

# Queer Voices

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# Acknowledgments

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## I. Objective

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Bringing together voices of allies and of the LGBT community to weave a narrative that is a reflection of those voices.

## 2. Introduction

The word 'Queer' is an umbrella term for sexual and gendered minorities. This community has borne the brunt of intolerance and rejection from the Indian society for a long time.

The project attempts to understand the nature of these oppressions that they face, bringing out their voices to lead to a better understanding of them. To translate the 'them' into 'us'.

It does so by bringing in the perspectives, life experiences and opinions of not only the queer community but also of everyone on this sliding scale of sexuality including heterosexuals.

Stories of these people existed before the retrogressive act of 377 came into being, criminalizing homosexual behavior in India. How has it affected these people? What are the prejudices that they face (if any) and is there a way to bridge this gap of our ignorance? These are some of the questions the project attempts to answer.

The project 'Queer Voices' draws its force from people and their stories, complex multi-layered identities and their tryst with sexuality.

### 3. Secondary Research

377 Act, 1861

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The British Raj introduced anti-sodomy law in 1861 as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a retrogressive step, it states.

*Unnatural offenses: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.*

*Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence.*

This law remains in place today in India, even though homosexuality between consenting adults was decriminalized in England in 1967.

Same-sex love in India and society's attitude towards it can be understood by looking at oral sources as well as written text. Oral tradition and sources, despite their richness and value are difficult to access as well as fix antiquity to. Thus, I looked at written text instead; helped immensely by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's pioneering book 'Same-Sex Love in India— A literary history'.

The book focuses on written texts about love and affection between men and between women (not biologically related) set in India and parts of Pakistan. The 377 act is seen as an agency of change, for the worse. Evidence to which is given in part by the change in India's literary tradition. The book is divided into three parts—ancient Indian materials, medieval materials and modern Indian materials—this division isn't watertight.

It throws light on ascetics, Ayappa devotees and the latent homoeroticism therein. It also covers same-sex love in legends, folklore and mythology, which in itself is a reflection of the society at the time. Shiva and Vishnu (Supreme Gods of the Hindu pantheon) give birth to a child namely 'Harihara'. Their love and affection for one another is sung and celebrated in the 'Bhagvata Purana'. Poems, ghazals and important texts such

as 'Babarnama' portray how homosexual figures were a visible part of society, holding important positions in court and otherwise. Mitrubi, a poet of Jehangir's court is asked by the emperor to compare the beauty of dark skinned Hindu boy to that of a fair skinned Muslim boy. He speaks of their beauty with immense passion. Babar, Amir Khusro, Mir Taqi and Madho Lal, important figures of the time, reveal much in their writings. Thus there exist enough literature to suggest a peaceful coexistence, heteronormativity and homophobia, seems to be the western import rather than homosexuality.



*“His beautiful face, his charming form  
I absorbed into my innermost heart.  
Khusro has given himself to Nizam.”*

- Amir Khusro  
(Translated by Saleem Kidwai)



This law led to persecution of homosexuals, it instilled in the Indian mind associations of sin and uncivilized behavior with homosexuality. The stigma and prejudice created and perpetuated a culture of silence around homosexuality, resulting in denial and rejection at home along with discrimination in workplaces and public spaces. With the result that alternate sexuality was practiced in darkness and with discretion. Sex with strangers and in public spaces became the way out, increasing vulnerability to physical disease and susceptibility to fear, paranoia.

The act further impedes HIV AIDS prevention and misrepresents the community as criminals, putting them in the same group as pedophiles. Blackmail and extortion by police and authorities continues to be practiced. Furthermore it prevents LGBT community from seeking legal protection from violence; for fear that they would themselves be penalized for sodomy. It has robbed them of a facility with which to express themselves.

In order to convince British babu's of India's piety, spiraled a movement. The purification of poetry, myths and legends that suggested homosexual love. The quest to explain away homo-eroticism led some critics to desperate measures.

Mir, a famous poet sang of his love and lust for the 'gorgeous boys of Delhi'. One of the suggestion put forth was that Mir turned to boys after frustration in a heterosexual affair. Others would say that love poetry (Mir and Amir Khusro often wrote love poetry) was poetry to God, who is male. Alternatively, since it was improper to refer to women in love poetry the gender was kept as male. Along with the bastardization of homo-erotic literature arrived horrific homophobic fiction like Rajkamal Chaudhuri's Hindi novel '*Macchli Mari Hui*' (Dead Fish), it suggests that lesbianism is the result of frustrated heterosexuality, unsatisfying, because women involved are really obsessed with men. '*Fire*', a film by Deepa Mehta portrayed women as lovers (Owing partly to unsuccessful marital life) faced problems from political parties as well as women's groups when it was released in 1996.

Ismat Chughtai's '*Terhi Lakeer*' (Hindi), Vijay Tendulkar's '*Mitra's story*' (Marathi) and Vijay Dan Detha's '*A Double Life*' (Rajasthani), all of which are now adapted into feature length films were controversial at the time and form part of modern queer literature.

Homosexual and transgender characters were shown as genderless caricatures in several bollywood

productions. In present times caricatures continue to be perpetuated by media and yet there is hope in films like '*Margarita with a Straw*' (Shonali Bose, Niles Maniyar) screened in IIT BOMBAY on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2015.



## Legal action against section 377

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In December 2007, Naz Foundation and the Lawyers Collective contest the act, the argument being that it impedes AIDS protection work, challenging the constitutionality of Section 377 on grounds of violation of right to privacy, dignity and health under Article 21, equal protection of law and non-discrimination under Articles 14 and 15 and freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution.

On 2nd July 2009, the Delhi High Court passed a landmark judgment holding Section 377 to be violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution, insofar as it criminalized consensual sexual acts of adults in private.

The judgment was challenged, however, at the Supreme Court and was overturned by the same stating that Section 377 IPC does not suffer from the vice of unconstitutionality and the declaration made by the Division Bench of the High court is legally unsustainable.

The 2009 decision was significant, it gave people hope. The change of law may not represent a complete change in society, however, it's a starting point. Supreme court's overturning was a big blow. The fight isn't over though, several non government organizations continue to work for the welfare of the LGBT community.

## Survival

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Despite the 377 act and social stigma, men of alternate sexuality continue to act on it. This is made possible through different ways depending on access as well as notions of privacy.

Men in the closet with limited access to technology use cruising spots (Public urinals, Cinema halls and specific railways compartments among others) and chance encounters in order to meet other men. Engagement with male sex workers is another pathway.

Men who have access to technology but choose to remain in the closet may use online messengers, classified ads (websites/newspapers) and social media groups. They may indulge in aforementioned cruising spots with the advantage of staying connected with strangers owing to mobile phones. Gay dating applications, websites and LGBT parties may also become points of access, albeit, discreetly.

Men who are out of the closet use a variety of the above points of access, albeit with less discretion.

The anonymity that the web allows has lulled many queer people into inactivity, while more and more people may be considered as '*practicing homosexuals*', fewer percentages rise to the occasion in the fight for representation. Radical movements are less likely to happen from within as much energy goes into fighting the oppressions that fear and the unknown cripples people with. Furthermore, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones' punctuated equilibrium in social theory (Inspired by **Stephan J Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium**) states that large shifts in society may punctuate change, leading to stability. The concept, it seems may extend to progress in the LGBT movement. The technological revolution that has brought in applications and cyberspaces that allow for queer individuals to meet and interact with each other is one such big shift. It has opened pathways and facilities that never existed.

*Large shifts in society may punctuate change, leading to stability. Technological revolution may be one such shift*

*“I want to scream  
all oppression is connected you dick!*



*at the heart of every radical action in history  
stood the dykes who were feminists  
the anti-racists who were gay rights activists  
the men who believed being vulnerable  
could only make our community stronger*

*as the violence against us increases  
where are the LGBT centres in those neighbourhoods  
where assaults occur most frequently?  
as the tide of the Supreme Court changes  
where are the LGBT marches  
to support a woman's right to an abortion?  
what say we about health insurance  
for those who can least afford it?”*

*- Staceyann Chin*



## All oppression is connected

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Audre Lorde, a Caribbean-American writer, radical feminist, womanist, lesbian, and civil rights activist described herself as black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet. She says *“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don’t live single-issue lives.”* The struggle for equal opportunities, justice, decriminalization and representation that queer communities fight for resonates with challenges faced by other oppressed communities.

All oppressions are connected and our sense of identity is complex. A person is more than their sexuality. gender, class, caste, place of birth, education, race, behavioral traits and complexion among others. These labels however end up limiting a person’s sense of self. The fight isn’t against homophobia alone. It is to move towards a society where not just heteronormativity but all kinds of normativities are done away with.

As part of the research I attended ‘Rainbow Mic’, part of Queer fest, organized by Queer Ink. It provides a platform to any queer or ally performer ensuring a mainstream audience for queer expression. It is here, amidst wonderful performances, I came across a poem by Staceyann Chin titled *‘All Oppressions is Connected’*. The poem echoed Lorde’s ideas. An excerpt from the

same is mentioned on the opposite page.

*‘Ambedkar helped me embrace the emotional within the rational’*, is an essay written by a law student who identifies himself as a cisgendered homosexual. He is born into a lower caste and asserts that his struggles with dalithood resonated with and helped him in his struggles with his sexual identity. The interconnectivity of these oppressions suggests that the struggles against them may resonate with each other as well.

In order to understand and fight one kind of oppression, the journey of another may be looked at. Hence I looked at dalit activism in India and came across a paper from the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies by T. Sirari and S. Jhodka titled. *“In the footsteps of Ambedkar, mobility, identity and dalit initiatives for change”*. An interesting insight from the paper revealed much:

*“Dalit Sahitya does not work without activism. It is associated with the masses. However, there are challenges. Writing requires patience and depth. While for the activists, there is a sense of immediacy for expression of anger. Craftsmanship is also important in literature. Literature should not become mere reporting or journalism. Literature requires reflection from the author.”*

The immediacy of activism and the effectiveness of literature in being an agency of change are ideas that aided progress in my understanding of tackling the oppression faced by the queer community.

## Acceptance and understanding

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Tolerance and acceptance towards homosexuality varies from country to country. On one hand the USA has legalized gay marriage, a remarkable move by the Supreme court. The govt. of Uganda is trying to pass a law that not only criminalizes homosexuality but also compels citizens to report homosexuals. Ministers pushing the bill, state that homosexuals are recruiting children to pass it on. The oppression here is so severe that citizens spew active hatred towards the queer community, forcing them to live in unsanitary conditions, refusing basic amenities and employing corrective rape practices.

India's story is complicated. The Humsafar trust organized an acceptance meet on 16th August, opening a forum for discussion amongst queer people and their friends, relatives and office colleagues. There is acceptance in varying degrees ranging from superficial to one where a mother publishes an add in the matrimonial section seeking a son-in-law.

I carried out posts on several LGBT groups on facebook to gauge the different responses parents had towards homosexuality before and after a child comes out (or is discovered). Members of the LGBT community shared their experiences. In several cases parents who appear liberal minded

towards alternate sexuality change their stance on finding out about the sexuality of their child. Therefore their acceptance came from a place of pretense and not understanding.

The cultural differences in the society shape the responses to conflicts in different societies. The face negotiation, communication theory holds up the idea of maintaining a face according to their cultures. The face is nothing but an identity, the persona we keep up in the society-a public image. As face represents oneself in the society, the people display an attitude which is desirable to them.

While people may accept homosexuals on a superficial level, this acceptance falls short when it's one's relative or friend. Heterosexuality isn't normal, it is simply common. A step in the positive direction is possible because certain obstacles have been cleared and acceptance exists on some level unlike Uganda where homosexuals are met with hate and hate alone. The next step is to move towards acceptance formed on the ground of understanding and humanity.

## Literature

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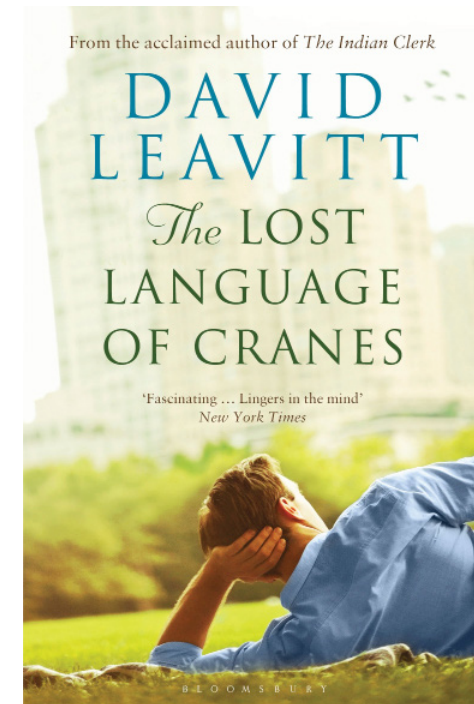
In order to best understand and express queer voices in India, it was imperative that other such voices be read. There are certain works of fiction that I came across at before this project came into being, like 'A Boy's Own Story'(Edmund White), 'Giovanni's Room'(James Baldwin), 'Funny Boy'(Shyam Selvadurai), 'Hostel Room 131'(R Raja Rao) and 'Black Holes'(Charles Burns) among others.

During the course of the project, however, I have focused on David Leavitt's highly acclaimed political novel, 'The Lost Language of Cranes'. I have also looked at Alison Bechdel's tragicomic 'Fun Home' along with 'Because I have a voice'(Narrain and Bhan). 'Shane, The Lone Ethnographer' by Sally Galman was particularly helpful in carrying out interviews for primary research.

In order to understand short stories Adriane Tomine's '32 Stories' and Shaun Tan's 'Tales from outer suburbia' were read.

### The Lost Language of Cranes - Metaphors

This book made waves owing to the strong political undertone it had. It has been said that 'the novel sums up the history of gay books themselves': that is, from the pangs of opprobrium (Owen) to self-acceptance (Philip). Owen visits gay porn theaters, shameful of his acts, he keeps distance from his son, fearing that his presence may turn him gay as well. Philip, Owen and Rose's gay son leads a stable life fueled by a manic need for love and desire to feel needed. Jerene, a language scholar and a confident lesbian woman with no history of queer family members, brought up in a traditional way raises questions of nature versus nurture albeit incidentally. Language links apparently disparate elements in a structured narrative. Close reading of this book explained the use of metaphor such that it only directs the reader to the message rather than becoming the message itself. Michel, an infant abandoned by a junkie mother is left to watch cranes operating outside his window, he copies moves and imitates sounds, creating his unique language. As a mentally handicapped adolescent, only cranes make Michel happy. This anecdote gains importance because it points to the title itself. The metaphor thus points at the question of nature vs nurture, that is played with throughout the book, albeit subtly.



## Queer themed films

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A gay couple from Hong Kong, visit Argentina hoping to renew their ailing relationship. The two have a pattern of abuse, followed by breakups and reconciliations. One of their goals in Argentina is to visit the Iguazu waterfalls, which serves as a recurring motif in the movie. This is the story of Kar Wong Wai's 'Happy Together'. A lampshade of the said waterfalls exists as an artifact that holds immense power. On watching Wai's 'In the mood for love', the protagonist's shoes acts as another artifact. These artifacts bring out the nuances in the lives of these characters. Thus I try and incorporate the use of artifacts in my project.

The Laramie project by Moises Kaufman, originally a play draws on hundreds of interviews conducted by the theatre company with inhabitants of the town, company members' own journal entries, and published news reports on the hate crime committed against Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. When people see their own way of thinking recast in the larger world view it allows them to see things beyond themselves, is the overarching observation from the film. An observation that guided the course of action I took for primary research.



## 4. Primary Research

### Confirmation Bias

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In psychology and cognitive science, confirmation bias (or confirmatory bias) is a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions, leading to statistical errors. It essentially means that one may end up validating an existing opinion instead of discovering them, asking questions such as 'Is it so?' instead of 'What is it?'

Furthermore sexuality is a sliding scale, a spectrum and more richness is achieved from multiple perspectives. Those of straight people as well as queers and everyone in between.

### Interviews

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Disclaimer: The identity of the interviewees isn't revealed nor is the transcript shared in order that they shall speak freely. The interviews are audio recorded for the sole purpose of understanding the project as promised to the same.

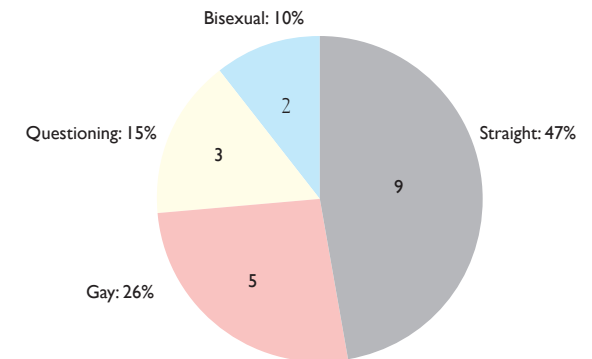
Sample size interviewed: 19  
Mean age of Interviewees: 26yrs

Profile of interviewees: A majority of the interviewees have lived in urban cities, are educated (minimum graduation) and are aware of homosexuality.

Duration of Interview: 30min–1hr10min

### Sexual orientation of interviewees

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## Interview: method and questions

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### Method:

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out where interviewees were encouraged to draw from their experiences. Furthermore, they were encouraged to elaborate more on issues and areas where they had an opinion or experiences to support the same. The primary questions were asked nonetheless in addition to those that came up in the course of the interview. The audio was recorded along with notes. In certain cases the interviewees were uncomfortable with recording in which case notes or chats became source of data.

### Questions

- How do you identify yourself with respect to sexual orientation?
- Do you know anyone who isn't straight?
- How do you know they are so? How (can) did you identify them?
- What kind of lifestyle do they/you lead?
- At what age did you come across them?/ Realize you are?
- How do you think they meet each other?
- How do you meet other queer people?
- Are people born queer?/How are you queer?
- Ideas of love and personal experiences.
- How would you respond to a gay/straight person expressing love for you?
- How would you respond to 377?
- Is there any link between HIV AIDS and homosexuality?
- What is their/your role in society?
- Why should they/you get representation in mainstream society?

## MSM Community

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“Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.”  
Second line mis-attributed to Henri Thoreau.

There exist a community in the large spectrum of queers or LGBT called MSM that is, men who have sex with men. Men who have sex with men (MSM), also known as males who have sex with males, are male persons who engage in sexual activity with members of the same sex, regardless of how they identify themselves; many such men do not (or cannot for various reasons) sexually identify as gay, homosexual or bisexual. The term was created in the 1990s by epidemiologists in order to study the spread of disease among men who have sex with men, regardless of identity. These men are very discreet and it was difficult to get interviews of such men, therefore in my research I visited a gay cruising theatre namely, ‘Imperial cinema’ as an observer. Here is an account of the visit. The visit didn’t yield any contact as no one was ready to talk to, it did however impress upon me the culture of silence and discretion rampant in this community.

## Visit to the Imperian cinema

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My journey begins on Lamington road, a busy marketplace, shop after shop selling electronic items, The crowd thins out significantly as the cinema nears. Next to a restaurant that doesn’t smell of anything nice stands a crumbling, rundown Cinema - Imperial. Its dilapidated state attracts attention, wrought iron gates, victorian architecture retaining motifs from days gone by. A queue of men wearing different clothes while sharing similar looking chappals eye me with suspicion. One of them musters the courage to make this ‘checking out’ process more obvious than others. Knowing the class dynamics of the place I decided to dress down, apparently not enough. Methinks wearing sport shoes wasn’t the best idea. I take the balcony in order to shift between levels. People in the stalls seem to be sitting there forever, it has to be the stuff of macabre. The theatre has no women except the image of one, the heroine from Kanti Shah’s ‘*MMS kaand*’. Men of all age groups are present, they look indecisive, waiting for darkness to descend, waiting for some sign before they fix their seat. Throughout the movie men change places, often moving to the upper right corner of the balcony, returning to their seats after 11 minutes or so. It smells of pee and in some places of semen. To my surprise, there are two men, who, by their attire seem to be from a higher economic background. While one of them changes places every time someone approaches, the other seems to be the one approaching. People look back

expectantly, some rub their hand on the seat next to them— an act of invitation. Time passes, men shift uneasily, when approached by others who means business, disgusted sometimes, inviting at others. The toilet tells a similar story. I go down to check the stalls, it seems that familiar faces from the balcony have come down to the stalls as well. During intermission the gates of the cinema are locked, a makeshift stall offers boiled eggs and chai. No one engages in conversation, there is an eerie silence broken by footsteps and occasional phone calls. Men who indulged in sexual acts a few minutes back, avert eyes, maintain distance and pretend to be oblivious to the other’s presence. The pretense is so well done, it’s almost believable. The film ends, no numbers are exchanged, conversations started or goodbyes exchanged. Outside the hall though, a few boys stand wearing tight fitted denims with bleached hair and kohl in their eyes. Who are they waiting for? I don’t know.



## 5. Data Analysis

### Understanding data

Writing down all ideas expressed by the interviewee that fell within the scope of the project and comparing them with the notes taken while recording the same. Points noted during the interview were supplemented by observations gained from listening to the audio again. Also audio helped in assessing emotions associated with the ideas presented.

### Distillation of data

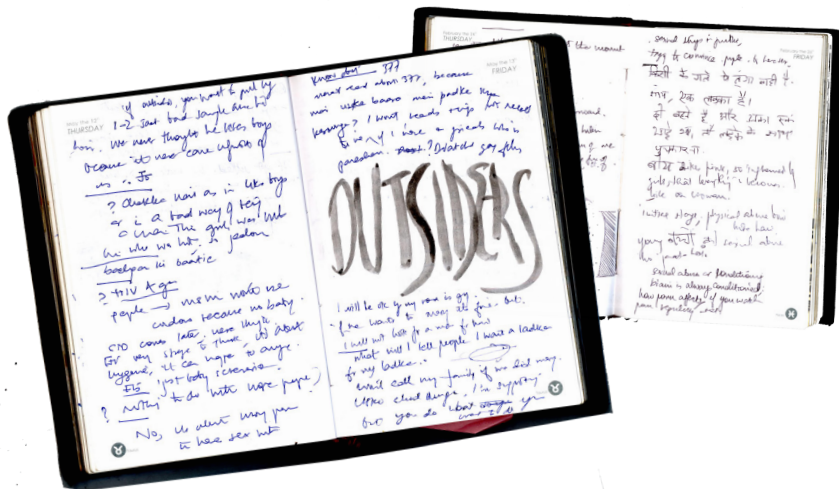
The notes were then reduced to ideas and dialogues that were in resonance with the project idea and outlines. These were written on Post-its. The idea behind using post its was to discover a categorization (if possible) rather than imposing one. This idea was inspired (distantly) in the way Jung (Freud's student) would first understand patients and then discover categories unlike Freud who'd establish categories first and then put patients in them. Keywords were highlighted on the post-its.

### Deduction of categories

On putting all the post-its together, a few categories were established. Of the 200 post-its several fit in overlapping categories. Each of these were further arranged based on opinions and dialogues as well as positive and negative undertones. These categories aren't water-tight, overlapping each other, the overlaps are revealing. Along with these categories several inferences were possible for instance, femmephobia came through in the responses of both straight and queer individuals.

The categories were:

1. Unrequited Love
2. Sexual behavior and lifestyle choices
3. Sexual identity
4. Behavior (other than sexual behavior)
5. Reasons for being Gay
6. Oppression
7. Acceptance



Even if ppl avoid homophobia  
- that there is exhaust  
& pressure → it's all  
about pressure  
Gay as  
you as  
gay ~~is~~

You don't know  
what gay  
ppl will do.

I am Shake  
(a. Shake  
I have trusted  
feelings for you

Show signs of  
injustice  
You don't know  
someone you  
to give error  
to them.

Don't  
about  
If you don't get  
- it don't be anti  
PDI. If you  
- just fall in that  
way is

Why should  
I know about BFT  
**I**

By not having an  
opinion. By being  
Silen → you oppress  
~~Gay~~ gay l. part  
& society → opposite

It's all about  
pretending

limits  
to play  
charm  
Will you?  
The bully? I  
the pen  
set back they not  
be want to  
but not happy  
about it

Abused by  
men  
rejected by  
women.

Gay ppl shouldn't talk  
about it.  
Strj. don't need to  
have to talk about it  
**SILENCE**  
?

Identity has  
multiple facets.  
not married.  
likes gay men.  
wears women clothes  
loves but can't have  
sex

People have aspiration  
& leading a normal  
life

**FREEDOM**



## 6. Concept Development

### Making connections

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Once the categories and placements were done, connections were identified by multiple readings of the same. Randomly picking two ideas to find lateral connection. Moving from top to bottom, left to right and reversing the order, among others were used to identify lateral connections



### Parallels

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Several parallels emerged between the responses of straight and queer people. Unrequited love came through as a category where one person's idea flowed into the other more easily; crossing boundaries of gender and orientation. It idea had a lot of visibility and the nature of oppression associated with it came through. One such example is as shown.

**Interviewee A:** *"I may love all people but when I'd touch a woman I was in love with, I'd remember it and have a memory of it, because it is someone I love. It won't apply to just any woman either. I love my friends but I don't remember or crave their touch."*

**Interviewee B:** *"I wouldn't hold my best friend's hand in school because she didn't know what it meant for me, holding hands. I didn't want to take advantage of her"*

It so happens that A identifies as a straight man while B identifies as a lesbian, and yet it's hard to differentiate. The value each gives to love is high. The difference lies in that love isn't given even a chance for rejection. The facility to express one's feelings isn't available.

### Contradictions

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While parallels and meeting points do exist, several contradictions came through. These contradictions allowed room for dialogue and reflection. Who is right? who is wrong and how does it matter in the larger scheme of things.

For instance two views come together here:

**Interviewee C:** *"A lot of people are in this gray percentage, they are neither love nor hate homosexuals, they can be brought to one side. These people don't harm anyone."*

**Interviewee D:** *"Your bandwidth goes in handling society, the kind of exhaustion that society makes you go through is tremendous, even when all it says is silence. 'Let them talk' keeps on building up."*

These responses while in contradiction of one another allowed for deep reflection on silence or no response as a response.

## 7. Concepts

### 1. Bites

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'A', upset over the ending of his relationship owing to issues of religion comes to meet his friend 'B'. 'A' laments over the helplessness of being rejected because of something he can't control whilst sharing a chocolate ('B' offers) with his friend. The sharing of chocolate; it seems is their tradition. 'B' stows away the wrapper as a memento of the love he feels for 'A', manifested only in the moments spent as friends.

The story attempts at highlighting the oppressing situation, disallowing 'B' to even express his feelings. The option of being rejected doesn't exist, for his affections can't take the test. This oppression is similar in the way religion can take over our identity putting 'purdah' over everything else reducing us to our religious identity. Oppression isn't in rejection but rather in the absence of the facility to express oneself.



## 2. Loss

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This concept is focused on acknowledgment and respect even as love may not be consummated. We see a girl watching the sunset, the silhouette turning from a man to two men standing side by side, to two men kissing and finally to nothing. As the silhouette changes she moves closer to the horizon whilst the sun sets. She stands alone grieving the goodbye she never got. The lines accompanying the visual are.

*“He was my horizon.  
I knew there was something twisted  
about loving a gay man.  
He was grossed out by my love for him  
He could’ve said a proper goodbye.”*





### 3. Threads

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A phone conversation between two friends reaches a point of conflict soon into it. It is read out in reverse to suggest melancholia and the absurdity of it all. This story focuses on unrequited love largely, and the idea that it can happen to anyone. After all, anyone can be on the other end of a phone call.

*A: This is the last time we are talking*

*B: Last time we are having this conversation.*

*A: This isn't natural or right*

*B: The person I like, unfortunately is you.*

*A: Darr lagta hai.*

*B: Arre toh kya hua?*

*A: You say that you think about me 24x7*

*B: Why do you hurt me like this?*



#### 4. Gay Kay?

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There exist several stereotypes associated with the queer community. It is essential to question these stereotypes. However, many members do fit the stereotype and bear the brunt of homophobia. Femmephobia (Intolerance towards effeminate men) is rampant not only among heterosexuals but also in homosexuals. An exercise in which the viewer is asked to arrange objects to make it look 'Gay' questions several things. It questions the biases we hold and our discomforts with acknowledging them.



## 5. Kathputli

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A young girl goes out with her mother to the *sabzi mandi*. She is appreciative of women around her. Her appreciation extends to her doctor who she calls Olive Oyl (cartoon character from 'Popeye'). Following multiple instances of appreciation of women by her daughter makes the mother conscious. She instructs her daughter that it is improper for a young girl to appreciate women thus, robbing her of her identity.

In doing so she also robs the possible innocence in this act of appreciation, labeling it as perverse and impure. The girl too, becomes a puppet of society and it's didactic views.



## 6. Freedom Pill

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Our identity is larger than the one imposed on us by 'guardians' of society. We allow ourselves to be defined by generic labels, choosing only those that get a nod of approval from these guardians. A beautiful, multi layered individual hides behind the mask of what is deemed appropriate. A freedom pill gives people the opportunity to be who they are, say what they want to be. The story would show how an otherwise colorless personality is awakened by the freedom pill. This color is a sign of acknowledgment of identity.



## 7. Used to(o)

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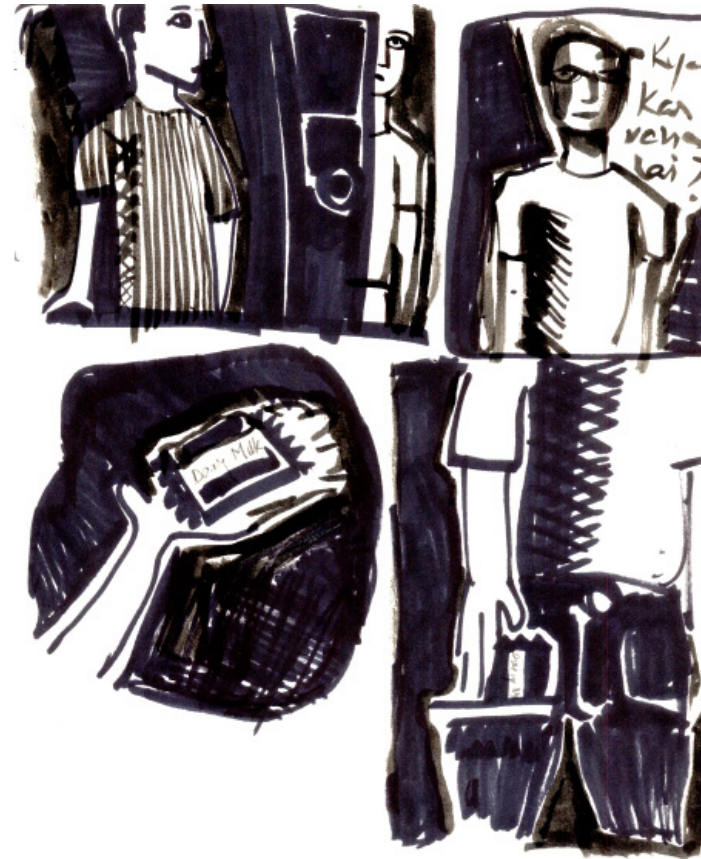
A boy makes drawings on the last page of his notebook, expressing himself. He receives ridicule and criticism every time he makes something on the last blank page. The expressive nature of these drawings, their complexity becomes sparser with time until he stops drawing all together. He is used to the ridicule and bullying, not comfortable with it. The bully uses him, hence he is 'used too'.

## Insights

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After creating these concepts I built on them based on the opinions and views of readers. It seemed that subtle narratives were often misread or failed in communicating that a homosexual relationship was being talked about (unless explicitly said). It is my humble opinion that language in itself—textual as well as visual is heterosexual. This finds parallel in how all language is male. When no gender is mentioned, everyone assumes it to be a man in literature. Love between men and between women is invisible even if it is in plain sight. Perceptions of visuals and text are largely heteronormative. In order to convey queer stories it is essential that text and visuals go hand in hand in order to extend each other and drive the message across.

We have a shared humanity, so the specifics are imagined and often filled in by the reader. Short stories are fed by the reader's insertion of his/her own experiences and life into the story, imagining what isn't written or drawn.



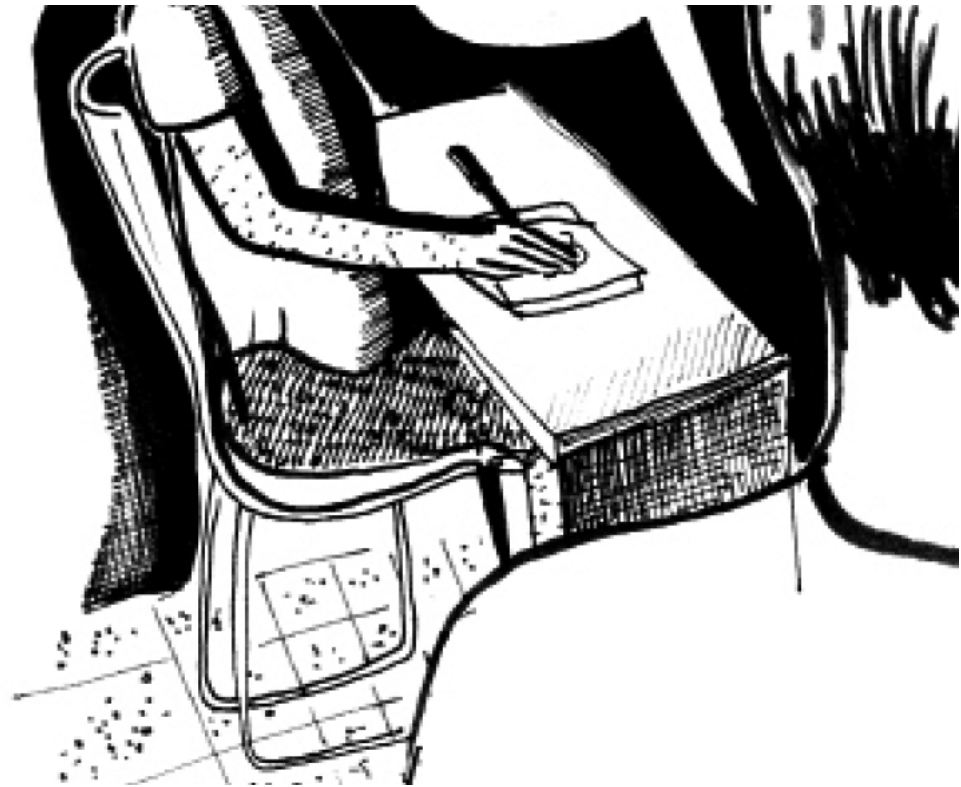
Storyboard for 'Bites'.

## Execution

### 1. Storyboarding

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Two stories, namely 'Bites' and 'Loss' were executed so far. It was particularly difficult to write dialogues for 'Bites' as it is a story that evolved out of stories of two individuals. In order to write the dialogues, character sketches were done, making up their histories and reactions. As mentioned before; language is often heterosexual, hence multiple iterations were done for the visuals. For instance an exchange of chocolates seems more intimate when the focus is on the hands alone. The act of sharing a chocolate was crucial to the story, therefore, by way of repetition and focus the message is driven to the point. 'Loss' was easier in terms of dialogue as there was an immediacy in it.





## 2. Style Exploration

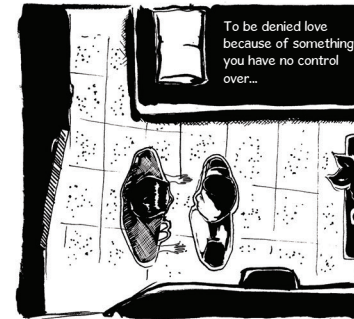
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Several style explorations were done, largely in black and white. The nature of the stories required the use of cleaner, simpler styles that complement the story rather than distracting the reader from it. Contemporary American graphic novelists such as Adrian Tomine, Charles Burns and Daniel Clowes were an inspiration for the same.





bites.



Final Story 'Bites'.



## Conclusion

The project enabled me empathize with the queer community and look at things with fresh perspectives. I understood the kinds of oppressions they face and the nuances of the same. I realized that despite labels of gender and sexuality there exists a shared sense of humanity, ideas that unite us, dissimilarities notwithstanding. In this case love. Unrequited love is at the heart of this oppression for several people. Oppression lies in the absence of a facility to express one's feeling for another. A paralysis in being disallowed from putting to test your love against acceptance or rejection.

Society's acceptance of the queer community is valuable only if it comes from a place of understanding. This understanding is made possible by sharing these expressions of love and helplessness felt by queer people. All oppressions are connected. When these stories of oppression, unrequited love and identity are shared it makes room for dialogue. Through dialogue resonances may emerge leading to empathy.

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