

'Let Us Hold Hands': Lived Practices of Intimacy Among Gay Youth in Urban India

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Abstract

This article contributes to the growing literature on youth sexualities and intimacy, by centring the lived experiences of self-identified gay youth in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata. It draws on interview narratives of thirteen gay youth between the ages of 19 and 26, living in Kolkata, to unpack two inter-locking ways in which these sexual minority youth co-construct intimacy within the urban space: (a) intimacy as verbal and non-verbal disclosure and (b) embodied intimacy. The findings underline how studying gay youth's practices of intimacy offer a unique window into sexual politics and urban life in twenty-first-century India.

Keywords

India, gay youth, intimacy, queer studies, critical sexuality studies, semi-structured interviews, lived experience of queer youth

Introduction

This article contributes to the growing literature on youth sexualities and intimacy by centring the lived experiences of young gay men in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata. While sociological scholarship on Indian youth has expanded significantly in recent decades (for an overview, see Bhadra, 2014; Jayaram, 2009; Jeffrey, 2011; Kumar, 2019a), questions around sexuality are largely absent from these writings. Indeed, sexual, erotic, and embodied aspects of social life have been peripheral to

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Indian sociology, and calls have therefore been made for ‘queering Indian sociology’ (Kumar, 2014), which extends to sociological studies of youth in India as well. This article heeds this call by unpacking the way young gay men in Kolkata ‘do’ intimacy beyond the private sphere. We draw on their lived experiences to analyse the way their practices of intimacy play out against the backdrop of structural heteronormativity, neoliberalism, and deep-seated social and spatial inequalities.

Till date, there has been little dialogue between critical sexuality studies and youth sociology in India. Barring a few notable exceptions (Boyce & Dasgupta, 2019; Horton, 2020; Kumar, 2022b; Mishra, 2020; Tonini, 2018), the concerns of sexual minority youth and issues of sexual citizenship in India have remained peripheral to Indian sociology, and consequently, theoretical work concerning structures of heteronormativity and sexual governance in India has been thin on the ground (John, 2008b; Kumar, 2020, 2014). Some argue that a broader ‘conspiracy of silence’ concerning sexuality is at play in India, encompassing the spheres of politics, social movements, and academic scholarship, which has led scholars away from the material sites in which sexuality has for long been embedded and contested (John & Nair, 1998; also see Srivastava 2004). Although academic writing on sexuality in India has witnessed incremental growth in recent years, the field remains marginal within Indian academia, and an ‘unspoken academic taboo on the subject’ continues to prevail (Kumar, 2022a, p. 1). This article intervenes in this wider landscape and pushes youth sociology in India into new directions by foregrounding intimacy as a generative sociological lens to think about youth sexualities in India. Further, the original empirical data we present here offer important correctives to the dominant theoretical frameworks vis-a-vis the study of heteronormativity, masculinity, and same-sex intimacy developed in the global north.

This article is divided into five sections. In the first section, we present a sociological framework for understanding intimacy, and it is followed by a section on existing research on sexual minority youth in India. Next, we outline the context and methodology of our study of gay youth in Kolkata. The subsequent sections present our findings. The article concludes with our reflection on what gay youths’ practices of intimacy in the city of Kolkata reveal about sexual politics and urban life in twenty-first-century India and beyond.

Understanding Intimacy

In recent decades, sociological scholarship on sexuality has drawn attention to the social production of sexual identities, the discourses that seek to categorize and regulate sexual practices, and the ways in which contemporary developments in digital technology and neoliberal capitalism shape sexual lives (Menon, 2012; Plummer, 2012). Retrospectively labelled critical sexualities studies (CSS) (Plummer, 2012), these conceptual developments have had, and continue to foster, close-knit ties with emancipatory politics including the dismantling of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980). Seen through the CSS prism, sexuality entails a wide range of meanings that encompass erotic desires, practices, identities, subjectivities, and representations (John & Nair, 1998; Scott & Jackson, 1996). In other words, sexuality is not confined to sex acts alone but encompasses sexual feelings and relationships and the ways in which one is or is not defined as sexual by others as well as by themselves (Scott &

Jackson, 1996). Sexuality, therefore, emerges as a site for fundamental political struggles and a medium of emancipation (Giddens, 2008).

Encased within this broader sociological approach to the study of sexualities, 'intimacy' as a concept has come to the fore as a useful means for understanding interpersonal relationships in the contemporary world. Broadly speaking, intimacy has come to signify everyday, embodied, and affective interactions and mutual self-disclosures (Giddens, 2008; Jamieson, 2011, 2002). It refers to the 'quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson, 2011). Consequently, 'practices of intimacy' have been defined as 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Jamieson, 2011). It is intricately linked with sexuality and draws upon the interdependent relationships between the public and the personal (Gabb, 2008). Relatedly, Seidman (2013, p. 13) defines intimacy as 'an historically unique kind of emotional and social closeness featuring the depthful sharing of inner lives, negotiating the conditions and dynamics of the social bond, and aspirations to sustain a sense of personal authenticity in an emotionally thick experience of solidarity'. Feminist and queer approaches to the study of intimacy have contested the way the intimate is placed within the private realm and shown how intimacy serves as 'a primary domain of the microphysics of power in modern societies' wherein 'all forms of close affective encounters are as much matters of state as they are matters of the heart' (Oswin & Olund, 2010, p. 62). Queer perspectives on intimacy further point to the way heteronormative discourses construct certain hierarchies of intimacy where heterosexual, marital, monogamous, and reproductive sexual practices are privileged and valued as 'normal', 'natural', and 'good' while forms of intimate ties and sexual expressions that fall outside the 'charmed circle' of the sexual hierarchy are labelled as 'abnormal', 'unnatural', and 'bad' (Rubin, 2011). Queer scholars have, therefore, challenged the normative conceptions of human intimacy that govern practices of intimacy and their study (Hammack et al., 2019). Building on these critiques, we view intimacy as a window into the interconnections among sexual governance, processes of social recognition, constructions of normative hierarchies of sexuality, and subjective experiences of 'closeness'.

Queer Youth in India

In recent years, India's youth population has received much scholarly attention, especially since two-thirds of the country's population is below the age of 35, making India one of the 'youngest' countries in the world in terms of demographics (Kumar, 2019b). Although data about sexual identity is not collated in the Indian census and no national-level data set exists on sexual identities of the Indian population, Kealy-Bateman (2018) estimates that around 45.4 million people out of India's total population of 1.21 billion are gender and sexual minorities. Nonetheless, sexual minority subjects in India have remained largely invisible within the academic literature, including that of youth studies. To address this gap in the scholarship, in this article, we focus on the narratives of one sexual minority group in India: gay men. Needless to say, the lived experiences of gay men are in no way representative of all sexual minorities in India, but their accounts of everyday life and practices of same-sex intimacy offer a crucial window into the structures of sexual governance

and gender regimes in urban India—social processes which remain underexplored in the extant sociological literature. To understand young gay men's practices of intimacy in Kolkata, in what follows, we situate their lives in the wider historical, socio-legal, and cultural context.

Non-normative sexual identities and expressions have been documented in Indian literary and cultural texts for centuries, and over the years, a plethora of localized categories have been deployed across Indian languages to denote non-heterosexual intimate ties (see Vanita, 2002; Vanita & Kidwai, 2008). However, the reference point for contemporary debates around queer lives in India is a colonial-era anti-sodomy law inscribed in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which criminalized same-sex acts. Introduced in 1860, this law imposed a Victorian discourse on sodomy in a country where homosocial/homoerotic relations have always existed and even received recognition (see Vanita, 2002). Section 377 of the IPC *did not* proclaim homosexuality to be illegal per se but criminalized carnal intercourse *against the order of nature* which includes any sexual act outside the heterosexual, procreative norm. It draws on the Buggery Act of 1533, which Henry VIII introduced in England. In a landmark judgement on 2 July 2009, the Delhi High Court read down Section 377 and decriminalized same-sex acts between consenting adults, but within a few years, the Supreme Court of India reversed Delhi High Court's 2009 verdict, and on 11 December 2013, it 're-criminalized' carnal intercourse *against the order of nature*. After years of protests and mobilization by LGBTQ+ groups, on 6th September 2018, the Supreme Court of India finally struck down Section 377 and deemed it unconstitutional. Inside the courtroom, Justice Indu Malhotra accepted that '[h]istory owes an apology to the members of this [LGBTQ+] community and their families, for the delay in providing redress for the ignominy and ostracism that they have suffered through the centuries' on account of this law (qtd in Majumdar, 2018). Indeed, Section 377 has been abused time and again by the police and members of the public to intimidate, harass, and even blackmail LGBTQ+ people across the country (Dore, 2015).

A singular engagement with law's flashpoints, like these landmark judgements, has been criticized for producing a truncated history of queer lives in India (Sircar, 2017; Sircar & Jain, 2012). Nonetheless, these legal crossroads remain particularly significant—as Bose (2014) reminds us—in fixing a timeline for the history of LGBTQ+ intimate practices and political struggles in India. At the same time, legal reforms alone have not dramatically changed the everyday lives of queer youth in India (Kumar, 2020). As a queer participant in Moitra et al.'s (2021) study put it, despite 'celebrating [the reading down of] 377, we are not free, our desires are still compartmentalized'. Queer activists in India continue to report how 'the spirit of 377 still looms' large in the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ youth in the country (Shahani, 2020, p. 91). Those advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in India point out that the repealing of the anti-sodomy law only brought 'momentary happiness' (Sappho for Equality, 2019, p. 3) without structural changes. In other words, this emergent post-2018 literature point to broad continuities in the everyday experiences of and social attitude towards queer people in India who continue to face discrimination, everyday violence, and exclusion on the basis of their gender expression, sexual identity and practices. These injustices and structural inequalities co-exist alongside the steady growth in queer-themed literary works in India and yearly pride marches

across Indian cities, a trend which started in Kolkata in 1999 (Singh, 2022). While pride parades and queer representation in cultural texts offer sporadic avenues of visibility, they have not translated into large-scale structural changes in social attitudes and public policy.

Homophobia and heteronormativity are deeply embedded across social institutions in India, which structure social attitude towards sexual minorities and mediate everyday lives of LGBTQ+ youth in the country. However, Vanita and Kidwai (2008) argue that it was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial India that dissipated strands of pre-colonial homophobia were transformed into virulent proportions, and these colonial-era discourses on sexuality continue to organize social relations in India today. The widespread prevalence of homophobia in contemporary India is reflected in the few public attitude surveys done on this topic. The 2016 Youth Survey, conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), among 15–34 olds ($n = 6122$) found that 61% considered same-sex relationships to be ‘wrong’, while only 14% considered it ‘right’ (CSDS-KAS, 2017). A more recent survey of 24,092 respondents in 12 Indian states again found that the majority of respondents strongly disagreed with the idea that ‘sexual relationship between two men or two women should be accepted in society’, and only 10% accepted same-sex couples (Centre for Regional Political Economy, 2019). These survey results paint a grim picture and drive home the fact that non-normative sexual identities and relationships continue to be stigmatized and marginalized in India, and the lives of queer youth are still negatively impacted. Against this backdrop, there is little in the way of empirical studies that document the ways in which sexual minority youth in India establish and sustain intimate relations as they continue to negotiate and challenge heteronormative discourse and institutions that actively de-legitimize and pathologize their sexualities. Sexual minority youth, as Driver (2008, p. 1) points out, ‘challenge us to rethink the very status of gender, generation, sexuality, and culture, and they push us to become nuanced in the ways we read, watch, and listen to young people telling their own stories and envisioning their futures’. We, therefore, set out to address the gaps in the extant literature by engaging with the lived experiences of young gay men in Kolkata, and we do so in critical dialogue with the conceptual framework of intimacy, which we believe can be expanded and further developed to capture the lived realities of gay youth in urban India.

The Study: Methods and Context

In this article, we draw on a qualitative study with young gay men in the Indian city of Kolkata. For this project, we adopted a participatory and informal approach that others working with queer youth in India have found useful (Patnaik, 2014; Sharma, 2006). At the time, both authors lived in the city. Initially, we reached out to self-identifying gay youth above the age of eighteen through our personal networks and informed them about the study. We made sure that prospective participants were fully aware of the remit of the project, and we answered any queries they had about it. Those interested in the project self-selected and contacted us to take part in interviews. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before interviews

were conducted. At the time of recruiting participants, same-sex sexual acts were still criminalized in India, and given the wider social stigma around non-normative sexualities, tapping into our own social networks for locating potential participants was the most appropriate way of recruiting this hard-to-reach and marginalized group of youth (Edwards, 2004). While recruiting participants from personal networks, we ensured that prospective participants were fully informed about their right not to answer any question or to terminate their participation at any point without having to give a reason. Besides, we also recruited participants through snowballing. Rather than adopting structured interview schedules, we chose to let informal conversations and semi-structured interviews be the mainstay of our methods. Participants were interviewed individually to ensure that their participation in the study remained confidential. During the course of our data collection, we also understood that many of our participants do not publicly proclaim their sexuality, and thus, our participatory recruitment method helped in strengthening trust and in gaining in-depth data. The participants' names have been anonymized to protect their identity. Overall, our methodological approach and data collection were guided by the code of ethics issued by the Indian Sociological Society.

The empirical materials presented in this article are drawn from two sets of fieldwork conducted between the summers of 2015 and 2016. A total of 13 gay youth between ages of 19 and 26 participated in interviews. All of them, except one, were either current university students or recent graduates. Reflecting the ethnic diversity of the city, the sample included those who identify their ethnicity as Bengali (6), Gorkha (2), Bhutia (2), Tamang (1), Lepcha (1) and Mizo (1). All of them have either grown up in and around the city of Kolkata or have made their home in the city for education or work. Most importantly for the study, they have had same-sex intimate partners while living in the city for quite a few years. They were all English-educated, and the interviews were conducted primarily in English with occasional usage of Bangla or Nepali in a few cases. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the authors—who carried out translation in relevant cases—and the data was interpreted using a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to discern patterns across participants' narratives and construct themes around their practices of intimacy.

Intimacy in the Everyday Lives of Gay Youth in Kolkata

Adopting a participatory approach, we asked our participants about their subjective understanding of the term 'intimacy' and how it relates to their own experiences. It bears noting that at the time of the interview, all participants were either in a same-sex relationship or had been in one in the recent past. Each one of them spoke about a range of practices and activities that they counted as 'intimate'. We were particularly interested in their practices of intimacy in spaces outside the 'private' realm. The repertoire which emerged in that public context covered a wider ground which included not only bodily and sexual contact but also a whole tapestry of emotional, cognitive, and culturally-inflected ways of 'doing' intimacy. Thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed two broad themes which will be elaborated in the rest of this article, namely (a) intimacy as verbal and non-verbal disclosure and (b) embodied intimacy. The themes are not self-contained but inform each other in different ways.

Intimacy as Verbal and Non-verbal Disclosure

We went together in public, in a restaurant. He [the partner] called me to come to the restaurant. He waited for me, just like he did all the bookings [...] Then I come. We talked, while holding our hands, not more than that... [But] the verbal, *the verbal is different*.

Remsanga is 24 years old and has been living in Kolkata for more than six years. Having grown up in a Mizo-Christian family, he now works in an administrative capacity in the healthcare industry. In the above excerpt, he describes his experiences of going out to a restaurant with his same-sex partner. His recalling ties together the two themes we have identified, that is, the embodiment of intimate practice and intimacy as mutual disclosure. His invocation of ‘holding’ hands and nothing ‘more than that’ reflects how embodied practices of intimacy are negotiated in the (semi) public places of Kolkata by young gay men, which we will discuss at length in the next section. The concluding part of his excerpt brings into sharp relief an important dimension of ‘doing’ intimacy, which he describes as ‘verbal’ intimacy. Remsanga is not only a sexual minority youth in the city but also a visibly marked ethnic minority. He went on to clarify that despite these factors, he is not afraid of what others say or comment upon; he simply does not feel comfortable in establishing any form of tactile intimacy with his partner in a public setting except a discrete moment of holding each other’s hands in a restaurant. At the same time, he creates greater room for practising intimacy through ‘the verbal’: by talking to his partner, sharing each other’s stories, and in doing so, nurturing their intimate bond. They become special and important in each other’s lives not only through bodily or sexual contacts but also importantly through affective and communicative self-disclosures in non-private settings.

Giddens’ (2008) argument around the ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the late modern world pivots on this idea of mutual self-disclosure of individuals as reflexive subjects. This form of intimacy of the self, rather than intimacy of the body, relies on *close association* with and *privileged knowledge* of each other and is one of the crucial practices that can help create and sustain intimacy (Jamieson, 2002, 2011). However, as Jamieson (2011) correctly points out, ‘disclosing intimacy’ is by no means the only type of intimate practice that can generate and sustain the subjective experience of closeness.

Surjo’s account lends another layer of complexity to these questions. He is 26 years old and has grown up in a middle-class Bengali household in southern Kolkata. After passing a state-wide entrance examination, he secured admission in a dental college. It was there that he met his current boyfriend Tamal. During our interview with Surjo, he described how they started dating and how their relationship grew:

We used to text each other all the time. In those days, we had black and white Nokia mobiles. That was how we mostly shared our feelings. In fact, our close circle of friends came to know about us when someone had accidentally read one of our SMS-es

Even when hanging out with their friends, Surjo went on to tell us that they would text each other if they wanted to share something privately with each other. His face was teeming with nostalgia and pride, as he sat down to talk to us about himself and Tamal. For him, those text messages and the old mobile phones not only served as a

vehicle for affective exchanges but also constituted material components enmeshed in their shared history of constructing their intimate relationship. When in public spaces, they often made use of encoded sign languages that only the two of them understood. Such signs were not only a way of communicating their desires and affections in circumstances when they felt ‘silenced’ by spatial heteronormativity but also constituted a pool of shared and privilege body of knowledge that only they, and no one else, had a key to. These are indeed forms of non-verbal, non-tactile practices of intimacy in action which reinforce the special quality of close connection, of being attuned to each other, that theorists of intimacy often refer to.

We also came across several other forms of non-bodily or non-verbal intimate practices. Jonathan is a 21-year-old student, who had grown up in the northern part of the state of West Bengal and has been living in Kolkata for four years. He described a weekly ritual that he and his boyfriend Sunil have developed: writing poems to each other. He explained that one of them would elect a theme or a topic and would compose a piece of poetry, and the other would then write a poem in reply to it. He shared a snippet of his poetry with us:

My heart attempts to escape from its discreet cage;
its been awakened from its cold tomb like Juliet.
But I look not for blade or arsenic or even lust.
It’s something else; that compels us to lie in each others’
bosoms like tender lip-petals of a flower that has just bloomed.
That sways and rocks forth in a wind that may die out anytime.

Jonathan’s poem, which he is happy for us to share, speaks to the ways in which he and Sunil construct their own narratives of closeness and being special to each other. The act of writing itself serves as a practice of ‘doing’ intimacy, an intimacy of the self as distinct from tactile intimacy. However, the articulation of close feelings has the potential, as Gabb (2008) notes, to elicit physical sensations in one’s intimate partner. We do not have the reaction of the recipient of this poem to draw such an analytic link here, but we do know from Jonathan’s account that no one else, not even their close friends, have access to these texts—produced, exchanged, and stored on a weekly basis as an archive of their growing relationship. Moreover, this act of self-disclosure, of sharing thoughts and feeling, metaphorically writes the body of the non-normative sexual subject into it. In disclosing himself to the other in the intimate dyad, Jonathan is re-discovering himself and indeed celebrating his embodied sexuality, which remains stigmatized and marginalized within the public sphere in Kolkata. It is a contestation and self-assertion outside the codes of political activism, engendered through an inwardly pursued practice of intimacy with his partner. This is where a transformative political potential is encased in the ‘doing’ of intimacy.

Taken in isolation, none of these practices in themselves are sufficient in producing intimacy, but the above instances have shown that the various demonstrations and declarations of affection operate in concert with these and many other practices of intimacy. As Jamieson (2011) has noted, intimacy is often built by practices which are not exclusively about doing intimacy, and especially in the case of non-normative sexual subjects reeling under censure and institutionalized homophobia, the ‘doing’ of intimacy through such practices carries emancipatory possibilities.

Embodied Intimacy

A key theme that emerged from our data centred around tactile dimensions of intimacy. During our conversations, the gay youth in our study reflected upon the way they negotiated public spaces in the city to construct non-verbal, bodily intimacy. The following is an excerpt from our interview with John, a 21-year-old student:

Interviewer: What kind of bodily intimacy have you shared with your partner in a public or semi-public space?

John: Holding hands; anything more draws attention.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example?

John: I think usually, we are still frightened to come out. So, we usually don't show it [bodily intimacy]. And if you are not that feminine or distinctive in your characteristics, then you can actually blend in and look like brothers and look like friends, very close friends.

John's practices of bodily intimacy with his partner brings the question of masculinity to the forefront of the debate. As long as one can 'blend in', one can unequivocally appear as 'close friends' who are culturally sanctioned to be physically close and even hold hands. Effeminacy, thereby, emerges as a potent public marker that aligns male bodies with non-normative, so-called 'unnatural', sexuality and gives one away, but John is not alone in policing his corporeal mannerisms to 'blend in' or 'pass' as straight. He uses the cultural acceptance of homosocial tactility among 'close friends' as a protection against homophobic abuses, including name-calling, that he has experienced in the city on multiple occasions.

Surjo (26) had a similar experience. He told us during the interview that: 'We never hugged or held hands in public. But then when we did, we found no one cares! We can just pass off as friends. So, we were like: "let's hold hands!"'

Both John's and Surjo's narratives offer a unique window into the public cultures of homosociality in urban India and the opportunities they create for same-sex tacitly among gay couples. There are two divergent strands that engender practices of same-sex tactile intimacy in the public spaces of Indian cities. As far as legal frameworks are concerned, Section 294 of the IPC outlaws 'obscene acts' in public spaces. Although this Section does not clearly define what constitutes 'obscenity', its provision continues to be used by the local police to intimidate, harass, and even arrest heterosexual couples found physically intimate or kissing in public parks, and it can very well be used to arrest non-heterosexual couples, but the instances are very rare. At the same time, Chatterjee (2014) has argued that in contemporary India, there exists a broad prevalence amongst majority of 'non-English educated' men, especially those in 'blue-collar professions', to freely participate in acts of homosocial tactility such as holding hands or embracing in public which they construe as 'brotherly', 'friendly', and thus unequivocally asexual. For instance, the historian Arthur Dudley (2015), while writing about contemporary Delhi, talks about two young men—presumably in their late teens or early twenties—whom he encountered in the metro:

They were smartly dressed but evidence of their profession, painting, was spattered in their hair and caked in their fingernails... What was notable but also perfectly mundane was that their hands were clasped around the same hold.

In an Anglo-American context, the only explanation for this intimacy would be that the two men were lovers. In India, it does not signal that at all. First-time visitors to Delhi from the West often declare to me wide-eyed that 'India is really liberal when it comes to homosexuality'. They have this impression because male friendship, especially the further away from wealth and English-medium education one looks, tends to be much more physical in India than in the West... For all anyone knows, the two men on the train might have been lovers, their secret protected by the very fact that no one would have suspected it.

What Chatterjee (2014) and Dudley (2015) imply is not only the fact that male friendship is much more publicly tactile amongst a large section of Indians but also they bring home the point that the English-medium educated and the white-collar professionals in Indian cities have come to attach, through mediatized consumption, distinctive connotations to same-sex bodily intimacy, be it holding hands or embracing in the public. Evidently, the image of same-sex individuals holding hands has been pivotal to queer rights movements globally with campaigns such as #HoldTight emerging around Auckland Pride or in the Netherlands where, in the wake of a homophobic attack, hundreds of Dutch men including government ministers walked the streets holding hands as a mark of solidarity. The fact that Surjo, an English-medium educated middle-class man, initially hesitated was squarely on account of his own learned cultural reflexes of what such an act signifies, but when he did hold hands with his partner, the impression that no one 'cared' gestures towards a different set of connotations attached to the same act in the public eye which absolves them from being 'suspected' in a country where even the youth continue to foster deep-seated homophobia (CSDS-KAS, 2017). In other words, homosocial tactility is, more often than not, read in the public places of India as expressions of friendship and brotherhood without any links being drawn to sexuality. This prevalent cultural script affords these young gay men with, what de Certeau (1984) calls, 'tactics' through which they gain synchronic access to public spaces via a politics of agency-within-constraints, where opportunities provided by the space itself are subversively utilized. The relief and the freedom gained through such access and the realization that they can indeed 'hold hands' underpin a crescendo in their own non-normative sexual politics. This finding also reveals the limits of prevalent sociological theories about masculinity, homophobia, and intimacy among men that have been developed in the global north. One of the widely-used theories in this field, the inclusive masculinity theory, is founded on the claim that masculinities in the global north are becoming less hierarchical and more inclusive with men displaying more tactile behaviour among themselves because they no longer fear that such practices will raise suspicion of homosexuality (Anderson, 2013). The decline in homophobia, that is 'the fear of being socially perceived as gay' (Anderson & McCormack, 2018, p. 548), is held responsible for the increasing prevalence of peer tactility among men including heterosexual men. However, our findings show that in contemporary urban India, there is a great deal of acceptability and widespread practice of tactility among men in public, while at the same time, homophobia and homophobia remain rampant as demonstrated by the social attitude surveys discussed earlier in the article.

Furthermore, the scenario presented by Surjo feeds into a widening gulf between what English-educated urban young gay men like him aspire for, in the wake of major changes in other parts of the world as far as queer rights are concerned, and the materiality of their present circumstances. Surjo went on to tell us about his, and

his partner's, future plans. They were planning to pursue postgraduate studies abroad and were particularly exploring the options and scholarships available for them in Ireland. On being asked why they were so keen on Ireland, he referred to the advancement in their subject area in that country and laid stress on the constitutional referendum in Ireland which legalized same-sex marriage by a popular vote in May 2015. The interview took place in June 2015 just after a month of that referendum which, Surjo repeated, made Ireland a very attractive choice for them.

At the same time, boundaries are constantly being redrawn around intimate behaviours in response to both the public/private distinction and the internal dynamics of intimate relationships. When it comes to bodily intimacy, Abhishek (23) explains:

I don't like to kiss and all in public places. I think it should be a little more private, between you and your partner [...]. Like see, holding hands is natural and cool; I don't mind. But kissing in a park, I would mind that cuz I don't want to do that.

Construction of embodied intimacy in the public sphere also involves internal negotiations within the dyad, as 25 years-old student Rajib told us: 'Sometimes, my partner was not comfortable. But I have always been very carefree about displaying affection in public'.

There are diverse ways in which these young urban gay men 'do' non-verbal, bodily intimacy. These practices of bodily intimacy outside the private sphere are in turn informed by these youth's consumption of transnational media and news which present them with aspirations for the future and lend newer meanings to their intimate practices which can be at odds with the understanding of public homosocial tactility that many Indians harbour. These forms of international media and news outlets became more accessible to middle-class Indians since the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s and has now become extremely commonplace in the era of mobile technologies and the internet.

The two main themes perused in our analyses—intimacy as self-disclosure and as embodied practice—feed off one another because as Jamieson (2002) argues, if there is a completeness of the intimacy of the self then it is only taken forward by bodily intimacy. The two are interlocked. Indeed, the body, in itself, becomes a mobile space that passes through the cartographies of law, religion, culture, and politics to emerge as a multivalent site that locates itself both within and beyond the public/private divide to chart novel epistemic maps. This epistemic reimagining of the non-normative body is the effective prelude in tracing back these questions of intimate practices and looking afresh at how to sociologically engage with these micro-politics of youth lives. This can consequently have direct implications in the way emancipatory politics around these questions are formulated.

Conclusion

In this article, we deployed the conceptual framework of 'intimacy' to bring into relief the practices through which self-identified gay youth in Kolkata foster the quality of close connection with their intimate partners despite the heteronormative structures that actively seek to de-legitimize, pathologize, and even criminalize their sexualities and personal relationships. The range of intimate practice—embodied or

otherwise that we identified ‘cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people’ (Jamieson, 2011). In turn, these practices of intimacy serve as building blocks of ‘tactical’ interventions into the social imaginary that has the potential to trigger contestations at the micro-institutional and personal levels. Though they may not necessarily conjoin the major strands of activism, these practices of intimacy, as forms of personal ‘projects’, can in themselves be of consequence in effecting change and transforming lives in the everyday setting.

Nevertheless, there are limits to what we can infer from our data and analyses. For the gay youth in our study, intimate relationships do stand for ‘personal relationships that are subjectively experienced’, but unlike Jamieson’s (2011) formulation, they lack social recognition with an entire gamut of social, religious, cultural and political institutions, rendering these ‘personal relationships’ as ‘unnatural’ and ‘sinful’. It is within these macrostructural constraints that these young people creatively use the prevalent codes of homosocial tactility to their advantage. Indeed, this lack of social recognition can and does facilitate the construction of newer forms of social interventions. Campaigns and protests are afoot and support networks are being built by dedicated activists to bolster the cause of sexual minorities in Kolkata and the rest of the country. The Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk has become the longest-running event of its kind in South Asia, bringing these debates to the heart of the city. For future studies, some of the themes broached in our analysis, such as the complex relationship between masculinity and homophobia in India, warrant further attention. Moreover, our sample too had its own biases. The economic and cultural capital at the disposal of our participants play an important role in their understanding and negotiation of intimacy within the city. Those young gay men outside the city, or those belonging to disadvantaged economic groups, are still largely absent from existing body of research.

Our findings, therefore, highlight some of the areas of youth lives that have categorically been under-researched in India. We attempted to pay attention to the fragments and the voices that otherwise slip under the radar. In doing so, we concur with Back (2007) that the task of sociology is to admit these voices and pay them their coveted attention, thereby giving a hearing to those who are not listened to. By bringing questions of intimacy and sexuality to the forefront, we not only wanted to contribute to the ‘queering’ of Indian sociology (Kumar, 2014) but also sought to wrest the agenda of youth research in India away from the ‘twin tracks’ of life-transition and sub-culture (see Bhadra 2014) and re-orient the transformative engagements of contemporary youth lives, thus gesturing towards the ‘queering’ of youth studies itself as Driver (2008) would put it. Our findings offer crucial correctives to dominant theories about masculinity and homophobia that have been developed in the global north such as the inclusive masculinity theory which argues that tactility among men has become more publicly acceptable and widespread because of decline in homophobia (Anderson, 2013). On the contrary, we have shown in this article how tactility among men is widely practiced in the public spaces of India while homophobia remains high and non-normative sexual identities continue to be stigmatized. More research on sexual minority youth and their practices of intimacy in the global south is needed to further develop these lines of sociological enquiry.

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