Fashioning Fabulation: Dress, Gesture and the Queer Aesthetics of Mumbai Pride

Brian A. Horton

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

ARTICLE

Fashioning Fabulation: Dress, Gesture and the Queer Aesthetics of Mumbai Pride

Brian A. Horton

Department of Anthropology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

India's ongoing legal movement to decriminalise 'gay sex' has been witness to the simultaneous sanitisation of queer spaces. From Pride parades declaring '*no nanga naach*, no flamboyance' to quotidian policing of excessive dress and gestures, there is a growing emphasis on respectability that stages queerness in the private rather than the public domain. The good homosexual subject is increasingly at odds with public gestures, performances and dresses that might seem too excessive, too flamboyant, perhaps too queer. But what might it mean to sit with the bawdy gestures enacted by *kothi*, *hijra* and MSM persons in Prides, in offices, in public spaces and in daily life? This essay makes a case for theorising the fabulousness of gender and sexual minorities in India, pushing homosexuality beyond the registers of legality and epidemiology. By examining the political implications of excessive and risky aesthetic practices, it argues that what is at stake is not only a centring of aesthetics in larger considerations of queer politics, but also the larger work of fabulation: the reinvention of what meanings queer subjectivity can take on in public spaces in India.

'No nanga naach, no flamboyance'

In 2017, the organisers of Pune Pride started a national furore when the organiser, the head of the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Samapathik Trust, wrote a Facebook post declaring that there would be no cross-dressing, flamboyance or anti-national/anti-religious sloganeering at that year's Pune Pride. In a statement to the *Pune Mirror*, Bindumadhav Khire, the Pune-based head of the Trust, doubled down, stating that 'Pune's Pride march has always been a conservative one. We don't want people to dress in a manner that embarrasses the community. There are families joining us and it wouldn't be right if we allow people to simply have fun and not work towards our cause'.[1] Khire further added to the fire, posting another Facebook message arguing with dissenters. He had taken on the responsibilities of securing the police

---

CONTACT Brian A. Horton ✉ bhorton@brandeis.edu

1. Anupriya Chatterjee, 'Pride March Faces Boycott as Khire Bans "Flamboyance"', *Pune Mirror* (31 May 2017) [https://punemirror.indiatimes.com, accessed 21 Jan. 2019].

permissions necessary to host the parade, and if LGBT people wanted to do 'nanga naach',[2] then they could organise their own Pride parades. Khire's reservations about the flamboyance of Pride signal larger workings of a respectability politics that aspires to LGBT visibility only for the purposes of being legitimised by normative society. As he continued in another Facebook post, he had caught two men having sex in a toilet near the venue one year, and another year, he had caught a transwoman showing her breasts to a man near the parade's starting point. Neither of these transgressions are uncommon—men often have sex in toilets across urban centres in India and transgender women can and do flash their bodies to others either in self-defence or to court lovers.

Khire's tirades are fascinating, not simply for his revelations that gay men have sex in public bathrooms or that transwomen show skin, but because he seems to want to police the image of the queer subject having fun, engaging in public displays of pleasure, joy and frivolity. In a separate interview, he argued his point about Pride more directly. He stated: 'The objective of Pride is not about an individual seeking attention—Pride is never about one person, it's about the community. The objective of Pride is to ensure that the gay community are accepted by society'.[3] His suggestion that Pride is not about fun, but is about work, more so about the work of rendering stigma visible, centres a narrative of queer pain as the primary mode of social recognition. Pride marches, for Khire and other activists who share his opinions, are crucially about both recognising stigma and overcoming it to go public, to be visible. In his estimation, frivolous, flamboyant costumes are not only distractions, but also detract from the larger message of Pride and the terms of queer visibility. Khire's comments dismissing cross-dressing were part of a larger language of homonormativity which aspires to a normalcy which renders LGBTKHQ[4] as legitimate citizens (Figure 1).

The Pune incident stages a clear instance in which the terms of queer visibility are linked to normative scripts that emphasise queer stigma, suffering and pain over joy and pleasure. The kind of queer subject that Khire and other organisers sought to portray evacuated queerness of its unruly, flamboyantly dressed and irreverent resonances in favour of a sanitised and respectable subject. By respectability, I highlight some activists' investments in a privatised sexuality that seeks sexual citizenship through a disavowal of public displays of sex and the retreat to a private, domestic space as the privileged site of sex. This was particularly amplified during my fieldwork, conducted between 2013 and 2017, during the ongoing battle over Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC 377), the 1860 ban on sex 'against the order of nature'. Given these stakes, it is clear that Khire's not so subtle call for queer respectability hearkens to a global gay rights strategy that seeks queer recognition through articulating the normalcy of same-sex sexualities. However, the respectability channelled by Khire is also inflected with local grammars of class, caste and gender. These norms around embodiment

---

2. *Nanga naach* is literally to 'dance naked', but metaphorically, a lewd and lascivious dance or public spectacle.
3. Sudhavna Shetty, 'From Engineer in US to LGBT Rights Activist in India: Meet the Man Who Organised Pune's Biggest Pride Parade', *The Logical Indian* (15 June 2017) [https://thelogicalindian.com/exclusive/pune-lgbt-parade/, accessed 21 Jan. 2019].
4. I use the term LGBTKHQ here to reference lesbian, gender, bisexual, transgender, *kothi* (passive, feminine, same-sex desiring men), *hijra* (ritualised transfeminine subjects who participate in the *gharana/guru shishya parampara* or guru–disciple system) and queer.

Figure 1. Sign at Mumbai Pride 2016 critiquing anti-trans double standards. Source: Photograph by author.

circumscribe excessive public performance—often colloquially called *tamasha* or spectacle—as untenable performances that risk the social acceptance of LGBTKHQ and invite public mockery. To read Khire's comments more closely, the moratorium on '*nanga naach*' is not just on the *naach* itself, but also on its public-facing mockery and the spectacularisation of queer struggles against the law.

Rather than dismiss these embodied performances as empty spectacles or detractions from the movement, what might it mean to sit with the bawdy gestures enacted by *kothi*, *hijra* and MSM[5] persons in Prides, in offices, in public spaces and in daily life? The events surrounding Pune Pride introduce the primary themes of this essay: how queer and gender non-conforming subjects use flamboyant clothing and gestures as modes of taking up space. I argue that aestheticised strategies like dressing up or

---

5. MSM stands for men who have sex with men.

sashaying down the streets in a flamboyant outfit for Pride help LGBTKHQ people work through their constant erasures from public space, institutional legitimacy, and even academic theorising. In this essay, I highlight ordinary challenges to prohibitions of bodily, gestural, sartorial, sexual and performative excess that are placed daily on LGBTHKQs. In doing so, I argue that these performances of excess by queer subjects challenge existing ontological assumptions of queerness that jettison fun and pleasure in place of always already marginalised, suffering and/or normative aspiring Indian LGBTKHQ subjects. I explore below the fabular work of LGBTKHQ subjects: their endeavours to confront erasure with presence, with hijacking space and reinventing modes of LGBTKHQ representations.

The interviews, anecdotes and photos presented here draw from a larger ethnographic project on the uses of *masti* (enjoyment, play, sex, intoxication or fun) for LGBTKHQ as a means of producing and reinventing what it means to be a sexual and gender minority in India amid a changing legal landscape. I spent over two years in Mumbai conducting more than one hundred interviews with LGBTKHQ persons in and around Mumbai, combined with extensive participant observation in activist and NGO spaces, at weekly parties, in four Pride parades (three in Mumbai and one in Pune) and in public cruising spaces. The majority of the interviewees consisted of individuals who name their sexual and gender identities through globally circulating terms such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer. Several also interchange these words with locally significant terms like *hijra*, *kinnar*, *kothi*, *panthi* and the epidemiologically constructed term MSM. All of the interviews were conducted in either Hindi or English or a mix of the two.

Legal, epidemiological and fabulist Indian queer subjects

With the emergence of NGOs working on LGBTKHQ issues in the 1990s, activist networks in India authored very specific understandings of Indian queer subjectivity through law and medicine. Working against the epidemiological crisis of the HIV/AIDS virus, these understandings of queer subjectivity were primarily invested in naming (and differentiating) sexual and gender minorities through vocabularies like gay, lesbian, transgender, *hijra*, *kothi* and *panthi*. It is under these pressures to make visible sexual and gender minorities both for holding legal and political attention, as well as garnering international and domestic funding for HIV/AIDS-related programming that initial conceptions of queer subjectivity took shape in India through legal and public health discourses.[6] It was at this time that LGBTKHQ subjects initially came into public view as victims of their illegality and endangered by their vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS virus. Activists relied on reproducing this queer suffering and vulnerability (to HIV, discrimination and violence) as a mode of rendering queerness intelligible and fundable to various state and international institutions. Thus, queer

---

6. Cohen's discussion of AIDS cosmopolitanism as essentially the large circulation of AIDS funding making possible the maintenance of NGO 'covert projects' hints at the kinds of discursive strategies of representing LGBT vulnerability as a mode of accessing international funding. Lawrence Cohen, 'The Kothi Wars: AIDS, Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification', in Vincanne Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg (eds), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 271.

subjects became defined in the larger public imagination by their abjection as well as their legal and social precarity.[7]

In response, scholars problematised the categories invented by activists, NGOs and the state for naming gender and sexual minorities. Many of these categories have actually colluded identities under the umbrella of terms such as *hijra*, MSM and LGBT.[8] Scholars have also been active in developing rigorous critiques of the entanglements between queer visibilities and the projects of national citizenship.[9] These critiques draw heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, tethering the emergence of sexuality as identity to the workings of the state's rights to 'make live and let die'.[10] They also link activist, NGO and even urban queer social networks to neo-liberalism, homonormativity and homonationalism. By exploring how 'the folding of certain queer subjects within the folds of normative nationalism is an inevitable aspect of sexual modernity',[11] scholars have entangled ongoing LGBTKHQ issues in India with the queer critiques emerging from American and European academia.[12] While these critiques are useful for exploding the workings of state power, they may perhaps centre sexuality as merely a conduit for the exercise of that power, so evacuating the transgressive significance of the ordinary, everyday labours of queer subjects. How might scholars read the chic, consumptive practices of LGBTKHQ subjects demanding the right to inhabit a flamboyance that is clearly at odds with a larger project of gender and a politics of sexual respectability?

Attending to the 'breaks and failures in deftly performing global gayness',[13] I argue that beyond the LGBTKHQ subjects' legibilities as epidemiological, legal, homonationalist and homonormative, it is also crucial to imagine them as fabulous. As queer critic Madison Moore argues, even when laws, politics, society and other structures discard and delegitimise queer subjects, they still use 'imagination as the best revenge'.[14] Creative modes of aesthetic representation through embodied and performative modes

---

7. Arvind Narrain writes that queer subjects are the 'hypervisible subjects of criminal law, figures worthy of derision in the media or [the] pathological subject of medicine, this effect of social intolerance is the reconfiguration of the "absence" which becomes presence when it comes to being [an] object of criminal law'. Arvind Narrain, *Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law, and Social Change* (Bengaluru: Books for Change Press, 2004), p. 7.

8. See Aniruddha Dutta, 'An Epistemology of Collusion: Hijras, Kothis and the Historical (Dis)continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India', in *Gender & History*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (Oct. 2012), pp. 825–49; Gayatri Reddy, 'Geographies of Contagion: Hijras, Kothis, and the Politics of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad', in *Anthropology & Medicine*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (Dec. 2005), pp. 255–70; Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Lawrence Cohen, 'The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas, and Academics', in Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 276–304.

9. Oishik Sircar and Deepika Jain, 'Neoliberal Modernity and the Ambiguity of Its Discontents: Post/Anti-Colonial Disruptions of Queer Imperialism', in *Jindal Global Law Review*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (2013), pp. 1–22.

10. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, David Macey (trans.) (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 241. Dasgupta and DasGupta build on this in India by defining queerness as 'an optic through which certain bodies are being folded into the life of the Indian nation-state and certain bodies are being relegated to let die', in Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (eds), *Queering Digital India* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 16.

11. Dasgupta and DasGupta, *Queering Digital India*, p. 16.

12. Sircar and Jain suggest that Puar's critique of homonationalism is all but an inevitable reality for India in the wake of the Naz court case to decriminalise sodomy. Sircar and Jain, 'Neoliberal Modernity and the Ambiguity of Its Discontents', p. 12.

13. Kareem Khubchandani makes a case for reading these discontinuities to better understand queer Bangalore nightlife on its own terms. See Kareem Khubchandani, 'Cruising the Ephemeral Archives of Bangalore's Gay Night Life', in Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (eds), *Queering Digital India* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 72–93.

14. Madison Moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 11.

of excess, being an unruly fashionista or a sartorial renegade, are opportunities for marginalised subjects to play, to travel between worlds, and to invent utopian possibilities through style. Fabulousness constitutes a mode of risky recalcitrance that promotes excessive style, gesture and performance as counteractions to the demands of normative life. It is a way of living through precarity that does not fully cede life to 'misery, complete desolation, and abandonment'.[15] In using the word fabulous, my point is not to centre the epistemic home of queer thinking in Western thought;[16] rather, fabulousness helps me name risky, castigated aesthetic practices as forms of queer political labour and sites of expression and flourishing for socially marginalised subjects.

But what might these fabulous aesthetic practices do, and why ought they to matter? Fabulousness as performative, sartorial and gestural expression extends how scholars of South Asia have theorised the linkages between subaltern aesthetics and politics,[17] as well as embodiment and gesture, as political labour.[18] As Soneji argues in his work on the *devadasis* of South India, the 'sexually explicit, casual, and unclassical' aspects of *devadasi* performance disrupt ideas of a 'pure' (depoliticised) aesthetics. And in doing so, they 'address the place of aesthetics in subaltern consciousness'.[19] Similarly, in his excavation of gesture as 'reparative labor', Khubchandani traces the embodied resistances of diasporic Indian gay men to sexual and gender policing; instead, channelling the moves of Sridevi or Madhuri Dixit on a dance floor resists bodily policing and prohibitions on feminised gesture.[20] Arti Sandhu's explorations of Indian drag trace deployments of 'auntie' aesthetics by drag queens as critical unfashionability that resists projections of fashion that exclude 'traditional clothing styles in preference to western fashion'.[21] Though from disparate archives, temporalities and contexts, sutured to the dances of a *devadasi*, the gestures of a partygoer and the threads of a Keralan sari in a trendy nightclub are critiques of archives, the limits of masculinity and Westernised sartorial codes. And it is in these critiques that not only do active modes of political imagination lie, but also aspirations to reinvent and reform representations of marginalised figures: *devadasis*, homosexuals and drag entertainers.

Building on this (re)inventive aspiration, I suggest fabulousness is not merely about practices that attune us to the linkages between aesthetics and politics, fabulousness is also about the work of fabulation, the invention of a people who are missing,[22] the enactment of alternate ways of being in the world: to write against an archive, to ask 'what else is there to know'.[23] In keeping with this provocation, I ask what else is there

15. Martin F. Manalansan, 'The "Stuff" of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives', in *Radical History Review*, no. 120 (Sept. 2014), p. 100, doi:10.1215/01636545-2703742.
16. See Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, 'Area Impossible: Notes towards an Introduction', in *GLQ*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Mar. 2016), pp. 151–71.
17. Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
18. Kareem Khubchandani, 'Snakes on the Dance Floor: Bollywood, Gesture, and Gender', in *The Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 77, no. 1 (Feb. 2016), pp. 69–85.
19. Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, p. 24.
20. Khubchandani, 'Snakes on the Dance Floor', p. 71.
21. Arti Sandhu, 'India's Digital Drag Aunties', in *Dress*, Vol. 45, no. 1 (Mar. 2019), p. 69.
22. Giles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 4.
23. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', in *Small Axe*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (June 2008), p. 2.

to know about LGBTKHQ subjects beyond their legal and epidemiological worlding or their supposed complicity in the structures of normativity? What can their aesthetic labours as fabulousness do to offer other possibilities of apprehending queer life beyond its current tethering to abjection and normativity? I offer an answer to these questions in the following sections through two ethnographic scenes: a makeshift fashion show at an NGO office and the annual Mumbai Pride march. Through fabulation, I consider embodied forms of critique from within these spaces that chase the limits of what is possible and imagine alternate forms of inhabiting public space.

Sifting through fashion detritus

The red sequined jumpsuit caught Naveen's eye first. A sleeveless number with a wide leg, the sequins glinted underneath the fluorescent lights as they gave a small twirl.[24] '*Dekh*, look!' they said as they began enacting an item number in the middle of the hall. Naveen's face lit up as they rehearsed some of their favourite Bollywood choreography in their new sequined jumpsuit. Across the room, in a corner, Ram had discovered a sheer red sari with gold detailing. Its border was thick with gold sequins and beading. Ram held up the sari to catch the lights from the ceiling and to see how sheer the stitching was. As they held the *pallu* of the sari up, they squinted as if they were both appreciating the beauty of the garment and appraising how well it would suit a drag number they might perform at their house over the weekend. Later Ram told me that they had tucked it away in a plastic bag so that no one else would be able to steal it from them. All around the office hall, people were chattering away, eagerly sifting through piles and piles of clothes. From sequined saris to neon leotards to a pair of red faux fur arm warmers—which Naveen tried on before tossing them back in the pile— the tiled floor of the hallway was covered in garments.

It was July 2016 and I was volunteering at the offices of a Mumbai-based NGO that works primarily on behalf of MSM, *kothi* and transgender health and human rights. These unwanted bags of fabric, glitter and sequins had been dropped off by a famous Bollywood costume designer who was apparently also a 'friend' of the LGBTKHQ community, as one of the office staff put it. The clothes were stuffed into large blue and white trash bags that the staff had to carry from the doorstep on the ground floor up three flights of stairs. As people tore open bags already bursting at the seams, outfits began to pour out of the plastic bags like fashion detritus. Oozing out of the bags, many of the polyester outfits and over-sequined looks broke so-called fashion rules. There was also literal trash: dead, outmoded looks that had served their purpose. Neon saris with oversized silver pailettes, jumpsuits with cut-outs in strange places and paisley Hawaiian shirts formed an assemblage of garments that became objects of pleasurable consumption and joy. Deathly 'unfashions' were reanimated as life-affirming objects of style.

Along with Naveen and Ram, the other *kothis* sashayed around the room cackling with laughter as they experimented with combinations of different pieces, evaluated other people's finds from the fashion trash heap, and jealously tucked away in their

---

24. Ram and Naveen use gender neutral pronouns in Hindi when speaking about themselves; hence the use of 'they' rather than 'him' or 'her'.

backpacks the pieces that appealed to them. Under the fluorescent lights of an NGO office that works for gender and sexual minorities at the margins of intelligibility, recognition and visibility, discarded clothes had become not just part of another story of queer life; instead, perhaps more crucially, they had become part of the potential for socially-discarded people to tell their own stories and write their own histories. Having ditched the red jumpsuit, Naveen decided to try on a black sequin-fringed faux two-piece body suit. Between the loose-fitting crop top bustier and the black flared pants was a piece of cream-coloured fabric that created the illusion of an exposed midriff and navel. The light hue of the piece of fabric stood in contrast to Naveen's duskier complexion. Despite the imperfection of the illusion, Naveen pressed on. They positioned their hands on their hips and cocked their head to the side, catching the light of the fluorescent ceiling lights. 'Photo', Naveen said to me, signing with their hands.[25] Naveen stood underneath the fluorescent light, shoulders perched, back slightly arched, and hands akimbo-style at the hips like they had reached the end of a catwalk and were posing for the cameras. The black sequins clearly made them channel the cover girl poses of the actresses and high-fashion models that grace the covers of major magazines. Despite the poor fit and mismatched skin tones, Naveen worked the discarded jumpsuit.

Ram, who was evaluating the quality of the saris, worked in the NGO's lab testing and counselling clients. They described their features as having always been 'very feminine',[26] which had led to intense bullying at school. At home, Ram's family would police them, telling them how they should sit and how they should gesture like a man—to act manly. Ram's brother would yell at him because Ram's 'girlishness' was the talk of the neighbourhood. The family forced Ram to go to the gym in the hope they would learn to become manlier in gesture, gait and physique. But Ram's femininity could not be contained and they were harassed there too. The NGO office was one of the few places where Ram's gender, their femininity, did not have to be policed and was celebrated. At night, when the bosses had left, Ram would hold court in the large hall of the drop-in centre, sometimes putting on a wig or a *dupatta* and dancing to item numbers or *lavni*[27] for clients who were waiting for test results. At large events, like Friday workshops—where community members would dance and perform—Ram would make loud ululations or repeat the loud claps of the *hijra taali*[28] for the performers they admired. The clothes that they picked up from that pile of discards became costumes for the cabaret acts that Ram would put on for friends at home on the weekends and at the NGO's off-site functions.

On other occasions, while passing time between clients arriving, I would sit in Ram's cabin (small office) and Ram would burst into song. '*Aaina hai mera chehra* (my face is a mirror)', they would sing, mimicking Lata Mangeshkar's high-pitched tone while pretending to adjust their imaginary breasts. Their hands would fan over their face, revealing their eyes like a heroine in a *mujra* scene who lifts her *ghoonghat* to reveal her face to a lover. Ram's voice and their playful choreography would draw

25. Naveen was deaf, but relied on a combination of signs and some speech to communicate.
26. Interview with Ram, Mumbai, 8 Dec. 2018.
27. *Lavni* is a classical folk dance of Maharashtra.
28. Clap.

others in the office. We would pack into the cabin and listen to Ram's stories of being cheated by a *panthi* lover, flirting with a rickshaw driver or with strangers on a train, or sleeping with the straight muscle daddy in their locality. Inside the walls of the cabin and in the hallways of the office, Ram not only held court, but perhaps also became more than a working-class *kothi* from a conservative Maharashtrian family that despised its feminine son. Amid the rapturous laughter that surrounded Ram's cabin, their diva gestures could be seen not just as a mode of reparative labour or re-membering of the past, but as the provisional enactment of a liveable present and an aspirational future.[29] Whether it is in Ram's gestures or Naveen's costuming, their yanking of future to present does not provide a coherent or stable identity; instead, they demonstrate the very malleability of selves. Ram's gestures did not cohere into a stable performance of self or the clear articulation of an identity that is congealed through repetitive performance.

Through discarded and unfashionable trash, what I call fashion detritus, Ram and Naveen participate in the manoeuvres of fabulation: of an invention of something out of the nothingness, discardedness or erasures of the present. In this case, it is literally taking trash and making it work. But this is perhaps not just about clothes, it is perhaps also about fabulating the dead political categories of Western gender and sexuality monikers. At a time when there is growing conversation on solidifying the identitarian categories of sexuality (gay, lesbian, MSM and so on) and their concomitant gendered roles (masculine, feminine, top, bottom), Ram acknowledges the possibilities of living beyond those frameworks: 'I say that I am a versatile. Maybe tomorrow I become a top. Or maybe tomorrow I would become a bisexual. One day probably I would go for castration also. And then Brian will say that Ram was versatile, bisexual and is transgender. Our ID always gets changed. Today you are something and maybe in future you would become something else'.[30] Ram participates in momentary acts of unruliness that make a scene, that draw others to witness, and that become iconic and memorable in the minds of other LGBTKHQ subjects. Ram does not necessarily create a new reality or a new normal, but, through their performances, becomes an instance of possibility. It is in the 'spirit of becoming something else' that I argue that the conceptualising of LGBTKHQ subjects as fabulists does the crucial work of keeping open realms of possibility and selfhood that are not about the abjections of illegality and epidemiological risk, nor the seductions of neo-liberal, normative life. Instead, as Ram and Naveen's experiences evince, the unruly gestures of performance or the drape of an outfit show inventive, creative subjects who daily invoke the possibilities of queer life even amid deadened clothes and categories. In the next section, I turn to the *tamasha* of Pride parades to examine how the fun of unruly dress and gesture make queer demands on public space.

'Our festival is coming': Fashioning queer Pride

India's first Pride walk took place in Kolkata in 1999 under the guise of the Friendship Walk, the precursor to what is now called the Rainbow Pride Walk in Kolkata. The

29. Moore, *Fabulous*, p. 71.
30. Interview with Ram, Mumbai, 8 Dec. 2016.

Friendship Walk was a sombre yet pivotal moment. A group of fifteen, mostly gay men dressed in matching yellow T-shirts walked door to door to agencies like the West Bengal State AIDS Control Society[31] with a list of demands and an agenda for greater inclusion for sexual and gender minorities.[32] Twenty years later, Pride marches have taken place in every major city in India, with more new marches planned each year. Today, Pride marches in Mumbai are spectacular displays of queer political critique and social protest. The 10,000-strong march boasts provocative signs and catchy slogans like '1, 2, 3, 4, open up the closet door, 5, 6, 7, 8, don't assume your kids are straight'. Along with the signs, elaborate costumes become viral images that are repurposed on the front pages of major newspapers and listicles for websites like Buzzfeed and Homegrown. Unlike other protest marches that are typically about reproducing suffering or struggle as a mode of visibilising political exigency, Pride marches trade in grammars of fun, hailing LGBTKHQ emergence through joy, celebration and stylised critiques.

Rather than thinking of these marches as yet another instantiation of a homonormative, neo-liberal aspiring queer subject,[33] I argue that these spaces offer key insights into how LGBTKHQ subjects catwalk the city and occupy public space and time in recalcitrant and unruly ways. For a few hours, throngs of queer subjects hijack public spaces by the thousands, not merely to visibilise queer politics, but to attract looks—to make sartorial statements, to have fun. These statements often displace onlookers and are in and of themselves for the appreciation of other participants in the parade. As the parade snakes its way down the streets of South Mumbai, causing traffic jams across Tardeo and Chowpatty Girgaon, participants stop to click selfies with one another, appreciate each other's outfits, and thrust their hips to the beats of the hired *dhol* and *tasha* bands that accompany the march. While crowds of onlookers stop to stare at the colourful spectacle moving through the streets, the participants themselves rarely take notice or engage with the crowds of bystanders watching the parade. Traffic comes to a standstill, patrons in shops and restaurants stand outside on the street, and residents hang out of the windows of buildings along the parade route to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. In one instance in 2017, a bus driver actually stopped his bus to take a picture of the rainbow flag being marched through the streets (Figure 2). In these very temporary moments, queerness takes on celebrity status.

For participants like Sanjay, the point of Pride is to dress up and be seen. Sanjay, a twenty-something gay man born and brought up in what he describes as a conservative Sindhi family, has become something of a local queer celebrity, especially around Pride. This celebrity status is primarily due to his fashion choices. He travels annually to Pride marches from Ahmedabad to Kolkata to Bhopal dressed in extravagant costumes that he designs himself. Whether it is adorning himself in full bridal jewellery, large costume headpieces or a rainbow turban with glitter stickers all over his face,

31. It is now called the State AIDS Prevention and Control Society.
32. Staff, 'A Walk to Remember', *Gaylaxy Magazine* (15 July 2010) [http://www.gaylaxymag.com/exclusive/a-walk-to-remember/#gs.UCsNYaFr, accessed 18 Jan. 2019].
33. See Rahul Mitra M.A., 'Resisting the Spectacle of Pride: Queer Indian Bloggers as Interpretive Communities', in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol. 54, no. 1 (Mar. 2010), pp. 163–78; and Priyam Ghosh, 'Performing Pride/Performing Protest: LGBT Activism Post Recriminalizing of Section 377', in *Rupkatha*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (May 2014), pp. 163–76.

Figure 2. Bus driver taking pictures of the Pride march in Mumbai in 2017. Source: Photograph by author.

Sanjay's understanding of Pride marches cannot be disentangled from experimenting with his own self-fashioning.

Pride marks one of the few opportunities to publicly wear clothes that would otherwise cause him to be harassed. As he says: 'You can't wear heels and go out to other events'.[34] This is because of the ways in which queer and gender non-conforming bodies are policed by society as well as by other LGBTKHQ persons. Sanjay spoke about this policing with particular reference to the ways in which upper-middle-class gay men police femininity. 'The stereotypical thinking has not gone from the community. On Grindr, there are phrases like "no girlsh people, no uncles, no leanish person, looking for a masculine guy, bodybuilding guy, etc.". So it is very prominent [gays] that people in the community are not accepting'.[35] Sanjay, like many gender non-conforming transpeople, has faced issues even getting into gay parties because organisers have put a prohibition on people cross-dressing. The discomfort that Sanjay highlights indicates that even the ostensibly accepting and inviting spaces of a party are fraught and perhaps even complicit in reasserting heterosexist and cisgender norms. The Pune Pride's moratorium on cross-dressing is also an apt example of this.

But for those who take to the streets to dress in the kinds of outfits that are often shunned in daily social milieus, transgressive style does the provisional work of fashioning utopia. It endeavours to create 'a separate space where we get to play with ideas, creativity, and expression to create a whole new world, a stylish one at that, in the here and now'.[36] As Sanjay confessed to me in an interview: 'I just love wearing heels. I love wearing things that society says are for women'.[37] Clothes are not just an integral part

---

34. Interview with Sanjay, Mumbai, 30 Jan. 2017.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Moore, *Fabulous*, p. 69.
37. Interview with Sanjay, Mumbai, 30 Jan. 2017.

Figure 3. Outfits from Mumbai Pride, Mumbai, March 2017. Source: Photograph by author.

of the critiques staged in Pride marches. It is also breaking the rules that is part of the fun—disregarding the logics of gender. It is through these sartorial choices that Sanjay enacts a capacity that prioritises feeling good. As he explained: 'When Pride comes around, I feel like we should go buy something because our festival is coming. When any festival comes, we buy stuff, we go for dress up Diwali. This [Pride] is the one month where different-different events are happening. And dressing up is a boost to my own self. I can say "OK, I look good"'.[38]

Looking good is not just fun, it can be playing with boundaries, getting rid of them altogether, reworking them to create a look that makes a fun statement and pushes queerness back into public space. As Figure 3 shows, one participant dressed up as Queen Elizabeth II of Britain. Playing on the meme 'Keep Calm and Carry On', the sign this time read, 'Do not keep calm and denounce section 377'. This participant was completely in character throughout the Pride, walking at a measured pace and mimicking the queen's famous 'wave' gesture. While the costume centred the illegality of LGBTKHQ subjects, it did so in a way that made a joke of the law. Illegality was not dressed up in the language of pain and suffering, but rather as jocularity, as critique in drag. In a similarly memorable costume,

38. *Ibid.*

another Pride participant dressed up as a rainbow unicorn and held up a sign that said, 'Leave Hate Outside, How Bow Dah'? The sign's turn of phrase reworked the viral 2016 phrase uttered by Danielle Bregoli, the infamous, badly-behaved teenager who became an overnight celebrity on a September 2016 episode of the American television programme, *Dr. Phil*, when she yelled out, 'Cash me outside, how bow dah', to the audience.

Both participants' signs point to one of the crucial interventions of this essay. While Prides might be imagined as either spaces for a respectability politics or perhaps as signs of homonormativity, they are also some of the few remaining public bastions of queer fun. Like Sanjay's allusion to a festival, Pride occupies a space of possibility and celebration in the face of multiple regimes of normativity. Pride is a space where subjects can weaponise themselves in the armour of glamour to protest, to critique or to please themselves. Within these spaces, LGBTKHQ have opportunities not just to be visible, but also to do and say in public the kinds of things that would cause them to be assaulted at other times and in other places.

Conclusion

Between the NGO office and the public streets of a Pride parade, this essay has attempted to highlight the political states of fabulous, queer aesthetics. In the dramatic performances of Ram and Naveen's fashionable appropriations of discarded clothing, and in Sanjay's prideful *femme* looks, I have sought to briefly articulate how queer subjects renegotiate and bring into existence revised forms of being queer. I call this work fabulation insofar as the aesthetic labours described seek a queerness that is not pushed into the privacy of the home—as much of the debates around Section 377 demand. Rather, the publicly-facing forms of queer aesthetic spectacle articulated here are as much about the pleasures and joys of doing the work as they are about the potential to reform existing conceptions of what queerness means in a present brimming with privatisations of queer sex through law, demands for gay marriage, and further relegation of queer subjects to spaces of domesticity. What the scenes articulated in this essay bring together are glimpses of the potential for fun to displace (however temporarily) the boundaries between public and private, between queer suffering and queer joy. In attending to aesthetic practices as embodied critiques, I have suggested that we might begin to witness queer ephemera that frustrate the larger narratives that are becoming mainstays in theorising gender and sexual difference in South Asia. The queer fabulist provides critical space to interrogate fun and pleasure as organising modes of life within the larger study of South Asia. Far from being broken, these shimmers of fabulous life offer glimpses of selves as enmeshed within economies of sexual desire and aesthetic aspiration that centre feeling good as an oppositional and exciting mode of worlding.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding