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Between the sheets: The queer sociality of Bombay zines

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ABSTRACT

With a particular focus on zines produced in Bombay from the 1990s to 2000s, this essay draws on and thinks with the masala that flavored the pages of three prominent Bombay queer zines: *Bombay Dost*, *Scripts* and *Gaysi Zine*. Through close readings of specific volumes, I demonstrate that zines constitute not only an overlooked archive of queer and trans cultures in India but have also been crucial to facilitating ‘queer sociality’ (Rodríguez 2011) between the sheets of the zine’s pages and in the worlds through which its copies might travel. I develop the concept of masala-with a queer accent (Khubchandani 2020)-to reflect its usage and meaning in queer spaces to reference sex, messiness, gossip and at times unruliness and nonrespectable behavior. Extending its potential, I suggest that masala names not only a genre of content that is erotically charged or gossip-laden but is perhaps itself an analytic or technique by which queer subjects make political claims and forge community.

KEYWORDS

Queer zines; print cultures;
queer sociality; Bombay
zines; masala; gossip

Masala magazines

Sandwiched between Bhupen Khakhar’s painting ‘White Angel’ on the front cover and a shirtless Rahul Bose frying sunny side up eggs on his nipples in a poster for Riyad Wadia’s film *Bombgay* on the back cover, the ‘Masala Mix’ edition of *Bombay Dost* (1996) offered its readers ‘Hot, Hot’ and ‘Hit, Hit’ stories, poems, photos and content. The pages of the issue glistened with shirtless men, collages of Bollywood celebrities and images of first times and cruising encounters conjured in the text of erotic short stories and poems from the editors. ‘Masala’ – a colloquial Bombay Hindi phrase that could loosely be translated as spice, gossip, or even mess – promises its readers a quintessentially Bombay flavor of content. Much like that perfect seasoning of spices, masala content names that bawdy, excessive, erotically charged material that gives its readers life, increases heart rates and makes the brows sweat a little. The obvious gestures to male nudity (not full, just shirtlessness) and to thick descriptive accounts of random hookups and sexual encounters make clear how the zine approximated masala’s erotically charged meaning.



Masala Mix Double Issue Cover. Bombay Dost Volume 5 No 2 & 3 (1996)

But masala can also be shade and gossip. In Bombay, when someone says ‘I have masala for you’, it can also be a way of saying ‘I have gossip’ or ‘tea to spill’. This meaning resonates in pieces such as ‘Bitching about Bitches’, which reviews gay screenwriter Dharam Veer’s exposé of ‘the gay underbelly of Bollywood’, *All the Bitches in One Basket*. In the cover story and exclusive feature, ‘Star-Speak’, major Bollywood celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan, Akshay Kumar, Juhi Chawla and Raveena Tandon offer their opinions on homosexuality. The responses, detailed in the cover story’s four-page spread, offer a range of opinions, from empathy and understanding to ignorance and prejudice. Thus, the promise of masala as displayed in the issue’s cover and in its editor’s note makes clear that the zine’s mission was to provide readers with an inside view into the jealously guarded and distant secret worlds of Bollywood celebrities, sex parties and social scenes.

With no budget and limited resources, Bombay Dost relied initially on word of mouth and existing social networks to circulate. For instance, physical copies were sold in brown paper bags at locations like the Veena Beena shopping center, just opposite the Bandra train station, a popular cruising site in the 80s and 90s. But as the Masala Issue demonstrates, the zine was not limited to these spaces. Like the gossip that travelled mouth to mouth, filling ears and pages of the zine alike, word of mouth enabled it to circulate not just among gay men, but also within the film fraternity and other powerful, elite circles as well. And the cache of these zines was not just that they told queer stories or provided relevant information about health, rights,

or safety. Their popularity was perhaps because of their salaciousness, their dealing in gossip and petty dramas, that dash of masala to season precarious times and uncertain futures.

With a particular focus on zines produced in Bombay from the 1990s to 2000s, this essay draws on and thinks with the masala that flavored the pages of three prominent Bombay queer zines: *Bombay Dost*, *Scripts* and *Gaysi Zine*. Through close readings of specific volumes, I demonstrate that zines constitute not only an overlooked archive of queer and trans cultures in India but have also been crucial to facilitating ‘queer sociality’ (Rodríguez) between the sheets of the zine’s pages and in the worlds through which its copies might travel. As queer performance scholar Juana María Rodríguez notes, ‘Queer sociality . . . is at its core an attempt at recognition. It is a utopian space that both performs a critique of existing social relations of difference and enacts a commitment to the creative critical work of imagining collective possibilities’ (332). As I develop in this essay, this sociality was cemented not just through utopian longings for recognition or visibility, but also via zine’s traffic in masala: that excessive, bawdy content that dealt in fantasies, lust, mess and at times petty gossip and shade.

From candid conversations on sex and sexual health to art and visual culture that emphasize gender and sexual subcultures, Bombay’s queer zines have made space in their pages for queer and trans desires, intimacies and pleasures. I deploy masala as a way to examine how queer zine makers captured queer love, life and even loss within the pages of their magazines. Typically, masala has been a term applied to films, to name those Hindi movies that are (like masalas as spices) a blend of various genres—action, comedy, romance, melodrama, etc. (see Ganti). As a concept, its symbolic power has been as a means of denoting the South Asian inflections within popular culture, specifically film (eg via concepts like masala Western as opposed to spaghetti Western). In this essay, I develop masala—with a queer accent (Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*)—to reflect its usage and meaning in queer spaces to reference sex, messiness, gossip and at times unruliness and nonrespectable behavior. Extending its potential, I suggest that masala names not only a genre of content that is erotically charged or gossip-laden but is perhaps itself an analytic or technique by which queer subjects make political claims and forge community. Put differently, masala is also a means by which the zine pages might travel and facilitate bonds between disparate and dislocated members of the zine’s readerships.

As the following pages attest, gossip garners attention, sex sells copies and mess melds together bodies in ephemeral spaces of pleasure and queer sociality. Thus, my gesture to thinking with the gossip, sex, fantasies and mess contained within the pages of Bombay queer zines is an endeavor to think about modes of queer sociality that emerge not through the formalized registers of political recognition or legal visibility, as other scholars have deftly articulated (cf. Dave; Gupta), but through messiness, salacious gossip and the ribaldry contained between the sheets of the zine’s pages. I demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between the sheets of the zine’s pages and the erotic worlds of sex, fantasy and playfulness that queer creators poured into zines and that zines facilitated through consolidating disparate readerships into more formalized social networks. From the secret shops and stalls to hunt down copies of zines like *Bombay Dost* to the events, gatherings and even organizations that have come into existence because of *Bombay Dost*, *Scripts* and *Gaysi*, zines are a genre of print culture that have been a crucial ingredient in the building of LGBTQ+ worlds in India. By thinking with these publications, I ask, what these Bombay queer zines tell us about the varied avenues of queer sociality and performance that are erotic, gossipy, messy and at times

problematic? How might zines remind us of the original work of queer subcultures as sutured to fantasy and desire and not just representation?

Queer zines against the archive

Zines gesture to the social lives of queer texts and queer objects. The zines that I have sourced for this essay came to me via former editors who collected and maintained original copies. While some editions have been archived and are digitally available, older editions of *Bombay Dost* and *Scripts*, came into my hands through the generosity of former editors who shared their collections, opened their homes to me and allowed me to take photos of every page of original editions. Stories about editions and specific issues unfolded in interviews and informal conversations as I sat in editors' homes and photographed page after page. I accessed *Gaysi zine*, the relatively youngest of the three zines I explore in this essay, by buying copies from their website and talking with a former editor. Across each of these zines, the editors were overwhelmingly upper-caste, upper class and urban-centric. Many of the zines, though offering a mix of Hindi, English and sometimes Marathi, were primarily Anglophone. Interviews with editors suggested that the incorporation of English and Hindi were strategic choices to help them circulate to reach broader audiences across India. This urgency to reach more people reflected a critique of both the limited conversations and spaces organized around queer issues. For instance, the editors of *Bombay Dost* described their impetus for the zine in the early 90s as a need not just to spread awareness about queer causes but also as a way to break out of the house party scene, which they described in an interview as overwhelmingly upper class, upper caste and elite. If as these editors suggest, 'parties were a distant and aspirational' thing, then zines become a useful (though still limited way) of attempting to both transcend those spaces and initiate more public dialogue.

Studying Bombay zines is not an absolute or definitive commentary on all registers of queer India, but offers a window into a particular time and place wherein some queer Indians used print cultures to intervene in what they perceived as the relative obscurity and invisibility of LGBTQ+ issues in mainstream life. The zines I have included in this essay were also not the only ones circulating in India. There were other small-scale publications, such as the handful of relatively contemporaneous zines that have come out of West Bengal (e.g. *Pravartak*, *Swikriti Patrika* and *Abomanob*), some of which circulated primarily among working class, trans and non-Anglophone circles. As loosely held pages collated by staples and ideas of queer community, these various zines refract some of the dreams of people, communities and worlds at the precipice of becoming. My engagement with these texts, particularly the set from Bombay, endeavors to open up conversation not just on these gestating queer fantasies of building new worlds. I also endeavor to build larger scholarly consideration for mediums like zines as important archives of queer culture beyond official archives, grand literary traditions and the intellectual overtures to history that have governed much of the work on queer cultures in South Asia.

Queer zines have rarely shown up in scholarship on popular culture in South Asia. Kanika Batra's (*Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities*) recent work on *Manushi* and *Bombay Dost* chronicles how zines sought to produce 'intimate readerships' by conjoining gay readers across India through content that catered to gay men. From discussions on Bollywood films to gossip columns like 'poison pudu' (poison pouch), Batra also

demonstrates how *Bombay Dost's* rise to prominence was at once a kind of space clearing exercise for the queer movement and yet perhaps also reproduced elite, urban, mostly male networks as a problematic representative of far more diverse and unequal communities. And yet, as Batra suggests, the zine also provided readers with an education in the various constellations of queer desire and terminologies that would come to shape queer social worlds (Batra 1). For Pawan Singh ("The Print Culture of *Bombay Dost*"), *Bombay Dost* is an apt example of what worlds of queer sociality in India looked like prior to the emergence of the internet and social media and in defiance of Western discourses that emphasized visibility and representation. Through an analysis of the personal ads of the magazine, Singh considers how queer subjects wove together abundant lives in 'the interstices of visibility and secrecy' (243). Batra and Singh's works are perhaps some of the only scholarly works on queer zine cultures in India, both of which focus exclusively on *Bombay Dost*. Zines are rarely taken up as objects of rigorous analysis and are not treated with the same seriousness as Hindu epics, Urdu poetry, or other literary texts.

In contrast, scholars have expertly described the importance of literary and historical texts as archives of queer presence that gesture back to extant histories of sexual and gender non-normativity on the subcontinent (e.g. Vanita and Kidwai; Vanita; Pattanaik; Thadani). Projects such as Thadani's (*Sakhiani*) quest for the 'vedic dyke' and Vanita and Kidwai's (*Same-Sex Love in India*) reading of literary archives are clear in their aims to 'demonstrate the antiquity and transformation through time of the ideas whose history we are tracing' (Vanita and Kidwai xvii). This body of work – which developed as a response to the claims that queer gender and sexualities were un-Indian and the residues of foreign colonial influences – deployed archival histories to make claims about the historicity of present-day sexual and gender minorities (see Shah and Arondekar for critiques of these archival recuperations). And it is also clear that these works were trying not only to respond to Indian political claims of queerness as Western but also the 'tendency' of South Asian historiography to 'ignore materials on same-sex love or to interpret them as heterosexual' (xxiv).

These points are well taken. However, as recent scholars have noted, the appeals to grand traditions and the presumed inclusivity of Dharmic and precolonial traditions elide continued erasures of dalit, bahun and adivasi queer and trans figures (see Banu; Aleya), stage Hinduism (mostly dominant caste culture) as inherently queer friendly (Upadhyay 466), and also produce a homoromanticism, where efforts to offshore homophobia to colonial influence undermine native agency by making the colonized 'blameless pawns' in colonial and neocolonial machinations (see Rao 33). Appeals to literature, ancient epics, and other 'great writing' (Katyul) alone render the scholarly or academic voice as the elite representative of queer print cultures in South Asia and its attendant diasporas.

While queer zines were run by many of the same elites and occasionally published stories that cited instances of same-sex desire or gender non-conformity in Dharmic texts, they also perform different works than scholarly appeals to grand traditions. Though they rarely espoused political takes that openly intersect queer and anti-caste critiques, *Bombay* zines still offer examples of the abundance of queerness without the necessity of overtures to homoromanticism or an uncritical embrace of so-called Dharmic tolerance (which elides longstanding histories of caste and indigenous discrimination). Early zine brands were not built on proving ancient roots of queerness in South Asia, nor did they apologize for messiness or non-respectability. Thumb through the pages of zines like *Scripts* and *Bombay Dost* and you will find sexually explicit language, banter and repartee, jokes that slip between

English, Hindi, Marathi and other Indian Languages, photos of shirtless actors and plenty of ‘masala’.

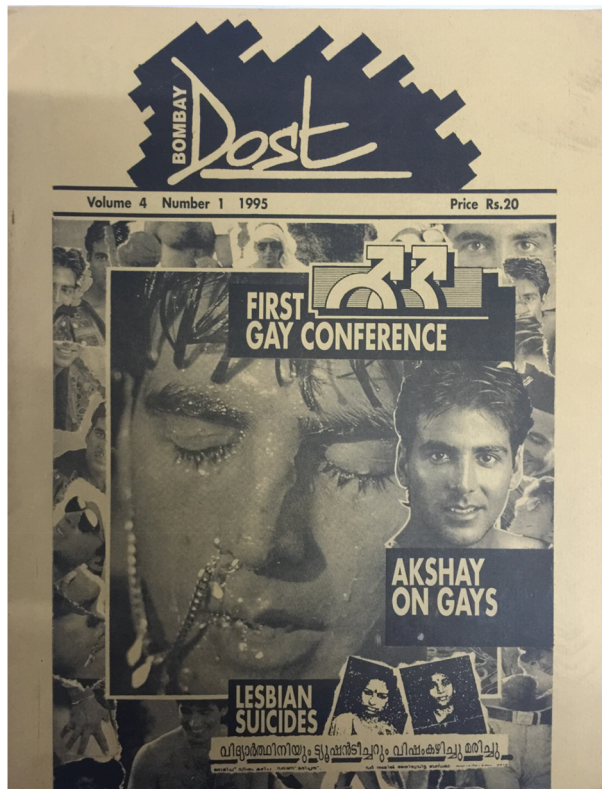
Zines are stylistically marked by their emphasis on gossip, playfulness, innuendo and risqué conversations on sex, intimacy and desire. Attending to the masala that constituted zines within their pages and in the worlds they curated offers a map of how queer subjects have and continue to articulate their desires and fantasies amid uncertainty and precarity. And at a political moment when queerness in India is being sanitized – now by some of the same editors who began these early zines (cf. Datta; Upadhyay; Horton) – zines are a provocative reminder that demands for respectability and overtures to heterosexual comfort were not always part of queer social and political agendas. In the following sections, I consider the different ways that queer zines produce space for their queer readers as well as take up heteronormative spaces in the service of queer worldmaking. I start with a scandal involving Bombay Dost and Bollywood, then describe Stree Sangam’s (now LABIA) queer feminist zine Scripts and taking space in the page and in public for queer feminist socializing, and end briefly with *Gaysi Zine*’s emphasis on quotidian queerness.

(Un)Saif Sex: Bombay Dost and Bollywood gossip

In a 1995 article for India’s first LGBTQ+ newsletter, *Bombay Dost* (BD hereafter), editor and founder Ashok Row Kavi reviewed the recently released Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan starrer *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi* (I’m The Player, You’re the Amateur). In the innuendo-laden review, aptly titled ‘Saif Sex’, Kavi speculated on the film’s homoerotic ‘secret messages’. From the heroes’ sidelining of the film’s heroines to the song sequences where Khan and Kumar are “‘handling each other” rather than the scores of women around’, the review lays out the case that the movie is riddled with homoerotic subtext. His point is further explicated by the review’s interwoven clippings from other publications, such as *Showtime*, which features a small story about the film, framed by photos of Khan and Kumar doing matching gestures along with the caption ‘Akshay and Saif make a perfect couple’. The review ends with Kavi’s suggestion that the film ‘needs to be taken to San Francisco for the Forthcoming Gay and Lesbian Festival’ (9). Lilted somewhere between film review and Kavi’s wishful thinking that Khan and Kumar were indeed portraying lovers, the review masterfully demonstrates the common queer reading practice of mining heterosexual media for the faintest traces of queer residue. Though not explicitly a ‘gay film’, *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi* becomes one at the mere suggestion that its audience perceives it as one. In his detailed description of the film Thomas Waugh (“Queer Bollywood, or ‘I’m the Player, You’re the Naive One’”) doubles down on Kavi’s reading of the text through an even closer analysis of the film’s song lyrics and dance sequences, noting how the film’s portrayal of the choreographies of playful homosocial behavior can easily slip into becoming a ‘surrogate for courtship behavior’ (292).

As the reactions to *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi* make clear, cinema has long been a crucial site for queer subjects to read themselves into narratives of romantic love and to fantasize about the possibilities of queer coupling, queer aesthetics, and even queer performance. Academic writings on *dosti* and *yaar* have attempted to find traces of queerness within hegemonic sites like natal kinship networks and hypermasculine friendships (Holtzman; Waugh). Scholars have also emphasized the radical possibilities of reading queerly or probing the thinly veiled ways that queer subtext is presented in ostensibly hegemonic and heterosexual texts (Muraleedharan). Gopinath (“Queering Bollywood”) situates this

queer reading practice as a means for diasporic queers to “reimagine and reterritorialize the “homeland” by making it the locus of queer desire and pleasure” (284). Juxtaposing the diasporic practice of making space in the text, queer performance scholar Kareem Khubchandani (*Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*) examines how queer subjects deploy cinema on the dancefloor to produce space for racialized South Asian queer subjects in white and straight worlds of nightlife. For instance, what he calls diva worship or the adulation that gay South Asian men place on divas and heroines like Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit signals not just queers reading themselves into Bollywood texts but also the appropriation of those texts to produce queer performance (as dance, gesture and speech) that is inflected with the grammars of South Asian popular culture. These various bodies of scholarship mirror Row Kavi’s strategy of reading the homoerotic tensions between Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan in *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi*. The extant scholarship on queer cinema also attests to how LGBTQ+ South Asians have taken up creative reading practices to fantasize about finding themselves in heterosexually driven film plots that reify marriage, reproduction, and their attendant institutions and practices.



Akshay Khanna' 's Opinion on Homosexuality. *Bombay Dost* Cover Volume 4 No 1 (1995)

But what makes *Bombay Dost's* interventions distinct is that members of the film fraternity were actively listening to and engaging with his gossipy, messy and speculative readings of Bollywood cinema. In a 1995 interview in *Stardust Magazine*, also reproduced in the subsequent issue of *Bombay Dost*, Akshay Kumar responds to the question ‘How does it feel being voted as the ultimate gay fantasy in the magazine *Bombay Dost*’ (5). As the

interview details, ‘Blushing beet-root red’ Akshay coyly responds to the interviewer’s question, initially ‘playing dumb’ before delighting in the reality of being gay men’s fantasy. The interviewer is surprised by Kumar’s response that ‘it feels really nice to be a gay fantasy. Great, absolutely great’. The brief clipping of the *Stardust* interview ends with a comment from the *BD* editor Ashok Row Kavi, who writes, ‘so guys go ahead and fantasize. Akshay loves it too. He doesn’t mind being “The Ultimate Wet Dream” of gay men’ (5). Fantasy takes center stage in this orchestrated exchange between *BD*’s readership and Akshay Kumar. And rather than disavow or shy away from those homoerotic fantasies projected onto his body, Kumar not only relishes them, but derives pleasure from his fan’s intense desires. Akshay’s response is a performative display of coquettishness ensconced in his blushing, evasion, and eventual acquiescence to the adoration of his male fanbase. It is crucial to note here that unlike other devoted male fanbases, the promise of fantasy is not that men could become him but rather that men could be *with* him. The review’s ability to seamlessly conjoin queer fantasies with the very object of their desires, signals a different project than simply reading media queerly. Rather, through its deployment of masala, the zine managed to produce the very queer encounters that its creators (and readers) fantasized about. But these encounters were not always positive.

In the same year, the other actor entangled in Kavi’s queer fabulations about *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi*, Saif Ali Khan, had less of a positive reaction to the review. After the *BD* review was already in circulation, Kavi was invited to be a guest on the StarTV’s show *Nikki Tonight* where he was asked to name his least favorite actor. Without mincing words and dramatically caricaturing her convent school Hindi accent, Kavi named Saif Ali Khan’s mother, famed screen actress of the 1960s, Sharmila Tagore (Kumar). Kavi also suggested that Khan’s lack of talent was not that far off from his mother’s. This latest jab at Khan was perhaps the final straw. Shortly after the controversial interview aired, Saif Ali Khan showed up on Ashok Row Kavi’s doorstep and forced his way into the apartment. The ensuing confrontation between Kavi and Khan ran through the queer gossip mills of Bombay and even made its way into the major newspapers as a multi-year courtroom drama. A *Firstpost* story summarized the incident, ‘In the heat of the moment, Saif not only punched Ashok Row Kavi but also shoved Row Kavi’s elderly mother to the floor when she tried to calm him down’. What had started as Khan pacing around Kavi’s apartment escalated in a way that perhaps neither party involved had anticipated. In his own reflections on the matter – in news and academic interviews – Kavi has suggested that rather than just the comments about Khan’s mother and both of their acting chops, it was the salacious review of *Main Khiladi, Tu Anadi* in *BD* that caused the outburst. In interviews, Kavi reiterated that Saif told him over the phone that the review, in particular the suggestion that the film should be submitted to a Gay film festival upset him. What had started as a bitchy, messy, gossipy review of a buddy cop film transformed into a melodrama of public insults, physical threats and injured mothers, seemingly overnight.

This drama of acerbic words, petty insults and fists exchanged between a journalist running a small magazine and one of the largest stars in Bollywood, demonstrates the incredible reach and circulation that *BD* had in its heyday. As Ashok and Suhail suggested in an interview conducted in Bombay in 2017, the magazine ‘had a multiplier of 100’. One copy might be read by 100 people because many men were too afraid to keep the magazine at home for fear that it might out them. So, issues would circulate among large groups of men or remain in

public spaces where men socialized, such as parks and train stations. But beyond just the men cruising local trains, the zine was clearly doing rounds on film sets and among actors, in what Suhail and Ashok named as a 'hidden dialogue' between Bollywood and *BD*, where actors would allegedly ask for copies on set to find out 'what they [*BD*] are saying about us'.

What Ashok and Suhail name as 'hidden dialogue' between the film fraternity and a gay men's magazine, is an important point of contact and connection between celebrities and the socially derided figure of the homosexual, secured through gossip. It signals the ways that gossip can become reality, or as Veena Das suggests, that words 'come to be transformed from being a medium of communication to becoming bearers of force' (Das 119). Force here is not merely the capacity for violence, violation or injury, but also the force of minoritarian assertion. The force of gossip also 'authorizes' subjects to 'speak back' to social structures and institutions that have excluded them (Holmes 56). If gay men only in the 80s and 90s were spoken about in larger public presses as either non-existent or as dangerous vectors of potential transmission of disease and death, then we might read the zine's use of masala and its subsequent influence on actors as the useful deployment of the gay as a gossipy, bitchy, queen in pushing back against the disavowals of Indian homosexuals. If the zine's movements and circulations could stoke such heated responses, then it is perhaps a signal of microscopic but important ways that queer gossip could be a powerful force in brokering larger public conversations on homosexuality in India. For instance, the editors of Masala Mix issue of *Bombay Dost* managed to get actors to go on record and share their opinions about homosexuality publicly [see figure 3].



Bollywood Actors and Actresses Offering Their Opinions on Homosexuality. *Bombay Dost* Vol 5 No 2 & 3 (1996).

This influence was not only one-sided. It also began to shape the magazine's content. As letters from readers indicate, content dealing with Bollywood and gossip was quite popular among the readership. By 1997 columns like 'Poison Pudi', or poison packet, became regular features of the magazine, demonstrating the prominent place of gossip in the zine. The column, written by 'Mata Kavi' (Ashok Row Kavi's pseudonym), adopted a bitchy, gossipy style that mirrored the tone of his *Main Khiladi Tu Anadi* piece. The column's dealings in salacious gossip about parties, badly behaved party hosts and some of the so-called social elites of Bombay gay circles also solidified the magazine's transition from health newsletter into a broader force for cultural and social commentary. But this commentary was not even, and the transition also happened alongside the dwindling content for queer women. Despite multiple attempts to produce content around queer women, the letters in popular features like 'Kush Khat' (Happy Letters) were skewed male and there were also no women on the *BD* editorial staff. Though the mid 90s saw *BD*'s renewed attempts to launch 'Chokkri', the women's section of the zine, which was a feature in the earliest editions of the zine, content was relatively infrequent by comparison. But by 1998, Bombay gets its first queer feminist zine, *Scripts*. In the next section, I detail the emergence of *Scripts* and the parallel course its zine attempts to chart out for queer women.

Lesbian Jollies: Reading *Scripts* in public

The inaugural issue of Stree Sangam's (now LABIA)'s queer zine *Scripts* opens with a note from the editors, known as a 'Scriptease' which appears across many of the early volumes of the zine as a teaser of sorts, previewing the content and the editors' motivations behind how they coalesced the materials that formed a particular issue. In this first Scriptease, two of the issue's five editors interview the other three. The style of writing teases the reader, peppering academic references to Foucault with gestures to the flesh. In the editors' parlance, writing is not merely the act of putting words on the page, but also 'lifting': the thieving of references, words, and styles from others (such as the mimicry of Foucault's writing style). Beyond lifting as an act of taking what is useful from others, lifting is also a means of feeling up, like 'bras with intelligent fibers that not only lift breasts but also feel them up'. Lifting denotes a style of writing as much as a means of using writing to touch others. As the editors point out, 'there are lots of women out there who do not have access to written material about women who love women' (1997, 4). From the outset, the writing exuded a style that was about sociopolitical uplift, to imagine queer possibilities for women who love women in India, as well as to dedicate space on the page and in writing for sexual and erotic gestures that might make the present more bearable and bring queer women into community. But this style was also opposed to singularity, be it an emphasis on individual happiness, queer politics alone, or the law as the only means of justice.

From the outset, editors of the zine named one of the key conceptual challenges of spaces like Stree Sangam and perhaps also zines like *Scripts*, 'its dual conception of itself as both a social and a political space' (LABIA 3). This duality necessitated content that not only spoke to the structural problems facing queer women but that also registered the social and political possibilities of queer and feminist collectivizing and community. Thus, at the heart of *Scripts*' practice of lifting was not only critique of the status quo but

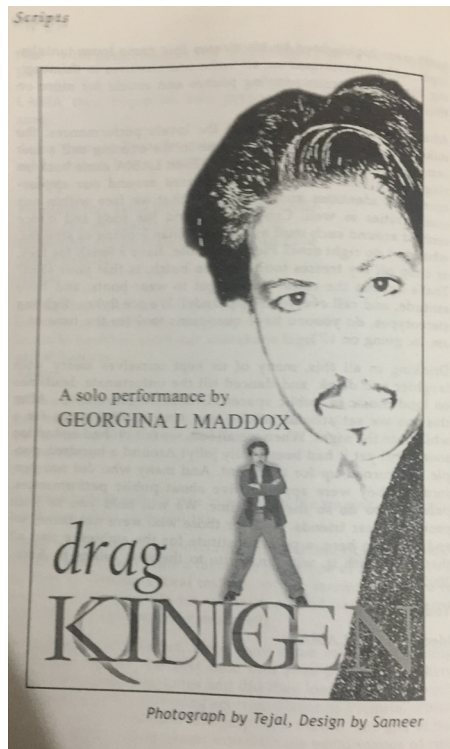
also critique as a means of queer feminist community; that shared political commitments and ethos might make possible spaces for women to meet, for touch to transcend the page and move into public space. Like earlier predecessors, such as *BD*, *Scripts* provided key content and conversation on queer issues and struggles faced by the community – particularly in the face of the Shiv-Sena led attacks on theaters after the release of *Fire* as well as larger communal pogroms, such as the 2002 Gujarat riots. But the zine’s trajectory was also geared towards bringing its readerships into community with one another.

Scripts was a response to the exclusions of queer women from mainstream publications like *Bombay Dost*. It makes that point clear in its opening ‘Scriptease’, that queer women were invisibilized in content produced by gay men. But to read the zine’s genesis as purely reactionary to what gay men were or were not doing would be wrong. *Scripts* also emerges from the problem of how women might keep a conversation going through letters. When Stree Sangam opened its first PO Box in 1995, it was flooded with letters, stories, poems, and other media from women across India. But as one of the early editors revealed in an interview with me in Bombay in 2017, ‘someone writes a story and then you write back, and then you don’t know what to talk about’. Put differently, part of the problem was how one-off letters to a postbox or even back and forth between senders and recipients could turn into more meaningful dialogue and conversation. Thus, *Scripts* responded to the problem of how might queer women might build and sustain conversations between one another when those conversations are virtual and, unlike digital communication, significantly delayed.

These conversations were also constrained by the limits of public space available for queer women. Interviews with Suhail and Ashok, the editors of *Bombay Dost*, demonstrated that the politics of gay men and queer women’s organizing were shaped by different relationships to space and thus different political concerns. These points are also reified in the content of the zine. For gay men, access to public space, to cruising and safety from police harassing gay men in public were central concerns that shaped not only the trajectory of gay men’s organizing such as the rise of anti-Sec 377 activism (e.g. Dave; Cohen) but also the zine itself. As Naisargi Dave found in the archive of letters between women, organized by Delhi-based collective Sakhi in the 1990s, the male-centered content of *Bombay Dost* was often alienating to queer women readers. These exclusions not only shaped how women engaged with zines like *Bombay Dost* but also produced intense desires for accessible public spaces for queer women. Thus, subsequent issues of the zine were in dialogue with social events that were curated to provide the zine with content but also to give the readers venues for self-expression and exploration through communion with other queer persons, such as film screenings, festivals, open mic nights, protests, and community meetings.

Issue 4 (2004) provides a great example of one event that *Scripts* curated that simultaneously served the dual socio-political charge of LABIA. Early into the issue is a feature with a black and white photo of a drag queen dressed in head to toe black. The queen’s mustachioed face is framed by long dark ‘tresses that came loose tantalisingly, as he mesmerised us, all limbs and postures in shimmering black’ (LABIA, “Scripts 6.1. Mumbai” 27). The queen’s hands were bent in the dancing pose of Nataraja with the

caption ‘Under the Diva performing at the Jollies’ just underneath (24). As the write-up on the page opposite the photo explains, ‘April Jollies’ was a fundraiser and community event for members of Stree Sangam and *Scripts* readers hosted in a terrace garden in Sion in 2004. The event, which drew participants from all across Bombay and even Pune, was supposed to help raise funds for a July 2004 workshop for ‘non-urban lesbians and queer women who had never attended any meeting or been part of a movement’ (25). Similar to *BDs* efforts and eventual organizing of Humsafar Trust and hosting of weekly social gatherings, *Scripts* imagined using the zine and the events surrounding it as ways not just to connect queer subjects in urban, anglophone, elite spaces, but also to facilitate queer spaces in non-urban and non-elite spaces as well.



A Poster of Maddox’s Solo DragPerformance. *Scripts* 6.1

Alongside the event’s aims to raise funds to build the capacity of queer women outside of urban centers, April Jollies was an effort to curate nightlife for queer women and allies; not just to provide a venue for meeting but to take up space subversively. From the reading of poems and excerpts of the zine aloud to drag performances by kings and queens, the event’s dual purpose speaks back to the socio-political impulse behind LABIA and *Scripts* as a whole. The drag performances were also perhaps some of the first ‘semi-public’ drag performances to feature drag kings who ‘looked-good’ enough to leave the audience ‘breathless and gasping for more’, according to the write-up (26). In her own piece on the Jollies event, which appeared in the same issue, just after the write-up of the event, independent critic-curator Georgina Maddox detailed the pleasures of getting into drag. Juxtaposing her drag king character to her out of drag persona, Maddox wrote,

‘Georgina was polite at parties, sipped her wine and talked about art. George, on the other hand, winked, flirted and blew smoke rings at all the ladies. It had them clapping and whistling. The last part of my act where I shed the coat, shirt and pants, to reveal a skimpy black tank top and a skirt that I had worn inside it, really brought the house down – if I may say so myself’ (30). She describes this experience as feeling ‘deliciously wicked’, particularly when opting to remain dressed in male clothing for the rest of the evening.

In this brief account of the performance, Maddox’s contrasting of her female and male personas not only playfully articulates the pleasures of genderfuck that are central to drag performance. It also hints at the stakes of that labor when it is done for semi-public consumption. Keeping on the mustache and beard, Maddox jokes about being introduced to a friend’s mother in drag and the stares that straight men passed at her when she moved through the party throughout the evening. Maddox’s performance, much like the other drag, music, dance, poetry and performances for the gathered audience were not just about fun and frivolity but also touched on larger politics of feminist subversion, particularly efforts to reclaim public spaces for women’s pleasures, especially at night. *Script’s* retelling of the April Jollies event demonstrates the ways that masala, here as the bawdy performances of drag artists, structured informal sites of nightlife that were simultaneously organized through the zine and also provided the zine with further content to fill its pages.

Through performances that either drew from published material from the zine or were described in write-ups about the event in the subsequent issue of the zine, April Jollies coalesced print and social cultures into a night of fun with a social purpose. It also stands as an apt example of the kinds of work that masala helped organizations like LABIA do to facilitate spaces that simultaneously spoke to the needs for more feminist organizing and coalition as well as public social spaces for women to mingle, gather, play, and even touch. In a time and place where physical spaces for women were (and still are) hard to come by, *Scripts* made space for queer women’s issues and politics as well as flirtation and erotics in the pages of its issues and in the worlds its readers navigated. It is important to read the pages of *Scripts* as counterhegemonic, textual spaces born out of the paucity of physical spaces for women and the intense desires for queer women to find one another. *Scripts* reminds us that while a zine is of course a literary document – that lives in words, text, and images – there is also a haptic life to it that undergirds not only how it circulates but how texts might be used in the service of bringing disparate people into physical relation. Its sheets contain not only stories of erotic worlds, desires and fantasies but those sheets also facilitate modes of queer socializing that meld bodies together, even if only for a night. I end this essay in the next section by briefly discussing the rise of Gaysi and its emphasis on digital and ordinary explorations of South Asian queerness.

The internet fucked it all up: Gaysi Zine and everyday queerness

During a 2017 interview with Suhail Abbasi, one of *BD’s* founders, I casually asked him what happened to the zine. Specifically, why there were so many gaps in publication, especially in the 2000s. Between laughs he said, ‘the internet came and fucked it all up’. By the late 2000s, both *BD* and *Scripts* were struggling to remain active publications. Both had also suffered periods where they stopped publishing and then attempted to restart. Editors from both zines cited the increasing availability of the internet as a primary

reason for making zines obsolete. At a time where more and more people were accessing chatrooms, virtual cafes, social media and eventually dating and hookup applications, it was hard to keep up with a readership that no longer relied as heavily on zines for information. Moreover, the social and political landscape for queerness in South Asia and the diasporas has changed dramatically as a result of longstanding legal battles over laws like section 377 and with the increasing advent of queer representation in film and television.

And yet, as the work of newer zines like *Gaysi Zine* reminds, younger generations are constantly seeking out and inventing new mediums and new modes for expressing queerness. While print zines were struggling to stay afloat in the 2000s, Gaysi Family creators MJ and Broom saw opportunity in online spaces. Unlike their *BD* and *Scripts* predecessors, who relied much more on hard copy and printed zines to spread information, Gaysi Family creators observed that younger generations of LGBTQ+ folks in India and the diaspora were desperate for online content. And so, Gaysi Family began as a blog in 2008 with an emphasis on queer storytelling for and by queer creatives. The writing maintained the masala-driven content of its zine predecessors but centered participatory formats like social media and blogs in order to capitalize on the digital affordances of social media. Likes, shares, retweets, follows and other key aspects of virtual and social media platforms, not only enable content creators to have a strong sense of their audience's numbers and demographics, it also allows content to go viral and have much broader reach and circulation. Going online also enabled them to rely on multimedia as a means of generating content to reach as wide an audience as possible. For instance, their video 'Happy in Gaysi Land' depicted LGBTQ+ residents of Bombay dancing and lip synching to Pharrell's 'Happy' in spaces across the city.

From stories to blog posts to reviews of queer media, Gaysi developed a cult following of readers who posted and commented on the blog behind pseudonyms. It was only after Gaysi Family had built up a bit of a following through its viral content and online blog that they began to move from online to offline. Specifically, they were concerned about how to move their readers out from behind their virtual pseudonyms and bring them together in person. This need for in-person connection led to the formation of social events, like their open mic night *Dirty Talk* (Khubchandani, "Between Screens and Bodies") as well as the eventual decision to bring out their own physical zine. The first issue of *Gaysi Zine*, which launched in 2013. The zine mirrored the blog's emphasis on modeling for queer readers the possibilities of a queer life, pleasure, and playfulness in the everyday. With themes like coming out, falling in love, and heartbreak, the first issue's small collection of poems and prose staged the fantasies of romantic love as a possibility for even those readers experiencing intense pressures to marry. In the Forward to the first edition, Broom, one of the two founders of Gaysi Family, opens by sharing her story of discovering her queerness while being married. It was not until she fell in love with her partner that she realized that there might be other Indian women who had left marriages with men to pursue relationships with women. Speaking directly to her readers, Broom assures that not only was she not the only one but that her readers are not alone. She ends by writing, 'With this zine we hope to reach more gaysis and show them that it really does get better and that one day you'll be laughing at how silly you were to think that you were all alone!'

I read Broom's insistence on the normalcy of her desires not purely as an aspiration for homonormativity, but subversively as a gesture towards queer sociality. Her writing captures what is at the heart of this essay's exploration of queer zines that zines are

a fulcrum of queer desires and fantasies that are predicated on a need for community and connection. As the pages of *BD*, *Scripts* and *Gaysi* suggest, the kinds of socialities forged by zines invite readers to imagine collective possibilities through the zine's pages and the worlds that zines might help create. And these longings are by nature problematic. They can be aspirations for normative conjugality or messy and gossipy rumor mongering. And yet the work that these pages perform is invaluable in bringing queer readers into community and to bring readers into social worlds and conversations that were not widely available at the time. Zines are a key example of the abundance of queer print cultures in South Asia that think about and theorize queerness with queer readerships in mind, rather than as peripheral to the text.

I have discussed how zines map out queer desires and fantasies by and for other queer subjects through their production of masala content. Particularly, I have examined how masala as gossip, excessive performance, and playful desire and fantasy helped produce queer spaces and connections. Thus, queer zines via their attention to masala offer counterhegemonic, semi-public spaces in and of themselves. They are spaces that were born out of queer hope, fantasy and the promise that words on pages might manage to touch those at even the furthest fringes nascent social worlds. And as the convergences and divergences between zines and their creators over the years demonstrate, this sociality is often fragile, messy and unfinished. Sometimes zines aspire to fantasies that might be politically incorrect or the language that they use is problematic, essentialist, or short-sighted by today's political standards. But these failures are not only 'an opportunity for new critical interventions' (Rodriguez 332) but also tell the stories of communal shifts and changes as well as petty squabbles and heated debates that have come to shape new collectives, new groups and new zines. And the Bombay zines collected in this essay tell an important story, not just about the work that words on pages might do to foment worlds of queer possibility. But how those texts might change hands, circulate between eager readers, give unimaginative readers a sense of the limitless possibilities enmeshed in queer texts, and sometimes add a touch of spice to an otherwise mundane life.

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