The Art of Naming:
Meditations on Queer Activism in Delhi

Akhil Katyal

...when words found mouths
when tongues wagged their way
into minds,
and each object shrank, suddenly,
to fit its own precise outline.

You could say
that was when the trouble started:
When things stepped into the cage
of a purpose I must have had
somewhere in my mind.

- Imtiaz Dharker,
'Words Find Mouths'

"Queer activism, here and now in Delhi, as I have lived through for the past three years, is composed of varied
definitional excursions that are precisely that, definitional excursions, baggy monsters, simplifying technolo-
gies that take enormous and complicated raw material, lets say of the morass of human sexuality and try to
produce, indeed with success, finished products, peculiarly sexualized individuals, gay or straight."

What is in the name: homosexual? If you say it again and again, homo-
sexual, homosexual, homosexual and so on, it begins to sound like
a creepy symptom. It is one of the
bad habits of words to give way on
the slightest bit of repetition. The
word leaks out of itself on being re-
peated, becomes what it originally
(!) was – the deceived one brought
into the menacing contract of mean-
ing making. Repetition is a paradox:
it both consolidates and shatters.
To repeat something is to validate
it, confirm its thereness and give it
a nod of approval; at the same time,
repetition, for repetition’s sake has
a sincere cheek; it kills the word
with a master stroke: pulls it out of
contingent frameworks and shows
the ghastly madness of the name.
The words straight, lesbian, gay, ho-
mosexual, MSM are names with the
classic weaknesses of names; words
which totter if they are not continu-
ously and shamefacedly propped up
by dense political, medico-legal or
religious frameworks of conception
that are consubstantial with their
usage. Every name is a product of
a particular framework. The name
does not define; it is rather a vari-
able within a hopelessly circular (in-
finently repeatable!) process – that
first gives the premises of naming
and then performs the very act of
naming based on these premises –
and then smugly locates this whole
process at the origin of things, be-
fore everything else, ala 'I am gay',
'Are you a lesbian?', 'We are
queer, we're here, get
used to it.', exercises
in definition mak-
ing, processes of
self-identification, no
loveable repetitions
but not simply so!

I am not senti-
mental about LGBT ac-
tivism (with about twenty
years of a movement be-
hind us in India, no one

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better be!) but I would be a part of all of it all the same, with an unfor- 
giving self-irony and a constant clapping on one’s own head. Queer 
activism, here and now in Delhi, as I 
have lived through for the past three 
years, is composed of varied defin-
tional excursions that are precisely 
that, definitional excursions, baggy 
monsters, simplifying technologies 
that take enormous and complica-
ted raw material, lets say of the 
morass of human sexuality (itself 
a finished product of another tech-
nology of conceptualisation), and 
try to produce, indeed with success, 
finished products, peculiarly sexual-
ised individuals, gay or straight. 
These are historical occurrences; con-
tingent responses for a 
world that can only be 
dealt with strate-
gic generalisations, 
with the steady rep-
ertoire of names, 
with banners asking 
for gay rights, hijra 
rights, lesbian rights, 
or with pleas com-
posed of canny sta-
tistics. Queer activ-
ism in Delhi then, com-
posed of a heteroge-
neous lot of organi-
sations, collectives and individuals 
responds practically(!) 
to this situation of 
frameworks. For the 
current case that the 
Naz Foundation and 
Voices Against 377, a collective of 
several queer, child-rights, women 
and human rights groups, are fighting 
in the Delhi High Court against 
the anti-sodomy law, section 377 
of the Indian Penal Code, we (the 
activists? I won’t dare choose to 
speak for everyone, though!) would 
present ourselves as minority legal 
subjects within the immediately 
available framework of the Indian 
legal system. Using the weapons at 
hand, we would shape ourselves 
strategically and then indulge in an-
other process of self definition: legal 
State citizens, Indians, homosexuals 
et al. That some of us provisionally 
or really buy into such logics of arti-
culate, if not artificial, self definitions 
and make them the markers of un-
derstanding ourselves for ourselves 
(in our personal diaries!), can not 
and should not be denied (because 
why not? we encounter another cir-
cular logic here, albeit of much so-
cio-political significance!). Politics is 
a name for strategies; the desire for 
and the social proc-
ess of change have 
to make use of avail-
able names, catego-
ries and obstructions 
and then plunge into 
a continuous process of 
remoulding these. 
We can not start (or 
end) with something 
that is already mutatis 
mutandis. Queer activ-
ism, as I have seen in 
process in Delhi, is the 
utopian process that 
deliberately excludes 
the possibility of a 
Utopia. It is a utopic 
process that finally 
understands the con-
cept of Utopia (for it 
is only the concept we 
can possibly discuss; 
Greek ‘ou’ is ‘not’, to-
pos is ‘place’, ‘utopia’ 
is a ‘noplacem’, it does not exist!). The 
Utopia is the defeat of all that is 
utopian and not what we could and 
have always easily and non-rigor-
ously believed in, that utopia is a the 
realisation of the utopic. The Utopia 
is implicit within the utopic; it does 
not follow it like a flower does a bud 
or like a child does a foetus.

The legal framework then 
becomes (pardon the repetition!) 
precisely that: a framework. The 
relationship of a framework of 
conceptualising people and that 
of the people’s processes of self-
definition is a complicated one, 
like the contract of the name with 
the person that it names is a con-
tingent and necessarily self-short-
circuiting one. This is not to judge 
the process of naming as simply 
undesirable or desirable within 
activist agendas, to get caught in 
the enquiry of whether it is right 
or wrong. One of the editors of this 
magazine, Labanya, mailed me, 
saying ‘We’d be glad if you write a 
non-fiction piece on Sexuality, Iden-
tity and the Indian State (this is not 
the title of course, I’m not deciding 
anything for you). By this I mean 
that while writing through your 
subjective experience on what it is 
to be homosexual in India, you also 
make mention of Article 377 and 
it’s practical/psychological impact 
on the everyday.’ Labanya would of 
course forgive me for quoting from 
her email, a text sent casually, an 
anticipatory text in preparation for 
more formal, definitive texts to fol-
low (“I’m not deciding anything for 
you.”). It is of course not an act of 
misrecognition; she could not pos-
sibly have been off the mark by say-
ing I could write about being ‘ho-
mosexual in India’. To narrate my 
subjective experience then would 
be a narration that would consoli-
date an essay on the homosexual 
india, generalised from a grossly 
localised somewhere of myself and 
my everyday. The essay would be 
a point of departure and also the 
point of arrival, having traversed 
unrepentant the multiplicity of ho-
mosexual subjective (or subjective 
homosexual?) experiences avail-
able within the available ground-
space of India. Acts of narration are
thereby also acts of naming if they eddy around word clusters, points of identificatory gestures. To say that the concept of the name works contingently i.e. historically, that we circularly imagine them into being within certain points of history, is not to say that they are unreal or fantastical with no palpable effects (the provisional bridge between the editor and me was the common grounds of understanding, by which we imaginatively place each other; homosexual in India or young editor who I’d like to know more). This terrain of the imagined, with all its imports, can hardly be dispelled or easily demarcated from the real. There is no escaping the realities of the name (as if that was desired or possible; names are the basis of how we interact, it is how we generalize ourselves, names mark our presence even when we are absent, kill me, I’ll still be known by my name! The name is everything!) but it is possible for all of us to see what conditions make what names possible for which people within certain moments of history. I could call myself gay; have done that in the past, will do that in the future, but what are the stakes involved here; not the stakes of security, rather the stakes of the very process of finding and legitimating a name for oneself, queer for instance, or even Akhil. When and how does the fact that I love men, that I want to fuck them or get fucked by them, become a variable for what I – want to call myself? When does the sex-bit get into the name-bit and how does this process work?”

“When and how does the fact that I love men, that I want to fuck them or get fucked by them, become a variable for what I – want to call myself? When does the sex-bit get into the name-bit and how does this process work?”

organised to mark this now historic date of August 11th was when we met at a particular venue at Cannought Place, made presentations about queer urban histories, talked about them, talked about personal experiences and all our first protests, loves, kisses, and then wore T-shirts that we had painted a day ago and walked around the inner circle of Cannought Place wearing those T-shirts with red roses in our hands (the first?) public LGBT gatherings in Delhi used to happen on the terrace of the India Coffee House in CP; they used to keep a red rose on the table as a clue, a locally acknowledged symbol; we chose to extend this curve of history, keep on a tradition, use their strategy of self-identification, use their name) and finally got together in Central Park and ended the evening with more songs and chats. The T-shirts we wore (see the Figure) on that day with slogans such as 377 Stinks, We’re Queer, We’re here, Get Used to it, Aadmi hoon Aadmi Se Pyaar Karta Hoon, Queer and Lovin It!, Aawaz Do Hum Anek Hain et. al. function like names; they form a visual vocabulary for self-identification within a dense public space like CP in Delhi. They want to disrupt the unmarked heterosexual space, dirty it and produce effects of alternative and strategic namings and spellings (new spells that we cast?). These names, as I have pig-headedly(?) tried to drive home the point, are not at the beginning or the end of things; they are caught in the mire, just like the people they seek to stain.