

# Lawrence Cohen

## *Song for Pushkin*

Sitting among wild young men  
I am lost in my thoughts.

– Aleksandr Pushkin

An imagined Russia – Soviet or otherwise – along with an imagined America have at times over the past century served as vehicles of hope in India as elsewhere. The American writer Jhumpa Lahiri tells the story of Gogol, the resentful son of Bengali migrants to Boston named by a father whose copy of the Russian's works had once saved him from a train wreck. The story I recount here centers not on an Indian-origin Gogol but on an 'America-returned' Pushkin. But it, too, is an account of hope and the limit to hope, set in the aftermath of a time when India, Ameri-

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ca, and Russia stood as parallel dream-worlds offering a receptive humanity the future. If it is an account of homosexuality, it is because homosexuality has come to serve as a privileged marker both of hope and its limit in the aftermath of the three worlds. If it is an account told as a song, it is a song in the sense of the Sanskrit *gita* and how I would render it, as the recognition of an ethical universe one is asked to call into being. I sing in the face of Pushkin's death. Ethics as a performative practice is offered here as a kind of mourning.

The account: two men, Pushkin Chandra and Kuldeep, were found murdered on August 14, 2004, in New Delhi, at Chandra's *barsati*, a small apartment adjoining his parents' residence. The Chandras lived in a gated enclave known as Anand Lok, the Bliss World, in the south of the giant city. Within days, residents of Delhi, as well as a globally dispersed public stitched together through the consumption of Delhi-based media, were being offered frequent and lurid reporting on what quickly became known as the Pushkin Affair.

The attention was based in part on Chandra's social position; accounts referred to his father's career in the prestigious Indian Administrative Service and to the posh surroundings of Anand Lok. But the extensive coverage emerged pri-

marily because Chandra and presumably Kuldeep were assumed to have enjoyed homosexual (or in newspaper Hindi, *samalaingik*) relations, and because they were from distinct social classes. Kuldeep was understood to be a Hindi or Punjabi speaker of a 'laboring class' background, and, like at least one of the alleged killers, was noted to be from the uncivil peasant culture of towns dominated by the Jat caste in the state of Haryana, just to the south of New Delhi. Chandra, scion of the Bliss World, had done his graduate training in management in the United States.

This class distinction between the men, registered through what anthropologist Donald Moore has called an "ethno-spatial fix" that here stitched together Haryana, the presumed incivility of Jats, and the inability to speak fluent English, became *ipso facto* evidence that the crime pointed to a 'nexus' linking wealthy gay men, poor boys, and criminal mafia. The *Hindustan Times* ran the headline "Pushkin Murder Uncovers Gigolo Trail." The once-staid *Times of India* was exultant: "Gay Murders Tip of Sordid Sleazeberg." Within hours of the murders, the relation between Chandra and the killers was inverted in the court of Delhi-based media: Chandra became a kingpin of vice, the murderers offered some kind of rough justice, and Kuldeep was as much a victim of Chandra as of whoever garroted them. An instant ethnography of Delhi homosexuality – offered as a violent and predatory demimonde abetted by the international privilege of jet-setting activists – was mobilized on nightly news reports.

The primary evidence of Chandra's criminal career was a cache of erotic photographs, allegedly of men having sex in Chandra's flat and elsewhere, along with pornographic films on disc.

Video-disc pornography, imported and homegrown, is widely available in Indian cities and towns – not only, as a decade earlier, in urban border and transit zones like bus- or train-station stalls but also in shops and bazaars at the center. But the photographs, both mementoes of parties and more explicitly sexual shots, were seen by the police as highly suggestive of a nexus linking extramarital sex to trafficking in poor men's bodies. That Chandra, or perhaps Kuldeep, might have just liked to take sexy photos was never publicly contemplated.

Soon a wide range of actors now ubiquitous in large Indian cities – in particular, human-rights activists and representatives of lesbian and gay groups – decried this near-instant inversion of criminality, which led to a smaller second wave of articles by Delhi media, now reporting on themselves. When in late 2004 I interviewed journalists working for the English news channel of the NDTV cable network, one of the agencies that more aggressively pursued the story on the homosexuality-trafficking nexus, they argued it was their more down-market Hindi news channel colleagues who were responsible for this new tabloid style. Rereading newspapers suggested otherwise.

These accusations and counteraccusations were in turn followed by a backlash, a still-smaller third wave of pieces more aggressively condemning Chandra as representative of the criminal-homosexual nexus. In an editorial by Swapan Dasgupta slyly entitled, "The Problem is *Not* Homosexuality," and widely circulated on Internet sites targeting the South Asian infotech diaspora, the author argues that it is not homosexuality in itself that gives offense but rather the politically correct refusal to recognize its persistent affinity with criminality. The problem, in short, is the nexus.

The effect of all this publicity was pronounced: many of Chandra's friends were subjected to intense police interrogation; family and friends became guilty by association; and the sexual and social lives of men having sex with men in Delhi were curtailed. Large gay parties and the gay night at an upscale pub were all shut down; park cruising and sex work were heavily policed; and AIDS organizations focusing on men having sex with men were attacked in the press as abetting trafficking. Months went by before the coverage abated.

And just as the cloud of the Pushkin Affair finally appeared to be lifting, and Chandra's friends saw a possible end to the interrogations, the academics appeared, asking more questions and trying to make sense of it all: thus my trip to Delhi.

I knew Pushkin; I did not know Kuldeep. Pushkin was the childhood friend of a close friend of mine, and I had briefly met him when he was studying business in the United States. We had other friends in common through overlapping gay and AIDS-prevention circles in both Delhi and Bombay. A number of U.S.-based academics I know had been close to Pushkin's parents.

Writing this essay reflects my belief that what was at stake in the moment of the Pushkin Affair demands considerable reflection. The task for the anthropologist, Arthur Kleinman has persistently argued, is to attend to "what is at stake," or "what really matters." For the many mutual friends of the subject of this essay and its author, what mattered was the dignity of a man, his family, and the world he was taken to stand for. For the human-rights and queer activists, what mattered in the Pushkin Affair was the global expansion of an ugly cultural anxiety they could name as homopho-

bia, linked to the generation of sexual panics by new forms of media. For journalists like Swapan Dasgupta, what mattered was India's ability to resist an inauthentic and violent cosmopolitanism centered on the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the place of a national order of culture and development. 'Homosexuality,' for Dasgupta, stood for the celebration of hedonism, the *sine qua non* of a more general state of selfishness transforming civil norms into criminality. That Chandra, fresh on his American training, went to work for foreign humanitarian agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and that his vocal supporters were often tied to NGOs based or funded from abroad, only led credence to what seemed an affinity between global humanitarianism and the loss of a local moral world.

But I want to suggest that what may matter in the Pushkin Affair takes us beyond an urgent contest between human rights and the localized invocation of a lost world. It takes us to the contemporary remaking of a persistent sense of 'India' as an irrevocably split world. This remaking in turn may help us rethink the conditions for an ethical life that I, being of my place and time, will call queer. Such an ethical life may provisionally be framed as standing outside of, and at times against, the institution of marriage or the norm, emergent in India, of the modern heterosexual couple. The variant of this life that I know best, figured between men, is often organized around the figure of the friend, or that of the teacher or master – and centers on what is alternately a gift or a demand that one may variously describe as sex or, in Hindi, as *khel* (play, something outside of the order of duty) and *masti* (intoxicating, addictive, and carefree pleasure).

Like the normative forms against which it stands as one kind of margin, this claim to an ethical life in the world the Delhi journalists attempted to portray as criminal and sleazy can become something else: a lie or an alibi. By ‘alibi’ I am not acceding to the terms of the journalists. Perhaps the best way to hint at what I mean is by citing the critical language of another, sometimes overlapping world, the one occupied by Pushkin, Kuldeep, their killers, and at times myself: that of the *hijras*, the ‘eunuchs’ or ‘third gender’ of South Asia. Hijras often name the stakes in the forms of life they craft in terms of what I might call the double to queer existence: there are true (*asli*) hijras, and there are false (*nakli*) ones. The anthropology of hijra life has tended to portray the relation between true hijras (who are intersexed or have had the operation, or have been accepted into the community by a hijra guru) and false hijras (who dress and dance as women but are not a third gender, or have not been accepted into the community) in terms of denunciation. But the border between authentic and inauthentic hijra embodiment, or belonging, is as much an improvisational exercise in creating a form of life under varied conditions of patronage and violence as it is a difference constitutive of sexual ethnicity.

In North America, queer debate in the first years of the millennium has centered on the question of ‘gay marriage’ and its threat as a project to a kind of queer authenticity rooted in a counter-ethic of sexual generosity and a disruption of normative temporality. The possibility of a differentiation between the counternorm of sexual friendship versus the norm of marriage as the condition and limit, respectively, of an ethical project may seem to call for a denunciation of the latter as inauthentic queer life. But

my invocation of *asli* and *nakli*, not as denouncing those forms of queer life that fail to maintain a counternorm but constituting the conditions under which persons craft a relation between norms and counternorms, seems relevant to a more capacious engagement with the trouble with gay marriage.

The split world I briefly mentioned, and will argue for, is of course a commonplace of analyses of both the violence and, after Hegel, the insight of a colonized, racial, or postcolonial ‘condition’ – and like all commonplaces risks a slide into banality. But the split I register in relation to the Pushkin Affair is contingent not axiomatic, an iterated sense of a universe cleft into hemispheres of violence and of beauty, an *entente* between urban administrative and capitalist elites (the so-called civil or beautiful) and rural and small-town peasants and landlords (the presumptively uncivil or violent). I turn first to violence, the figuration of incivility.

I have suggested that the key figure in the accusation against Pushkin, and almost immediately against all homosexuals, was the ‘nexus’ between homosexuality and criminality. This figure of a nexus, ubiquitous in political reportage, suggests an affinity or attachment in which a civil institution is deformed by an underlying relation to criminalized interest. A brief review of Indian newspapers and magazines since 2000 offers hundreds of variations on the nexus, with innumerable components coupled together, in themselves operating as what Lévi-Strauss would term “floating signifiers.” (They include politicians, the drug trade, the Congress Party, Pakistan, ivory smugglers, the Communist parties, doctors, North Korea, the United States, ‘insurgents,’ ‘agents,’ ‘terrorists,’ ‘mafias,’ China, the HIV virus, Bollywood,

the Reliance Corporation, Israel, builders, the environment, the CIA, Al Qaeda, cricketers, evil, science, 'anti-peace elements,' piracy, sex work, the Bangladesh army, the market, national security, the AIADMK Party, investment bankers, energy, food, marriage, and globalization.) Nexuses of all sorts abound, and the sense of a nexus is meaningful independent of its particular components.

However, what Dasgupta calls homosexuality – within the logic of the nexus – is not just another entity deformed by unsavory attachment to corrupting elements. Rather, it has come to stand metonymically for the nexus itself, for the threat to civil society, whether that civility is represented as a threatened modernity, a threatened tradition, or a threatened hybrid between the two. The degradation of Pushkin's memory, and his friends and family, was propelled by a particular collective sense of sublimity that entrepreneurial media could seize upon: that even in the gated enclaves of the rich, in the bosom of the civil service, in the World of Bliss, corruption wildly devastates, producing orgies of violence.

If there is another ubiquitous word for this threat within dispersed contemporary discourses on the problem of incivility, it is an unexpected one: feudalism. Citations of feudalism dog political reportage, but these do not refer to specific Indian historiographic debates, such as whether European feudalism was exceptional or whether the concept can fruitfully be applied to, say, the India of the fourth century of the Common Era, or of the eighth, or of the tenth through thirteenth.

Rather, the temporal referent of the feudalism I am describing is split – an era just past, an epoch just dawning. But in general, this 'feudal' is less some antediluvian, or even recent, epoch than a

miasma or plague that ever threatens to overwhelm the frail tissue of urban civility. Such a feudalism is less temporally than spatially represented. The plague has a privileged location in much reportage: it lies in the hinterland generally, thus the discussion of the Haryanvi Jat villages where Chandra's lover and one of his killers came from, and particularly in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, *fons et origo* of the feudal. It lies also in that state's erstwhile Chief Minister, the arguable champion of the 'backward' castes Lallu Prasad Yadav. Hence 'Lalooization' and 'Biharization' are familiar terms for feudalization as a process and threat.

Backwardness completes the trio of terms standing at the verge of civility. Far more than the nexus or the feudal, the backward is reflexively elaborated and enjoys a sort of national conversation. India's most prominent debate on entitlements and distributive justice centers on the problem of how many school admissions, political seats, and state jobs should be 'reserved' for persons legally marked as backward. Backwardness in this context signifies persons belonging to low castes. Since the late 1980s, the question has been whether or not reservations should be extended from so-called Untouchables, or Scheduled Castes (SCs), to the less marginal Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Fierce debates rage over whether OBCs are as backward as their classification suggests, and over the motivation of politicians in extending reservations. In reservations debate, backwardness signifies lack of equal opportunity or a caste label that allows one to make a pretense of such lack. But while the fight over who can claim the otherwise ignominious label of backward continues, what backwardness exactly consists of is less clear.

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Let me illustrate how backwardness, feudalism, and the nexus came to be attached to dominant understandings and representations of same-sex desire toward the end of the twentieth century and into the present one.

In 1997, I was living in the city of Lucknow, the capital of the populous state of Uttar Pradesh to the east of Delhi and to the west of that acme of legible backwardness, Bihar. U.P., as it is known, is said to take a close second to Bihar in the rankings of feudal rot, and I have heard journalists in conversation refer to 'U.P.-ization' as an analogue of Biharization. The moment I describe has me talking with a reporter named Deepak Sharma, who had penned a story on the murder of a local physical education instructor, Frederic Gomes, at the prestigious La Martinière School.

Earlier that summer, Gomes was shot to death, apparently while asleep at night in his bungalow, behind the main complex of school buildings. La Martinière is built around Constantia, the palace and tomb of the Enlightenment mercenary and aesthete Claude Martin, who had been under the patronage of the ruling dynasty of Awadh at their height. The structure, extraordinary in its mixing of genres, is frequently described by British historians and travel writers as exemplary of some larger truth. William Dalrymple writes lovingly of La Martinière as

perhaps the most gloriously hybrid building in India, part Nawabi fantasy and part Gothic colonial barracks. Just as Martin himself combined the lifestyle of a Muslim prince with the interests of a renaissance man – writing Persian couplets and maintaining an observatory, experimenting with map making and botany, hot air balloons and even bladder surgery – so his mausoleum mixes Georgian colonnades

with the loopholes and turrets of a mediaeval castle; Palladian arcades rise to Mughal copulas; inside brightly coloured Nawabi plasterwork enclose Wedgwood plaques of classical European Gods and Goddesses . . . In its willful extravagance and sheer strangeness, Constantia embodies like no other building the opulence, restlessness, and open-mindedness of a city which lay on the fault line between East and West, the old world of the Nawabs and the new world of the Raj.

Some of this same description reappears in "East of Eton," another Dalrymple piece on the school and the Gomes murder, in which the oddness of young men trained to recite English poetry and to take the British side in recitations of the 1857 "Mutiny" is used to exemplify a milieu in which time stands still until shattered by the violence of a new order.

After the murder of Gomes, many disparate rumors circulated, several in the tabloid Hindi press: Gomes was involved in local drug mafia. Gomes had discovered a student involved in the drug mafia. Gomes was involved with notorious women. Gomes was involved with a male student. Gomes was involved with a male student and a notorious woman. Sharma, who was then writing for the English paper *The Pioneer*, wrote a piece summing up all of these rumors, which was entitled "Gomes was a gay."

I was in the city working with a new 'gay group' called Friends India, which was started by a group of largely 'married gays' (to borrow the parlance of Delhi and Bombay). By the time I met its leaders, Friends India was run by a younger idealistic and unmarried Shia schoolteacher and an older married and retired Hindu military man, one of the original founders. Whereas many elite Anglophone men in Delhi used to refer

to gays as other elites who liked sex with men, and to straights as the working-class men they had sex with, the erotic axis of difference in Lucknow seemed to be more pederastic. Gays were older men who liked *chikna* boys. A *chikna* boy was a 'smart' or 'smooth' teenager, one who was thought to cultivate the gaze of older interested men for both pleasure and personal advancement. One day, I turned to *The Pioneer* and saw Sharma's headline, followed by additional information: Gomes was not only "a gay," he was a womanizer and in the drug trade, and so forth.

How could Mr. Gomes have been both a womanizer and gay? But even as I asked Sharma this question, I knew at least one likely answer: 'gay' for men here and at this time still suggested as much a general excess of desire as a specific object choice – not just a wife but women, not just women but boys. Sharma laughed and said pretty much the same. I don't necessarily believe all of these rumors, he told me. That's the point: the papers have gone crazy, accusing Gomes of every offense in the book. That's why I wrote the article. But then why, I asked, finally figuring out the question, did you summarize "every offense" with "Gomes was a gay"?

Sharma looked a bit sheepish. I didn't mean that he was a gay, he said to me. But the poor fellow was murdered, and suddenly he was being accused of everything. Somehow "Gomes was a gay" seemed the best was to say this.

Sharma then offered an elaboration of the particular nexus connecting Lucknow, La Martinière, homosexuality, women, and drugs. Again: a crime has been committed in a place that stands for all the civil promise of an old order, revealing secret connections that deform that promise. "It's not about homosexuality itself," Sharma said, "but it is all

about Pathans." This conversation was a few years before the post-9/11 American invasion of Afghanistan had resuscitated the colonial ethnography of Pukhtoon or Pathan proclivities to pederasty and violence. What do you mean, I asked, my words and Sharma's recalled some hours later in my notebook. Sharma argued that the Pathan culture of Malihabad was taking over places like La Martinière. Malihabad was a town not far from Lucknow, long settled by Pathans who had migrated into north India. Heroin, Sharma told me, is the key. Pathans are key players in moving heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan through India. Malihabad is flush with new money. The Pathans now are all sending their children to places like La Martinière. Its culture is changing: drugs, money, guns, and womanizing are all part of it. And of course, he continued *sotto voce*, Pathans are famous for enjoying homosex.

Sharma's account framed Lucknow through its famed school as a cynosure of the moral world of British liberalism. This world faced deformation, here localized not as Bihar but as a neighboring town. The illicit connections binding the local order to viral influence in this case were not NGOs but the older interregional networks of the Pathans.

Sharma's editor, a former sociologist, happened to come in on our conversation near the end. The business about Pathans, he told me, is all rot. It is all about land tenure. I'm from Punjab and my wife is from Bengal, he said by way of explanation, regions bordering the badlands of U.P. and Bihar to the northwest and southeast. We don't have all this homosex there. But here in U.P. you find it everywhere.

I asked why his homeland and his wife's differed so from the states of U.P. and Bihar that they straddled. His re-

sponse was not ethnoses tied to contemporary flows (Pathans, heroin, traffic, new money, old predilections) but cultures of discipline and punishment formed over the *longue durée* of colonial and postcolonial infrastructure. The forms of taxation and land tenure that the British established here in the Gangetic plains, he told me, were particularly oppressive; they set in motion a culture of such extreme oppression that not only women but also men are at risk for sexual violation at the hands of dominant landholding groups. Rape of male landless laborers and other economically marginal men has become a tool frequently used to discipline them. He described this particularity of “U.P. and Bihar” as a “feudal culture.”

The *feudal* here was not an emergent state but an effect of the colonial period. The editor’s argument was framed in secular terms, drawing as much on examples from the Hindu ruling cultures of cities like Varanasi and Patna as the Muslim ones of Lucknow and Faizabad. However, the feudal landlordism he described is a particular feature of modern nationalist critiques of the pederastic culture of Islamic aristocratic life, where as in the writer Premchand’s famous short story (and Satyajit Ray’s film), “The Chess Players,” the homoeroticism may often be an implicit figure of libertinage that is part of a set of excessive attachments including games and womanizing. A generation of historiography framed the erstwhile rulers of Lucknow, the *navabs* of Awadh, as effete and licentious. The very term *navabi shauk* – princely inclination or desire – implies a fondness for younger men.

The feudal thus carries a double valence – an imminent condition of civil collapse and an archaic condition of agrarian excess. It draws variously on spatial, temporal, and communal refer-

ents that frame it as the condition of somewhere or someone else. But for places denigrated as persistently backward, it can mark a form of identification and ensuing politics. Thus during his tenure in the late 1990s Bihar’s former Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav could patronize the *launda nautch*, cross-dressing young men who dance and provide sex for male guests at weddings, as a ‘populist’ measure to secure his reputation as a man of the people. In Varanasi, in the east of Uttar Pradesh near the Bihar border, ‘homosex’ (the term that moves easily between English and Hindi) was frequently described to me as a feature either of Muslim Pathan towns to the north or Hindu dominant-caste landlords in Bihar to the east, but it was also claimed by a number of local satirists and writers as a distinctive feature of the antinomian quality of the city’s cultural milieu. Against the pretensions of a dominant national order associated with the metropolitan city and its forms of consumption, backwardness might mark itself as a state of authenticity set against a different kind of excess, and the figure of homosex could mark something other than degeneration.

But one must immediately qualify the gender of such homosex. When I asked a senior minister of Laloo’s Rashtriya Janata Dal Party why, despite metropolitan condemnation, his party had hired dancing boys, he told me that the party’s base respects women, unlike the urban elites who oppose it. “In *orchestra* weddings,” he said, referring to the usual wedding bands popular in the state capital of Patna and elsewhere in the country, “ladies dance for the wedding party. But in our rural areas we have the idea that we must respect our daughters. To dance is human (*nautch to hota hai, is duniya mein*), but boys dance as it is not proper for ladies to do so.”



This sense that metropolitan culture challenges the normative order of gender and honor may be a commonplace of agrarian social change: in India in the period of neoliberal economic and social transformation, one of the more potent vehicles of political theater has been the metropolitan or international challenge to women's comportment in the form of lesbian rejection of familial norms. Thus, a local land contractor and gangster in Varanasi who participated avidly in organizing the annual carnival celebration of Holi, and who spoke approvingly of sex between men as a familiar feature of the order of pleasure and violence that regulates political life in the city, was outspoken in attacking Deepa Mehta, the Indo-Canadian director of what he called the "lesbian film" *Fire*. The film was an attack on Indian and particularly Hindu men, he told me, and he was happy, he said, to orchestrate the protests against her when she first tried to film *Water* in Varanasi. Unlike a number of other parts of the world being transformed in the aftermath of the cold war, India did not experience significant political attacks on sex between men as part of the challenge to metropolitan inauthenticity.

The minor backlash, the 'third wave' of reporting after the deaths of Kuldeep and Chandra, suggests the possibility of a shifting field of sexual publicity. Political gain, or national purification, through the condemnation or prosecution of sex between men is not an entirely novel feature of Indian modernity over the past century. In the 1930s there was controversy over the writer Ugra's depiction of pederasty (in which M. K. Gandhi himself intervened to suggest that the predatory violence of such desire was set against the self-transforming goals of *satyagraha*), and more recently

there were prosecutions of AIDS activists, and later 'married gays,' in Lucknow as violating Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code prohibiting carnal intercourse against the order of nature. A commonplace of postcolonial studies frames the cause for sodomitical anxiety as a constitutive feature of the sexual imaginary of British colonialism, and yet the danger of arguments that reduce the contingency of current sexual politics to the persistence of the colonial wound is to reduce an engaged diagnosis of the present to the binarism of Europe versus an imaginary precolonial world. The virulence of forensic publicity in the face of the Anand Lok murders demands more. In particular, it demands attention to the other face of homosex's current publicity.

If the *feudal* characterizes modernity as a fragile temporality ever ready to slide into the life of the nexus, a kind of Hobbesian Warre, I want to argue for feudalism's persistent opposition to a contrastive state I will term *fashion*. It is in the implosion of feudalism and fashion as modes of knowing the world that I want to locate the refusal to mourn for Pushkin.

Chandra's guilt was clinched in the court of the media by the presence of the sexual photographs and the claim that he was a commercial trafficker in images of young men. Though unsubstantiated (and, according to many men in Delhi and Bombay who were part of his circle of friends and who appeared in some of the photographs, simply untrue), the claim resonated because the photographs called to mind a different staple of contemporary publicity, that of so-called modeling scams.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the potential fungibility of good looks under the sign of 'style' began to underwrite the extensive commitment of petty

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bourgeois youth in small towns and large cities to modeling as a practice. News about top models, and the designers and impresarios that elevate them to celebrity, became an everyday feature in Hindi and English papers in north India, and exemplary stories of fantastic careers in the new field of *fashion* proliferated.

Beauty as a project and demand is one way to think about the differential stakes in futurity. In small towns across the subcontinent, market streets are now lined with shop fronts offering hopeful futures. Computer institutes and English-language tutors have been joined by fashion and modeling schools. On the Internet, dozens of websites featuring the photos and biodata of many thousands of young women and men from India and Pakistan stitch these localized aspirations into a national and transnational scene of hope.

If any of the pedagogies of hope has come to stand metonymically for the rest, it is not computers but *fashion*. Fashion designers are avidly followed in the press, not only on Page Three, the society news, but even in the reportage of national affairs, as when exchange between India and Pakistan is enhanced by the gift of a *sherwani* coat by Pakistan's 'top designer' to the Indian prime minister. Fashion, like computers, is the *entrée* into a kind of flexible citizenship. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) vies with the famed Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in the competitiveness of its entrance exams and the global scale of the future it produces. Even the unlettered can hope to become models.

But as fashion has proliferated as a master narrative of hope, hope's limit has also appeared, as a seamy underside to fashion. With all the new publicity of fashion's possibility come repeated ex-

poses and other narratives of *nakli* or counterfeit opportunities, i.e., stories of casting couches and would-be models tricked into prostitution. The primary victim of modeling's counterfeit hope is usually a young *mamuli larki*, an ordinary or 'middle-class' girl much like Jassi, the heroine of the top soap opera of 2004, *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*. (*Jassi* was based on the Colombian *telenovela* *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*; an American version, *Ugly Betty*, appeared in 2006.) The heroine of all three is a young woman of modest means who discovers her 'inner beauty' and emerges as an international star of fashion, but the road to fashion's new hope is lined with traps. In the Indian soap, Jassi's photograph – the sign and vehicle of what I am calling both the fungibility and the hope of fashion – is repeatedly utilized by villains of various sorts to do her harm.

But the exemplary body of fashion's hope is as often male as it is female, despite the importance of the beauty queen as a dominant figuration of this hope on the national scale. Beauty appears to be too risky a strategy for *mamuli* young women: as in the 2005 Hindi film *Bunty aur Babli*, in which a spunky girl with dreams of stardom runs away from home to try out for a fashion show only to be told that the price for entry is sex with the organizer.

If women are less available than men within certain narrative forms to demonstrate fashion's fungibility, accounts of the transvaluation of ordinary male subjects often distinguish *fashion* as elite apparatus from *style* as its creative appropriation. Crudely, within the logic of contemporary Hindi film (and the Hindi pulp 'sexology' and 'true crime' magazines studied by scholars like anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava), 'fashion' is to 'style' both as women are to men and as the rich are to the poor.

Fashion bespeaks the radical innovation and mastery of codes of distinction, as the spectacular order both of the nation (the beauty queen winning for India and propelling the national physiognomy onto the global stage, or the fashion designer as a surprisingly ubiquitous object of exchange in periodic thaws between India and Pakistan) and of the global commodity (Indian fashion competing with the best of New York or Milan). Within media pitched to imagined *mamuli* audiences, fashion has a double edge: it inevitably calls to mind a predatory moral economy of sexual harassment; individualist 'selfishness' and *shauk* (desire, inclination) set against the reproduction of extended family values; and the fetishization of money and other antifamily and antitrafficking object relations.

'Style,' as the citation of fashion, allows for more comfortable ambivalence. Many relatively inexpensive commodities, particularly clothing, are marked by the generic brand 'Style.' Style, in other words, carries the expansive equity of the generic, or *mamuli*, within new symbolic economies of value. Many of the young men I interviewed over the past decade in north Indian towns and the metros of Delhi and Mumbai use style to describe a certain kind of hope and its actualization. Linked to English-language and computer skills as much as to the dance moves or sartorial capital that might land one a career in the evergreen world of the cinema, style marks the site of an actual politics of symbolic and social capital as opposed to fashion, its imagined limit.

This distinction helps us understand the position of one of the most prominent culture heroes associated with the new order of the potential, if risky, convertibility of hope and style, and in turn the invention of Pushkin as trafficker in

the sexualized deformation of young men's hope.

From the late 1980s onward, I began to notice references in elite Indian media to a 'new masculinity' that was globally competitive, not some hypermasculine order, as predicted by scholars like Ashis Nandy, but a softer and more androgynous elite form. "The new Indian man is unafraid to get a facial" was one of the sillier variants on the theme. This globally fungible masculinity was of course set against the imagined violence of the backward or feudal, and one of its avatars was the male fashion designer. Designers, so the account went, were masters of the code of the new global order, but – and here was the full measure of their heroism – they were also exponents of the particularity and imagined global popularity of *Indian* fashion, what became known as 'the ethnic.' The fashion designer thus represented a new kind of actor, globally positioned and yet *at home*, in every sense, in the world.

But many stories generated by attention to this new hero turned out to be grim: again, accounts of fake institutes taking parents' money and running, of 'casting couches' for aspiring youth, and of modeling as a front for luring youth into pornography and prostitution. If popular film featured women as the victims of the age of *nakli* fashion, art film with its realism turned as well to the sexual exploitation of men. Thus in the 2005 film *Page Three*, a reporter asks her gay best friend to help out her aspiring actor boyfriend find work in the industry, only to discover them sleeping together as the price for assistance; and in the 2004 *Let's Enjoy*, a Jat and working-class gym instructor – an 'ordinary' man and would-be model – sneaks into a fancy Delhi 'farmhouse party' (these private estates to the south of the city have become synonymous with elite parties,

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drugs, and sex) in the hopes of being discovered, only to discover that the gay fashion designer present is only interested in sleeping with him.

Much was made in the press of the screenplays for realist films like *Page Three* and *Let's Enjoy as romans à clef* based on actual events. The predatory gay fashion designer story was understood as a familiar feature of the new economy, with many journalists and screenwriters citing actual cases, to the extent that their ever more conventional features began constituting a new urban legend. But if the 'gay' as the relation and the limit of neoliberal hope features heavily as a figure of such realism in film, it fails to do so as a figure of the feudal or backward, the deforming outside to the civil. When the nexus is treated in film – usually staged as stories of crime syndicates or the corruptions of politics – the narrative is usually offered in an epic or tragic mode, and the stock scene of the deformation of a heterosexual love affair is not, as in *Page Three*, accompanied by a gay subplot. In part, this may be because the citation of effeminate or 'gay' characters in cinematic accounts of crime and punishment draws on a long-standing comic convention of subverting the claims to authority of the police, criminals, or other representatives of local sovereign power through camp, present in the regional dramatic traditions of western and northern India: *nautanki*, *tamasha*, and others. One of the more popular of many examples is the 1991 *Mast Kalandar*, featuring both a very swish Pinkoo, the man-crazy son of a notorious gangster, and the police officer who is madly, if campily, in love with him. The homosexually predatory landlord, gangster, or politician as a dramatic rather than comic figure therefore moved from the tabloid media into literature (in the works of Vikram Chandra,

Pankaj Mishra, and Makarand Paranjape, for example) rather than film, targeted to and consumed by a more elite audience fearing the loss of a well-circumscribed civil society.

In the wake of the accusations following the deaths of Chandra and Kuldeep, I have offered a different mapping of 'the global gay' than either colleagues who focus on how AIDS and other vectors of globalization produce a transnational gay culture, or those attentive to the breaks and disparities between the variously queer practices and identifications that have proliferated globally from the late 1980s to the present. Despite the emergence of vigorous social movements and a wide range of political, humanitarian, and intellectual and expressive projects, neither queer sexual cultures nor institutional or popular responses to them have been the dominant representations of 'homosex' or 'the gay.' Rather, the elaboration of two figures – on the one hand, the sodomitical and usually rural threat to civil society, and on the other, the figure of the gay limit to youthful hope – bracket commitments to order, or the ordinary, as imaginable norms of an Indian future. The violence with which the two young men were killed could be immediately inverted into an account of how Pushkin embodied the corrupt nexus that perverts the hope of ordinary men because the available forensics superimposed on them these two figures: the sodomitical nexus, and the gay limit to beauty's hope.

Whatever the relation between Pushkin Chandra and Kuldeep, and between either of them and their two killers, and whatever the desires behind the incriminating photos, homosex in Delhi has been the vehicle of social mobility, understanding, pleasure, and love across the deep sense of a status divide that

has led so many sociologists and philosophers from abroad to label hierarchy India's preeminent genius or curse. It has also been the site of commerce and exploitation, to the point where I have many times heard elite men in the capital refers to 'gays' as men like themselves and 'straights' as the working- or service-class men they pass around like *kula* among themselves. Homosex may offer far greater possibilities for the undoing of status exclusions than do the various marriage systems of a twenty-first century society, but it carries no imperative for any such undoing. Status differentials, on the contrary, are often the site where erotic attraction as well as opportunity emerges.

What might it mean to speak of the 'ethical,' then, in the face of the accusations and counteraccusations marking the Pushkin Affair? The task here is neither to secure nor redeem Chandra's damaged person. Two men are brutally killed, two others await judgment, a family and friends are devastated, and various experts get their twenty minutes. That a well-off young man sought sexual connection with working-class Jats and vice versa invokes a moral world in which status differentials are loosened, if not undone, through sexual fellowship. It also invokes the shared desire of many elite men for 'rough trade,' and the extensive opportunities for enacting violence in either direction across a status divide. Fetishes, if that is what we have come to, never have politics a priori: heterosexual desire *tout court* is the most significant example. If the persistent desire for the other across a gender, race, or class differential always traverses the ground of a prior violence, there may be work to be done that neither presumes denunciation nor a commitment to commensurability as the dominant value. This work is what I mean by en-

gaging forms as both *asli* and *nakli*, as both authentic and somehow not so. It is not fair to ask any of this of Pushkin: it may be helpful to ask it of ourselves as his survivors. But any such work is hard to entertain when homosex is required to stand for the nexus, and gay life for the limit to hope.

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