

Censorship and Ethnographic Film: Confronting State Bureaucracies, Cultural Regulation, and Institutionalized Homophobia in India

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Based on my encounters with the Indian censor board while trying to get my films approved for broadcast on Indian television, I explore how bureaucratic institutions such as the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) operate as instruments of the nation-state to control speech, regulate culture, and stifle dissent in the interest of advancing the Indian government's nationalist, paternalist, heteronormative agendas and policies. I also look briefly at how nongovernmental actors like special interest religious and political groups attempt to regulate even the transnational domains of media circulation online, which offer some possibilities for transcending the regulatory mechanisms of the nation-state. Citing my experiences to show how ethnographic films and scholarship are continuously shaped by the various mediascapes within which they circulate, this article opens up a conversation about what it means to submit our scholarship for sanctioning by the nation-state in which we carry out our research. [censorship, ethnographic film, gender, India, sexuality]

On July 28, 2014, I received an unexpected phone call from the New Delhi office of the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The voice on the other end, which identified itself simply as “Rajeev from the censor office,”¹ informed me that the Delhi censor board had rejected my application for a U/V (Universal Video) certificate for my most recent film, *Mardistan [Macholand]* (2014), an ethnographic documentary that explores masculinity in India. Rajeev went on to explain (in Hindi), “Some content in your film was found objectionable by the censor board. Cuts are required.” The news came as a surprise, as I had preemptively removed expletives including *gandu* (the Hindi equivalent of “faggot”) from the film acting on the recommendation of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), the funding agency that had already scheduled the film to be broadcasted on *Doordarshan* (state-owned Indian National TV Channel) later that year. The censor board's refusal to certify *Mardistan* threatened to derail these plans and jeopardized future screenings of the film in India.

In this article, I use my interactions with the CBFC as a starting point to explore the practice of film censorship in India, specifically in regard to documentary and ethnographic films intended for nationally televised circulation. Instead of issuing an outright injunction, nation-states like India deploy bureaucratic institutions, like the CBFC, as instruments for controlling speech, regulating culture, and stifling dissent. In turn, rather than serving its citizens, bureaucracies such as the CBFC deploy antiquated colonial-era notions and morally loaded legal concepts of “obscenity” and “vulgarity” to advance the nationalist, paternalist, heteronormative agendas and ideologies of the nation-state.

Considering the rapidly shifting landscapes of transnational media circulation, I also reflect on the possibilities available to filmmakers and ethnographers to circumvent state-imposed limitations, which include turning to social media and video-sharing websites so as to circulate uncensored versions of their films. I look briefly at how nongovernmental actors like religious and political groups are increasingly infiltrating and

attempting to regulate even the transnational domains of media circulation such as YouTube that might offer some possibilities for transcending the regulatory mechanisms of nation-states.

Having filmed and exhibited several documentaries in India over the last decade, I have encountered with alarming regularity both official and unofficial censorship efforts that include cuts imposed by the censor board, comments on social media, blatant threats in the form of anonymous phone calls, and direct confrontations during post-screening discussions of my films. Considering the current void in discussions on the censorship of ethnographic film and media within our discipline, these accounts serve as an opportunity to begin a dialogue about the circulation of our scholarship. Given anthropology's historically troubled relationship with the government (Price 2004), this article asks what it means to submit our scholarship for sanctioning by the nation-states in which we carry out our research.

Following William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur, who point out that "regulation is self-reflexive," meaning that the official and unofficial acts of censoring or silencing something legitimize and call attention to its circulation within the public domain (2009, 21), the questions raised here are: how are our films and our scholarship continuously shaped by the various mediascapes within which they circulate, and how does institutional power condition what is knowable in the form of ethnographic accounts?

According to the Cinematography Act of 1918 and 1952, the public exhibition of all films in India, regardless of their origins, requires certification from the CBFC. Headquartered in Mumbai, the CBFC has nine regional offices, including one in New Delhi. The regional offices process applications for censor certification while an advisory panel (often referred to simply as the "censor board") appointed by the Central Government of India determines which one of the four following designations should be assigned to a given submission: "U" or "V/U" for unrestricted public exhibition, "U/A" for unrestricted public exhibition with adult supervision, "A" for adults only, and "S" for content restricted to "any special class of persons." Films and videos broadcasted on national television during primetime often require a "V/U" certification. When I asked Rajeev for the specifics of the censor board's objections in the case of my film, he replied (in Hindi), "The material deemed objectionable

is too obscene to describe over the telephone." I was summoned to appear in person at the New Delhi branch of CBFC for further guidance on how to re-edit my film in a way that would relieve the censor board's anxieties.

On the morning of July 31, my assistant director and I took an autorickshaw from our motel in South Delhi to the nearby CGO Complex, a colony of mid-century towers that house several governmental agencies, including the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Upon reaching the CBFC office, we were told to wait in a florescent, windowless room lined with ceiling-high cabinets overflowing with stacks upon stacks of bounded files of varying colors and age. After 45 minutes, we were ushered into the adjacent office, where a slender, neatly dressed man introduced himself as Rajeev. Without offering an explanation, Rajeev started listing the segments of the film that had to be cut. I interrupted him to ask for a rationale behind these cuts, and he snapped back, "These orders have come from above! You have to follow them."

Rhetorical phrases like "from above," along with lengthy wait times, are familiar strategies commonly deployed across governmental bureaucracies in India on varying levels to obscure the decision-making process and signal a sense of indifference toward their subjects, whom these agencies are tasked with serving. By drawing on the inherent hierarchies embedded within bureaucratic structures and their ignorance in regard to the decisions made by the censor board, Rajeev effectively positioned himself as a mere messenger in an opaque institution, thereby foreclosing any opportunity for me to challenge the agency's decisions. Yet, the authority and the finality in Rajeev's tone of voice made it clear that he was also the agency's gatekeeper, the only individual I (along with other Indian filmmakers like me) could and would access.

India has a long history of bureaucratic dysfunction. Governmental agencies are notorious for their inefficiencies, lack of transparency, excessive interference in financial markets, and widespread corruption that makes the seamless delivery of the basic social services nearly impossible (Bear and Mathur 2015). Yet, as India's economy undergoes neoliberal transformation and a growing number of basic services and infrastructure are privatized, moving the nation further away from the socialist democratic ideals upon which it was founded, rather than dismantling bureaucracies, the

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state often uses these institutions to silence and control the citizenry. Far from a callous disregard of its subjects, the state deploys bureaucratic structures to inflict structural violence onto its citizens (Gupta 2012).

Petitioning the CBFC to reconsider its decisions is a long and arduous process, familiar to many artists. Among the most notable examples of artists confronting state-sanctioned censorship is documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, who ended up fighting his case all the way to the Indian Supreme Court after *Doordarshan* refused to screen his documentary *Father Son and the Holy War* (1995). Following the objections raised by the censor board and a ten-year ordeal, the Indian Supreme Court finally ordered the film to be telecasted on national television.

In my own case, after a brief and frustrating encounter, I consulted with the funding organization about the required cuts. Fearing that a censor certificate might not be issued in time for the upcoming broadcast, I grudgingly relented and made the cuts without petitioning

the censor board for reconsideration. Two months later, we received another call from Rajeev informing us that a category “V/U” censor certificate had been issued and was ready for collection (Figure 1).

Censorship and Cultural Regulation in India

Examining the circulation of public culture in India, Mazzarella and Kaur note, “state sanctioned censorship has become the most consciously and conspicuously formalized institution of cultural regulation” (2009, 9). Given India’s rich and diverse traditions of film production and spectatorship, CBFC and its regional offices have always played an active and influential role in determining how films are publically exhibited and thereby shaped the content, the aesthetic, and the themes of Indian films (Ganti 2009; Mazzarella and Kaur 2009; Mehta 2011).


Given India’s historically high illiteracy rates, Tejaswini Ganti explains, “the (Indian) state has viewed film

प्रारूप IV-A / FORM IV-A नियम 35 (1) देखिए / Sec. Rule 35 (1)

भारत सरकार / GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
केन्द्रीय फिल्म प्रमाणन बोर्ड / CENTRAL BOARD OF FILM CERTIFICATION

यह प्रमाणपत्र केवल वीडियो फिल्मों के बाबत विधिमान्य है
THIS CERTIFICATE IS VALID FOR VIDEO FILMS ONLY

भाग-I / Part-I

9161 

No. VIS/307/2014-DEL Documentory

प्रमाणपत्र सं. तारीख श्रेणी
Certificate No. VIS/1/393/2014-DEL Dated 29/9/2014 Category

वी/अ
V/U

अनिर्बन्धित वीडियो
UNIVERSAL VIDEO

फिल्म
Film: MARDISTAN (ENGLISH) (Colour) (Video) Duration 28:11 min:sec

निम्नलिखित परीक्षण समिति के सदस्यों द्वारा परीक्षण के पश्चात तथा उक्त परीक्षण समिति की सिफारिशों पर बोर्ड एतद्वारा यह प्रमाणित करता है कि पीछे संलग्न भाग -2 में उपदर्शित काट-छांट और उपात्तरों के अधीन फिल्म अनिर्बन्धित सार्वजनिक प्रदर्शन के लिए उपयुक्त है।
After examination of the film by the members of the Examining Committee mentioned below and on the recommendations of the said Examining Committee, the Board hereby certifies that the film is fit for **unrestricted public exhibition** subject to excisions and modification listed in part II on the reverse :

1. PRIYA SINGH
2. RAJ KUMAR (E.O.)

यह और प्रमाणित किया जाता है कि उपरोक्त बोर्ड द्वारा अधिरोपित काट-छांट और उपात्तरों को वास्तव में कार्यान्वित किया गया है।
Further certified that the excisions and modifications imposed by the Board have actually been carried out.

आवेदक का नाम अध्यक्ष
Name of the Applicant DR. HARJANT GILL (RAJ KUMAR)

निर्माता का नाम For Chairman
Name of the Producer RAJIV MEHROTRA Regional Officer,
CBFC, DELHI

FIGURE 1. Image of a V/U censor certificate for *Madistan*, issued by CBFC on September 29, 2014. Photo credits: Tilotama Productions [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

as a pedagogical tool in its modernizing agenda,” where censorship serves as an important tool to regulate images and themes being consumed by the “masses,” who according to the state are “incapable of distinguishing the difference between filmic representations and reality, and therefore easily swayed or manipulated by film images” (2009, 97–99). Underlying the day-to-day operations of the censor board and the importance it assigns to itself is a paternalistic, nationalist, and classist attitude that treats viewers as “immature citizens,” incapable of policing their own actions (Mazzarella 2011, 342–44).

While the justification for the need to censor is often voiced through an idealized discourse of balancing free speech with broader concerns for social welfare within a democracy, the processes related to its practice are far from democratic. Offering insights into how CBFC operates, Ganti explains, “the censor board is often comprised of four or five members untied to the Indian film industry, and the board’s regional officer, frequently a government administrator with no formal training in filmmaking or film analysis” (2009, 93). Based on her interviews with former members of the Mumbai censor board, Ganti concludes that the guidelines used to evaluate submissions are intentionally vague, overemphasizing arbitrary cuts and removal of entire scenes from films they deem objectionable for a whole variety of reasons (2009, 93–94). Even though the censor board’s paternalism is directed at a range of what its members perceive as potentially corrupting depictions on-screen (including drinking, smoking, or gratuitous violence), its most routine and draconian prescriptions often center on representations of sex and sexuality, especially ones that challenge the militantly heteronormative and patriarchal institutions of marriage and family.

Since consolidating political power in the early 1990s, India’s Hindu-nationalist, ultraconservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), along with its more extremist and fundamentalist faction Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has often tied anxieties related to sexual propriety with the preservation of patriarchal tradition, middle-class family values, and the project of imagining a Hindu-centric national identity. They have accomplished this by mobilizing communal anxieties and by singling out cinematic representations along with other forms of popular culture that might transgress social norms, positing them as potentially threatening to the nation’s social fabric and Hindu way of life (Bose 2009). Family-centric religious programming featured on *Doordarshan* in the late 1980s and the early 1990s played an integral role in advancing BJP’s project of envisaging this new middle-class Hindu-centric national identity (Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). Even though Indian mediascapes have undergone rad-

ical expansion since the 1990s, the compulsion to regulate popular culture, especially films, and increasingly social media, continues to be a prominent part of BJP and RSS’s ongoing political and nationalist agendas (Menon 2012; Udupa 2012, 2016).

My first memorable encounter with the Indian censorship apparatus also dates back to 1995, when Milind Soman, India’s first male supermodel, was charged with promoting obscenity under Section 292 of Indian Penal Code (IPC), a conviction that accompanied a two-year imprisonment for appearing nude in a shoe advertisement. Growing up in India in the early 1990s (at the age of 14), the spectacle surrounding the offending images and charges against Soman sparked my interest in seeking out the original advertisement. My very personal discovery of these publicly circulated images, which the state had deemed “obscene,” culminated into my own sexual awakening and the realization of my same-sex desires, memories that I narrate in my ethnographic documentary *Milind Soman Made Me Gay* (Gill 2007). As I chronicle in the film, this intimate revelation of my queer sexuality was simultaneously accompanied by an even more unsettling awareness that just like the images of Soman’s naked body, my sexuality too was rendered obscene, my desires were also criminalized by the same colonial regimes of power and legal apparatus (Section 377 of IPC) deployed to punish Soman for his transgressions (Figures 2 and 3).

The obscenity charges against Soman represented a microcosm of the anxieties being felt on regional and national levels in response to the liberalization of the Indian economy along with the advertising-led consumer revolution and the culture of individualism that characterized life in urban India throughout the 1990s (Mazzarella 2011, 333). Set against the backdrop of this rapidly shifting landscape of individual freedom and desires pitted against patriarchal and heteronormative traditions and norms, my film *Milind Soman Made Me Gay* explores how nationalist and fundamentalist regimes (in India as well as the United States) deploy the language of obscenity, criminality, and monstrosity to exert control over our intimate desires, our bodies, and our claims to citizenship (Gill 2010).

On the Politics of Defining Rape

Unpacking the concept of “obscenity” as frequently deployed by the Indian censor board, Mazzarella notes, “the very language of film censorship in India so often seems willfully archaic, preserving, as it does, the legal terminology of another epoch: baroque stuff about moral turpitude, depravity and corrupt social fabric” (2011, 330).

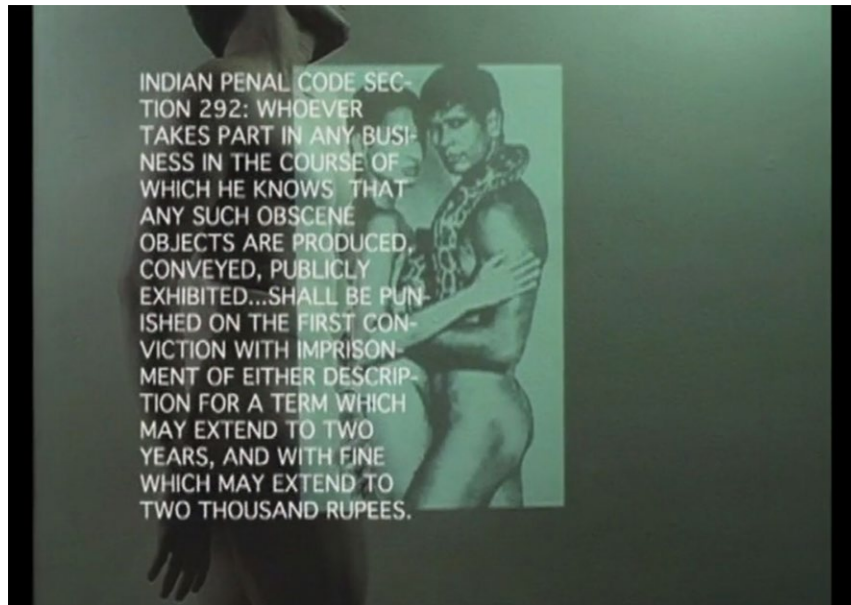


FIGURE 2. Still from *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, juxtaposing Soman's image rendered obscene by the nation-state against Section 292 of IPC that criminalizes obscenity. Photo credits: Tilotama Productions. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

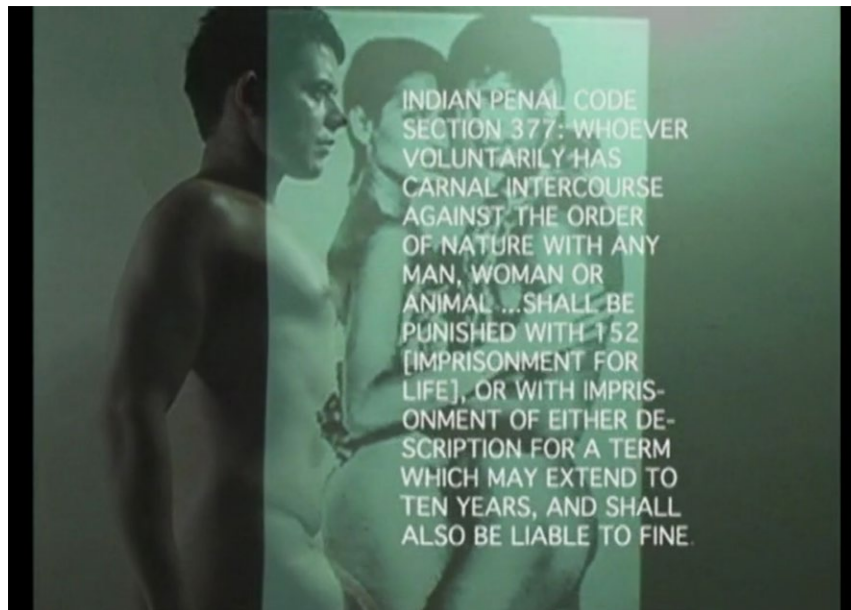


FIGURE 3. Still from *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, juxtaposing queer desire rendered criminal by the nation-state against Section 377 of IPC that outlaws sodomy. Photo credits: Tilotama Productions. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

More often than not, it is only upon offending the sensibilities of members of this government-appointed censor board that the Indian film community learns about the latest word, phrase, or depiction that has been deemed inappropriate and removed from public circulation. Making sense of the censor board's decisions often requires one to take a more discursive approach, with a thinking-

through of these silencing practices in relationship with how other institutions operate, as well as a consideration of the cultural and political agendas being promoted by bureaucrats and the political class in charge of their appointments.

As I discovered during my meeting with Rajeev, topping the list of segments that the Delhi censor board

deemed obscene in *Mardistan* were the terms “anus” and “penis” (Figure 4). On the surface, these cuts might seem indiscriminate, fitting into the pattern of juvenilizing Indian audiences, emblematic of the pedagogical paternalism and compulsion for sexual propriety that motivate the censor board’s decisions. However, a more contextual exploration of the silencing of these two terms suggests that the censor board’s directives carry deeper and more political implications.

Through personal narratives, family biographies, and ethnographic observations, *Mardistan* explores the construction of Indian masculinity in relationship to patriarchal supremacy, gender-based violence, son preference, and homophobia in Indian society. I made *Mardistan* in response to the highly publicized gang rape and murder of a young woman in December 2012 in New Delhi, and the lack of critical exploration of Indian masculinities within the subsequent mainstream coverage of the incident. My goal was to make a film that would contextualize sexual violence in India within broader inequalities across gender, class, and sexual

hierarchies, and to show how rape and sexual violence are a symptom of these inequities in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal supremacy and compulsive heterosexuality. Rather than fetishizing gang rape and glorifying the men who enact such violence, *Mardistan* explores the various processes through which men learn to become men.² By chronicling the life histories and experiences of four Indian men belonging to different class backgrounds, the film reveals how the production of patriarchal masculinity involves often-violent processes, including the sexual violence young men often enact on each other and sexual minorities, in addition to women. The film opens up a conversation about male rape and the various ways in which men in positions of power use sexual violence as a way to exert control not only over women but also over other men.³

Mardistan also features a detailed interview with Nivedita Menon, a Delhi-based feminist scholar and academic whose insights and narration contextualizes the experiences and life histories of the four men featured in the film. Menon argues that the Indian judicial

भाग-2/PART-II
कांट-छांट और उपान्तरों की विशिष्टियां/Particulars of excisions and modifications :

File No. : VIS/307/2014-DEL
Film : MARDISTAN (ENGLISH) (Colour)
Applied Running Time :28:11 MM:SS
U (Unrestricted Public Exhibition) Cert. No. VIS/1/393/2014-DEL dated 29/09/2014

Cuts recommended by CBFC

Cut No.	Location	Description	Guidelines	Duration(MM:SS)	
				Deleted	Replaced
1	00:09:20 to 00:09:28	Replaced visuals of alcohol brand with general shots.	2(v)	0:00	0:08
2	00:14:59, 00:23:26	Muted word "Penis"	2(vii)	0:00	0:00
3	00:23:28	Muted word "Anus"	2(vii)	0:00	0:00

Voluntary Deletions/Additions after the examination

Total Deletions at the time of Examination: 0:00 MM:SS
Total Replacement at the time of Examination: 0:08 MM:SS

Total Voluntary Deletions after the Examination: 0:00 MM:SS

Actual Duration of the film after the aforesaid deletions and replacements will be 28:11 MM:SS in 1 Cassette(s).

अध्यक्ष
For Chairman (RAJ ROMAR)
Regional Officer,
CBFC, DELHI

FIGURE 4. List of cuts made to *Mardistan* to obtain "Unrestricted Public Exhibition" certification from CBFC. Photo credits: Tilotama Productions. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

system's inability to adequately prosecute rape and sexual violence is rooted in antiquated attitudes toward sex and sexuality—identical to ones that motivate practices related to censorship—that deploy similarly vague concepts of morality and sexual propriety, often leading to victim-blaming, obscuring the ability to obtain a legal conviction, and further reproducing a culture of impunity toward crimes related to sexual violence.

In the interview, Menon elaborates on legal reforms enacted by the Indian government in response to the 2012 Delhi gang rape, and how interventions put in place as part of the 2013 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act remain woefully insufficient. Even though the Indian government amended the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to revise laws on sexual violence, based on the recommendation by a special committee appointed in the aftermath of the incident, the changes failed to broaden the definition of rape far enough to recognize men and other sexual and gender minorities as victims of rape (Menon 2013).⁴ As a result, the definition of rape, as it currently exists in Sections 375 and 376 (2) of the IPC, only allows for women to be the victims of rape, and for men to be the only perpetrators (Stokes 2014). In advocating for the need to redefine rape in the Indian judicial system as a form of “violence against all bodies,” during her interview Menon declares: “If a woman has had an object inserted into her *vagina*, she has been raped. If a man has had a *penis* or an object inserted into his *anus* or his mouth, he has been raped!”⁵

It was within this definition of rape in relationship to the male body that the Delhi censor board found the use of the terms “penis” and “anus” obscene and flagged them for removal. Curiously, the censor board did not object to the term “vagina” as uttered by Menon within the same sentence while referencing rape in relationship to the female body. During our meeting, I implored Rajeev for a rationale for the censor board's decision, but he stuck to his script: “These orders have come from above!” Signaling an end to our brief meeting, he made the following ultimatum: “You have no other choice. You have to make these changes and resubmit the film to obtain a censor certificate.” With that, my assistant director and I were ushered out of the Delhi CBFC office.

At the Intersection of Sodomy and Obscenity

It is no coincidence that the Indian government's discursive practices and policies around sexual minority rights are often articulated through similarly antiquated notions of sexual propriety, countering moral corruption, and threats to the heteronormative and patriarchal institution of family—concerns that frequently inform

the censor board's actions. India's LGBTQH⁶ communities' efforts to fight for equal rights are hindered by the equally vague concept of “sodomy” that categorizes all form of “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” as a criminal offense (Bhaskaran 2002; Puri 2016). And just as the censor board's application of the concept of “obscenity” is malleable and often reactive, India's sodomy laws have been referenced to denounce not only same-sex desire, but also a wide range of non-procreative sexual acts, consensual and nonconsensual, including male rape. While Section 377 has rarely, in its 157 years of existence, been used to charge individuals of committing sodomy, the specter of criminality associated with any form of nonprocreative sexual act under the law suffuses it with punitive potential. As LGBTQH communities gain more visibility across India, Section 377 has become an instrument for regular harassment, abuse, and extortion by corrupt police officers, as well as by homophobic family members, landlords, employers, and the like.

Following a brief period of advancement in sexual minority rights, as the LGBTQH communities' persistent campaigns led to the Delhi High Court's landmark decision to strike down the provisions of Section 377 that criminalized homosexuality, in December 2013, eight months before my contentious meeting at the Delhi CBFC office, the Supreme Court of India (SCI) overturned the Delhi High Court's judgment, reinstating Section 377 in its entirety. SCI's justification for upholding the constitutional validity of Section 377 also hinged upon a vague interpretation of the concept of sodomy and an extremely myopic reading of law that in the justices' opinion only criminalized sex acts, and not sexual identities (Akila 2014). SCI's judgment is illustrative of how legal ambiguities coupled with moral anxieties around issues related to sexuality and sexual rights make it easy for the nation-state to dismiss the concerns of those individuals and communities whose very existence is affected by its policies.⁷

Given this legal context, the Delhi censor board's insistence on removing the terms “penis” and “anus” from Menon's understanding of rape—foreclosing the discussion of rape in relationship to the male body—offers useful insights into how bureaucratic institutions like the CBFC often endorse the political agendas of the governing party. Far from simply offending the middle-class sensibilities of the members of the Delhi censor board, the decision to exorcise these terms from *Mardistan* must be seen as a political act, an endorsement of the BJP's patriarchal and homophobic platform, coincidentally the party that had just returned to power (led by its populist leader Narendra Modi) a couple of months before my meeting with Rajeev at the Delhi CBFC office.

In the aftermath of SCI's decision, I surmised that in a nationally televised documentary about sexual violence, any discursive exploration of the concept of male rape threatens the establishment's rigid categorization of the sexual lives of its citizens. On one level, the concept of male rape requires the need to differentiate the criminal act from consensual sex between two men, a possibility that the current BJP government and its bureaucratic institutions have little appetite for. Instead, following the resurrection of Section 377, sex between same-sexed individuals (consensual as well as nonconsensual) remains squarely fixed within the moral and legal frameworks of sodomy (Stokes 2014). On another level, questioning the legal definition of rape also undermines the reforms carried out following the 2012 Delhi gang rape, which the government had touted as noteworthy achievements in combating sexual violence against women in India. Hence, the terms "penis" and "anus" were omitted, whereas the term "vagina" remained unchanged (see Figure 4).

While disheartening, CBFC's decision to censor these segments from my film is emblematic of how governmental bureaucracies as well as nongovernmental organizations, and even funding agencies like PSBT, often proactively adapt their practices and policies to align with the incoming government's political agendas. The opaque bureaucratic structure of CBFC and the secrecy around how the censor board makes decisions obscure the existence of institutionalized bias. In the absence of evidence of certainty, anthropological observations such as I make here offer productive possibilities for identifying and outlining patterns of decision making as predictable (Engelke 2009). Accounts of filmmakers repeatedly confronting similar regulations in their films exploring issues related to gender and sexual rights suggest a systematic shift toward more explicitly homophobic policies under the current BJP-led regime, especially when contrasting CBFC's policies in regard to on-screen depiction of same-sex sexuality during BJP's previous tenure (nearly twenty years ago).

In the 1990s, religious groups like Shiv Sena, an extremist faction of RSS, led the charges to censor films by forcefully disrupting screenings and vandalizing movie theaters (Patel 2002). Among Shiv Sena's most notable and widely reported acts of violence was the 1996 destruction of Mumbai-based cinema houses showing Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), one of the first Indian films to center around a same-sex relationship between two middle-class Hindu women. Although the Mumbai censor board twice cleared the film for mainstream release with minimal cuts, Shiv Sena's boycott and opposition to the film and other representations of queer sexuality on-screen solidified BJP and RSS's

explicitly homophobic attitudes toward sexual minorities (Bachmann 2002). However, in 1996, the Mumbai censor board sided with the filmmaker and thereby sanctioned one of the first on-screen depictions of a same-sex relationship in India; the 2015 addition of the term "lesbian" to the list of banned words by the same organization twenty years later underscores the more recent institutionalization of the culture of homophobia within CBFC.

In a phone interview, Indian documentary filmmaker and LGBTQH rights activist Sridhar Rangayan, who is perennially confronting similar institutional challenges to the circulation of his films, lamented the recent politicization of the censor board. Far from being an autonomous governmental body tasked with the responsibility of evaluating films on their own merit, Rangayan complained that the censor board is frequently advancing the political agendas of the current government.⁸ Before the BJP returned to power in May 2014, Rangayan's nationally televised documentary *Purple Skies*, a film chronicling the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in India, was assigned a "U/V" certificate by the Mumbai censor board without any cuts. The following year in 2015, Rangayan's subsequent national-award-winning documentary *Breaking Free*, which chronicles human rights violations against members of the Indian LGBTQH community, was slapped with an "A" certificate without the option of making cuts, and thereby dramatically diminishing its potential to be exhibited on Indian television and its prospects for mainstream distribution.

The inability to obtain a censor certificate carries profound financial and career consequences for independent filmmakers like Rangayan. In addition to being deprived of broadcast possibilities, uncensored films are also barred from being included in Indian film festivals, public exhibitions, and organized events. Without a censor certificate, their films are given fewer opportunities to compete for national awards and other recognitions.

Censorship in an Era of Transnationalism

While the censored version of *Mardistan* was telecasted on *Doordarshan* and at other public venues across India in 2014 and edited in accordance to the cuts demanded by the Delhi censor board, a few months following its debut I released an uncensored version of the film on video-sharing websites including YouTube and Vimeo (to be accessed openly and free of cost). Unlike cinema halls, television channels, and film festivals that operate under the state's scrutiny, video-streaming social media platforms like YouTube and Vimeo are often able

to circumvent regulatory bureaucracies like the CBFC. Making an uncensored version of my film available to a transnational audience, unencumbered by the censor board's irrefutable cuts, became my way of negating the sense of powerlessness I experienced in my interaction with the Indian censor board, and thereby reclaiming my agency as the author of the film. Unsurprisingly, filmmakers across India are deploying similar tactics to register their discontent with the censor board, calling attention to its often outrageous and draconian policies. While some like me have simply released or leaked uncensored versions of our films online, others have deployed even more creative techniques for challenging the censor board (vis-à-vis the nation-state) by uploading montages of shots and dialogues from their films that the censor board deemed unsuitable for mass circulation, thereby generating additional interest in and publicity for their projects. Many filmmakers, including Rangayan, have defiantly shown uncensored versions of their films in various public venues in India, keenly aware of the fact that their decisions to do so carry significant legal repercussions.

The Indian government's recent attempts to ban websites like Vimeo and DailyMotion in December 2015, accusing them of propagating anti-nationalist propaganda, were met with public outcry that reverberated across social and mainstream media. The Department of Electronic and Information Technology (DEIT) quickly backpedaled, lifting the ban on major websites, including the two mentioned above, and thereby forged a new sense of political consciousness among Indian media consumers who had up until this point reluctantly swallowed the censor board's decisions.

While social media websites are beholden to corporate interests where algorithms are often used to exercise control over information and media disbursed across its platforms, it remains untethered from the kinds of state-sponsored sanctioning enforced through bureaucratic institutions like the CBFC. However, content featured on sites like YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook is increasingly subjected to informal policing or "online vigilantism" undertaken by anonymous online trolls, as well as religious and political groups who often turn to the comment sections of a particular video to undermine its validity or target the individuals, featured within it (Udupa 2016). In the case of *Mardistan*, comments directed at Menon, the feminist activist featured in the film, have been particularly vicious. Accompanying the film, I also uploaded the hour-long interview with Menon, segments of which were featured in the 28-minute documentary. Following a spate of student protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi in early 2016, in which Menon was involved,

members of the BJP administration accused the protest leaders along with Menon of being "anti-nationalist," while the Delhi police arrested the president of JNU Student Union for "sedition," yet another vaguely defined colonial-era law that was added to the Indian Penal Code in 1870 (Liang 2016). In the weeks that followed, Menon's interview on my YouTube channel was inundated with comments accusing her of being "anti-nationalist" and "anti-Hindu," and calling into question her patriotism, professional credentials, gender identity, and sexuality. What troubled me the most was the violent and dehumanizing nature of some of these comments, and the cruelty and viciousness they express. While the individuals authoring such comments are able to hide behind a pseudonym, their discursive practices and actions represent attempts to silence any critical conversations around contentious topics such as gender, sexuality, and national identity, by threatening direct violence. Although extreme in nature, I regard this form of citizen policing as an extension of the broader continuum of structural violence imposed by state bureaucracies. The underlying motivations of both the CBFC and recent online trolls and vigilante groups are aligned as drivers for the control of cultural representations and speech through censorship.

Extralegal attempts to censor my films are by no means limited to cyberspace. Having filmed and exhibited several documentaries in India over the last decade, I have encountered, with alarming regularity, attempts to regulate the content and circulation of my scholarship. These include blatant threats in the form of anonymous phone calls as well as direct confrontations during post-screening discussions of my films. For instance, following a 2008 screening of *Milind Soman Made Me Gay* at Panjab University in Chandigarh, a faculty member stood up and asked (in an accusatory tone), "Why are you promoting homosexuality to our students?" In 2010, as I was getting ready to film my documentary *Roots of Love*, which explores the phenomenon of young Sikh men cutting their unshorn hair and giving up their turbans, I received several anonymous phone calls inquiring about the themes of my documentary and reminding me that cutting hair is considered blasphemy within Sikhism. Identifying themselves as "concerned community members" the anonymous callers echoed the paternalistic anxieties and patronizing views of Indian viewers that underline the censor board's thinking. This thinking assumes that simply by showing one Sikh man getting his hair cut on-screen, others are encouraged to follow suit. After consulting local community leaders, representatives from PSBT, and other Indian filmmakers, I made the decision to stage the sequence that depicts a Sikh man undergoing this profound transition in his

life, followed by a prominently displayed disclaimer that read, “No Sikh men were de-turbaned during the making of this film.”

Over the past decade of working in India, I have come to anticipate such uncomfortable encounters as routine features of researching, filmmaking, and screening my films in the country. I am, however, caught off-guard upon encountering similar silencing attempts and opposition directed at my films from members of diasporic communities. The most memorable examples of these forms of ideological policing include a phone call I received from the director of the New York Sikh International Film Festival in 2012 asking me to re-edit *Roots of Love* to make it more sympathetic toward the older generation of Sikh men featured within the film (invested in retaining the turban as a symbol of Sikh identity) and as a prerequisite for its being included in his festival. More recently, after a 2016 screening of *Mardistan* at the University of West Indies in Trinidad, I received an email from an academic accusing me of being “white-washed,” “undermining traditionalist and nationalist aspirations,” and “hawking western ideologies wholesale including homosexuality.”

Conclusion

Less than a month after my contentious meeting with the representatives from the Delhi CBFC, the Chief Executive Officer of CBFC Rakesh Kumar was arrested and indicted along with the regional CBFC agent and a member of the censor board by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on charges of corruption, for demanding a 70,000 INR (about \$1,050) bribe in exchange for clearing regional films for universal release. Unsurprisingly, corruption is a pervasive feature of the CBFC and its regional operations (TOI 2015), just as much as corruption is a feature of other bureaucracies throughout the Indian governmental apparatus (Gupta 2005). Even though some of my friends advised me to inquire about paying a bribe to streamline the process of obtaining a censor certificate for *Mardistan*, I had promptly dismissed the suggestion not only because bribery violates both my personal and professional ethics, but also because I could not afford such a large amount of money. In a nation where corruption and nepotism are frequently viewed as essential components of the available infrastructure of opportunities for upward class mobility, corruption (along with nepotism) also operates as a mechanism for exclusion, further marginalizing the voices of independent filmmakers working on social justice issues. Corruption economizes the images we produce in ways that fundamentally violate our con-

stitution and our investment in the idea of free speech as the foundation of a fairer and more equitable society. In this way, I regard institutionalized corruption as yet another component, along with censorship and cultural regulation that constitute the structural violence the nation-state inflicts onto its citizenry through its bureaucracies.

Against the backdrop of an ever-changing landscape of media production and circulation, anthropologists have explored the in-depth relationship between different forms of popular media, nation-states, and consumers of public culture (e.g., Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). This article builds on that rich tradition of media inquiry to consider how the different forms of media that we produce as anthropologists interact with and are shaped by the nation-states and domains in which they circulate. This article is also about taking a “multi-modal approach” to the knowledge we produce (Collins, Durrington, and Gill 2017), and the various academic and non-academic terrains that we often navigate in the process of disseminating our scholarship. My experiences about applying for and obtaining a censor certificate that are detailed here illustrate some of the ways in which the process of knowledge production continues even after the account of our research (a book, a film, and an article) is published. By sharing my experiences and the experiences of other filmmakers about their interaction with bureaucratic institutions such as the CBFC, my hope is to initiate a dialogue within anthropology about the circulation of our scholarship and questions concerning how our films and our scholarship are continuously shaped by the various mediascapes within which they circulate.

These accounts also highlight the challenges of working as an ethnographic filmmaker in a country like India, producing films whose primary audiences are television viewers and the citizens of that nation. Having to seek approval from the bureaucratic agencies like CBFC adds to the physical and emotional labor of filmmaking. At the completion of each project, I am often left feeling demoralized. I am often tempted to give up on the idea of circulating my films within India, and instead focus on academic audiences in Western institutions. Yet, in the aggregate, undertaking such exercises leads to deeper revelations about how the nation-state operates, often not fully apparent in the moment. Having confronted bureaucratic agencies like CBFC through which the nation-state enacts structural violence onto its citizens, I am able to arrive at and lay out (as I have in this article) a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which inequities like sexism, homophobia, and religious fundamentalism are institutionalized into the very structures of governmental bureaucracies. And

the more often I encounter them, the more convinced I become that undertaking such efforts is a radical act in itself. It accompanies significant political and cultural implications for social change, which anthropologists (and filmmakers and journalists) committed to the idea of public anthropology and intellectualism must undertake—again and again.

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Notes

- ¹ Name has been changed to protect the participant's identity.
- ² See my critique of Leslee Udwin's 2015 BBC documentary *India's Daughter* (Gill 2015). Also see Roy (1994) and Roychowdhury (2013).
- ³ See Chopra, Osella, and Osella (2004), Mehta (2006), and Pascoe (2007). While the discussion of male rape and sexual violence against men remain absent in popular media, the topic has been explored within contemporary Indian literature; see Sandhu (2012).
- ⁴ In the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gang rape, a three-member commission led by retired Chief Justice J. S. Verma was tasked with reviewing and amending the criminal laws on rape and sexual violence.
- ⁵ Emphasis added.
- ⁶ "H" stands for Hijra/Hejira, a third gender recognized by the Indian constitution (Khan et al. 2016). Also, see Narrain and Bhan (2006) and Puri (2016) on sexual minority rights in India.
- ⁷ Referring to the LGBTQH community as too "minuscule" of a minority group to warrant the law's repeal, SCI left the ultimate decision for the repeal of Section 377 in the hands of an openly homophobic government.
- ⁸ Conducted on April 4, 2016.

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