What the YouTuber who recorded 'gande log' at a Delhi gay spa didn't show you

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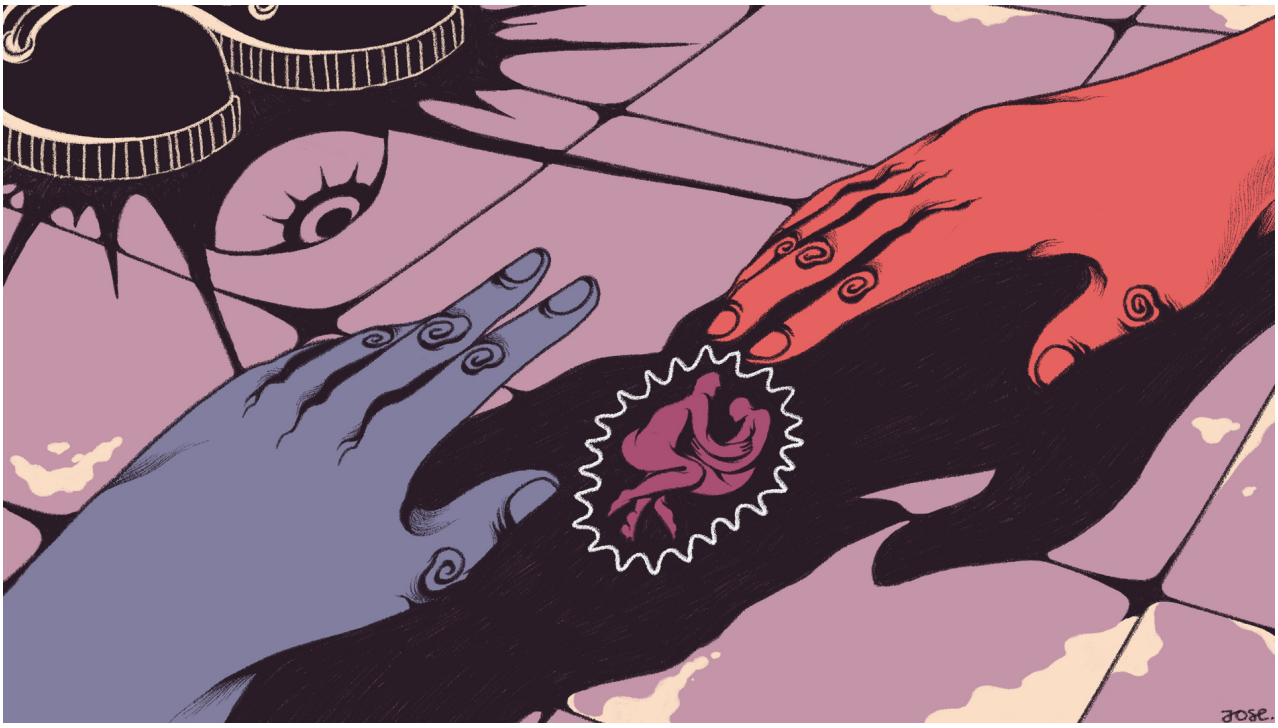

OPINION

On the evening of April 19, 2025, a gay spa in South Delhi was the site of a violent interruption.

A video reporter from *Tehelka Delhi*, a YouTube Channel, had barged into the spa, flanked by police officers. As he screamed, “naked men, naked men”, his team shoved a camera into people’s faces. Bodies in towels were labelled “*gande log*” [dirty people] engaging in “*ganda kaam*” [dirty deeds]. Their images were broadcast online as a public spectacle—an exposé of gay sex and the so-called corruption of society.

Spas like these are a sanctuary for many. A rare space of belonging in a city where privacy is scarce and sexuality is constantly policed. Its regulars include men living discreetly, some in heterosexual marriages, others who travel from distant cities for the anonymity and possibility Delhi promises. These are men whose desires are inconvenient to others, whose lives are often lived between the lines of legality and social disapproval, even six years after the reading down of Section 377 of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code that criminalised same sex sexual activity.

It was a Saturday evening, and the spa, like many others across Delhi, was filled with men who desired other men. The air, thick with the heady blend of sweat and cologne, was suddenly sliced open by the sharp glare of the camera and the louder voice of moral indignation.

The notion of being dirty—which is deeply caste-coded in the Indian context—separates respectable bodies from those that aren't. According to the reporter, the spa he "raided" is a "brothel," and there could be no respectable bodies there.

But this wasn't just a "raid." It was a violation—of bodies; of privacy; of the fragile architectures of queer refuge that have been built in a city that never quite allows one to forget that desire is a risk.

Performing outrage for a growing online audience, the reporter emptied bins to reveal used condoms as though uncovering evidence of a crime. Holding the condoms with his hands, he declared, "this is the unmaking of our moral fabric" and "our cultural integrity, our golden history is in peril." As he sat down in protest outside the spa, demanding action, he transformed into something more terrifying than a reporter: a self-appointed custodian of public virtue.

People scrambled to hide, to flee. The fear was palpable. The camera didn't just record—it hunted. One queer man who had travelled to Delhi from Rajasthan and was at the spa that day described the experience as terrorising:

"It's 2025 and he [the reporter] was making people feel like they are doing something wrong, even though it [gay sex] is completely legal," he told me. "The reporter was not passing the mic to anyone else. So on camera, it is only his voice. So naturally it sounds like his narrative is correct."

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I was in a spa that evening too, though not the one raided. But fear followed gay men in Delhi that day. WhatsApp messages pinged—queer friends cautioning one another, warnings passing through the city's invisible web of care. Suddenly, every space of pleasure also became a space of potential violence. Cartographies of desire and possibility had found their eternal twin in geographies of fear.

Before I left the spa, a boy stopped me. He said he was from Haryana and that he desired me. He offered to exchange numbers to meet again. "Do you have a place?" he asked. His question was more of a reminder: the lack of safe spaces continues to shape how and where queerness gets to exist.

And yet, inside precarious spaces like these spas, something else breathes. Joy. Kinship. Celebration. I have seen people bring prasad, share sweets on Eid, order samosas and Maggi, help each other find jobs, accompany one another to parties, plan trips, fall in love. These spaces carry the whiff of sex, but also the possibility of home.

But even in these spaces, caste never leaves us.

The boy who desired me asked where I was “basically from.” Then, what was my caste?. I was stunned. I asked him why that was needed—and left. Even here, in this supposedly free zone of flesh and intimacy, the structure of caste insists on asserting itself, shaping who can desire and be desired.

Later that night, a queer person I have chatted with on dating apps before came home. As we were chatting, he commented on an Instagram video of mine, telling me I was a good speaker. He hesitated, then asked if I worked with an NGO. “You speak so passionately for Dalits and Ambedkar,” he said, “So, I thought maybe you’re in an NGO.” I told him I’m a professor.

Something in the room shifted. He looked down at the floor, then said softly, “I think you won’t judge me, but I’m also of Ambedkar’s caste. We celebrate April 14th [Ambedkar’s birthday] grandly.”

I smiled and said, “So am I.”

He smiled back. “It’s 2025… and still caste matters so much.”

Yes, it does. Even in the realm of touch and tenderness, caste is a haunting.

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On a different visit to a spa I generally go to, emboldened by a couple of drinks and the comfort of the soft-lit sitting area, I sat down next to a young gay boy who was dressing up after his adventures in the steam and sauna. As he slipped into his jeans and began reassembling the outfit he had arrived in, I noticed the *janeu*—the sacred thread of caste privilege—around his shoulder. Half out of shock, half out of impulse, I asked, perhaps too boldly, “Why did you bring a *janeu* into a place like this?”

He didn’t flinch. He listened to my question quietly, even kindly, and nodded slowly. “I understand,” he said. “There is so much casteism in our society. But I have to wear this for my family.”

He told me he had taken it off before entering the room– a space of sweat, seduction, and longing– leaving it behind in the locker along with his phone and ID. That thread, too, it seemed, needed its own pause, a time-out from the rituals of masculinity and hierarchy.

He wasn’t from Delhi—he had travelled from Orissa, and as we talked, our conversation moved toward land, belonging, and exploitation. We spoke about Adivasi resistance, about how certain communities are always seen as “outsiders,” even on land they’ve stewarded for generations.

What began as an awkward question evolved into a shared understanding. In that strange, dim room that smelled of stale cologne and laughter, caste and queerness were not just identities but starting points of political conversation. The space had allowed for

such fragile, fleeting, but real conversations to take shape. It reminded me that even within the dense sensuality of saunas, with their codes of seduction and unspoken rules of approach, there is room to speak across differences. There is room to listen.

This city, Delhi, like so many others, breaks your heart in quiet and spectacular ways. It builds you a world in back alleys and steam rooms, only to threaten to take it away again. But this is our city too. The "*ganda*" is in all of us. And to reclaim it—without shame—is to reclaim our right to desire, to live, to belong.

On a recent visit to another spa, exactly a week after the haunting memory of the raid, the scent of palpable fear still lingered in the air. It was a strange alchemy: sweat, cologne, steam—and something heavier now. Anxiety. Something had shifted in the space. And yet, even in the thickness of this unease, there was a visible, stubborn commitment to hold on. To not abandon. To refuse erasure.

Near the sitting areasome of the Kothis and gay men danced, their bodies moving with deliberate defiance. They parodied the reporter who had raided the South Delhi spa, imitating his moral outrage with exaggerated expressions, suggestive dance moves, and sharp, loud Hijra *taalis* [claps] that pierced through the room like declarations of survival. In their gestures, there was something playful but also something cutting: a reclaiming of narrative, a refusal to cower. This was satire as survival, parody as protest.

Unlike some of the more sanitised, polished spas of Delhi that cater to gym-sculpted cisgender gay men seeking discreet transactional encounters, here the crowd was messy, lively, and gloriously diverse. There were glamorous Kothis with their *kaja*l-lined eyes; there were gay men from across Delhi's working-class neighbourhoods—Nangloi, Badarpur, Madipur, Raghubir Nagar. There were visitors from Ghaziabad and Meerut, who had crossed city borders not just physically but also socially, looking for fleeting freedom.

In these gatherings, bodies rub against bodies not just in erotic tension but in shared histories of migration, caste, queerness, and survival. The steam room fogs their worlds together; the dance floor (or its makeshift version in a sitting room) becomes a stage where multiple cities, multiple lives, temporarily converge. These queer spaces, though fragile, build moments of belonging outside the violent norms of Delhi's respectable, elite, and sanitised queerness.

Of course, these spaces are not utopias. They carry their own hierarchies, risks, and occasional violence. Exploitation is real; consent is not always respected. Surveillance lingers, not just from outside but sometimes from within. And yet, within their fleeting architectures, there is also a promise—small, stubborn, and unrelenting—of joy. Of collective breathing. Of laughter loud enough to drown out the news reports that call us "*ganda*." Of dance steps irreverent enough to mock the custodians of "culture" and "morality." Of hands reaching for each other across distances that, outside this room, might have been too wide to cross.

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