

# A collaborative dialogue about nurturing with/in queerness

Feminist Review

Issue 143, 76–88

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DOI: 10.1177/01417789261442007

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## Abstract

We are a group of four persons, assigned female at birth, identifying as queer and non-binary, residing in India. We ruminate about the need and politics of queer nurturing. Drawing from our own and our friends' fragmented life histories, we wonder about the elements of nurturing, such as intergenerational allyship, friendship and kinship, that shape our present. Our rumination and writing are collaborative. We have received formal academic training methods and methodologies in our disciplinary backgrounds and identify as academic activists. Because of this combination, our writing evades formalism, with the intention of being accessible to both non-academics and our students. In a larger global dialogical space, this will be categorised as 'knowledge production from the Global South', a somewhat overused phrase perhaps that hides more than it clarifies. Other than our geographical location, the phrase fails to highlight that we are also bearers of caste-class privileges. So, instead of conceptually positioning ourselves as (uninterrogated) figures from the Global South, we reframe ourselves as dialogists to exchange thoughts about queer nurturing. We hope that this will help sustain transnational dialogues when conversations fail and authoritarian regimes flourish. We met via Google Meet video chats, discussed and then went back to writing. Nurturing is central to our lives and movements, which is absent from a popular dictionary definition. We are queer folks embroiled in turbulent political moments that translate to violent casteist and classist affronts on the ground. Therefore, we look to the promise of nurturing as we almost break when we break each other's fall. This promise is manifested in our connections to each other, i.e. the authors. Nurturing is all we have against violent encounters, institutional backlashes and dying elders. Nurturing, while interactional and requiring individual attention, will be viable if it is informed by radical compassion and bound by the constitutional imagination of the social. It is urgent to recapitulate feminist and queer histories of

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nurturing and situate our political position today. It is perhaps the experiential and epistemological basis of feminist and queer politics, where nurturance finds political meaning.

### **Keywords**

nurturing, care, feminist, queer, trans\*, collective, India

## **Introducing our collaborative dialogue**

We are a group of four persons,<sup>1</sup> assigned female at birth, identifying as queer and non-binary, residing in India.<sup>2</sup> As we write this, four of our friends and queer kin are recovering from being assaulted and sexually harassed in a populated place in South Kolkata (Ray, 2025). South Kolkata, in the larger urban imaginary and in terms of infrastructural privilege, is a hub of middle-class desirable goods and services,<sup>3</sup> including cafes, supermarkets and malls. Jodhpur Park, where the incident occurred, is also home to Porshi,<sup>4</sup> a space that supports and nurtures queer and trans\* individuals. Hence, the beating and sexual harassment came as a shock, especially as the incident was spatially very close to our canteen. Against this backdrop, we ruminate about the need for, and the politics of, queer nurturing. Our ruminations and writing are collaborative. We have received formal academic training in specific methodologies in our disciplinary backgrounds,<sup>5</sup> and we identify as academic activists. Because of this combination, our writing eschews formalism, with the intention of being accessible to both non-academics and our students. In a larger Global North academic context, this will perhaps be categorised as ‘knowledge production from the Global South’, a somewhat overused phrase that hides more than it clarifies. Beyond our geographical location, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are also situated within structures of caste and class privilege. Our positionalities as members of dominant caste backgrounds, endowed with varying degrees of cultural and economic capital, inevitably shape our modes of engagement and access to institutional authority. Such privileges afford us a degree of ease in interactions with the police and local government officials – an ease that remains unequally distributed and often inaccessible to our caste and class-marginalised kin and peers. So instead of conceptually positioning ourselves as (uninterrogated) figures from the Global South, we reframe ourselves as dialogists exchanging thoughts about queer nurturing. Each of the sections that follow is written by a different author, named respectively in the section header. While this is the case, we view this as a collaborative work as it emerged from our writing, meeting via Google Meet for video chats and conversations and then going back to writing. Writing collaboratively on a piece about nurturing is a moment of nurturing itself when ideologies of knowledge production seem to suggest otherwise. We hope that our sharing this work will help sustain transnational dialogues when conversations fail and authoritarian regimes flourish.

## **Niharika: Nurturing as radical compassion**

Nurturing: ‘to take care of, feed, and protect someone or something, especially young children or plants, and help him, her, or it to develop’.

Cambridge Dictionary (2025)

Nurturing is central to our lives and movements, which is absent from this popular dictionary definition. We are queer folks embroiled in turbulent political moments that translate to violent casteist and

classist affronts on the ground. Therefore, we look to the promise of nurturing as we almost break when we break each other's fall. This promise is manifested in our connections to each other, i.e. the authors. It is also tied to those whose shoulders on which we stand: our dead and fragile mothers, our queer and trans\* elders. They have taught us what nurturing means: most of the time it is gendered, and at other times it embodies a politics of collective being. So, if nurturing is gendered (and casteist and classist in the context where we reside), why turn to nurturing? Because nurturing is all we have against violent encounters, institutional backlashes and dying elders. Nurturing, while interactional and requiring individual attention, is viable if it is informed by radical compassion and bound by the constitutional imagination of the social.

### অন্যকে লালন করা (*To show loving kindness towards the other*)

We meet the limits of our material resources as we encounter those evading child marriage, escaping 'love jihad'<sup>6</sup> and passing silently in strictly surveilled residential societies. Tangible resources of finance and coordinated human help are not always enough or readily available these days. So, we stretch our intangible resources, such as listening to each other, sharing our hopelessness and focusing on the immediate task at hand. Being vulnerable is not an option; that is for northern academic speculation. We say this because many of our caste-class marginalised queer and trans\* kins are born in precarity; hence, growing up requires protecting oneself from vulnerability. When surviving violent institutions, vulnerability is not an advantage. Neither is strength: that is for self-help industries. Beyond vulnerability and strength, nurturing resides in its crevices. But, if nurturing has to be reparative, its future now lies in radical compassion. In compassion, the conventional self can neither survive nor exist unless the other survives and lives. It is urgent, intergenerational, multidimensional and rooted in place. The intimate space, the distant geography and the not-so-familiar street all overlap in entangled ways, as the self and other silently slip into each other, bypassing heteronormative laws of kinship. But if we are to sincerely practise our politics of turning away from reproducing casteist and classist homogeneous structures, we may have to abandon idealised queer kinships as well. They sometimes perilously foreclose the conditions for compassion because they too often hover dangerously close to Brahmanical models of endogamous unions.<sup>7</sup> When dominant-caste queer and trans\* persons seek cultural familiarity in queer relationalities, it is a mirror that often reflects comfort in one's universe of hegemonic power.

In 1956, Dr BR Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, accompanied by over 300,000 followers in Nagpur. Inspired by Dr Ambedkar's political spirituality<sup>8</sup> and my experience as a Mahayana Buddhist practitioner, I turn to nurturing loving kindness as *maitree*. *Maitree* is a Sanskrit term that translates as loving kindness and friendship. *Metta* in Pali similarly invokes loving kindness. Fellowship, friendship, *maitree* and *metta*: all are a call to recognise compassion as an essential component of ethical living (Dalai Lama, 2018). I am drawn toward Dr Ambedkar, invoking the *Triratna*, or the Three Jewels,<sup>9</sup> where Buddhist practitioners (including myself) take refuge. Along with two other invocations – *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, inspired by the French Revolution, and *Educate, Agitate and Organise*, drawn from the British Fabian Society (Queen, 2024) – the declaration to take refuge in Buddhahamma<sup>10</sup> forms the pillars of Dr Ambedkar's social justice praxis. These invocations were brought into conversation with the social and material realities of caste humiliation.<sup>11</sup> But as Jadumani Mahanand (2021) argues, how can fraternity exist in a Brahmanical social order with graded caste inequality? In resonance with Mahanand, I ask: how do we imagine radical compassion in deeply caste-coded contexts that pervade queer and trans\* living?

Furthermore, nurturing is fraught, it is exhausting and yet it is significant to so many queer trans\* lives. When we struggle with burnout, grief and conflicting demands, we turn to our secret archives of troubled care, our plants, our non-human companions and our spiritual friends. When we do not have the conditions once dreamt of to care for others, we turn to the language of rights and the Constitution because we cannot afford to reject the juridical or its promise, which is essential to our rigidly stratified society. We turn to the law when the law fails us, not to be crassly recognised but to demand expansive conditions for collective repair. The possibility of collective repair through faith in the Constitution inspires me. Dr Ambedkar (2014 [1947]) elaborated on the relationship between minorities and the state in his memorandum to the Constituent Assembly on 15 March 1947, outlining the rights, obligations and conditions required to secure a political democracy. While the memorandum primarily focused on the conditions and rights of the ‘depressed classes’, it is a text that beautifully lays down the duties and responsibilities of the state towards minorities. In it, I read a call for radical compassion that brings together political democracy and economic rights, offering a chance at reparation. Perhaps nurturing can be reparative at both an individual and a collective level, despite and because of being informed by burnt-out-ness and violence.

### **Sutanuka: The rhizomatic self and nurturing cracks in the system**

I feel like a rhizomatic weed (আগাছা) as a non-binary queer, neurodivergent and grieving body.

In this dialogue, I draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1980) theorisation of ‘the rhizome’ and envision rhizomatic weeds as an analytical metaphor for trans\* and queer bodies in relation to the conjoined workings of hierarchical institutions that perpetuate capitalist-ableist-brahmanical-cis-heteronormativity. I bring Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) imagery of rhizomatic weeds into an everyday understanding of them, as I experience their life/death in a ‘well-maintained’ garden with boundary walls. Like other plants, weeds germinate from seeds and claim surfaces from above and below – whether it be a wall or a piece of land. The seeds, dispersed by various methods, remain dormant until they receive favourable natural resources, including sunlight, rain, air and space. These resources help them nurture a rhizomatic structure, where the stems below the surface send out horizontal roots and shoots in intervals, developing an image of non-linear, interconnected and interdependent growth, with a decentralised focus/power that does not follow a predetermined survival template. This holds the potential to survive under extreme weather conditions, unlike many other plant species. It is essential to mention here that the weeds are never ‘nurtured’ and their ‘being in the world’ is seldom considered worthy of nurturance or care; instead, they are regarded as ‘undesirable’ forms of life in a ‘well-maintained’ garden space/territory.

Trans\* and queer bodies, like rhizomatic weeds, spread their wings when they have access to resources in their own time, without worrying about having to meet normative deadlines. However, as weeds often become a source of panic for the gardener, trans\* and queer bodies become a source of panic for the prevailing capitalist-ableist-brahmanical-cis-heteronormative regime. The gardener panics over the weeds’ non-commercial, unproductive, wild and unruly spreading in their territory. Further, the weeds become the gardener’s source of repulsion as they often hold the potential to ‘pollute’ the ‘pure breeds’. They usually become unintelligible ‘abject’ bodies, from which the territorial gardener aggressively wishes to sanitise the space.

The panic-stricken, threatened and repulsed gardener perceives the weeds as ‘pests’ whose growth needs to be controlled. Thus, without any hesitation or accountability, the gardener pulls out and kills the weeds in the name of beautification – nurturing and enhancing resources for the desired plants,

which often (re)produce flowers and fruits and are often deemed pretty and pure according to normative sociocultural, aesthetic and economic standards.

Does this stop the weeds from growing? The gardener employs professionals to keep their garden ‘weed free’ – just like the state and social institutions that continuously work towards sanitising their nation-state from trans\* and queer bodies.

Now I go back to my memories of 11 February 2025 when my trans\* and queer friends and kins were attacked by a mob, as mentioned in the introduction. I was not present at the exact site of the attack, but I later came to know that the police, in their urge to bring the law-and-order situation under control, picked up the survivors of violence and took them to the police station. By the end of the day, the police also accepted our complaint against the attackers. However, in the process of lodging the complaint – in every step of following procedural ‘due process’ – both the survivors and we had to face extreme forms of trans\* and queer negativity and harassment. As if trans\* and queer bodies deserve no right to be heard, no right to dignity and, of course, no right to compassion-empathy-nurturance-care, just like the undesired and abject weeds. Furthermore, as trans\* and queer bodies, we cannot even hold any of the state apparatus accountable for the harassment we had to endure. Against the capitalist-ableist-brahmanical-cis-heteronormative order, we bear the continuous threat of being uprooted just like the weeds in a ‘well-maintained’ garden.

Since the day of the attack, discussions around mob violence have continued simultaneously while we support one another’s mental and physical well-being. Many among us have expressed our anger and disappointment over the police decision to detain the survivors and their complete lack of immediate action against the attackers. For them, it seemed that the police did an injustice to us. In our discussions about police inaction, one of the survivors reflected, ‘What if the police hit back at the attackers? Will that do justice to us? If that had happened, I would have stopped the police from beating the attackers’. I believe this reflection defies the dominant sociocultural masculinist narrative of resistance, such as ‘an eye for an eye’ (ইন্ডের জবাব পাটকেল). Perhaps a feminist approach to nurturing and care in this context can be imagined as non-hierarchical/non-paternalistic: something that breaks the cycle of violence by understanding it as structural and contextual, not as communal or individual.

As I take in this understanding of feminist nurturing and care, I continue to hold a deep sense of grief<sup>12</sup> – as I mourn the violence experienced by my kins and friends – and ethical pain<sup>13</sup> as I sincerely try to fathom the vulnerabilities of trans\* and queer bodies against a repressive regime. However, with my imagination and identification with the rhizomatic weeds, I bring to the fore their resilient nature that continues to spread their wings in extreme weather conditions. The cycle of life/death of the rhizomatic weeds continues while embracing the precarity and vulnerability of their existence.

I call for a more expansive imagination of being in this world as trans\* and queer bodies – akin to rhizomatic weeds that continue to unfurl despite repressive or extreme environments. When our very existence provokes panic, threat and repulsion, the mere act of continuing to exist becomes an assertion of resilience, even as we endure and embrace grief and ethical pain. At the same time, the survival of these weeds offers profound hope: that, gradually yet persistently, they may blur the predetermined imaginaries of hierarchical and paternalistic systems of nurture and care, as well as the notion of a ‘well-maintained’ garden space defined by rigid boundaries. To nurture the cracks, in this sense, is to defy masculinist narratives of resistance and revenge. Perhaps, then, our resilience itself becomes a mode of being – one that continuously tends to and expands these systemic cracks.

I wonder now, what do I do with my intense feelings of grief and ethical pain? At the same time, I endure/embrace phases of 'non-functionality' and 'unproductivity'; it is difficult to sustain myself within a highly individualistic and neurotypical socio-economic culture such as we live in, which in my case manifests through various degrees of psycho-somatic crises. I feel that perhaps grief and ethical pain can be transformed into resistance through feminist nurturance and care. This collaborative work, exemplified in the present dialogical piece, is an instance where I transform my grief and ethical pain into resistance through the act of writing, while being nurtured by my rhizome-like network of queer kinship.

### **Poushali: Nurturing as feminist-queer collective praxis**

In the rising onslaught of right-wing majoritarian hatred and divisive politics, in living compulsory neoliberal lives, what is the role of feminist-queer care and nurturance? Has nurturance been a prerequisite in feminist movements and collective spaces? With time, do we also recognise a lack or fatigue in feminist-queer nurturing?

As hate, divisiveness and violence increasingly proliferate and become normalised within society, the feminist-queer practices of affective labour and care grow ever more complex and demanding. In the midst of such politics of hate, and within a capitalist context driven by the fetishisation of productivity and performance, the task of building support and sustaining communities becomes both imperative and profoundly challenging. In these individualistic times, nurturance is coated and advertised with the concept not only of 'self-care' but also of 'self-love'. The capitalist industries of 'self-care' and 'self-love' not only promote consumerism and privatisation in all aspects of life but also push us to individualised remedies in structural crises relating to unemployment, unaffordable education, health emergencies, riots, domestic violence, rape, sexual violence and many others. How is the feminist-queer praxis of care and nurturance battling capitalist industries? To reflect on our current dispositions, perhaps a historical glimpse of feminist-queer labour and nurturance becomes necessary.

It is perhaps within the experiential and epistemological basis of feminist and queer politics that nurturance finds political meaning. The history of autonomous women's movements and collectives<sup>14</sup> in India was about finding a common reference point in shared oppression. There are numerous narratives of women escaping violent homes and activists struggling to create spaces of shelter, support and legal and emotional assistance. Nurturing involved sharing intimate spaces, taking on domestic responsibilities and opening homes to numerous women. In the 1990s and 2000s, feminist campaigns worked with differences in addressing experiences of casteist atrocities and communal and religious backlash. Since the 2010s, it has been about reclaiming public space and the workplace from impunities of sexual violence – from Slutwalks, Pads Against Sexism and Kiss of Love and Take Back the Night protests after the gang rape of Jyoti Singh in Delhi in 2012 (John, 2019) to reclaiming the streets after the rape and murder that took place at R. G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in 2024 in Kolkata (Basak, 2025).<sup>15</sup> The politics of resilience, care and nurturance have had to remain relentless and uninterrupted, particularly in the face of escalating state repression. It can be argued that it is this very politics that has enabled the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR movement (Zaidi, 2020) to endure despite widespread state violence and suppression.<sup>16</sup> But how are our feminist-queer collectives and solidarities sustaining themselves in the aftermath of such large-scale rebellions and brutal state excesses? The legacy of feminist-queer politics of care and nurturance demands renewed reflection at this critical juncture.

Incidents such as that of 11 February 2025 – when our queer kin and friends were physically and sexually assaulted – compel us to revisit and reposition this legacy. This was not merely another instance of brutal sexual and physical violence; it also served as a moment for internal re-diagnosis of our collective radical praxis of care and nurturance. Like many other manifestations of heteropatriarchal violence, this incident did not mark the beginning of a new movement. Rather, it sought to hold and assimilate care and solidarities quietly, through a slow and collective recognition. It attempted to make sense of humiliation, pain and grief by locating them within forms of collective bonding and nurturance – forms that were also disruptive, since queer and trans\* bodies and identities are often subjected to shame and scrutiny even within feminist-queer collectives. This disruption exemplified what Mark Andrejevic (2004) terms ‘lateral surveillance’, wherein the pervasive surveillance practices of state and authoritarian regimes generate internal mechanisms of monitoring within marginalised communities. While our feminist-queer collectives continue to endure such lateral surveillance from within, these tensions simultaneously compel us to re-interrogate the idealised and long-cherished political praxis of feminist-queer nurturance and solidarity.

I want to pause and reflect on where we find ourselves faltering today in sustaining the ethics of resilience, care and nurturance that have long served as the foundational ethos of feminist and queer movements. Whether it is the persistence of lateral surveillance or the difficulty of sustaining solidarities in the aftermath of mass movements, are we burdened by an ever-expanding weight of exhaustion? Exhaustion borne from the histories of organising, of providing care and support at home, in workplaces, in counselling centres and across movement spaces. Exhaustion from the very excess of feminist care and labour: the care, labour and nurturance that have always been presumed as given, as prerequisite, as the default matrix underpinning every political movement.

The issue probably is not about being or not being able to perform the feminist-queer politics of radical care and nurturance. Rather, it is about recognising exhaustion. Recognising and articulating the particular nature of ‘feminist exhaustion’ (Nash and Pinto, 2025) that has been carried for many years through personal and political struggles. It has always been a continuous challenge for feminist-queer politics to sustain collective nurturance in movements; build collectives alongside caregiving in family, relationships and at work; make deviant choices and lead unconventional lives. It is a praxis defined fundamentally by care and nurturance, by emotional labour in every sphere – work, activism, personal relationships, friendships, family. To attend to this ‘unrelenting need to care – and a feminism defined by the unrelenting call to care’ (Nash and Pinto, 2025: 93), perhaps the need of the hour is to recognise and articulate fatigue and exhaustion too; because it is only by articulating, communicating and sharing exhaustion of care, labour and nurturance that one may be able to deconstruct the burdens of excess care – the excess and compulsive care that piles up with capitalist and neoliberal work regimes and solitude. It is through such recognition and articulation of ‘feminist exhaustion’ that one may be able to dislodge the capitalist industries of ‘self-care’ and ‘self-love’.

The re-examination of the feminist-queer collective praxis of care and nurturance can only take off through a dissociation between the capitalist tasks of care, labour and nurturance within the family, at work and between the feminist tasks of support, mutual aid and collective, organisation and movement building. It also helps one to recognise and dialogue about feminist-queer care, labour and nurturance that have not found articulation in this part of the world. In recognising, asserting and dialoguing about feminist exhaustion, fatigue also creates a ground for sharing personal-political battles that are finding liminal or no space in the rising onslaughts of incessant violence, extraction and exploitation. After all, where do we start from, if we have forgotten to look back at experiences not only of violence but also of exhaustion: experiences as women, queer and trans\* people in our multiple roles as workers, caregivers, administrators, mothers, lovers, friends and activists.

## **Kolika: Self and collective care, a queer feminist challenge to capitalist heteronormativity**

In a world battling the iron shackles of capitalism, the concept of care is monopolised by the same. As capitalism calls for increased productivity and assesses self-worth and success based on that, care requires us to pause, rest, introspect and use time differently. Does feminism give us an alternative reality where efforts at care can be acknowledged and accommodated in this otherwise capitalist world? Youth activists engaged with organisations or collectives that identify as queer and feminist find such spaces to be carrying the history and potential of living in a reality that provides an alternative to heteronormativity as well as capitalism – two systems that nourish and celebrate one another. Capitalism is a system that promotes individual freedom and choice while reinforcing gender norms – a practice that also defines heteronormativity. Social images shriek of the binary gendered division of labour, binary gender roles, binary gendered appearances, binary gendered families – all sitting heftily on capitalistic notions of the ideal binary complementing each other, being at their productive best. The invisibilisation and otherisation of gender and sexual non-normative individuals and communities characterise the everyday practice of heteronormativity. The neoliberal capitalist system thrives on and perpetuates binary, heteronormative gender norms and reinforces hierarchical power structures.

Activism requires engagement inspired by the will to defend human rights for all and oneself, respecting freedom and agency across all identities and intersections. Activism also needs to incorporate strategies to identify burnout and address it effectively. Julie Drolet et al. (2017: 203) describe burnout in the human services field as ‘a state of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion resulting from chronic exposure or involvement in human service work’. Burnout is inevitable in activism but it is not the end of the world, and burnout can be reversed. People can rise from a burnout stage in their lives. Collective care is a way of sharing the burden of burnout.

Feminist activists strive to incorporate an understanding of self and collective care into their personal and professional spheres through an alternative lens. The organisational and collective spaces they are a part of also play a crucial role in determining their feminist experiences. There are ongoing efforts through peer-counselling workshops, narrative-based workshops, organisational and community retreats and youth leader trainings, among others, to establish the need to look at self-care and collective care as essential elements of activism, build a language around it, speak it and communicate it to others across generations. However, a tension exists around the slippery tendency of care (both self and collective) to take recourse in capitalist furnishings. Deluging oneself with care products and practices that only serve capitalist consumption alienates the self. What is required to make this language inclusive is to be able to understand a person’s intersectional location based on their different identity-based experiences. While grasping intersectional locations, it is crucial to also reflect upon one’s own identity-based location and the privileges and non-privileges that come with it. A person’s understanding of care and nurture is determined by their own identity-based experience. However, as an activist, the goal of care and nurture cannot be to satiate a personal understanding of care built solely on one’s own lived experience. Care and nurture can only be experienced in their wholesomeness when they actually reach the person needing it and make a qualitative change in their current life.

Self-care and collective care should go hand in hand with each other for activists, as they address their own burnouts and the need for care felt among others. The spirit of feminist care exists as a challenge to a capitalist, heteronormative society that continually tries to homogenise identities and to push for a linear system of production and reproduction. Sara Ahmed (2017) articulates feminist survival as a matter of keeping one’s hopes alive, and the trope of the feminist toolkit persists as an expression of feminist praxis, solidarity-building and self-preservation. Survival thus becomes a shared

feminist project. Ahmed (2017: 249) suggests that ‘putting together a killjoy survival kit can also be a survival strategy’. The toolkit contains reminders accumulated over time – what one needs to do and have around to keep on going. Ahmed (2017: 236) says: ‘We will accumulate different things, have our own stuff; we can peer into each other’s kits and find in there someone else’s feminist story’.

Over the years, new laws and acts have emerged in our country<sup>17</sup> that spark hopes in the minds of the LGBTQIA+ community: invisibilised in pre-colonial India, pathologised and criminalised in the post-colonial. The latter carries powerful and dominant strains of Victorian morality, brahminical domination and a unidimensional narrative of nationalism. However, how does the law address the unavailability of love, support and empathy? How much do laws and policies nurture a queer soul – a soul that is otherwise considered dispensable, a soul through which the community survives with the sense of knowing queer grief – in a social environment that is hostile to and unaccepting of non-heteronormative lives and practices?

A crucial element for sustaining activism is to show care towards others through a consciousness of oneself and the constitutional rights that one has. One cannot care for another if one does not care for one’s own self or is unaware of the constitutional rights that protect one’s life, liberty, livelihood, dignity, selfhood and individual choice, among others. The practice of collective care needs to be supported by self-care. If caring for others exhausts all energy and time, the self will gradually tire out and reach a point of exhaustion. Caring for oneself and nurturing oneself is a conscious and challenging practice, because it first and foremost requires acknowledging the existence of the self. Acknowledging a queer self is difficult because society pushes us to suppress that self to an extreme point through multiple rounds of socialisation. To identify this is to be able to celebrate oneself. A Bangla slogan that marks this celebration of the queer self is around the demand for not just food but food that one enjoys: ‘queer trans manush chaay ki, bhaater shonge ghee’ (কুইয়ার ট্রান্স মানুষ চায় কি, ভাতের সঙ্গে ঘি).<sup>18</sup> The struggle for survival and the nurturing and blossoming of the self and the community should include not only a full belly but a happy and pampered belly, too.

## Writing together

In this piece, we have shared our understandings of feminist and queer nurturing. We have situated them within collective and movement histories, as well as political anchors, in grief, pain, exhaustion and collective and self-care, all grounded in radical compassion. Our writings reiterate how queer nurturance is all about building resilience to the capitalist and neoliberal industries of individualism, violence and alienation. The four sections thrive on common threads, such as identifying the roots of nurturing in feminist, trans\* and queer lives – in collective building and movements and in recognising grief, pain, exhaustion, nurturing the self and building collective resistance and compassion through *maitree* and enjoyment. The constant tension between the self and the collective – particularly in neoliberal, right-wing political times – and the question of how to find sustenance by extending and empathising with the other are also crosscutting themes.

We are able to articulate and engage in this dialogic exercise through our inherited caste-class-language privileges, though in our present lives we are quite vulnerable, constantly resisting institutional and state surveillance, hatred and violence. It is our peculiar positions in the current Indian social fabric – where we run the risk of being deviant and targeted citizens because of our queer, non-binary identities and academic-activist locations – that embody critical dissent, pedagogy and non-normative lives, which in turn are perceived as threats by existing political orders. Locating ourselves through the theme of nurturing thus becomes a political and pedagogic exercise, essential for our own survival and also for pushing our thoughts and imaginations on nurturing.

Nurturing emerges here as a radical practice: a practice both fragile, because it is easily exhausted or co-opted, but also powerful, because it resists violence, sustains lives and unsettles hierarchies. It is what allows us to hold grief and ethical pain without collapsing into revenge, to recognise exhaustion not as a weakness but as a shared condition and to insist on cracks in the ‘well-maintained garden’ of normative life while holding space for the possibilities of (m)any ways of life. Our writing together has itself been an act of nurturing – making space for anger, fatigue and hope, while drawing strength from queer-feminist lineages of care.

If nurturing is fraught, it is also sustaining. It survives in everyday gestures of compassion, in collective refusals of violence and in the stubborn insistence on joy – not just survival but trans\* and queer survival with pleasure, with *bhaater shonge ghee*. This is the possibility we hold on to: that nurturing, in all its contradictions, remains one of our most urgent queer-feminist practices of resistance and repair.

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### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. As this is a collaborative piece of work, our names appear in alphabetical order.
2. Kolkata in West Bengal and Sonipat in Haryana.
3. We deploy ‘middle class’ to mean a heterogeneous group that holds the aspiration to be ‘mobile in terms of caste-Hindu respectability and neoliberal values based on employment/productivity’ (Subramanian, 2024: 7). The literature on the middle class in India is vast, a subject beyond the scope of this article.
4. Porshi (পোর্শী), which literally means ‘neighbour’, is a training centre and queer canteen initiated by Sappho for Equality, an organisation working for the rights and social justice of individuals with non-normative gender and sexual identities.
5. We are from overlapping disciplinary backgrounds and trained in sociological and social anthropological methodologies and queer/trans feminist ways of doing research. We are also embedded in our activist contexts and committed to accessible and ethical knowledge to de-centre Brahmanical ways of producing knowledge. Social science research and writing in India have traditionally been closed off to Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi persons because of historical and intergenerational oppression and inaccessible ways of ‘doing’ theory. For more on Brahmanical ways of knowledge production, see Guru (2002) and Arya and Rathore (2019).
6. ‘Love jihad’ is a term used by Hindu extremists to claim that Muslim men are forcibly converting Hindu women to Islam by wooing and marrying them. The *Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Act, 2021* (2021) is the codification of this claim and is popularly known as the ‘love jihad law’. For more on love jihad and its links to securitisation, see Malji and Raza (2021).
7. Endogamy (marrying within one’s specific social group) is a key mechanism of reproducing the caste system, as the norm of endogamy requires that individuals marry within their own caste group (see Ambedkar, 1917).

8. Dr BR Ambedkar's political spirituality is rooted in a disappointment with Hinduism's incapacity to dismantle caste stratification and a simultaneous affirmation of Buddhism's capacity for non-discrimination, egalitarianism and social dignity (see Ambedkar, 2011 [1957]).
9. The Three Jewels in Buddhism are Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.
10. The words and teachings of the Buddha.
11. Dr Ambedkar's decision to leave the Hindu fold was informed by his and his community's experiences as an 'untouchable', marked by humiliation and violence. Through his study of various religious traditions and his inquiry into the systemic causes of the indignities endured by the 'untouchables', he became convinced that Buddhism represented the only viable humanist path (see Dr Ramendra, 2010).
12. Zena Sharman (2023) argues for a more nuanced, compassionate and inclusive approach to processing loss, challenging conventional ideas of grief and mourning; she stresses the value of accepting the messiness and complexity of grieving and advocates for mourning practices that put the needs and experiences of the griever first. According to Judith Butler (2004), grieving may be a transforming force that challenges social notions of disenfranchising marginalised groups of humanity and nurtures new forms of solidarity; they argue that developing empathy and ethical responsibility requires an awareness of our common susceptibility to experiencing grief.
13. Adriana Cavarero's (2000, 2016) work around the concept of ethical pain suggests that by identifying our integral fragility and interconnectedness, we can achieve more empathetic and compassionate ethics and accept the unavoidability of ethical pain stemming from relationships between self and other.
14. Autonomous women's movements and collectives began in the 1980s in India, where feminist struggles against sexual and domestic violence and equal rights for women gained political language and prominence similar to the feminist movements of the 1960s–1970s in the United States (Basak, 2024).
15. In 2012, the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi led to massive citizen uprising against gender-based violence and renewed calls for justice in response to sexual violence and harassment in public spaces and the workplace. In 2024, the 'Reclaim the night, reclaim the right' movement emerged following the rape and murder of a doctor in R. G. Kar Medical College in Kolkata, India; the victim's name in the R. G. Kar case has been publicly withheld.
16. In 2019, the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR protests emerged against the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA)* (2019) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), which enact changes in routes to new citizenship and state documentation requirements that blatantly discriminate against Muslim and severely affect marginalised groups, women and trans-queer people. Led by Muslim women and students and supported by civil society and activist groups, the movement experienced orchestrated state repression and violence in Delhi but nonetheless stalled the adoption of the NRC and NPR in early 2020, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
17. *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* ([2014] INSC 275) is a landmark judgment passed by the Supreme Court of India, which recognised transgender persons as equal citizens of the country deserving constitutional protection; it also granted transgender persons the legal right to self-determination of gender identity and to challenge one's sex identity assigned at birth based on the person's external genitalia. *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) and Anr. vs. Union of India and Ors.* ([2017] 10 SCC 1) declared right to privacy as a legal fundamental right; this had a direct positive impact on acknowledging the lives and dignity of the LGBTQ+ community. *Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India* ([2018] 10 SCC 1) is a landmark decision that was passed by the Supreme Court of India, which decriminalised consensual sex among same-sex adults by partially striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which is a discriminatory law introduced by the British in 1861 that criminalises 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' and has persecuted LGBTQ individuals for over 150 years. *The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act* (2019) was passed in 2019.
18. This slogan can be translated as 'What do queer trans persons want? Rice with butter/ghee'. Butter and ghee (or saturated fat) is consumed with rice, but both are condiments that are only affordable to certain consumers. Rice can fill a stomach and satiate hunger, but butter or ghee also adds to the enjoyment of eating the rice. In essence, the saying acknowledges that satiating hunger is not enough to live a fulfilling life: the individual and community also need pleasure, pampering and happiness.

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