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Thrice Invisible in its Visibility: Queerness and user generated 'Kand' videos

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The door opens. A young man in his underwear walks out. He looks around, looking for somebody. There is excitement in the air as the camera shows us glimpses of other men in similar states of undress, milling around a dorm room. There is a call for music. The door shuts in our face. Three guys, holding their smart-phones, reminiscent of paparazzi waiting for celeb-sighting, wait in growing anticipation. Strains from an old Hindi movie song make their appearance. It is a melody you know if you grew up in India. It is one of the most iconic songs associated with a snake who could transfigure into a human at her desire, singing and dancing in a battle of wills against a charmer who she knows will kill her, but with whom she has also fallen in love. It is a song that you have heard endlessly in subsequent settings of fun, frolic and seduction, from the monitored coupling during Navratri, the nine nights of dancing festivities that serve as one of the few sanctioned mingling of people of opposite sexes, to the shady dance clubs you went into as a teenager, curious to see what happens behind the curtains of glass beads and cigarette smoke.

As the music catches on, the door opens. The cameraman, who has a bigger camera (size does matter, after all) than the point and shoot apertures on the cell-phones, quickly frames the shot, giving directions for others to make way for a small train of semi-naked young men, making an entry. The seven men, glorious in their own ordinariness, unironically, or perhaps intentionally, break into a disharmonious chorus of the first Bollywood song that launched Salman Khan as an 'item-boy', replacing the body of the female actor, modest in her peekaboo fashions and wet clingy sarees, with a sculpted young man, shaved, bronzed, shirtless, and singing about his desire for the queen of his imagination. One of them is caressing an empty bottle of water. Another has a cricket bat that he is fiddling with. The camera follows them into a communal shower, as the men flock into the cubicles and, in gay abandon, dance under the showers.

They eventually come out, their bodies now glistening with water, and break into dance moves imitating the snake-woman in the original song. You realise that the music has progressed, and that this is a familiar tune, but not the original song. It is

a remix. The high-pitched vocals from the original song have been replaced by a more global husky diva voice. The men are performing the Bollywood 'thumka' – the thrust of their hips, as their wet underwear clings to their buttocks, moving asynchronously to the music, and to each other.

One man, caught in the joy of the moment, finally slides onto the floor and writhes around on his back, pretending to be a snake. Another one straddles him, playing an invisible pipe, and bouncing on the crotch of the man on the floor. A third person joins in. He is covered in foamy suds. The suds spread. Nipples get rubbed. There are groans of ecstasy. One thrusts his crotch into the face of the other. Somewhere in the background, another is down on his knees, imagining the half-erect penis of his friend is the snake-charmer's instrument. There is more soapy fondling and cuddling. Words like 'rumble tumble' and 'horse-play' rise in your mind.

The camera has changed its focus. You can see that it has been charmed by the non-bubble butts on display under the wet fabric of the underwear. Bulges in the front show that at least some of the men are aroused, by the unbearable lightness of being. Sodomy is simulated to great hilarity. The cricket bat is introduced. Two men straddle it. Two more go down on the bat, enjoying the thought of having it penetrate them. More men pass between the legs of others, even as there is collective high-pitched grunting, making up for the lack of women in this simulated sexual foreplay.

It is at that moment they realise that there are no women present and a sudden awareness of the homoerotic setting of the performance seems to dawn on the men. As if in defiance, women are invoked and evoked in bodily gestures. Three men point at their own breasts and jiggle them around a bit. A few more mimic a dance move from the song you remember as the thing that scandalised your parents when you were 16, when Madhuri Dixit, the then national heartthrob danced to the lyrics of 'What is under your blouse?' Things get a little too heated up. One of them realises that one among the group is sporting a full blown erection. It is pointed out. Everybody stares. There is much laughter and pointing. There is more grabbing and simulating intercourse. The seven performers decide that it is time to end the performance. As a goodbye shot, they all line up, in ascending heights, their arms outstretched in a messianic embrace, reminiscent of Shah Rukh Khan's trademark romantic gesture. Collectively they give the camera a middle finger, and as if offended, the video comes to a choppy and abrupt end.

Welcome to the world of Masti and Kand videos (referred henceforth as Kand videos), where the video described here is more a rule rather than an exception. Masti, the Hindi word for 'fun' and Kand, which can be translated as 'scandal' or 'prank' have been conflated where the line between scandal and fun (also referring to the blurring line between consent and abuse on the digital space) is blurred and used to define a subgenre of user generated videos on popular video streaming websites like YouTube. Kand videos include a wide range of user generated pornography between consenting adults, spycams that capture surreptitious encounters, sting operations that seek to provide testimonies of promiscuity, anonymous cameras that insinuate themselves into private spaces, exposing and leaking the people in it, self-recorded videos of performing to popular Bollywood tunes, and groups of young men and women (generally gender separated) having 'a bit of fun' in shared living spaces. In all these types, sexual activity and the body are central to defining the core of the Kand videos. While they also share a similar aesthetic of hand-held, jerky, choppy, largely un-edited amateur videos that seem to be the emerging aesthetic of web video, what unites them is the focus on the bodies of the people in it.

As film-maker Bhrath Murthy (2009) says of probably one of the most public Kand videos – *Mysore Mallige*, which is the leaked video of two consenting young adults on a sex-weekend – the Kand videos are the first thesis of what Indian bodies look like outside of framed images in popular media. Murthy argues that despite the graininess, the lack of focus, and the often confused frames of references in these videos, this is undoubtedly the first production of the 'authentic' which is not caught in the expected tropes of either the dreamy aesthetics of Bollywood or the broken imperative of development agendas that capture the Indian body in motion. The Kand videos owe their popularity, at least to some extent, to their ability to reveal quotidian and regular bodies to an audience that is otherwise forced to consume only the glorified media icons or indeed, pornographic bodies that are surreptitiously imported from other countries. The authentic body in these Kand videos is also a memetic body, and often inspires the audiences to record similar or response videos and thus add to the growing database of videos from India.

User Generated Content, then, has been celebrated as the moment of visibility of the queer Indian body, becoming the reference point of sexual identification and expression. Especially, with the Kand video, it marks one of the first representations of homo-eroticism, which is not forced to masquerade as 'friendship'. There is a

growing discourse about the visible queer body online and how it forms and informs the presence and participation in public forums and spaces like the queer pride marches and public demonstrations. Especially after the dramatic events where the Delhi High Court passed a landmark judgement de-criminalizing consensual same-sex relationships between adults – a decision that was later overturned by the Supreme Court of India – there has been a see-saw of queer bodies negotiating with what kind of public they can occupy, and the digital has often been presented as the answer. Almost in the vein of these Kand videos, I am going to attempt a perverse reading of these libidinal excesses and argue that the Kand videos, far from granting visibility and presence to the queer imaginary, actually seek to shame, tame, control and contain the queer body by rendering it thrice invisible.

The Private and the Unnatural: Spaces of Queerness

Given the dubious and ambiguous nature of India's social, cultural, and legal attitudes towards homosexuality, it is not a wonder that gay identities, desires, bodies, and encounters exist in the grey zone of visibility. In certain urban pockets in the country, you might find a thriving subculture where people identifying themselves as queer (inclusive of, but not always extending to, trans identities) who co-exist with cis-gendered folks. Gay parties, lesbian meet-ups, queer support groups, activists, intervention groups, and legal help-lines are present but transient. Even within these tiny communities, identities are blurred, rejected, and peculiar forms of discrimination are exercised against those who do not fit the global norms of being queer. However, for the large part, queer identities remain invisible.

In the pseudonymous possibilities of cyberspace and the gay dating sites that have been populated by the emergence of digital populations – from apps for instant hook-ups to platforms for long-term dating – there has been a subliminal presence of the queer in the social landscape. As the global development agenda opens up the country to progressive ideals and values of acceptance and liberalization, there is still a persistent precariousness in gay visibility, and the gay sexual landscape remains both private as well as inscrutable. This relegation of sexuality to the domain of the private, reminiscent of the old 'don't ask don't tell' policies, performs an act of great violence on the queer political movement as well as the queer bodies that experience it.

As Audrey Yue (2012) points out, in her analysis of Singapore's cultural acceptance of gayness without political reform, the creation of these autonomous zones of queer identity help in marking some spaces as 'queer-only', and by definition marking other spaces as intolerant and inaccessible to queer bodies and forms. Yue argues that the queer is then asked to retain a dual identity, where in the day time, much like the 'respectable' spaces that become venues of gay gathering once a week, they are expected to subscribe to normative standards of heterosexuality, and they are granted agency only in these contained and selected spaces of sexual expression and desire. This regulation of space through time also forces the queer body to be split, not only in its social performance, but in its temporal being, the continuum of its identity constantly punctured and ruptured by the expectations of timely behaviour. This dichotomy, where, in order to be queer you have to first perform a heterosexual identity, which is allowed its queer spaces and moments, particularly underserves trans and non-normative bodies, privileging cis-gendered bodies as the norm that marks the boundaries of queerness.

The Kand videos follow this very logic in the digital spaces. They give us a sense of a hyper-visible queerness – it is right there, it is not censored, it is allowed to co-exist and thus it is no longer a problem. The Kand videos are a signal of our progressive urban cosmopolitan outlooks, not bothered with what people do in the privacy of their own rooms, as long as they do not bring it out in the open. The Kand videos, as long as they are just scandalous fun, and frolicking pranks, are visible and allowed, but they then shrink the spaces of more political performances online. This cordoning off of selected spaces online, as spaces where being queer is okay, introduces the same kind of double bind that Yue is arguing about. On the one hand it creates ghettoised online spaces where all queer identified bodies then can only present themselves as ironical, dissociated from the messy realities of bodily practices, and visible only in the guise of fun and friendship. They thus get to stand-in as evidence for greater visibility and acceptance of queerness in everyday life, undermining political action that seeks the presence and performance of queerness beyond lifestyle and visibility. In the conflation of scandal and fun, Kand videos also produce a naturalization of the queer identity as non-threatening and legible to the heteronormative gaze, effecting a gentrification of sexuality by constructing acceptable forms of homoerotic behaviour – hooking up in a drunken state or hiding your desires under raunchy encounters is okay – while denying the queer body its affect even within this private space, which can be operationalized only with a sense of irony and apology.

The Kand videos do offer a space for physical queer bodies to be represented in their gay abandon and moments of joy, creating the first instances of homoerotic and sometimes homosexual representations online, and this needs to be celebrated. However, it has to be recognised that they also create a condition of invisibility that is not particularly in support of a larger queer political movement. Especially read in the light of the Supreme Court judgement which cited lack of awareness and visibility as the key reason why Indian societies are not ready to accept homosexuality, in its overturning the decriminalization of the lower court, it is necessary to realize how these 'safe' Kand videos, while offering the promise of visibility, reduce both the spatial and the performative scope of queerness in the country.

To present the Kand videos as the moment of emancipation for the queer movement is to make the queer invisible – available only to the intended user, in the highly atomized and targeted world of the digital web. It is necessary to understand that the social web as we experience it now, is not based on push-based systems.

User Generated Content does not get 'pushed' to the users, interrupting their heteronormative consumption of the web. They get trapped in 'echo-chambers' of the web, where they are either presented only to those who would be identified as the possible consumer – people who have been predicted and profiled by algorithms as having queer interests – or to those who actively pull this content through search engines or subscription to online queer communities. That is why the number of views on these videos still remains quite stunted and the conversations that follow even more so. It is in the nature of the digital web today that heightened production does not necessarily mean increased consumption by a diversity of users. Instead, folksonomies of digital material and their granular and atomised classification ensure that it gets circulated within specific contained communities – a phenomenon that the network theorist Duncan Watts calls a 'small world effect'. The Kand videos, then, even as they survive in the non-viral modes of digital pleasure, because they wear the mantle of 'just fun', remain unavailable for political mobilisation. They do catalyse a rise in quantity of memetic videos but they remain cloistered, available only to those who seek these videos rather than becoming a part of the larger circuits of distribution and consumption. In effect, they push the queer body into a disadvantage by replacing the demand for visibility with the promise of surplus and plenty, offering quantified queer instances as a solution to the question of acceptance and presence of queer bodies in the discursive publics of sexuality.

The Kand videos do offer pleasure and participation to the queer body but are unable to make the connections with the larger political aspirations (online or otherwise) of a queer movement that is still struggling against social, cultural, political and legal sanctions in the country.

The Concealed and the Revealed

Tied in with this containment of the queer body are the politics of concealment. Defining certain spaces where the queer is allowed to exist immediately makes them into precarious spaces. Not only can they be easily shut down, they also can be targeted for attacks of bodily harm and privacy. The Kand video, in its frivolity and exuberance, often obfuscates the fact that the idea of this private queer space has been at the centre of a barrage of attacks on queer cultures and identities. In summer of 2012, for instance, a regional TV channel, TV9, in Chennai, decided to conduct a 'sting operation' to reveal the hidden underbelly of queer subcultures. Also labelled as 'Kand' in sensational media, this time the word had more sinister meanings. It was no longer referring to pranks but to scandal or criminal activities, as the reporters, armed with a mobile recording device, entered an organised gay party and shot footage of people dancing and partying. Without any attempts at anonymizing the people in the videos and showing their online profiles on the popular gay dating site Planet Romeo, the TV channel sought to reveal what happens in the perverted containment of private spaces, feeding the popular fear that if we naturalized homosexuality, our society will become one giant orgy of frenzied bodies.

The TV9 expose is not new and it is not alone. In a similar sting operation, in April 2010, Srinivas Ramchandra Siras, a professor at the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) was 'exposed' for being gay by self-proclaimed citizen journalists, who violently broke into his house and took videos and pictures of him having consensual sex with another adult man. Following this act of 'revealing', Siras was suspended from the university citing misconduct, and eventually he was found dead in mysterious circumstances in his own house, where the authorities could not find a conclusive cause of death. The tragic story of Siras' persecution and death foreground the spying, telescoping aesthetic of ubiquitous and pervasive recording devices which constantly captures our everyday life through human and machine agencies. From the surreptitiously held cell-phone to the invisible drone flying in the sky, there is a constant stream of visual material that is produced of our public and private spaces. The Kand video, which sometimes has agency and consent but often

features people who are too intoxicated to give informed consent, or indeed, spycams strategically placed in rooms of intention, mimics this moment of revealing the private and the personal to a pornographic voyeur. It is in fact the rhetoric of fun and rendering these acts of private intimacy and practices as 'kand' that justifies these moments of intrusion and violence, rendering the subjects extremely vulnerable to social critique as well as regulatory punishment.

For instance, repeatedly, in the comment section to these Kand videos, there are people who come and spew abuse at these men having fun, for being gay, for being effeminate, for engaging in unnatural acts, and for being a stain on Indian societies. Even those viewers who consume these videos for pleasure are able to express their desire only in disguised appreciation of the 'masti' or joy and not of the bodies or the homoerotic overtones of the video. In fact, expressions of desire that sound homosexual are often derided, flagged as inappropriate, abused and threatened or faced with the tag 'NoHomo' which often accompanies the description of such Kand videos. The performers themselves take up the defensive 'NoHomo' tone in their comments or description of the videos. These videos, which do not mask the identity or the location of the performers, can also open them to internal censure from the university authorities, which crack down on such instances citing violation of a code of conduct. The potentials for cyberbullying that might emerge when these videos go locally viral or are distributed across the user generated content websites are huge and outside of the purview of existing legal regimes against hazing and bullying.

The construction of the Kand video as this untainted moment of celebration and joy obfuscates the larger mechanics and machine logics that frame, shame and censure the queer by constantly intruding in the private, the personal, and the intimate moments of their lives.

The visibility, in the case of the Kand video – both in how the video gets constructed, but also in the scrutiny that the video is subjected to – is thus dubious, if not downright harmful. It creates the private space of queer encounters as one that is fair grounds for invasion and violation of privacy and bodies, as well as sites of titillation and scandal that need to be periodically penetrated by the heteronormative gaze that seeks to reveal what is hidden, and in the process, initiates processes of shaming and punishment that punish the queer body and its desire to be public, and push it into further invisibility.

The Queer Guy for the Straight Eye

The most violent kind of visibility that the queer body is installed in is that of selective visibility. The queer is not absent. Its absence would be generative because it would demand questions of inclusion and erasure. We have already seen the two kinds of invisibility that arise from containing the queer in counter-public and limited spaces, and by hiding the very technological apparatus that seeks to regulate them even while granting them interface visibility. The third invisibility that the Kand video embodies is the positing of the queer body, reduced to nothing more than an obscenity of surplus. In popular cinema, for instance, the queer body has either been normalised as evil and pathological, as evil masterminds that plan and conspire the fall of society or the effeminate butt end of all jokes, which is marked only by its lack of masculine traits or belonging to the heteronormative fold. This strategic revealing of the queer guy for the straight eye allows it to be easily invoked in discussions and representations of queerness in conditions of abnormality, contagion and crime. The Kand video, and the way in which it circulates and operates, is consumed and shared, follows this particular trajectory. The videos are 'tolerated' because what they tell us about the queer body and its excesses are in exact accordance with what is popularly known.

In the Kand videos, the male bodies and their relationships are either presented as clownish and jocular, or mired in shame and apology. When you contrast the Kand videos with other genres of net porn that also emerge with the ubiquitous technology devices, you can see that not only in the framing of the subject but also in the way the digital objects are consumed, there is a marked difference. The Masti videos, for instance, which often feature straight instances of 'fun', but also women in homoerotic settings, and spycam images of straight couples making out, there is a different trajectory for the hosting and consumption of these videos. They get censored on popular video hosting websites like YouTube and Vimeo. They appear on user generated porn websites like PornHub. They are seen as embodying desire and sexual intimacy, which are not granted to the Kand video. The Kand video is forced to be nothing more than a joke, visible only to laugh at the strains of queerness that we hide in our cultural practice, whereas the Masti videos, in their heterosexual male gaze, are invested with meanings of eroticism which are beyond the scope of the image.

As Namita Malhotra (2011) argues, in her significant monograph on *Pornography and Law*, what constitutes porn is often contingent upon the expectation of the

image rather than its content. In fact, in the case of digital straight user generated pornographic videos, we often have videos which do not show sexual content. There are long shots of wrinkled beds with no human bodies, spy cam images that are so grainy that if there was no caption describing it as porn, one would never have figured out what was on the screen, close-ups and strange camera angles which make it difficult to decipher the human body, exposed in its pixelated intimacy. And yet, they are charged with erotic desire and intention, making them authentic expressions of sexual desire and intimacy. The Kand videos, in stark contrast, even when they do have naked male bodies in interaction with each other, are only allowed to be 'Kand videos', and never as videos of self-expression or desire.

This positioning of Kand videos as bereft of emotional and affective intent and experience, is another way by which the queer gets counted, accounted for, and discounted in the digital. The focus of the genre is essentially only on practices, which are often exaggerated and consumed with a sense of derision. There is no space for the reading of affect, desire, and irony as a space of expressing the forbidden. The excesses of queerness are conducive to the repetition and reputation economies of the social web, but it gets reduced to nothing more than traffic. It is not allowed, by the authors fearing censure, by the consumers afraid of queer-shaming, and by those who share, of legal action, to be anything more than a placeholder queerness – a queerness that can be visible only if it makes invisible the mechanisms and desires of queerness, settling only for the representation and visibility of the biological body and its interactions.

This production of the queer guy, who can be easily mocked, controlled in how he identifies himself, and the building of acceptable spaces of sexual interaction for a straight audience, in norms of straightness, is a new kind of invisibility, where the queer has to be assimilated rather than accepted for what it is. It is a process of getting rid of the excesses of queerness, so that it can be rendered cute and pleasant, as a plaything that can be safely placed in the reinforcement of the patriarchal heteronormative code rather than a questioning of it.

Power and Control in the Time of User Generated Web

It was my intention in this paper to take a pause in the almost breathless celebration of hypervisibility and cacophony of the participatory web. Despite research that shows how social and political inequalities get amplified in the social web, there is

an inherent faith in user generated content that is foregrounded in talking about social media. Especially in countries like India, where the technology penetration is still nascent and it is imagined that a huge population is going to be digitally connected and have access to and contribute to the digital information sets, the exuberant celebration of the alternative voice finding visibility and voice on the web is both infectious and exciting. Narratives of empowerment, of visibility, and of finding presence within the digital domain flood academic discourse as well as policy and practice that is geared towards getting the disenfranchised visibility in the digital networks. So strident is this narrative, so persuasive in its promises, that it becomes the dominant mode of analysing cultural products, even in the face of evidence and experience that shows that different intersections of historic disadvantage like gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion, language, location, etc. get reconfigured as gating factors to effective presence and voice on the social web. This critique often gets side-stepped because it takes the expected form that advocates, what Asha Achuthan (2011) calls 'a condition of apoeria' in technology and development practices.

In explaining her characterisation of apoeria, Achuthan argues that when it comes to intersections of gender and sexuality with the digital, it offers a pre-wired set of responses. The first step is to fetishize access and insist that the sexual invisibility and inequity will be corrected by connecting everybody in the digital networks. Once access infrastructure building is initiated, there is recognition that access is uneven and does not guarantee presence. Efforts are made to train these identified minorities to be habilitated into the existing practices, making them 'subjects' of technology. Presence proves to be inadequate, because in the burgeoning information sets of the digital web, it is highly possible to be present but not be visible. The next step is to think of inclusion and set up corrective mechanisms by which the underserved communities can be included in discourse, practice, and policy. This immediately establishes corrective mechanisms of control and regulation, where only certain kinds of bodies and identities can be created as occupying these positions of power, eventually amplifying the same inequalities that the entire process was set up to address. Apoeria, then, becomes a trope by which the queer and the digital are pitched against each other, and each shares a common blind spot where the body itself slips into a blackhole. So that when we examine Kand videos the analysis either focuses on the interfaces and the logic of quantification that digital technologies offer, or it focuses on mechanics of

regulation and provides a queerness that is acceptable to the heteronormative status quo.

My reading of the Kand video is trying to avoid falling in this trap, where the visibility, the presence, the distribution and the circulation of these Kand videos are not, in themselves, contributing to the queer rights politics in India. Instead, I am proposing that we need to read the Kand videos, and indeed, other similar user generated cultural products, as sites of contestation and regulation. Instead of locating the critique merely on the question of representation, and the associated chain reaction from Access to Inclusion, I propose that we read the Kand videos as generating and producing new forms of regulation and control of queerness. This is no longer regulation that depends on keeping the queer invisible and outside of the fold of cultural practice and representation. Instead, this is a regime that allows for the queer to be assimilated, produced, and contained so that it remains politically neutered, bereft of rights, and palatable to the heteronormative status quo. In the reading of the Kand videos as granting three times invisibility to the queer, even as it makes the queer body hypervisible and present, I am suggesting that in looking at questions of digital technologies and gender and sexuality, we need to move away from limiting our analysis to the interface. Instead, examining the technicity (Manayath, 2012), the mechanisms, the contexts of circulation, and processes of negotiation of identity and practice, located in the intertwined mechanics of machinic distribution and affective reception, helps us forge a stronger and more nuanced agenda for queer politics in emerging information societies.

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