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Title

The great Indian pink rush: Speculating on LGBTQ EDI after the decriminalization of sodomy

Abstract

This paper provides an ethnography of management consultants in India whose key offering is advising corporations on how to be 'LGBTQ-friendly'. Following consultants as they attempt to convince potential clients that LGBTQ EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) policies yield economic benefits, this paper illustrates the rituals and technologies consultants employ to stimulate speculative investment in EDI and belief in their expertise. Central to these presentations is the construction of India as a pink frontier, a territory once sexually and economically backward, but whose backwardness can be overcome and made extractable with the consultants' expertise. Analysis of these presentations shows how sexual and economic difference is continuously mobilized in corporate offices to facilitate speculative investment needed to facilitate a more modern, 'LGBTQ-friendly' Indian economy.

Keywords: business case; corporate citizenship; information technology; management consultancy; pink frontiers.

Introduction

The Indian Supreme Court's decision in September 2018 to read-down the colonial-era anti-sodomy law Indian Penal Code Section 377 (hereafter, Section 377) initiated a flurry of economic activity (Kotak, 2018). Popularly construed as the decriminalization of homosexuality (Lakkimsetti, 2020), this ruling was celebrated in Bengaluru's information technology (IT) community as a moment in 'corporate history'. At fever pitch and within seconds of the ruling, many of the world's largest corporations published statements in support of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) workers (ABP News, 2018). For 12 months following the ruling, Bengaluru's conference halls, co-working spaces and its nationally renowned resto-pubs were continuously occupied by global corporations marketing various LGBTQ workplace policies introduced after the decriminalization of sodomy. Companies organized such events to broadcast public declarations of their newfound 'friendliness' to LGBTQ workers. Such events gestured toward an audience composed, at once, of potential LGBTQ 'talent' and global business observers alike.

The months following the September 2018 ruling I term India's great pink rush. This term is inspired by Indian LGBTQ workers I interviewed who had witnessed the vicissitudes of the legality of Section 377. Sodomy had previously been decriminalized by the Delhi High Court in 2009, a decision later struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013, only for the Supreme Court to later repeal its own ruling in 2018. LGBTQ workers remarked in bitterness that they had seen a similar boom time in 2009, when global corporations initiated nationwide campaigns promoting the need for LGBTQ equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the workplace. This previous boom time in 2009 went bust when corporations suddenly rescinded those same policies and silently withdrew public campaigns following the 2013 Supreme Court decision (Bathija, 2024).

Not only had a rush been witnessed before, so too did this moment seem to be in continuity with the history leading up to the 2018 decision. Claims to rights based on LGBTQ identity have always felt like an arrival in India (Dave, 2012), in part because the efforts to repeal Section 377 were borne out of the globalized effort to combat HIV/Aids, during which development institutions pressured India to repeal the anti-sodomy law understood as a barrier to effective sexual health intervention (khanna, 2016; Vijayakumar, 2021). It seemed that in 2018, it would be global corporations taking the mantle of developmental intervention by signaling the arrival, again, of a global discourse of LGBTQ rights, but this time in the name of the white- collar corporate employee and for the cause of economic modernity.

But how does a global discourse of LGBTQ workers' inclusion emerge in India? This paper provides an ethnography of the actors behind the corporate events following the 2018 decriminalization of sodomy and the speculative technologies they mobilized to make this economic activity possible. Much of the fanfare of the emergent LGBTQ-identified worker in India in 2018 was based on the mobilization of a discourse

popularly termed in India as the ‘business case’ for LGBTQ EDI (Nambiar & Shahani, 2018, pp. 21–25). The ‘business case’ discourse is one that promises to further the objectives, at once, of sourcing global talent and further instantiating meritocracy. The business case is an increasingly popular discourse that argues that the implementation of LGBTQ EDI policies will make the corporation appear both more cosmopolitan (by attracting young and creative knowledgeworkers) and meritocratic (by ridding the workplace of what advocates describe as the economic irrationality of anti-LGBTQ bias). Most advocates of the business case argue that this is achieved through the implementation of trans-inclusive healthcare coverage, protections against serostatus discrimination, gender neutral sexual harassment protections, LGBTQ hiring drives and LGBTQ-inclusive marketing strategies. From the outset, the business case discourse is the promise of profit through India’s IT sectors’ two chief values, namely the interconnected ideals of corporate self-regulation and meritocracy (Subramanian, 2019).

This paper considers the practices that actors use to mobilize the so-called business case discourse to ‘bring about change’ in India’s private sector (Nambiar & Shahani, 2018). This paper argues that actors seeking to promote LGBTQ workplace benefits and protections employ speculative technologies centred on the ‘business case’ discourse to convince companies that investing in EDI policies will generate economic benefits. Speculation is understood as a practice by which technology is used to manifest and make material the otherwise immaterial, like ideas and ‘incalculable’ outcomes (Rajan, 2006; Upadhya, 2016). In focusing on the business case for LGBTQ EDI as a speculative technology, the paper draws from extensive ethnographic material to illustrate how actors map zones of potential value extraction in India’s business landscape, which this paper terms pink frontiers. Frontiers are presented as ‘discoveries’ through the construction of a ‘wilderness’ so that ‘some-and not others may repeat its rewards’ (Tsing, 2005, pp. 27–28). The use of technology is thus a practice, at once, of edging out the unknown and making it intelligible and manageable to audiences of investors.

This paper shows how advocates of LGBTQ EDI policies use speculative technologies that produced the great Indian pink rush. These actors construct pink frontiers by employing cartographic practices that map India, at various scales, as a wilderness at the edge of sexual and economic modernity. This will illustrate how consultants use speculative technologies to construct India as a problem zone lacking implementation of LGBTQ EDI policies, presenting themselves as those possessing the expertise to make these edges extractable, in doing so, speaking to broader questions about the terms by which gender and sexual minority populations become subjects of extraction (Cavallero & Gago, 2020).

India continues to lack protections for most gender and sexual minority workers. Efforts to promote corporate self-regulation through EDI remain one of the primary discourses connecting gender and sexual identity to working conditions there. How consultants use speculation becomes important within a longer history in which LGBTQ rights in India

have always been global and, for that reason, interconnected with questions of modernity and sovereignty. Section 377 was itself a law enacted under British colonial rule whose efforts at modernization included curtailing what the British Raj saw as sexual impropriety in the region (Hinchy, 2019; Puri, 2016). Later during the global HIV/Aids crisis in the 1980s, India was again spotlighted as a geography of contagion (Reddy, 2005). Development agencies saw in India a pernicious case, whereby its vast numbers of hijras (transfeminine third- gender subjects) and men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSMs) warranted globalized efforts to intervene in what they saw as these groups' rampant, high-risk sexual behaviour, namely penetrative anal sex (Vijayakumar, 2021). Yet, the state hindered HIV/Aids development interventions through routine weaponization of Section 377, used to intimidate sexual health outreach workers and extort sex workers. This prompted global development agencies and local activists to demand the repeal of Section 377 to facilitate sexual health interventions and, further, to acknowledge LGBTQs as rights-bearing subjects (khanna, 2016; Puri, 2016).

Against this historical backdrop, this paper takes a modest approach in illustrating how the speculative technologies used to argue for the business case focus attention on the continuous citation of backward sexual others to stage the pink frontiers promising value extraction. The paper shifts focus away from critical approaches, such as that of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007), that attend to how Global South modernity is impeached according to its production as sexually backward against a Global North whose modernity is evidenced through its extension of rights to LGBTQs. Critiques of homonationalism are significant for illustrating how contemporary global movements' efforts to pressure the Global South into adopting LGBTQ rights reproduce colonial inequalities. While not fundamentally disagreeing with this conclusion, this paper departs from this approach by using ethnography to consider how local actors in Bengaluru themselves staged India, at various scales, as a pink frontier of economic and cultural backwardness in order to facilitate claims on corporations for investment in EDI policies. The paper presents the various techniques employed by actors behind the economic activity following the 2018 decriminalization of sodomy, namely management consultants who specialized in gender and sexual inclusion in the Indian workplace. I focus on the use of three interconnected speculative technologies mobilized to construct India's pink frontiers, namely (1) cartography, (2) white papers and (3) autobiography. Following Rajan (2006), I present these technologies as speculative rituals performed in events aimed at stimulating 'belief' in the 'business case' for LGBTQ EDI.

To illustrate the emergence of LGBTQ workplace benefits and protections discourse in India through speculation, I draw from ethnography conducted in Bengaluru over 10 months from September 2018 to June 2019. I arrived for fieldwork at Kempegowda International Airport just hours before the Supreme Court read-down Section 377, witnessing immediately the pink rush that swept across India. Fieldwork involved drawing on a network of scholars and activists who connected me with consultants, along with NGOs who provided LGBTQ EDI consultancy services. Consulting here is defined by providing support for companies to implement policies and events aimed at

making each more ‘friendly’ to LGBTQ workers, including recruitment drives, hiring protocols, employee benefits packages, performance evaluations, promotion procedures, and inclusive marketing strategies (see Nambiar & Shahani, 2018). I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which I recorded and later coded. These findings are supplemented with extensive fieldnotes taken during and after events to which informants had invited me to attend as a researcher and consented to my presence for the purpose of research and later writing-up of findings. Nevertheless, I have anonymized informants’ names and removed identifying details. In the following sections, I first introduce economic anthropological approaches to speculation that are critical for understanding the emergence of ethical business practices, situating these within the broader context of the information technology sector’s moral assertions of modernizing the Indian nation, its economy and its workers. This global push for LGBTQ EDI, initiated by consultants locally in Bengaluru, is also placed in continuity with India’s always already globalized negotiation of LGBTQ rights. Ethnographic findings are then presented in three subsections based on the speculative technologies consultants employed to stimulate investment from their audiences, namely cartography, research presented in white papers and autobiographies conducted as testimonies. I will conclude with a call for more ethnographic attention to practices involved in the global circulation of LGBTQ cultural artefacts and discourses.

Speculative technologies and the rationalization of business ethics

Anthropology’s engagement with speculation has been useful for understanding processes of ‘economization’ and the potential inequalities resulting from them. Laura Bear (2020, p. 9) articulates speculation as ‘technologies of imagination’ constituted by ‘future-oriented social action aimed at directing capital’. Extractive industries illustrate how a range of technologies – like oceanic cartographies and geological surveys – are utilized not only to map areas where value is predicted but, perhaps more crucially, to communicate to potential investors the promise of untold riches, should they choose to unlock their capital (Weszkalnys, 2015; see also Appel, 2019). Speculation is thus geared toward convincing potential investors of their imminent returns, generating value not from the ‘tangible material indicators of successful productivity’ as might be the case in seeking investment for the manufacture of commodities, but from ‘intangible abstractions, such as the felt possibility of future productivity or profit’ particularly important when investing in incalculable outcomes, like ideas or potential mineral reserves (Rajan, 2006, p. 18, emphasis in original). Speculation can account for conditions of emergence when ideas that promise value are invested in, and new social formations are triggered, regardless of their eventual outcome.

Presentations become critical sites in which to analyse speculative technologies as embodied performances. Those seeking investment aim to boost audience confidence by strategically using PowerPoint, quantitative data, affiliation to elite universities, and

personal narratives in performances that aim to build the credibility structurally required for stimulating potential investors' belief in a particular project or idea necessary for speculation's 'future tense' of 'promissory conjuration' (Ho, 2009; Rajan, 2006, pp. 129–133). Speculative practices, and the processes of valuation to which they aim, present themselves as an 'economy of appearances' constituted by an assemblage of embodied actors who mobilize a range of techniques to build the drama and hype required to stimulate the circulation of capital (Tsing, 2000, pp. 132–152).

Popular discourses of business ethics under the banner of economic, social and governance (ESG) initiatives, under which LGBTQ EDI falls, present such 'incalculable' promises that manifest themselves as fruitful sites through which to draw out how speculation is used to materialize otherwise immaterial values and beliefs (De Neve, 2016; Leins, 2020; Rajak, 2011; Shamir, 2008). This is because the financial benefits that ESG proponents extol, or the 'futures' they promise, are arguably 'incalculable' (Rajan, 2006, p. 133). ESGs are understood as a means of 'doing well by doing good', aiming to overcome the longstanding Marxist belief that generating profit comes at social costs, seeking instead to forge assurances in 'mutual benefit' and 'win-win' economics, placing enterprise as a 'partner' in state development (Rajak, 2011; Rigillo, 2015).

Ethnography of corporate ethicizing may usefully turn towards consultants who are often themselves critical to promoting ESG discourse or implementing ESG policies and practices (Rajak, 2011). Consultants can appear as the 'ultimate knowledge workers', whose work requires symbolic representation of reality, including speculative 'techniques of abstraction, calculation, and persuasion' used to justify the organizational interventions constituting their service offerings (Chong, 2018, p. 8). As Kimberly Chong (2018, p. 137) finds among her Chinese consultant interlocutors, they themselves see their work as ambiguous and speculative, quoted as saying they are in the business of 'finding solutions and controlling outcomes'. The informants of this study are consultants specializing in LGBTQ EDI, whose primary service is to facilitate corporate clients' implementation of EDI policies, such as the crafting of trans-inclusive employee healthcare benefits and HIV/Aids non-discrimination policies. This work involves the routine demonstration of the 'business case' for LGBTQ EDI at conferences and in workshops to convince potential clients that such policies will stimulate economic benefits for companies. An ethnographic approach is required because consultants rarely generate innovative ideas, per se, but parasitically gather information from their clients, which they continuously add and amend to their otherwise rote recommendations (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2012). Although consultants promise radical organizational innovation, their work is better described as one of homogenization and standardization, as they move from client to client, recommending the same organizational changes but supplemented with 'learnings' from previous ones (Thrift, 2005). To the extent that consultants cannot be said to offer novel or innovative ideas in organizational practice, ethnography is critical for understanding how these knowledge workers are able to implement organizational change regardless.

The ethics of IT-led development in India

The ‘business case’ for LGBTQ EDI and the speculative technologies enacted in its name must be placed within the broader moral economy of the IT sector in India. The IT industry’s longstanding moral claims of modernizing, at once, the economy, its workers and the nation at large (Nair, 2005) are founded on its recognition of ‘talent’ through claims of ‘meritocracy’ (Subramanian, 2019; see also Upadhya, 2016). This is articulated through that industry’s strident critique of caste-based reservations, which are otherwise mandated in public sector employment (see Bear, 2007). For the IT industry, India’s aspiration of shedding its reputation as the world’s cost-saving ‘back office’ requires the instantiation of meritocracy to allow excellence in work that is believed will position India to claim its rightful place as a value-added and competitive node in the global economy (Upadhya & Vasavi, 2008). Proponents of meritocracy argue that to be globally oriented requires the disavowal of caste in the workplace as India’s most embarrassing marker of backwardness, threatening its claims to modernity (Subramanian, 2019). This is critical for the IT industry to position itself as a more modern alternative to state-led development founded on government-regulated employment, which it characterizes as a rigid bureaucracy that preempts innovation and reminds the world of India’s continued lack of development. It is, perhaps, no surprise that the IT sector is the country’s most supportive audience of the ‘business case’ for LGBTQ EDI, making the IT hub of Bengaluru the heartland of experiments in corporate ‘LGBTQ-friendliness’.

Observers globally have begun rallying against LGBTQ EDI efforts, which critics argue function as distractions from organizations’ structural violence (see Ritchie, 2015), particularly acute in self-regulatory projects claiming meritocracy (Ahmad et al., 2024; Fleming, 2007). While India’s IT industry has been a tremendous vehicle of socioeconomic mobility, this mobility has been uneven. Women working in call centres, for example, have experienced new forms of agency owing to the introduction of novel income sources and sociality in gender desegregated offices, along with the relative breakup of women’s domestic sequestering through late-night work hours (Patel, 2010). Yet these changes have largely been experienced by and available to working-class women in ‘non-value-added’ sections of ‘IT’. In contrast, IT white-collar workplaces associated with ‘value-added’ services requiring ‘global talent’, like software engineering, have not witnessed such a profound socio-economic transformation (Upadhya, 2016). These meritocratic workplaces of ‘value-added’ services – the key clients of LGBTQ EDI consultants – continue to be homogenous in terms of gender, class and caste, populated almost exclusively by English-speaking, educated, urban, dominant caste and elite cisgender men. Scholars have undertaken a range of contemporary and longitudinal studies to demonstrate that this is not coincidental but the result of entrenched casteism in the IT sector (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Shakthi, 2023; Subramanian, 2019). Thus, the LGBTQ activists I interviewed in Bengaluru routinely dismissed consultants’ efforts to make IT ‘friendly’ for LGBTQs, which they

perceived as gestures of including the already included (e.g. dominant caste cisgender men), diversifying the office only in terms of gender and sexual identity as singular axes of difference. At worst, such critics often argued that LGBTQ EDI consultants' silence on caste, something pronounced in 2018–2019, works to facilitate casteism by masquerading as caste-blind meritocracy. This paper does not fundamentally challenge criticisms that socio-economic inequality is reproduced through IT's meritocratic discourse but instead utilizes ethnography to illustrate a nuanced portrait whereby difference is not wholesale edged out when diversity is ushered in (see Ward, 2008). Instead, I argue that performances of speculative technologies ritually summon backwardness, thus making socio-economic difference integral to the moral project of making the Indian IT industry 'LGBTQ-friendly'. This paper foregrounds the rituals required in staging the scene of speculative investment that requires the constant summoning of figures of backwardness to demarcate pink frontiers inviting economic intervention. In doing so, I suggest that the corporation's claims to morality require processes of extraction staged as the transformation of gender and sexual backwardness as a resource to facilitate modernization, the outcome of which becomes evidence of meritocracy's force in impacting social change. While this is a subtle suggestion, I argue that this theoretical assertion holds salience for how exclusion may be understood in zones where the new subjectivity of the LGBTQ worker is emerging through speculative enactments of the 'business case' discourse.

Modernity and exclusion in India's globalized LGBTQ movement

LGBTQ activism in India has always been a question of global political economy. Contemporary efforts at LGBTQ EDI find antecedents in the colonial experience. Section 377 was itself one of many laws introduced under colonial rule that sought to curtail what the British Raj saw as sexual impropriety antithetical to the efficient management of the colony (Puri, 2016). As Jessica Hinchy (2019) notes with respect to the passage of the Criminal Tribes Act, its infamous Part I, which categorized Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes as criminal by heredity, includes the lesser-known Part II. This second part categorized India's transfeminine hijras as themselves a criminal caste warranting 'extirpation'. As Hinchy (2019) documents, this was owing to hijras' gender ambiguity, migratory labour patterns, their ritualized displays of song and dance offending public morality and their sex trade enabled by their propensity for sodomy. Part II and supplementary welfare programmes sought to eliminate the hijras' way of life by curtailing their free movement, promoting cottage industries and enforcing agricultural settlement. If rampant,widespread sodomy risked the spread of venereal disease among colonial administrators, it was the hijras and their association with anal sex that rendered them a figure of South Asia's ungovernability in extremis. Problematizing hijras as antithetical to colonial modernization suggests the emergence of gender and sexual difference as a matter of the colonial economy.

Contemporary struggles for recognition of LGBTQ rights, particularly efforts to repeal Section 377, illustrate the centrality of global political economy to gender and sexual politics in the region. Contestation against
Section 377 emerged in no small part from activism around sexual health, particularly efforts to mitigate the spread of HIV/Aids (khanna, 2016; Narrain & Gupta, 2011). Starting from the 1980s, Global North countries began to fear that India would become a site of HIV/Aids catastrophe. International organizations constructed India in epidemiological cartography as a territory of exceptional permissiveness of sodomy, particularly among its many hijras and MSMs (Kole, 2007). India's inclination toward sodomy was again spotlighted globally but this time according to epidemiology's assessment of anal sex as a high-risk activity that easily spreads HIV. This prompted global intervention to stop the spread of HIV/Aids when funders believed the Indian state was too technologically underdeveloped to enact nationwide sexual health interventions. Additionally, international organizations understood India as too conservative to grapple with the taboo subject of sexuality, let alone male same-sex sodomy, which thus warranted global intervention through funding for local NGOs. It was within this context that globally funded NGO sexual health outreach workers faced threats of arrest and blackmail under the threat of Section 377, thus making repeal of the law a necessity shared between local LGBTQ activists and Global North funders (Vijayakumar, 2021). The reciprocal production of Global North modernity and India's lack therefore became again defined according to sexuality, but this time relative to a new rubric defined by the recognition of LGBTQ rights, or what Puar (2007) terms 'homonationalism'.

The significance of this history is borne out in criticism of the emergence of Section 377 as the primary vehicle to articulate LGBTQ rights in law and public culture (Dave, 2012). This history is tied to efforts to mitigate HIV/Aids by NGOs, who earlier faced significant barriers in effective outreach to India's most marginal. Social stratification at large became reproduced in the unevenness in accessibility of sexual health services: whereas urban, dominant caste, upper-class English-speaking cisgender men easily accessed these services, it was the rural, poor and transient who often faced access barriers. To the extent that NGOs sought to modernize sex through education in safe sex practices, sexual modernity became just as unevenly distributed as all development initiatives in the region. NGO workers and their global funders faced enormous criticism around their efforts to legally repeal Section 377 because it was understood as a self-serving platform for whom the already advantaged NGO workers and their beneficiaries stood to gain; it seemed like a platform that was single-issue, focusing exclusively on gender and sexual identity
divorced from class, caste, language, religion and urban citizenship (Dave,
2012; khanna 2016).

Popular response to the 'business case' for LGBTQ EDI in India evokes both this colonial history and the contemporary predicament of exclusion among India's poorest gender and sexual minorities, specifically hijras and the rural. Given the widespread

publicity that events promoting the business case now take, observers routinely point to rural India and the hijras as the exemplars of those who stand to be excluded from corporate India's meritocratic vision of modernity. Such a position thus resonates with the critiques of Indian IT moralizing presented above, wherein efforts to be inclusive in support of wider financial efforts to promote meritocracy are understood to exclude the most vulnerable, such as subordinate caste groups and those who speak in the vernacular. In the following section, I draw from my extensive ethnographic fieldwork among management consultants in Bengaluru to illustrate how figures of gender and sexual difference variously problematized as backward in this long history – at turns the nation, the rural, and the hijras – are ritually summoned in EDI's speculative technologies. This serves to suggest how the backward other is not wholly excluded from corporate offices but is, in fact, continuously brought into them to facilitate investment, if only to stage their eventual exclusion. The significance of this finding suggests how local actors make claims on global capital through speculative technologies that always evoke the backward other necessary to illustrate their displacement as itself the investment opportunity.

Speculative technologies and the construction of pink frontiers

The following section presents three widely shared speculative technologies across LGBTQ EDI consulting in Bengaluru. These sections are representative of the techniques utilized among all LGBTQ EDI consultants, though I draw from only two of the three groups I studied. Because consulting is a force of standardization (Thrift, 2005), it is not surprising that otherwise competitive EDI consultants employ similar strategies. Nevertheless, consultants often specialize in a few speculative technologies, so for expository reasons, the scenes selected below represent the respective consultants' strongest tactics in stimulating 'hype' (Tsing, 2000). Taken in turn, the three speculative technologies described are cartography, white papers and autobiography.

Cartography and the mapping of sexual economic backwardness

Among the three consultancy groups I followed during fieldwork, the for-profit start-up of Shiva and Sanjay I call Proud Partnerships (PP) was the most ambitious, having the greatest impact locally in terms of curating the largest number of workshops, obtaining sponsorship from large conglomerates, and hosting events with higher-profile celebrities than other consultants in Bengaluru. I first interviewed Shiva and Sanjay at an upmarket coffee house in the wealthy Indiranagar neighbourhood of eastern Bengaluru, during which they described the history of their business partnership, something that emerged from their shared interest in entrepreneurship and uplifting minorities in the workplace. At the time, they were both employed as human resources (HR) managers at different legacy Silicon Valley-based MNCs (multinational corporations), though Sanjay would soon leave his position to work on the consultancy full-time. Shiva drew inspiration from his long participation in NGO activism in the city and personal experiences of sexual marginalization to design PP programming. Sanjay, lacking experience in LGBTQ

activism, marshalled skills he acquired as a mid-career professional holding a senior HR position at a legacy Silicon Valley company. Sanjay had long been passionate about a range of workplace issues, especially women's 'equity'. Together they utilized their skills in HR, their contacts cultivated from their combined decades in IT, and their respective passions to make inroads into many companies, connections to other professional associations, and appear as speakers at various EDI events globally.

Their presentations at their workshops or on-site at a client's office followed the same format, beginning with narrative storytelling from what they asserted was the 'global' perspective on LGBTQ EDI. They usually defined the global perspective through various laws passed elsewhere. For example, if India had only repealed Section 377 in 2018, the United Kingdom had repealed its anti-sodomy provision decades earlier. 'Even the United States' had legalized sodomy and same-sex marriage, they said, in an exaggerated tone to illustrate overcoming an impossible hurdle owing to that country's apparent conservatism. Dramatizing the United States in this way was critical because that country represents the hallmark of business cultural acumen in Bengaluru's IT milieu. This was particularly acute as many of PP's audience members worked for Silicon Valley-based companies. It seemed that even the most conservative of countries can put aside political irrationality for the economic benefits of LGBTQ EDI.

Appealing to India's current self-consciousness as the world's 'back office' and a widely-held sentiment that national dignity rests on becoming an added-value node in global production networks (see Upadhya, 2016), Shiva and Sanjay deployed 'citational practices' (Ong, 2006) strategically to invoke longstanding anxieties that India lacks the cultural competencies to successfully compete in global markets (see Subramanian, 2019), which they did to lay out a problem. In quite literal terms – presenters and audience members often used the word 'modern' itself – they staged the problem as nothing less than civilizational: 'If India wants to remain competitive [provide value-added services], it must become modern in its business operations. It must adopt what experts around the world understand as necessary'. Shiva and Sanjay framed the adoption of LGBTQ EDI as a vehicle to arrive at value-added dignity and pride. The economic advantage of LGBTQ EDI had already been decided elsewhere; in 2018, it seemed that 'Now is the perfect time for India'.

Positioning India as less modern owing to its then-lack of adoption of LGBTQ EDI recommendations in comparison to the United States, Shiva and Sanjay's presentations aimed to generate hype for speculative investment by illustrating their projects locally. After establishing global consensus on the 'business case', they presented a second problem: India's smaller Tier-2 and -3 cities. Their narrative began through a projection of PowerPoint slides narrating their 'journey' from a small passionate project in a distant city to a growing start-up in Bengaluru. For investment, start-ups must evidence growth to foster belief in their projects (Rajan, 2006). PP evidenced growth through reference to a portfolio of exciting projects that at once charted their past and future trajectory as India's preeminent LGBTQ EDI consultancy. Their journey to Bengaluru replicated

penetration in India's largest cities known for long-established LGBTQ activism correlating with sexual health NGO penetration. Thus, a map of India showed early establishment in the usual places of Mumbai, Bengaluru, New Delhi and Kolkata, as well as in major technology hubs like Hyderabad, Pune and Gurugram. PP presentations utilized the citation of their past projects – such as trainings for companies in hiring trans women and drafting health insurance packages that did not disclose employees' serostatus – that had been successful in Bengaluru and were near completion elsewhere. Moving between near and far, they used these examples to stimulate both credibility and a sense of excitement and mystery.

Important for this story were their efforts to go farther. Discussing their nationwide strategy, their maps were chronologically transformed to illustrate reach into smaller Tier-2 and -3 cities known neither for their booming IT economies nor their LGBTQ tolerance (perhaps because they were relatively less penetrated by sexual health NGOs). Their map sought to surprise the audience with its focus on Tier-2 and -3 cities in North and East India, cities once facing socio-economic deprivation and stigma from India's urban elite who often castigate such cities as too backward and 'illiterate' to have a thriving LGBTQ culture. Shiva referenced programmes 'piloted' in Patna, Ranchi, and Bhubaneshwar, which were employed to provoke hype and mystery with the unsubtle suggestion that the 'business case' could travel beyond the metronormative centres associated with LGBTQ belonging like Mumbai and Bengaluru, to make LGBTQ EDI possible in areas otherwise judged 'impossible' for LGBTQ life (Arondekar & Patel, 2016).

Having begun talks for establishing an LGBTQ employee resource group (ERG) in Jamshedpur, they summoned the small industrial town associated with mining as evidence of both the national reach of their once-small start- up and as evidence of the pink rush itself. Geographies 'everywhere', they described, 'even in Jamshedpur' are beginning to unlock the value of LGBTQ EDI, they claimed. It was not just that PP reproduced India's Tier-1 cities as the proper places of LGBTQ belonging, itself often a reflection of uneven development and, consequently, the uneven distribution of sexual health NGOs. It was that the promise of value lies in extracting from peripheral Tier-2 and -3 cities, now constructed as pink frontiers. Having noted their presence now being established in cities like Jamshedpur, Shiva turned to the audience and posed the question: 'Will you be a part of this national story?'. Indicating growth is central to claims that start-ups are worth investing in, and here PP utilized cartography to stage the promises of value that speculative investment in LGBTQ EDI promises. Yet, what a focus on speculative technologies reveals is that the production of certain geographies as unequal is not incidental to the arrival of LGBTQ EDI discourse in India, but is central to how these actors aimed to circulate it. PP constructed pink frontiers to demonstrate the potential for growth in the start-up. Like oceanic cartographies and geological surveys used to stimulate investment in oil fields by suggesting zones where resources are predicted to lie (Weszkalnys, 2015), so too PP drew maps of India that sought to merge previously desperate though parallel imaginaries of that country's smaller cities

as both economically deprived and vacated of LGBTQ cultural possibility. Their growth across the nation, even in Jamshedpur, evidenced their potential to extract value from India's LGBTQ 'wilderness' (Tsing, 2005), its pink frontiers presently inhospitable to the economic rationality of the LGBTQ EDI 'business case' but promising wealth, should their IT audiences choose to recognize the potential of these cities' respective 'talent'.

White papers and the appeal of so-called best practices

In November 2018, I attended a 'premier' of a report held in a small conference room in a Silicon Valley-based IT company in Electronic City, a peri-urban neighbourhood in southern Bengaluru constructed to support special economic zones (SEZs) hosting MNC offshore offices. In the small room with me were about 20 white-collar workers, primarily straight-identified women in HR and a few GBQ (gay, bisexual and queer) cisgender men in various engineering and junior or middle management roles; at some point during the two-hour event, an executive manager stood in the back of the room for about three minutes before leaving. The 'premier' we gathered to witness was for a report titled 'The Status of Corporate India after 377', produced by consultants Bala and Santosh and in collaboration with a mid-level HR manager of the company in which we sat. The event came just two-months after the decriminalization of sodomy and assessed the current state of LGBTQ benefits and protections across India's private sector. The report was glossy and thick, printed in colour and included the branding of another five MNCs representing the technology and financial sectors that had also contributed to it. The report described an overall dire situation in an India set apart from the global economy by its near abjection of LGBTQ worker protections. However, despite this, it noted a few companies that were willing to take the 'risk' in rising to 'global standards' by adopting LGBTQ EDI, of which the company hosting this premier was one foregrounded in the report as one of the key 'leaders' and 'changemakers' in India, along with the report's other sponsors.

Bala and Santosh together worked for an international ESG consultancy firm that I call Business Allies (BA), whose India office operated part-time from a small co-working space. Bala and Santosh both identified as gay and headed the LGBTQ 'stream' alongside other staff who focused on women and disability streams. In mid-career, their work sought to utilize their experience as gay men to place their passion for human rights to profitable ends by having what informants often referred to as a 'gay job', or getting paid to advocate for LGBTQ benefits and protections in 'corporates'. Like Shiva and Sanjay, they could be considered 'tempered radicals' (Kirton et al., 2007), or those whose career choices sought to implement policies favouring human rights but whose own work remained within the structures of corporations and whose efforts were geared toward reforming the brunt end of labour exploitation.

One of BA's key strategies for promoting LGBTQ EDI that differentiated it from other consultancies was their production of high-resolution, glossy documents variously termed 'white papers', 'benchmarking reports', or more simply, 'research'. As suggested

by the term ‘benchmarking’, these reports assessed the economy at national and international scale based on adoption of issues current to LGBTQ EDI, such as same-sex partner benefits and inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in non-discrimination policies. The contents of these reports followed in a roughly similar format. Initial assessment of the global economy with mention of positive moments of LGBTQ EDI in North America and Europe was promising; then came Asia in general, and India in particular, assessed as lacking far behind. Positive changes strategically positioned global recognition of the ‘business case’, and global adoption of LGBTQ EDI policies, as a question of ‘consensus’. In the report premiered on this day, they claimed global consensus held that LGBTQ EDI policies were necessary to attract global talent and profit from so-called pink markets emerging across the world. Within these reports, a small handful of MNCs was highlighted as ‘change agents’ who Bala described as ‘brave enough’ to counteract the challenges of a sexually conservative India by enacting their policy recommendations domestically. The reports thus placed LGBTQ EDI in a logic of ‘best practice’ and the service that BA offered was one of utilizing their combined cultural expertise, of being both gay-identified and experienced HR professionals, to facilitate the implementation of LGBTQ EDI in India’s difficult and traditional business environment. Like the previous section, what BA elaborated here as ‘white papers’ and their portfolio of ‘research’ on LGBTQ EDI implementation in India represented their strongest offering. BA was the only group in Bengaluru at that time that was able to produce such high-quality reports focusing on India. Thus, despite widespread and highly vocalized envy of their glossy, thick brochures among EDI competitors, I saw their reports utilized everywhere, even cited in PP presentations.

These reports communicated the necessity for protections and benefits for those unacquainted with issues facing LGBTQ workers. But perhaps more importantly, these reports presented a rationale for speculating on LGBTQ EDI because they offered a platform for promoting the brand of the clients initiating EDI policies. The publication of reports prompts events that added value to the otherwise mundane, non-value-added or even costly implementation of ESG initiatives (Rajak, 2011). Against the presumption that it would be difficult to access corporate events discussing LGBTQ issues, during fieldwork, they were very easy to access because they were always open to the public because they functioned as branding exercises as much for current employees as well as potential talent and the business press at large. These reports were able to generate value through the promise of public engagement, reputation and hype that such premiers could offer. In other words, the publication of LGBTQ EDI ‘research’ was crafted on the basis of their being able to be premiere-able.
The stakes of production of such reports became apparent to me when I was shadowing the work of another small LGBTQ consultancy group that occasionally collaborated with BA but competed with them for clients.

Although most consultancies collaborated with each other, all wanted to unseat BA’s national dominance in reports and research. As a doctoral student willing to offer my research skills pro-bono, EDI advocates often expressed that they needed authoritative

materials that could speak to the ‘reality’ of LGBTQ experiences in the Indian labour market. Following anthropologist Julia Elyachar (2006), I found myself studying ‘research’ as an artefact itself: what it meant to people, particularly in the hopes that I, a foreign researcher, could aid EDI by lending the visibility and legitimacy accorded to a scholar with affiliation to a British university. Benchmarking exercises presented themselves as forms of research but consensus among EDI advocates was that such artefacts would be even more legitimate if they could cite references that produced the aesthetics of research, namely a large, quantitative data set; they were, in other words, in constant pursuit of the ‘research effect’ (Elyachar, 2006, p. 415). In order for any LGBTQ EDI consultant to cultivate a client relationship, they needed to establish themselves as experts in the client’s industry to convince the client that they are both knowledgeable enough to understand the client’s problems but also relatively more knowledgeable than the client so to provide solutions unknown to the client (see Thrift, 2005). During the pink rush in 2018, this became all too apparent when various LGBTQ consultants realized that they were relying on documents that largely framed the need for EDI against a background of the re-criminalization of sodomy in 2013 and needed, as quickly as possible, large quantitative data sets able to describe the then-current situation in 2018.

Consultants are constrained by the need to appear as both industry experts, knowledgeable enough to solve their client’s problems, but also holding greater forms of knowledge than the client that can serve to expedite the solutions the client needs. This goes to explain the near ubiquitous appeal to ‘best practices’ in EDI advocacy. As Kimberly Chong (2018, p. 30) notes, ‘best practice’ is ‘aterm that derives rhetorical force from the implication that there is one universal scale of evaluation for management or organizational practices’. The term at once signifies a ‘standardization of business praxis’ but is also ‘legitimated by recourse to locally relevant and historically specific discourses’ (Chong, 2018, p. 7). The premiers of white papers serve as marketable occasions through which consultants seek to stimulate belief in audiences, investors, LGBTQ employees and business observers that LGBTQ EDI is a global best practice already established by IT head offices; in other words, the extent to which authority was drawn from ‘best practices’ in the global market, BA claimed authority through appeals to IT’s dominant players, most of which are in Silicon Valley. As Indian LGBTQ EDI consultants described to me, they were attempting to ‘leverage’ the Supreme Court’s 2018 decision, moving between appeals to the legitimacy of purportedly global standards of business praxis with relevant critical historical events closer to home.

The focus on speculative investments in LGBTQ EDI is critical for shifting attention away from the discourse of the need for Indian outfits of MNCs to adopt Western cultural business norms – here forms of organizational governance under the guise of modernity – but to show how value is performatively generated through staging the conflict that emerges when a so-constructed traditional offshore economy resists adoption of ‘best practices’, producing India as a space of gender and sexual backwardness. Indian consultants reproduce this colonial imaginary to stage the

intervention they promise to enact fo their clients. Here, ‘friction’ emerges not as the difficult byproduct of tense, conflicting relationships (see Tsing, 2005), but is performatively enacted under the spotlight of the EDI stage that shows the challenges India faces, and the role that Indian LGBTQ EDI consultants can play in alleviating obstacles to profiting from the pink rush.

Autobiography and the staging of sexual economic transformation

Although I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with consultants, such encounters often lacked a sense of ‘privileged ethnographic access’ (Rajan, 2006, p. 119), as these moments typically revealed little more intimacy of these figures than what was already available publicly. Studying LGBTQ consultants, although a minority within a larger field of ESGs in India, nevertheless presented challenges associated with ‘studying up’ (Gusterson, 1997; see also Ho, 2009). This was not because these consultants were difficult to access, but quite the opposite: their expertise on LGBTQ culture was often claimed through public performances of their autobiographies. This was crucial to stimulate belief in their offering, because it was their cultural competency, they promised, that would enable the successful execution of talent acquisition drives, the drafting of relevant HR policies, and the networking of clients into larger circles of experts. Consultants’ use of autobiography was constant and routine, exemplified clearly during one event I attended in the peri-urban hub of Whitefield at a Silicon Valley MNC. This meeting was set up to ‘sensitize’ current employees to LGBTQ EDI policies and convince the upper management of the need for further administrative support. I watched Shiva reiterate his passion for LGBTQ workers, a claim he legitimated by his unapologetic self-declaration of his gay identity, a frankness relatively taboo in Indian public culture. This was further substantiated through reference to both forms of discrimination visited upon him throughout his life but also the support he received in his adolescence and in his career. With reference to his current employer, he said he knew what it meant to work for a company with managers in and beyond HR that were supportive of LGBTQ staff: ‘You work harder, are able to commit to your work when you know that people are behind you. You can really believe in your job and the company’s mission’. Thus, to study LGBTQ consultants requires the study of how knowledge workers understand, claim and communicate the expertise they utilize to move capital (Chong, 2018, pp. 23–24; Rajan, 2006). If Shiva utilized his autobiography to establish claims to expertise as a translator of sexual politics and business acumen at the beginning of a workshop, it was trans women’s autobiographies, sometimes literally referred to as ‘stories of transformation’, positioned at the conclusion of consulting events that were used not to establish a speaker’s own expertise but marshalled as evidence of the promissory of speculative investment in pink Frontiers.

In one such event at a large European accounting firm, a trans woman I call Meenakshi concluded one of PP’s ‘sensitizations’. Shiva had organized the event in collaboration with the firm’s HR manager and posted its details on social media. Like the premiers of white papers mentioned above, although this event’s stated objectives were to

‘sensitize’ workers to LGBTQ staff needs, it was framed as a marketing event for both PP and their client. The event was therefore open to the public. This event proceeded as most would: Shiva as an external consultant began by presenting his own brief autobiography; this was followed by the client, who spoke about their own internal efforts at recognizing and implementing the ‘business case’. The event concluded with Meenakshi giving her a near majority of the event’s allotted time to tell her tale of transformation aided by LGBTQ EDI.

Standing before the audience of about 40 white-collar professionals, Meenakshi began as I would hear most begin in LGBTQ EDI narratives, namely with her adolescence as a formative period of gender dysphoria. She started, ‘I come from a small village. I can’t say the name because my family is still there, but it was a small and traditional place’. She described her resistance to her family’s attempts at forcing a medical intervention, after which she fled to Bengaluru because ‘somehow I knew there were hijras there’. She quickly found a hijra household that took her off the streets. Yet having grown up respectably middle class, she was uncomfortable with the economic demands of the head guru mother, typical of most hijra households: ‘They wanted me to do sex work, do begging, do all sorts of things’. A turning point in her autobiography came when she eventually met a bank manager at what I call CashCard, who was also a frequent attendee of PP sensitizations. The manager enrolled her in a small ESG programme, which sought to train trans women in computer literacy skills to enable competencies in personal finance. This was a paid programme, which provided income during its six-month duration and suggested the possibility of a job offer at its conclusion. Ultimately, CashCard did not offer Meenakshi a job, yet surprisingly this outcome did not deflate the optimism of Meenakshi’s narrative: I learned a lot, and thank you, ma’am, for that [directed to the banker in the audience]. But what I learned more was that I could do what I wanted. That this thing [being transgender] won’t hold me back … I gained friends and skills. I know so many people who can help me here in Bengaluru now. As her nervousness and sorrow in the beginning of her story gave way to a giddy excitement, the audience responded in kind, and a fierce clap and standing ovation followed her harrowing account. Meenakshi’s autobiography strategically mobilized the citational practice of ESG programmes elsewhere, utilized to demonstrate the speculative potential of investment by illustrating previous success. The message of ‘success’ in this narrative is underscored by the fact that the ESG programme did not actually deliver Meenakshi employment but, in fact, something more important: entrepreneurial sensibilities and business connections. Significant to my argument is that the facilitation of the entrepreneurial trans subject’s arrival, the valuable transformation delivered through speculative investment, is that the figure of the hijra, or the longstanding archetype of recalcitrant labour and South Asia’s quintessential manifestation of gender difference, is not altogether displaced from corporate India or Bengaluru’s special economic zones; rather, her presence is continuously demanded in the repetitive production of EDI events, shorn up in order for audiences to bear witness to her displacement. Meenakshi’s story functioned as a testimony, citing her own transformation that links somatic gender affirmation to respectable, entrepreneurial

citizenship as a means of signaling the power that investing in LGBTQ EDI has in transforming one of India's most unruly labouring subjects.

While Meenakshi's story is striking, similar stories of evading or coming out of hijra lifestyles with the aid of LGBTQ EDI are common and routine throughout ESG advocacy in India. Thus, rather than the hijra coming to be evacuated of potentiality and excluded from India's elite IT offices as subjects neither 'talented' nor adding value, it was through such speculative performances that hijras were nevertheless ritually summoned as the sexual economic backwardness from which value becomes extractable. Were it not for a transformation from the hijra, a subject traditionally located in a network of kinship with its obligations of disreputable remunerative practices of sex work and begging (Reddy, 2005), there would be no need for expertise and nothing for the audiences of the 'business case' to bear witness; in short, no event and no future on which to speculate.

Queer liquidation: Toward an open-ended conclusion

This paper – mapping India's great pink rush and the speculative technologies mobilized to instantiate LGBTQ EDI policies locally – aims to intervene in extant criticisms of corporate ethicizing projects promoting 'LGBTQ-friendliness'. On the one hand, ethnography of the pink rush illustrates how the fever following the Supreme Court's decision created opportunities for speculative technologies to harness and capitalize on this energy. While my larger research has detailed cases of head offices in the Global North attempting to 'control' their offshore offices in India by mandating the implementation of LGBTQ EDI policies there (Aaberg, 2024; see also Aaberg, 2026), this paper foregrounds the role that consultants play locally in facilitating this process.

These findings contrast with extant approaches that have foregrounded the reproduction of coloniality through a mapping of the world according to modernity now defined by recognition of LGBTQ rights (Puar, 2007). The significance of this critique is that the Global North, understood as modern according to its recognition of LGBTQ rights, can claim a position of moral authority that facilitates intervention into the sexual politics of backward territories. Yet, this paper's focus on the embodied technologies of speculation illustrates how Global South actors themselves aim to stimulate the pink rush through citation of the Global North as modern through its extant realization of the wealth that follows the implementation of LGBTQ EDI, thus complicating portrayals of the Global South, and its offshore offices and workers, as entirely under the control of an interventionist Global North. In the speculative scene, consultants construct India as backward to stage it as a pink frontier. In doing so, India becomes extractable, promising a transformation in development now equally economic and sexual.

In addition, this ethnography aims to show how the promised transformation of India as an extractable pink frontier necessitates the ritual shoring up of socioeconomic difference. This responds to another prominent critique against corporate ethicizing, in

general, and LGBTQ EDI, in particular. Such critiques rightfully point toward corporate self-interest as an imaginative and ethical horizon (Rajak, 2011; Rigillo, 2015), especially in efforts to diversify and include minorities in organizations (Ahmed, 2012; Fleming, 2007; Ward, 2008). Efforts to make the workplace more inclusive to LGBTQs premised on meritocracy reproduce socio-economic inequality among LGBTQs to the extent that meritocracy is premised on the need to hire 'talent'. The economically marginal among LGBTQs may not be recognized as 'talented' and ultimately become excluded, reproducing socio-economic marginalizationwitnessed in all LGBTQ empowerment initiatives (see khanna, 2016). Neither do I disagree that meritocracy is a violently exclusionary discourse. Instead, this paper demonstrates how difference is ritually summoned in meritocratic spaces to facilitate its very exclusion. The summoning of the Indian nation as backward, its smaller Tier-2 and -3 cities as backward, and constant citation of the hijra as a despised figure who must be transformed into the global 'transgender' subject (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Mount, 2020) together illustrate how backwardness is central to speculative technologies constructing India's pink frontiers. Socio- economic difference and sexual backwardness are thus routinely drawn into India's elite IT offices, if only for the audience to bear witness to their expulsion as 'promissory' (Rajan, 2006), here IT's ability to transform backwardness into an acceptable singular axis of LGBTQ difference. Markers of class and caste difference, the vernacular, and the rural are all cited to illustrate how speculative investment has the capacity to transform India's backward sexual economic landscape into a modern and cosmopolitan one that privileges merit and recognizes 'talent'.

This paper shows how a global LGBTQ rights discourse is enacted, circulated and contested in India through an ethnographic approach of following the actors whose careers aimed to generate speculative value as agents facilitating the emergence of this discourse locally. In no way does this paper suggest that the 'business case' for LGBTQ EDI is ultimately liberatory. Instead, the paper adds to the scholarship aiming to complicate portraits of Global South LGBTQs in anthropology and in critical theory that routinely betray them as ultimately preoccupied with questions of nation and nationalism (Boellstorff, 2005; Posocco et al., 2025), whether mindlessly adopting LGBTQ rights discourses from the North or, perhaps equally mindlessly, preoccupied with outright refusal of them in declarations of sovereignty. Instead, I have sought to challenge this depiction from on high by taking seriously the actors behind India's newly emerging 'LGBTQ-friendly' corporations. This is significant not only for articulating the political economy of LGBTQ EDI, but for tracing the development of newly emergent discourses on LGBTQ recognition in the workplace and LGBTQ workers' rights. In a country without benefits or protections for LGBTQs in the private sector, it becomes crucial to understand how actors seek to make claims on global capital in a context where global corporations have already positioned themselves as the vehicles of sexual economic modernity.

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