Rao and Mary Anne Mohanraj, as well as many emerging and first-time writers.

Traversing childhood to old age, rural to urban, and all imaginable genders (a couple of stories even take the point of view of other species), *Out!* reflects the richness and vibrancy of an almirah that has thrown itself open.

Amidst this diversity, what these stories share is the expression of previously untold lives, wowing our small team of readers with their power, originality, honesty, humour, and sheer style. Here are quiet narratives about the drama underlying seemingly mundane lives; saris in subdued, tasteful colours, if you will, that nevertheless ripple with a subtle passion. And here are flashy feather-boa stories, stories dressed in sequins and grit, stories disguised in Armani suits that open up to reveal the rags of the street, or a red dress with matching-matching strappy high heels. Here is a simple village girl's polyester salwar kameez; the fine white cotton of a high-caste widow's sari; rough folds of dhوتي or blue jeans. Here are layers of silk rustling with whispers. These stories wear cascading jewels and thick makeup, or walk unadorned, stripped, naked, into the world.

The characters that emerge from this almirah are distinguished, in the end, not by gender or sexuality, but by their unforgettable humanity.



Anthologies usually cluster stories into sections such as family, identity, and so on. But the thirty stories here seemed to resist any such easy categorisation. Queer writing, like our lives, is complex; defying easy pigeonholing, these pieces have assembled themselves in an aesthetic order, as stylishly as one might put together an outfit for a coming-out party, a parade,

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or even a wedding.

Each of the six sections in this book opens with a phrase from a story, an image that evokes an item of clothing or an act of self-representation. The sections of the book are thus aligned with the concept of the closet, the articulations and contradictions of what we wear, how we appear, and who we really are. Some tales are speculative and richly imaginative, transporting us to near-mythical parallel worlds; others are grounded in a reality that varies in texture from harsh jute to golden weave.

The first section, *as I stood before the mirror, in the harsh yellow light*, takes its title from a piece called “Blank Mirror” by Ashley Tellis, a writer of Dalit background whose narrator gazes unflinchingly at himself through the eyes of lovers, enemies, and self. The section begins with a law student’s love story entwined with the backdrop of the unfolding Section 377 legal case that determines the validity of his love. It goes on to bring together fictional and nonfiction writings about identity that include, but also transcend, the coming-out narrative. Figuring out who we are has been a central pursuit of queer stories. As these writers explore issues of being and becoming, they do so in the context of the larger “mirror”: of communities gay and straight; of family, lovers, and neighbours; and of the nation itself.

The next cluster, *the oil for my hair, gleaming green and jewel-like in the golden fluted bowl*, reaches back towards the old world in the now. Among the many contemporary and coexisting Indias, some of what persists is the rural, familial, idiomatic, vernacular — an ancient, connected sensuality that is not just queer, but ever-present and alive in such everyday details as girls experiencing the touch of jasmine oil and boys “playing with the rat.” Despite conventional wisdom that urban upper-class India is morally liberal while the countryside is uniformly “backward” and conservative, many of these stories explore the legacy of tolerance and possibilities of love even in the quietest landscapes.

With section three, we move starkly into a globalised and technological world: *wrapped in an oversized green gown, lying on a stark white sheet*. The heroes and heroines of these stories take journeys, make choices and face their consequences. They undergo transformations and explore various forms of self-reinvention. Entire families, and even casual connections, undergo alchemical changes because of the magic of queerness — since, as Oriya writer Sarojini Sahoo’s story remarks, “The real magician is the one who knows how to live.”

Self-discovery takes many forms, and for queer people, love and desire is often a pathway towards revelation. The stories in section four, *under the white T-shirt, where her skin begins to talk*, explore the world of intimate relationships with unapologetic sentiment and sensuality. In fantastical and assuredly adult landscapes, these writers explore the meeting-place of body and heart, self and other, eros and kama.

In urban, ultra-modern India, plots twist and intertwine, villains become victims or heroes, and cities teem with clashes of cultures, classes, even species. Section five, *his makeup palette: traffic-stopping red mouth, blue azure eyelids*, brings us queer tales set against the backdrop of a new India where anything can happen. Here, queerness is only one — and perhaps the least — of the many dramatic phenomena unfolding around us.

And finally we come to: *placed my cardigan on the pane, and smashed it open*. Here are characters that break barriers and silences, make their own way, and discover their destinies. As they forge their experiences on their own remarkable terms, they form families that expand and adapt. Negotiating new relationships, they learn that anyone can remake themselves anew.

We close this section, and the book, with a groundbreaking conversation between two artist-activists, long-time allies of the community. Their dialogue frames the space where this book enters the world: the mainstream. Filmmaker Chitra Palekar, who has petitioned and spoken out publicly against

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Section 377 as the mother of a lesbian, and actor Nandita Das, who portrayed a woman in a same-sex love affair in *Fire*, converse here for the first time about their journeys from well-meaning newcomers to staunch allies of the queer movement.



Through their stories, and throughout these pages, we crack open the almirah to give you a peek. Come in, look around, join the party — and feel free to try on anything you want.

MinalHajratwala

Bangalore/June 2012

