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"Where do all the lovers go?" – The Cultural Politics of Public Kissing in Mumbai, India (1950–2005)

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Abstract

Public expressions of sexual intimacy have often been subject to moral censure and legal regulation in modern India. While there is literature that analyzes the cultural-political logics of censorship and sexual illiberalism in India, the discourses of sympathy towards public displays of intimacy has not received as much critical attention. In this paper, I take the case of one representative discursive space offered by a popular English newspaper and show how the figure of the 'kissing couple' became an important entity in larger discussions about the state of urban development, the role of pleasure in the city, and the imagination of a "modern" Mumbai.

"Public kissing is just not Indian" – Pramod Navalkar, Indian politician[1]

1 | INTRODUCTION

In most Indian cities and towns, kissing in public places has been considered culturally inappropriate. The argument against men and women kissing, holding hands, and hugging in public is that it is culturally inappropriate, disrespectful to community standards, and downright 'obscene'. Although recent protests and campaigns by urban youth[2] have begun to offer a sense of organized resistance to traditional norms governing behavior in public spaces, it is common knowledge that couples engaging in 'public displays of affection' are often subject to moral policing by local police, political parties, and private citizens. Along with the national law that criminalizes obscenity under Section 294 of the Indian Penal Code, several cities and towns in India have locally-specific laws and codes that make indecency a punishable offence. Despite several legal pronouncements that have pointed out that kissing in public is not a punishable offence (Palishkar, 2014), the overall acceptability of intimacy between adults in public is relatively low

(Ganguly, 2016). The interpretation of "indecency" – what constitutes "indecency" and its relationship to sexual imagery – has been a matter of contention and cultural negotiation about what it means to be "Indian" and "modern" at once (Kapur, 2000; Mazzarella, 2013). As the first quote above puts it succinctly, there is a general understanding amongst some groups in India that public kissing is just not 'Indian'. Especially after India's economic liberalization reforms in the early 1990s, right-wing political parties and affiliated religious organizations have tended to be the most vocally anxious about the fears of cultural westernization of Indian youth (see Narayan, 1998; Oza, 2001).

As such, as Alan Hunt (2002) points out in his work on public spaces in the USA and Canada, processes of industrialization and urbanization led to major changes in the ways in which men and women interacted in public. Hunt shows how 'civic respectability' or the middle-class preoccupation with social and moral conditions of cities tended to manifest most strongly in the surveillance of heterosocial spaces like dance halls, saloons, parlors, skating rinks etc. Paying attention to how it was not just the 'state' but other formal and informal mechanisms that ensured a constant surveillance and regulation of these spaces, Hunt shows how notions of respectability manifest differently in different contexts especially at different times of the day. While Hunt's analysis is instructive in its attention to the metaphorical narratives that 'respectability politics' are enmeshed in and the kinds of regulatory processes that characterized public life in early 20th century western societies, postcolonial contexts might offer somewhat of a different spatial, historical, and cultural context for analysis. The very understanding of public spaces, their development through time, the particular characteristics of postcolonial middle-class cultural politics, and the existence of a middle-class aspiration to mimic a certain 'suitably modern' (Liechty, 2003) sensibility in most postcolonial contexts presents a fertile ground for an analysis of how and why the regulation of heterosocial activities in countries like India take the shape and form they do. In this paper, I take the case of public kissing between men and women as the point of contention in the urban city of Mumbai and I analyze the discourse around it through time. However, while Hunt's work focusses on official reports that discuss heterosocial relations in negative terms, I go the other way: I analyze and examine narratives that *support* public kissing in Mumbai and the cultural politics of that rhetoric. Further, I show how the case of supporting public kissing implicates issues that go beyond concerns of moral regulation and culture policing alone to implicate issues such as the state of public spaces, and understandings of privacy.

2 | THE CASE: PUBLIC KISSING IN MUMBAI, INDIA

In most debates around globalization and its relationship to regional and communalization in Indian politics, the megacity of Mumbai tends to emerge as particularly implicated in tense contradictions. On the one hand, it is considered to be most cosmopolitan and "sexually liberated city" in India (Abraham, 2001; Banaji 2006); and on the other hand, it is also the cradle of communalist and religious fundamentalist politics which have tended to be culturally conservative (Hansen, 1999; Lele, 1995). The "provincialization" of this global city (Varma, 2004) which is also home to India's largest film industry – Bollywood – has particular implications for the normative conditions that make public life possible (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995). In the particular case of public kissing, Mumbai has seen its own share of moral policing of couples in public places. Considering Mumbai has a lot of public spaces, especially along the beach, there has been ample 'social anxiety' (Hunt, 1999) about the function and meaning of public spaces (Anjaria, 2016). The local law - Section 110 of the Bombay Police Act 1951 – is often used to round up couples at public places criminalizes "indecent behavior" in public and is often deployed at the discretion of officers on beat.[3]

While scholars like Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2012) contend that couples are policed as a manifestation of dominant patriarchal values that seek to regulate sexuality in public, they also show how Mumbai has also seen a pushback against moral policing and sexual conservativism especially amongst youth in everyday acts of resistance (also see Abraham, 2001; 2002). The proliferation of new consumer spaces – malls, coffee shops, and bars – has facilitated the construction of an urban 'middle-class' sexuality in Mumbai: one that is simultaneously progressive *but* respectable (Phadke, 2005). The fact that the Mumbai Police, upon facing a lot of flak from citizen groups about

increasing instances of moral policing, issued a public statement in 2015 that they would no longer use the local anti-indecency law to arrest couples in public places for being intimate with each other is testimony to how moral policing by religious fundamentalist and culturally conservative groups is not always entire successful. Moral policing, in fact, has hardly been about successful in its attempts at silencing and repression – instead, it has provoked charged discussions and debates around modern aspirations, cultural rootedness, and the self-fashioning of a megacity. The co-existence and dialoguing between the "cosmopolitanism" of Mumbai and the "communalist" forces in the city it a particularly compelling site to analyze how reactions to moral policing are framed, discussed, and wielded in public discourse.

This presents us an opportunity to go beyond scholarship on spatial regulation of sexuality and morality (see Bell & Valentine 1995; Cooper, 1998; Hunt, 2002; Vance, 1984) to think about how in postcolonial societies, the project of spatial regulation is also implicated in a project of constructing a "suitable" modernity (Liechty, 2003) – one that can accommodate both the desires and fears of cultural westernization. Studies of urban life have often focused on exclusionary narratives that owe their origin to neoliberalism often to the neglect of taking seriously the role of pleasure and play in urban life. While exclusionary narratives and the oppression of culturally hegemonic practices of ordering public spaces are important to pay attention to, I argue that one needs to also take into account not just resistance to them but also how framings of sympathy and inclusion are used by the 'middle class' to chalk out a sense of being "suitably modern" in urban India: *on what terms* is 'public kissing' interpreted to be appropriate or even desirable – a cause worth fighting for? Arguably, by discussing only one response to public expressions of intimacy – policing/repression – what might be missed out on is how and why the conversations around public kissing have changed over time, especially the concerns and contentions of those who support and, even, romanticize kissing in public spaces. The case of public kissing, apart from being empirically under-researched, provides an entry-point into better understanding the cultural politics of the public performance of modernity. In this paper, I delve into the ways in which those who support public kissing have, over the past fifty years, made sense of their stand, how they have argued against moral policing, and what these understandings and arguments tell us about the social practice of imagining (Appadurai, 1990) a "modern Mumbai". I show how an analysis of rhetoric around public kissing over time reveals the ways in which the performance of modernity centered around the public presence of the 'couple'. As I discuss, I find that sympathetic discourses around public kissing implicated issues and concerns around what it means to be "in public" and what it means to be a modern city. I find that articles purportedly written in support of public kissing tended to use that stand to springboard into broader commentaries, especially about the state of public spaces.

3 | LITERATURE REVIEW

The regulation of behavior in public places is, unsurprisingly, not particular to India. Scholars have shown how spatial exclusion and moral regulation are interlinked in several parts of the world (see Cresswell, 1992; Hubbard, 1998, 2004; Hunt, 1999, 2002; Sibley, 1995; Valverde, 2008) and how norms governing sexual behavior in public spaces are produced and normalized in acts of everyday practice in a wide variety of social contexts (see Berlant & Warner, 1998; Nast, 1998; Hubbard, 2001; Hunt, 2002). These works provide an array of cases and processes by which certain bodies and behaviors are marked and reproduced as "desirable" and "appropriate" whilst others are viewed as abject and treated with suspicion, disgust, and/or horror. What is important to note is that spatial exclusion – a function of disciplinary power in society – is never a process of mute repression but a generative process of discursive production that constructs the 'normal' against which values about behavior, conduct, and the desire for self-discipline are interpreted and enacted (see Berlant & Warner, 1998; Foucault, 1979; 1984). In fact, determining what is "public" and what is "private" is itself a process of interpretation and performance and while they are often treated as two ends of a static dichotomy are products of collective meaning-making (Herzfeld, 2009). Most empirical work on spatial exclusion, however, shows the 'middle-class' plays a particularly robust role in constructing codes of

acceptable behavior and conduct and facilitating a sense of aspiration towards these codes (see Fernandes 2004; Kaviraj, 1997; Liechty, 2003; Shields, 1989; Tomba, 2004; Zukin 1987, 1998).

In India too, scholars have shown how the ways in which the 'middle-class' has been crucial in redefining citizenship through the lens of consumption and consumer pleasure is critical to understand the imperatives behind the collective practice of imagining modern subjectivity which often gets played out and validated in public culture (see Fernandes, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003, 2013; Rajagopal, 1999). After India's independence from the British, the growing importance of the educated 'middle class' working in conjunction with the state in actualizing plans of spatial regulation can hardly be overemphasized.[4] Scholars have shown how the 'middle class' has been critical in shaping the discourse and practice of urban development in India especially after economic liberalization in the early 1990s (see Anjaria, 2009; Chakrabarty, 1991; Ellis, 2012; Fernandes, 2004; Ghertner, 2015; Kaviraj, 1997; Ramakrishnan, 2013) especially as leisure, recreation and consumerist pleasure inhabited key roles in the social imagination of the global city (Breckenridge & Appadurai, 1995). As Leela Fernandes (2004) notes succinctly, "spatial practices are technologies for the production of a vision of a liberalising India that centers on the visibility of the Indian middle class" (p. 2416). The urban cleansing of cities in India today is a product of middle-class fervor to purge public spaces of signs of incivility that emanates from the urban poor. The zealous support of the current government's "Clean India" campaign is the symptom of this deep-seated middle-class desire for "world class" city spaces (Ghertner, 2015).

But the visibility of the middle-class vis-à-vis urban development hardly means an unquestioned acquisition of domination over public spaces. Very often, those that are marginalized through spatial regulation in cities subvert authority and power through both organized and unorganized forms of political resistance (Benjamin, 2008). In fact, the middle-class often also voices a sense of victimhood and marginalization, especially when it comes to policies that govern the use of public space (Anjaria, 2016). The polyvocality of the middle-class discourse around public space complicates any notion of a simplistic idea of urban politics. Better yet, it opens up the possibilities to gain a nuanced sense of how urban development is caught up in the cultural politics of postcolonial modernity. The public performance of romantic love in the form of public kissing is one such activity in which middle-class discourse merits close attention because it is riddled with diverse, often contradictory, ideas of Indian modernity. In fact, it communicates a sense of unease not because there is an outright decrial of this act, but that it brings to relief the anxieties associated with the collective determination of what constitutes an authentic or appropriate Indianness.

While some studies do examine the intersectional relationship between class, caste, gender and sexuality in public spaces, especially in the case of women's place in public (Phadke et al., 2012; Shah, 2014) and homosexual visibilities (Shahani, 2008; Srivastava, 2007), there is still a reasonably large empirical lacuna when it comes to understanding *intimacy* between couples in public spaces and the kinds of responses it generates. This is not too surprising since this aspect of everyday life is generally addressed in studies that have to do with changing patterns of courtship practices and 'love marriages' in India (see Abraham, 2004; Mody, 2008) rather than with the lens of public space and its control *per se*. What requires empirical address is how narratives of safety, risk, reputation, morality, and privacy get used and circulated when it comes to couples in public spaces? If, as Ghertner (2015) argues in his latest book, the middle-class hegemony over urban space is a 'rule by aesthetics', how does this implicate the public presence of "canoodling couples"? More importantly, how have these narratives and framings changed over time and why? Examining the relationship between urban politics and the growth of middle-class performativity in the case of public kissing allows us to analyze and interrogate what Setha Low (1996) calls the "spatialization of culture" in the production of public space.

Taking the case of one representative discursive space offered by a popular English newspaper read avidly by the 'middle class' in Mumbai, I show how the figure of the 'couple' became an important entity in larger discussions about the state of urban development, the role of pleasure in the city, and the imagination of a "modern" Mumbai. While I examine reportage and editorials about public kissing from the 1950s till the early 2000s, I concentrate on the early 1990s in order to draw out the ways in which economic liberalization in India became a cultural marker for the self-fashioning of an 'Indian middle class' that was centered around a rights-based discourse and a consumptive

disposition, instead of the austere commandments of 'developmentalist duty' (Mazzarella, 2003, 2011; van Wessel, 2004). Instead of assuming that the 'middle class' is a static category whose boundaries are determined by socio-economic figures, I follow the likes of Liechty (2003) and Fernandes (2006) in understanding its social reality as one that is reproduced in everyday practice – a performative and discursive category that is hard to measure but often is the marker of identification, aspiration, and critique in contemporary India (Chatterjee, 1997). I also follow Mazzarella (2009, 2011) in thinking about the figure of the 'middle class' as an idiom through which a series of contemporary concerns are brought into "critical juxtaposition", especially the rise of religious nationalism, cultural conservativism, and consumerist liberalization.

4 | NOTES ON THE ARCHIVE AND METHODOLOGY

Newspaper data in qualitative sociological research provides one with an entry-point to grasp how certain ideas, beliefs, and normative attitudes are framed in social discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Gamson et al., 1992; Macdonald, 2003; Earl, Andrew, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004). Publics emerge in relation to the circulation of texts (Warner, 2002) and newspapers are one such important source of cultural framings. Newspaper carry not just reportage of specific incidents related to this issue (say, police arrests, scandals, etc.) but also columns and letters to editors which help gauge a social 'sentiment' longitudinally. As such, historical sociology is no stranger to historical, longitudinal analysis based on a *single* newspaper (for instance, see Kerbo & Shaffer, 1992; McAdam and Yang, 2002; Soule & Earl, 2005) provided that enough caution and care is taken in not overstating one's claims based on a single newspaper.

In this paper, I analyze data from *Times of India* (TOI), which is a useful source to gauge a certain type of 'middle class' discourse over time: that of an English-speaking, "global Indian" class of citizens who have been negotiating their status as 'representative citizens' of India on global and local scales especially since the early 1990s (Radhakrishnan, 2011; 2008). Currently the most widely circulated English newspaper in India, with more than 3 million copies being sold every day (GoI, 2015) TOI has shared an elective affinity with the urban and upper middle-class in metro cities in India through time due to both its content, and its status as a symbolic good (Udupa, 2012; Udupa & Chakravarty, 2012). As Samir Jain, the Vice Chairman of TOI, is said to have stated crisply, "The Times of India is aspirational. Our readers should display it. They don't even have to read it" (Subramanian, 2012). This means, of course, that my study is not fully representative of a 'general opinion' on public displays of intimacy in Mumbai; it is, instead, an analysis of a *particular social space*: a 'middle class' that models itself as the 'global Indian' class.

In terms of circulation in Mumbai, *Times of India* has consistently been the most popular English newspaper in the city with its circulation only rising with the years (Malhan, 2013: 33–34). The fact that its numbers have increased phenomenally over time signals both good marketing and pricing strategies and, perhaps, also indicates the primacy of a "feel good" newspaper in contemporary readership practices in India, as Udupa (2012: 885; Auletta, 2012) argues. As Mazzarella (2011) points out, the middle-class has, since the 1980s, paved the way in reimaging citizenship and belonging in terms of consumerist enjoyment as opposed to developmentalist duty. TOI seems to offer new regimes of (mediated) desire and *legitimizes* these very desires and aspirations. This is, again, not to say that media *produces* desire but that it offers a mode of articulation through which these desires gain legitimacy and traction in a society undergoing rapid socio-cultural changes. This makes TOI a useful aperture into the cultural politics of the social space that interests me – the urban middle-class and their purportedly progressive cultural outlook.

I collected articles for analysis from TOI's online database – a large and fully searchable collection of articles available via institutional access on ProQuest from 1861 to 2002. As discussed in the literature review, the period of the 1980s was crucial to the making of a robust middle-class in India and their active involvement in the social control of public spaces. Since this decade is a useful starting point to gauge reactions for and against sexual explicitness in public, I decided to bookend my archival repertoire with 1950 on one end and 2002 on the other – with a focus on the 1980s and 1990s. While newer issues of the TOI are available on their own website, the searching mechanism is

different and I wanted to maintain uniformity across searches, so I decided to stop at 2005. I searched for articles and collected them in three distinct phases:

1. I searched for basic terms such as "kissing in public"; "smooching"; "obscenity in public"; "Section 110 Bombay Police Act"; "moral policing"; "culture police"; "cuddling"; "snuggling", etc.

2. I then read through the articles collected and looked for more specific names, places, events – such as, "Pramod Navalkar", "Bandstand", "Marine Drive", "Five Gardens", "Valentine's Day"; "Savage Garden concert", etc.

3. Imaginably, I gathered a lot of irrelevant data and so I had to read through the articles collected and collect only those that dealt with the main issue of public expressions of intimacy and *sympathetic* responses towards couples.

I ended up with close to 187 news items – articles, columns, letters to the editor, interviews with celebrities – dealing directly with this issue. I followed the heuristics of thematic qualitative coding (Saldana, 2015) and analyzed my archival data interpretatively. I looked for issues that prompted a spurt of conversation about couples in public spaces and analyzed the articles *sympathetic* to the plight of couples in public spaces by looking at recurrent phrases, analogies, metaphors, arguments. I coded for tone of the article, for their emotive nature, and for their rhetorical framings.

5 | DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 | 1950s to 1980s: of open spaces and prying eyes

"There is no corner of an open ground in Bombay where young boys and girls don't go holding hands. No dearth of motorcars on the side-roads and by the seaside where gentlemen and ladies sit or lie in sweaty embraces, even if a trifle sheepishly".[5]

The excerpt above captures pithily the ways in which public kissing and behavior of couples in public was often discussed by popular columnists and writers. Mulk Raj Anand, an eminent Indian novelist, wrote these lines in an article about the controversy around censorship in the Hindi film industry. Arguing that Mumbai was no stranger to "sweaty embraces" – a reference to both the sultry weather of Mumbai as well as the passion of a couple embracing – he argues for the censor board to be less paternalistic in its treatment of erotic imagery on-screen. In fact, around this time, several articles were written with a view to thinking through the need to "protect" Indian audiences from the affective excess of erotic imagery. The link between on-screen erotic imagery and its effect on off-screen behaviors was often the concern of state officials. After the publication in 1968 of a government report advocating lesser censorship of erotic images and violence in Indian films stirred up charged conversations about mass media influence, Indian culture, visceral obscenity, and freedom of expression.

Amidst a lot of varied tangents to this issue, perhaps the most striking pro-censorship argument, ringing of self-effacing elitism, was causal in nature: watching "obscene" acts on-screen induces the weak-minded in the uneducated lower classes to perform the same acts in public and, thus, those who know better should interfere (see Mazzarella, 2013). Along with the expectation to display 'self-control' in public – as in the legalistic discussions on intimacy in public – there was a corollary worry that any exposure to a sensuous excess might lead to be the breakdown of self-control in public places, especially in the 'voyeuristic lower class men'. Even the kinds of letters written to the editor in the Bombay edition of TOI around this time voiced concerns about how showing kissing *in public* in films might not conform to what was realistically observable in Indian society.[6] The idea was that there was not enough self-regulation in the society yet and so regulation by the state was necessary. For that matter, even liberal critics who were against censorship voiced a faintly similar opinion. For example, a newspaper report that covered the

proceedings of an anti-censorship seminar noted that even though everyone there was united in their stand *against* censorship, some respondents opined that perhaps there could be a ban on showing kissing *in public*, or passionate and prolonged kissing."[7] The worry about influence of erotic images was that the "wrong kind of people" may use open grounds and public spaces to their own pleasures without surveillance or interference, without sanction. The idea was prevention, not cure.

At the same time, the very *legal* status of kissing in public was a matter of confusion since the laws present regulated obscenity and required that such acts definitely caused "annoyance to others" – but how was one to determine if kissing in public is an *obscene* act that annoyed others? In a case in 1956, for instance, a couple was arrested for kissing under a deserted bridge. However, since it was a *deserted* bridge, there was not enough evidence to establish that this act caused sufficient "annoyance to others". The watching 'public' was undetermined and, thus, not annoyed. Hence, the couple was let off although not without the expected moral chastisement by the court judges for displaying no self-control, getting carried away, and being insensitive to the sensibilities of Indian communities which consider sexual exhibitionism 'obscene'.[8] Chided for no self-regulation – thereby confirming the suspicions of those who suspected the same – the absence of onlookers despite the status of the bridge being a "public space" helped the couples' case. There were no "eyes" on the sidewalk.

For logical and logistical reasons, then, places that provided a relief from 'prying eyes' became a haven for couples. However, these isolated spaces that provided a haven for public kissing *also* guaranteed a risk of criminal activity. A repeated source that revealed the presence of couples in public were newspaper reports that reported criminal activities like crime and theft by gangs and petty thieves at beaches and parks, especially in the suburbs. Through the 1960s and 1970s, there are scattered reports and articles – such as those titled "Gangs Terrorizing Couples"[9] – that document the harassment of couples at secluded spaces by gangs of chain-snatchers, petty thieves, eve-teasers or extortionists. Apparently, petty thieves and robbers would nab couples who would meet by secluded seashores and isolated parts of the city and rob them. Newspaper items that covered these stories, on the face of it, alluded to couples' presence in these areas *as if it was all but strange*. In fact, peripheral references to courting couples seeking privacy in public places even in topically unrelated articles suggest that Bombay's public life has never been a stranger to it. For instance, in an article written as early as 1933 about the planned conversion of an isolated 'haunted house' in Bandra (a suburb in Bombay) into a park, the author refers to its use by many young courting couples "to obtain an undisturbed hour to themselves"[10] - and how they might not appreciate this redevelopment. Similarly, a personal essay written in 1964 which had nothing to do with the topic of intimacy in public per se *also* has a mention of couples 'canoodling' in secluded corners.[11] The fact that couples used secluded spaces to engage in acts of intimacy was alluded to as if it were all but surprising.

However, in all of these articles and discussions what is important to note is the *kinds of spaces* that are conjured up in discussing couples and intimacy in public. "Deserted bridge", "haunted house", "open grounds", "secluded corners", "secluded seashores" etc. were some of the phrases used to describe the spatial context in which couples sought privacy in public. Such descriptions of spaces evoke an image of 'open spaces' rather than public spaces on which "the drama of communal life" (Carr, 1992) can be staged. Instead existed secluded and isolated spaces – for couples and criminals in equal measure. The 'politicization' of public kissing, as I show later in the article, begins in the 1980s as *open* spaces are converted to *public* spaces requiring a consensus on what acts and behaviors constitute 'appropriateness'. It is at this juncture that the figure of the couple becomes an important bone of contention to think through matters of modernity and urbanity.

5.2 | 1980s to 2000s: space crunch and political paternalism

5.2.1 | Space Crunch: where does one canoodle now?

In the 1980s, one of the ways in which the discourse around public kissing in the pages of *Times of India* was framed was a worry and lament about the lack of public spaces for couples. Couched in the rhetoric of lack of privacy, it is in

the 1980s that we see a more concerted effort at an active sympathizing with couples in Mumbai who were running out of spaces to find privacy. It has often been a public secret that the high density of population in Mumbai affords one anonymity but not privacy, especially not to couples who live in shared housing arrangements due to skyrocketing rents. As one reporter in the early 1990s remarked:

> "Ah to be in love! The world should suddenly be a better place. But in this teeming, cramped Bombay city of about 10 million people, lovers just have to make do with whatever little intimacy and privacy they can find on its streets."[12]

However, other articles often talked of being romantic and intimate in public as *desirable* but also lamented that the development of public spaces – while attractive for couples – presented a collateral damage of too many disapproving "eyes on the sidewalk" (Jacobs, 1961). The development of public spaces around this time might seem to present a strange irony: how did the *increase* in public spaces result in a lack of spaces for couples? The logic, and the lament, behind this seems to be that erstwhile undeveloped spaces did not attract too much public footfall because they were either too dangerous and isolated, or were the haven for squatters and the homeless. With the focus on urban rejuvenation and redevelopment of public spaces, families and children began to frequent these spaces making the figure of the 'kissing couple' less privy to the kind of privacy afforded earlier.

For instance, in an essay titled "For Lovers Only" in 1982, George Menezes, a well-known columnist with liberal views, laments the loss of 'lonely places' for couples by pointing to how couples seem to have to make a hard choice between 'spruced up' parks which are *overcrowded* with joggers, *or* secluded open spaces far away from the city that are unsafe due to the unchecked growth of chain-snatchers,[13] thieves, voyeurs and other criminals.[14] Arguing that the city planners have "no place in their plans for the young and the romantic", the author points to a trend of reclamation and concretization of beaches, and the development of joggers' and family parks in Bombay as being responsible for the shrinking of viable spaces for couples. The author notes how couples tended to come to parks around noon-time, in the heat of the day, to avoid the other users of the park – joggers, especially – although sometimes one could spot couples in the evening too, trying to find niches of privacy amidst a sea of children, senior citizens, and joggers. In 1987, a similar sense of empathy for couples in public spaces is communicated by another columnist in a reflective essay about routine activities in public parks in Bombay.[15]

With time, this sense of a sympathy for the figure of the couple on in terms of a 'space crunch' grew stronger. The constant allusion to how romance and intimacy in public have become sullied due to overcrowded public spaces *or* due to projects of urban rejuvenation that are making things "all too visible" is strongly noted in articles through the 1990s. Perhaps the words of Jerry Pinto, a well-known novelist and columnist in India, in a 1995 article poignantly titled "Love In Bombay" capture this sentiment best:

> "Take the case of Scandal Point at Breach Candy where in days of yore we were wont to disport ourselves with the lass of the moment. There were tall bushes and rocks all over the place a whole host of hidey holes in which an amorously inclined couple might lend credence to the name of the place. Now someone has razed the shrubs and someone else is busy clearing up rocks and the whole thing has been given over to yuppie kids who flirt with each other over distances that can be measured in yards."[16]

The reference to the refurbishing of deserted spaces into highly public spaces that made privacy difficult to attain is complemented by a reference to "yuppie kids" or those who do not value a sense of physical intimacy that marked Mumbai's urban history. Discourses that lamented the lack of privacy for couples tended to, interestingly, did not argue that public kissing ought to become accepted in mainstream, popular culture. Instead, they seemed to be more about the density of people in Mumbai, the state of public spaces and, even, a nostalgic account of Mumbai's urban past. In supporting the possibility of wanting pleasure in public spaces, the tone of the articles is less celebratory and more disdainful of the kinds of issues couples have to deal with. The support for public intimacy is implicit.

However, not all those who supported public intimacy were discussing privacy. Following the case of a date-rape of a fifteen-year old at a public place, letters to the editor discussed the problems with letting remotely sexual

behaviors going too far. A regular TOI columnist, in response to this rape, articulated a popular opinion of concerned parents in a provocatively titled column "Fifteen, Romancing – and Dead"[17]:

> *I live on the periphery of a large park whose seeming placid darkness cloaks a hundred passions each night, the couples that reluctantly tear themselves away from its escapist embrace are as often very young as they are middle-aged. If it doesn't offer the same privacy as the desolate, eerie rocks off Breach Candy, it does, with hindsight, provide more protection, or at least the chance of timely intervention.*

By offering public spaces surrounded by residential areas as a *safer* haven for couples, the author was pointing to the dilemma that had existed since the 60s: would one want privacy or safety? If people were *watching*, couples would feel the need to self-regulate their behavior but, in exchange, they would be safer. In the pages of TOI, a back-and-forth ensued. The idea was that places where lovers can be watched and, thus, protected were better for their own sake was better till such a point that society "evolves" in terms of its cultural mores. Regulation of some kind, via the self or imposed by the other, was a necessary evil. While many readers seemed to agree with the opinion cited above, some others were less sure that safety was more important than privacy for intimacy[18] and yet others argued that the check on couples was *anyway* in place since Mumbai was so crowded – a familiar lament by now, as had been noted – which ensured an automatic check on "how far one could go" in terms of being publicly intimate. As a popular journalist and active urban activist put it, "at these places, everyone is in full view. It is ridiculous to think that anyone is up to anything".[19] It is interesting that this kind of a 'full view' ensures that even if they *wanted* to be "up to anything", they couldn't.

5.2.2 | Of Moral Guardianship and Culture Policing: The Political Environment

Between 1995 and 1999, the transfer of governmental power to right-wing conservative party *Shiv Sena* and the appointment of Pramod Navalkar as Cultural Affairs Minister resulted in a proliferation of anti-obscenity activities and discussions in the city. With the self-appointment of Mr. Navalkar as the 'moral guardian' of Mumbai also resulted in stricter surveillance of intimacy in public.[20] Already renowned for his column[21] in a Marathi newspaper *Navshakti,* and for his "anti-prurience" drives as a local corporator and as an MLA,[22] Navalkar epitomized the ideal middle-class political actor: 'action-oriented', principled *and* extremely concerned about civic issues in Mumbai. Under his leadership, there was a visceral conservative move to rid public life of 'obscenity' and, subsequently, there were several bans on obscenity in films, books, television, advertisements, etc. Additionally, several projects were initiated to curb the 'obscene' behavior of couples in public spaces: sheltered bus stops were demolished to curtail their use by couples at night; double-seat benches were replaced by single-seat chairs in certain public; *exclusive* senior citizen parks were created; anti-obscenity drives along beaches and waterfronts were carried out with great alacrity and police sanction and the use of anti-indecency city laws was rampant; plainclothes policemen were stationed at concerts to monitor behavior of youngsters and prevent "hugging and kissing" by them (as in the case of Savage Garden's concert in 1998); anti-Valentine's Day protests took violent shapes and forms; raiding of guest houses, hotels, even private parties was common practice. It was also in the late 1990s that certain waterfronts and parks began to be shut down at a specific *time* in the night – mostly 10 pm – since the city considered to be unsafe after, and since Pramod Navalkar felt that "no decent man or woman is interested in strolling the beach late in the night".[23] Each of these measures pointed to an acute acknowledgment of the presence of romantic intimacy in public *and* the need to control it.

One particular case exemplified the tensions inherent during this time. In 1997, a BJP-affiliated local civic official replaced the wide benches in a large public park - Five Gardens - in Parsi Colony[24] with single-seat chairs in order to prevent couples from indulging in what he termed "American behavior" in public.[25] Not just that, he also got "No Kissing" signboards set up all around the park, and deployed some police officers around that area to 'keep a watch' on couples. In explaining his strategic policy, the official also reportedly said, "The seats have been arranged in large groups specifically so that the concerned citizens can sit in front of them and pointedly embarrass them". This move

garnered mixed responses from the public, but TOI's columns, editorials, and reports expressed disdain and annoyance at such conservative measures. TOI brought out a 'debate' column in which a conservative opinion battled a liberal one on this particular issue.[26] The former argument was two-pronged: one, that it is not in 'Indian culture' to be exhibitionist about one's sexual feelings towards another; and two, that the argument that 'couples have nowhere to go' does not hold water since the presence of 'canoodling couples' hinders elders, children, and just conservative people from using public spaces; by making people feel awkward and embarrassed, couples were appropriating public spaces.[27]

The contra-argument, on the other hand, was that when the community-members who constituted the neighborhood around the park did not have a problem with these couples, it was not up to the government to intervene. The author further opined that it is not even as if Five Gardens endows 'privacy' per se, since it is so full in public view, such an open space flanked by residences all around. On a final and introspective note, the author points to how television carries obscener images than what one witnesses at Five Gardens anyway.[28] In fact, about a month after this incident, the Dadar-Matunga Residents Welfare Association[29] – which also has members from Parsi Colony – spoke against this conservative measure and said that Five Gardens has historically been a space for couples and that since couples in Mumbai have nowhere else to go, it is quite understandable that they need these spaces. They added, further, that now with the single-seaters in place, couples tended to sit a lot closer than before.[30]

In a similar vein of policing behavior of couples, Pramod Navalkar stationed plainclothes policemen at the Savage Garden concert in May 1998. The function of the policemen was to monitor the behavior of the crowd and intervene in case of obscenity in public. However, the comperes of the concert – VJ Sophia Haque and model Marc Robinson – ended up kissing on the stage much to the chagrin of certain civic groups who, apparently, even filed a "kiss report" to file legal chargers against the comperes.[31] This kind of paternalism displayed by the State attracted criticism in the TOI columns.[32] Written during this controversy, one article argued that public display of intimacy was *not* the behavior of elite, westernized, spoilt youth seemed but that it is was a more vital problem of the lack of space in the city that forced even middle-class and married people to seek privacy in public – a trope that we have discussed earlier:

> What do you do in this city of Love and Longing[33] if you need some time alone with your lover/spouse and have no access to your own private space, a hotel room, or a friend's empty apartment? Truth, they say, is stranger than fiction. Did you read about the young couple who drowned at Bandra's Bandstand, oblivious to the tide as they cherished a few moments alone on the rock that was theirs for the sunset?[34]

The mix of romantic rhetoric along with the familiar disdain for Mumbai's "space crunch" was a common rhetorical strategy in these articles. The portrayal of the couple not having a *choice* is all too evident in many of these articles that view public intimacy as a matter of circumstance and not desire.

5.2.3 | "Ban spitting, not love"[35]: Of Politics and Public Spaces

In 1998, a column titled "Mr. Navalkar, what's next?" published a scathing criticism of Navalkar's policies of social purification and moral policing. Yet, at the very end of this article which was essentially calling attention to the ridiculously 'backward-looking' cultural policies of Navalkar, the author says this:

> Last month, Navalkar took up yet another cause – that of curbing the menace caused by beggars and eunuchs at traffic junctions. Consequently, the city police were asked to 'deal' with them, which they are presumably doing. Meanwhile, the beggars are still very much around.[36]

The portrayal of 'hapless couples' being harassed either by policemen *and/or* beggars, hawkers, eunuchs, voyeurs, and street urchins is striking in its omnipresence in articles through the late 1990s and early 2000s. The constant contrasting of couples with defecating, spitting, or 'pissing' men is symptomatic of the complicated relationship between class and sexuality.[37] For instance, during the infamous Five Gardens controversy mentioned earlier in the paper, Prof Vrinda Nabar – a popular figure in the Mumbai intellectual sphere and a resident of the concerned neighborhood at

that time – reportedly said that she had never seen anything too excessive at the park and that "only *sheer desperation* would induce couples to hold hands and whisper sweet nothings under the salacious gaze of a dozen voyeurs. It is pathetic that this city forces young people to come to a place like *this*".[38] Similarly, in condemning a series of arrests made in 2000 by the Mumbai police of couples along waterfronts in Bandra and Malabar Hill,[39] the following question was asked in a news report, "Aren't these love birds a far better sight than people shitting by the side of the road?"[40] On the lines of the heading of this sub-section, another popular columnist of this time sarcastically remarked, "Indians don't kiss; they prefer spitting on the streets".[41] Yet, another article makes a similar sardonic remark about how we have a problem with kissing but not with lewder acts[42] or even "exposed bottoms on the side of the railway tracks"[43] In fact, I did not find a single article between 1980 and 2005 that attributed anything but a certain 'inevitability' to couples using public spaces for privacy. There was no suggestion that, maybe, couples *enjoyed* public spaces. *That was the point, in fact: how could they when these spaces were the cesspool of "undesirable" bodies?* The empathy voiced for couples in public spaces was voiced through making the urban poor the 'folk devil'.

In articles that discuss couples in public spaces, there is a deliberate effort to point out how the revamping of public spaces will benefit these couples; that getting rid of beggars, hawkers, eunuchs, sex workers, urchins, etc. is beneficial for 'everybody'. It is not a matter of coincidence that while the middle-class discourse that was critical of Pramod Navalkar's 'cultural purification' agenda, they were extremely enthusiastic and supportive of his work on revamping public spaces – especially waterfronts, beaches and promenades – and getting rid of the 'undesirables'.[44] While the discourse earlier had been that of lamenting the plight of couples in secluded spaces due to mounting rates of crime and harassment, the call – as the political voice of the middle-class grew louder – now was to categorically expunge public spaces that *harassed these couples*. The spokespersons for the 'global Indian' middle-class seemed to have, thus, found a way to assert their progressive politics with regard to sexuality while lobbying for a more 'class-based' cleansing of the city. The "hapless couple" is spared and sympathized with, because it presents a flavor of modernity that is not at odds with the aspirational cosmopolitanism of Mumbai.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have endeavored to detail and understand on what terms sympathy for couples in public spaces has been articulated over time in the case of the city of Mumbai. I find that the figure of the 'couple' becomes an important discursive marker in the early 1980s and that issues to do with public kissing often get articulated vis-à-vis the "plight" of couples in public places. The discourses that ostensibly support public kissing inevitably get tied to discussions around the state of public spaces in Mumbai. The public performance of romantic love in the form of public kissing is one such activity in which middle-class discourse merits close attention because it is riddled with diverse, often contradictory, ideas of publicness, safety, privacy. As I discuss, I find that sympathetic discourses around public kissing implicated issues and concerns around what it means to be "in public" and what it means to be a modern city. I find that articles purportedly written in support of public kissing tended to use that stand to springboard into broader commentaries, especially about the state of public spaces. Ultimately, the aim of this article has been to add historical-empirical depth to the ways in which the topic of public behavior in India is discussed.

ENDNOTES

[1] Cited from: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/the-politics-of-pda-in-india-kiss-protest/382877/

[2] For example, in October 2014, a group of men belonging to a conservative political party in India vandalized a coffee shop in the city of Kozhikode in Kerala, India. They alleged that this coffee shop was frequented by young men and women who indulged in "immoral activities" such as kissing, cuddling, and smoking. As a response to this particular event which is symptomatic of a more general culture of social control over acts of intimacy in public, a public campaign involving popular demonstrations and kiss-ins was started by a group of youngsters in Kerala. Called 'Kiss of Love', this campaign aimed to challenge the silence around norms governing behavior of couples in public spaces. Initially planned as an isolated kiss-in against moral policing, this campaign found resonance in other urban cities in India and within a span of two or three months, major Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Kolkata witnessed similar kiss-ins organized by youth groups. Since kissing in public is transgressive of socio-cultural norms governing behavior in public places in India, the mode of protesting – groups of youth kissing each other in public – was provocative and, unsurprisingly, led to counter-protests by fundamentalist groups. Counter-protestors performed a sense of anxiety over the "un-Indian" character of both the bone of contention – kissing in public – and the dangers of "too much westernization".

[3] This section of the law read: "No person shall willfully and indecently expose his person in any street or public place or within sight of and in such manner as to be seen from, any street or public place, whether from within any house or building or not, or use indecent language or behave indecently or riotously, or in a disorderly manner in a street or place of public resort or in any office, station or station house." In November 2015, the Mumbai Police issued a public statement that they would no longer use the local anti-indecency law to arrest couples in public places for being intimate with each other.

[4] Historically, the very hyphenation between 'public' and 'private' space that so much of Western thought is based on has been shown to be problematic in the Indian context due to the differences in historical interpretations of spatial boundaries and the practices that constitute them (Gupta, 2005; Ghosh, 2006; Heath, 2010; Hinchy, 2014). Kaviraj (1997) and Chakrabarty (1993) argue that the social understanding of 'public spaces' in India have to contend with how the space outside the home was ritualistically constructed as the 'polluted'. Activities, such as, defecating, washing one's clothes, urinating, squatting, were considered appropriate to a schematic where the space of the home commanded decorum and propriety – not the space outside. The building of public spaces, thus, required a project of consensus-building regarding the function and meaning of spaces outside the home. In other words, the building of public spaces required the careful construction of a set of norms around behavior in public spaces. The discursive shift from 'outside spaces' to 'public spaces' involved a spatial negotiation of what the aesthetic aspirations and regimes of conduct of/in public spaces would be.

[5] Anand, Mulk Raj (1969, Oct 12) "Sex In Bollywood" *TOI*, p. 17; emphasis added.

[6] Letter to Editor (1969, Sep 11), *TOI*, p. 9

[7] N.A. (1968, Oct 30) "Film censors irrational: complaint at seminar". *TOI*, p. 8

[8] Suntook, N.F.S. (1956, Jun 3) "Ahmedabad couple booked for kissing in public". TOI, p. 7 In a similar case a year before this, another couple had been jailed for six weeks for "vitiating the atmosphere at a public fair" in a small town in the then State of Bengal. In that case too, the bone of contention had been the 'public' context of the act and how the transgressive disregard of 'community standards' was reason enough for prosecution. See N.A. (1955, May 4). "Couple Jailed for Kissing in Public", TOI, p.1

[9] N.A. (1978, Apr 2). "Gangs Terrorizing Couples", *TOI*, p. 3

[10] N.A. (1933, Jul 10) "Will Bandra Have a Park?" *TOI*, p. 7. One of the early discussions of the perennial problem of competing uses of public spaces.

[11] Freeman, Lawrence (1964, Jun 9) "A Walk In The Park" *TOI*, p. 8

[12] Trivedi, Swapna (1993, Apr 3) "Being Private in Public" *TOI*, p A1

[13] A term used to denote petty criminals who steal necklaces or chokers off women's necks.

[14] Menezes, George (1982, Aug 6). "For Lovers Only". *TOI*, p. 8

[15] Bagchee, Sandeep. (1987, Mar 19) "A Day In The Park". *TOI*, p. 8

[16] Pinto, Jerry (1991, Dec 28) "Love in Bombay" *TOI*, p. 10.

[17] Karkaria, Bachi (1995, Apr 30) "Fifteen, romancing – and dead", TOI, p. 14

[18] Pinto, Jerry (1995, Apr 25) "So where does one canoodle now?" *TOI*, p. SM5

[19] Olivera, Roshni. (2002, Nov 19). "Don't the police have anything better to do?", *TOI*, p. A1

[20] In 1995, a right-wing government came to power in Maharashtra. A coalition of Bharatiya Janata Party and *Shiv Sena*, one of the first measures to be taken by the government was changing the name of the city 'Bombay' to 'Mumbai'. BJP stands

for Bharatiya Janata Party, a national party which has an avowed commitment to Hindutva ideology and right-wing politics. Shiv Sena, a regional party in Maharashtra, is also extremely right-wing in its politics and advocates a Hindu nationalism. It has based its support on asserting a Hindu-Maharashtrian identity by its anti-Westernization and anti-Muslim campaigns. A history of either is obviously not something I can provide here. For that, see Hansen (1999) and Bedi (2016).

[21] Titled "Bhatkyaachee Bhramanti" (trans: Man About Town), the column was mostly a commentary on civic issues.

[22] A Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) is a representative elected by the voters of an electoral district (constituency) to the Legislature of a State in the Indian system of government.

[23] N.A. (1998, Sept 11) "Chowpatty beach banned for public", *TOI*, p. 2

[24] A large neighborhood in the heart of the southern Mumbai, historically known for being an ethnic enclave of *Parsis*.

[25] Minwalla, Shabnam (1997, Aug 10) "BMC plays spoilsport, puts lovers in tight spot" *TOI*, p 5.

[26] N.A. (1997, Aug 17) "Are Cuddling Couples a Nuisance", TOI, p. 7

[27] The notion of "spectatorship" of these acts in public is important to note. The idea that public spaces are for *families* is typical of the heteronormative assumptions with which public culture operates (Berlant & Warner 1998).

[28] The counter-argument "well, this is precisely why we want to censor television shows as well" is just waiting to be made here!

[29] Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs) are civic bodies that represents the interests and concerns of the residents of a specific urban or suburban locality (or neighborhood) in Indian cities.

[30] N.A. (1997, Sept 15) "DMRA Secretary stands up for lovers". *TOI*. p. 3

[31] N.A. (1998, May 16) "Thought police gave 'kiss report' to Mendonca on May 4", TOI, p. 3

[32] What is worth noting in this controversy is a theme similar to the Five Gardens case: resistance. Even though the comperes of the Savage Garden concert knew that police were stationed to monitor behavior – as the Cultural Affairs minister had already made that information public – they kissed on stage, as if a show of defiance since they knew that such an act would not constitute 'obscenity in public' in a court of law just like the couples in Five Gardens who continue to use the space.

[33] A reference to a book titled "Love and Longing in Bombay" written by Vikram Chandra published in 1997.

[34] Ramani, Priya (1998, May 17) "Where Do All The Lovers Go?", *TOI*, p. 6. It was also now that Navalkar started possibly his most popular initiative – *Nana-Nani* Parks (trans: Grandfather-Grandmother Parks). These parks, which exist even today in some parts of Mumbai, are exclusive parks for elder citizens. These parks were made so that elder citizens do not have to witness obscene behavior by couples which, apparently, was the case in other parks.

[35] N.A. (2000, Sept 22) "Ban Spitting, Not Love" in Letters to Editor. *TOI*, p A4

[36] D'Souze, Mignonne (1998, Sept 14) "What's Next, Mr. Navalkar?", *TOI*, p. 25.

[37] See Joseph, Manu (2000, Sept 18) "Crowding out cupid" *Outlook*. Accessed from http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/crowding-out-cupid/210057 on January 2, 2016.

[38] Minwalla, Shabnam (1997, Aug 10) "BMC plays spoilsport, puts lovers in tight spot" *TOI*, p 5.

[39] Both upper-class residential areas. Residents of Bandra share a particularly troubled history with couples along the waterfront since most of the sea-facing residents find the sight of public expressions of intimacy offensive and have a record of having registered complaints with the Mumbai police.

[40] N.A. (2000, Aug 25) "The Plight of Lovers", *TOI*, p. B10

[41] De, Shobhaa (1999, Oct 1) "Chumma Chumma De De" *TOI*, p 36

[42] De, Shobhaa (2000, Oct 1) "Chumma Politics" *TOI*, p 16

[43] Mitra, Soma. (1995, Aug 22) "What is obscene to some..." *TOI*, p. A3.

[44] See Kalimee, Aboozar (1997, Feb 28) "Drive to keep sex workers off roads" *TOI*, p 5.

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