Junctures
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

26: gender

November 2026

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26094

ASMITA KUNDU

ON WILDNESS AND FAILURE: READING JACK HALBERSTAM IN INDIA

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

© 2025 the authors; © illustrations, the artists or other copyright owners.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26094

ASMITA KUNDU

ON WILDNESS AND FAILURE: READING JACK HALBERSTAM IN INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to think through certain crises in gender and sexuality with the philosophical ideas of 'wildness' and 'failure,' as articulated in Jack Halberstam's *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020) and *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). The essay analyses how preoccupations with meritocracy, capitalism, legibility and success shape our understanding of gender binarism, heterosexism and other normative modes of being. In India especially, the aftermath of the Transgender Amendment Act (2026), which seeks to delegitimise the question of self-determination of gender to establish trans-ness and gender as categories to be verified by screening committees and medical boards, has opened up crucial junctures to think through anxieties about gender and sexuality in popular and political discourses. These anxieties often result in attitudes reflected in visual media whenever it seeks to represent the queer subject. Moreover, since India still operates as a caste-hierarchical society, questions about intersectionality also feature in the politics and aesthetics of representation, and, inadvertently, many stories about queer lives mirror queer concerns about success and failure. Halberstam's ideas offer possibilities to think beyond 'orderliness' and taxonomic obsessions and re-imagine failure as resistance. This paper refers to four South Asian films, Karan Kandhari's *Sister Midnight* (2024), Abhishek Kapoor's *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi* (2021) and Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2020) to understand the radical possibilities wildness and failure can offer for queer subjectivities in India.

INTRODUCTION

In India, one of the ways concerns pertaining to trans and queer rights, and how we think of gender and identity at large, has manifested recently is in the passing of the Transgender Amendment Act, 2026. Despite considerable public outrage, mobilisations and protests, the act was officially passed by the Indian Parliament on 25 March 2026, jeopardising the right to self-determination of one's gender.[1] Previously, because of a 2018 judgement, Indian citizens had the right to officially name their gender (as it appeared in official government mandated documents) and subsequently access

gender affirmative health care.[2] The present act mandates that applicants must go through a process of medical certification by a Chief Medical Board where they will be screened to determine if their claims to acquire a 'new' identity are indeed valid.

Additionally, the Act seems to prioritise only certain identities (like individuals with intersex variations), leaves a whole range of gender non-conforming and trans people out of the provisions and dictates that any gender-affirming surgeries be directly reported to the District Magistrate. Aside from equating gender with essentialised and biological realities (that can be 'verified' and 'screened'), the act can be read as an example of the persistent bureaucratic need to make something *legible* and *provable* to deem it worthy of credibility. This article argues that such needs are inextricably linked with institutional preoccupations with orderliness and merit that manifest in social, political and cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and occasionally in stances of resistance that aim to challenge oppressions that result from it. In other words, attitudes and ideations that come into play in determining meritocracy as an adequate means to ensure equality in a deeply hierarchical system, that progression must be linear and measurable for everyone or that human worth is tied to productivity, are in many ways similar to thought processes that fixate on codifying expressions of gender and sexuality as naturalised realities through state-sanctioned or capitalist norms. For example, the Transgender Amendment Act puts the onus on the individual to possess traits and capabilities that are both legible and sufficient enough to be deemed worthy of board-certified recognition. They need to *pass* the screening to gain visibility and supposed legal protection. This carries the assumption that certain identities, and by extension certain individuals, are more deserving than others to *merit* official recognition.

The article argues that narratives of gender inclusion which centre ideals of success, assimilation or legibility can inadvertently alienate many queer subjectivities that cannot be contained within such discourses. It uses Jack Halberstam's theorisations on failure and wildness, as they appear in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), to understand and analyse how contemporary queer discourse in India is both associated with and challenges notions of orderliness, meritocracy, and legibility.[3]

Halberstam's works deal with two related ways of thinking against structures that render certain lives more intelligible than others. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam reclaims failure both from its status of being a deficiency and from its optimistic repute as a learning opportunity and a step towards success. He argues that failure can interrupt the progressional logics of capitalism, heteronormativity and meritocracy. It is a political formulation to critique our attachments towards expectations of success and a productive future. Moreover, it is a medium through which we can understand what defines success in the first place. *Wild Thing*s extends this line of critique to challenge the epistemological foundations of order itself. For Halberstam, wildness or the wild represents a mode of knowing that unsettles classification, naturalised binaries and the desire to place subjects within stable categories. Ultimately, both failure and wildness are ways of understanding queerness.

Halberstam theorises that the queer subject is always already incorporated in the logic of having failed—in relation to capitalism as well as to patriarchy. His formulation of wildness is an act of epistemological dis-ordering that looks at ways through which a

queer subject is rendered either natural or unnatural. Here, wildness challenges ways of living, interacting and being in the world as a human, which include and exclude certain modes of being queer.

The present article uses Halberstam's ideas to analyse select South Asian films with respect to ongoing discourses from politics and popular culture in India, to examine how failure and dis-order can produce alternative ways of knowing, relating and inhabiting the world. It specifically focuses on the Indian context where caste, gender, sexuality, merit and institutional belonging are deeply entangled. Broadly, it asks whether becoming visible, successful, legible and 'in place' within existing social and institutional structures is necessary for imagining a queer reclamation.

The inspiration for this essay emanates from my personal entanglement with wildness and failure. Growing up queer in India, when I began to realise the contours and repercussions of my identity, I (not unlike many Indian children/students) reassured myself many times that eventual success (either financial or academic) would solve everything. However, I was at best an average student and was sub-par in matters of calculation, memorising, quick-thinking and so on. I could fare better in literary studies, but eventually when I was faced with the reality of standardised testing, even in humanities subjects, where MCQ questions determine whether someone will be suitable as a teacher, I had to make peace with a delay in success in that domain as well. For all intents and purposes, my life does not resemble any conventional aspirational narrative because I cannot be settled within a heteronormative family, and I cannot compensate by possessing a lucrative job. Additionally, either due to neurodivergence or my general disposition, I struggle with tasks that involve aesthetics and execution: keeping a clean house, organising, not losing valuables and so on, which sometimes spill over into how others perceive me—as a thoroughly dis-organised woman.

Conventionally speaking, I may not qualify by many standards of 'success,' which then implies a certain affinity with failure; and the fact that I cannot present myself as a methodical and organised human being highlights my proximity to wildness. These judgements are exacerbated by the fact that queerness in itself is a failure to uphold certain notions of normativity and lies outside of how things are organised—hence, wild. Therefore, stories that showcase how a queer person or a woman girl-bossed their way into becoming a high court judge, or how they have impeccable fashion sense, do little for me. While there are enough scholarly, literary and artistic works that critique such phenomena as pink-capitalism or problematise how often queerness gets co-opted by heteronormativity, the most succinct expressions of these anxieties are best expanded upon via Halberstam's work. It is worthwhile to note that this essay does not take an auto-ethnographical approach as a core methodology; however, I briefly cite my personal experiences here as lived realities that serve as possible examples. Methodologically, the essay combines theoretical analysis, close reading, film analysis and political critique of popular culture and media. It reads Halberstam alongside scholarship on caste, meritocracy, memory, affect and reproductive futurity, and attends closely to specific cinematic scenes and narrative resolutions. The autobiographical passages offer a limited reflexive and situated analysis, in which using personal experience is used to exemplify rather than generalise the operations of normative aspiration and failure.

The first section of the article is about reclaiming the act of forgetting as a political and survival tool. With reference to Halberstam's ideas, it discusses the peculiar

position memory and forgetting hold for any kind of marginality, especially queerness. It refers to Karan Kandhari's film *Sister Midnight* (2024) to reflect on how performances of normative gender rely heavily on memory and often resemble practices such as rote-learning.[4] The following section explains the connection that meritocracy might have with cis-hetero normativity and caste hierarchy, and the problems of queer aspirational stories that get represented in South Asian movies such as Abhishek Kapoor's *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021).[5] It contrasts this with representations in short films like Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi* (2021).[6] The following section refers to Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2020)[7] and deals with understanding failure as a political category. Finally, I expand upon the liberatory potential of Halberstam's ideas of wildness and their connections with queerness. This is substantiated with references to all four movies discussed, to look at how different representations of queer reclamation arise from their relationship with normativity and orderliness. Ultimately, the article explores how queerness connects with sociocultural ideas of order and merit. It looks at Halberstam's ideas of failure, forgetting and wildness as critical practices through which the normative conditions of recognition themselves can be questioned.

FORGETTING AS RESISTANCE

One of the common ways forgetting is invoked as a blessing (mostly in psychological studies or therapeutic discourses) is in the idea of 'moving on.' Numerous examples of self-help literature, like "Let Go and Move On: 15 Tips to Forget the Past," by Elizabeth Perry, posit that when something tragic or traumatic happens, one's ability to forget becomes the ultimate act of refusal.[8] Such formulations participate in a broader therapeutic discourse in which the past is understood as something that must eventually be released in order for the subject to become productive, resilient and future-oriented. In a slightly different context, the aspirational logic of 'moving on' often gets incorporated in the ways queer lives are narrated retrospectively. A 2017 Better India article titled "8 Inspiring Indian LGBTQ Individuals Who Raged Fearless Wars & Emerged Victorious!" cites the case of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (a well-known transgender activist and socialite in India) as one of the "successful queer stories."[9] The article recounts her experiences of being bullied and abused, before moving on to her educational achievements, activism, international representation and the establishment of the Indian Super Queen pageant. The piece organises queer experience through a grammar of adversity followed by triumph, or by citing cases where the adversities were required to be forgotten in order to 'move on.' Laxmi's history becomes legible primarily because the obstacles have been successfully overcome. Conversely, forgetting, at least how it manifests in academia among other domains, is considered a mark of failure, while having a good memory and being able to retain information is considered meritorious. The privileging of memory is evident in examination practices where students are required to negotiate between memorising and understanding in order to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge. British education researchers Noel and Dorothy Entwistle have examined how memorisation remains integral to students' preparation for examinations, even as it exists in tension with deeper forms of understanding.[10] Within such a framework, forgetting can operate as an inability to adequately acquire or reproduce academic knowledge.

In India, despite several measures to instil methods of teaching that prioritise

conceptual familiarity, rote-learning persists as a pervasive method. Hindu religious institutions have historically centred rote-learning in the transmission of knowledge, and it bears association with the Brahmanical practice of teaching Vedas.[11] Similar practices were codified with education and examination standards instituted during British colonial rule in India.[12] One of the tendencies reflected in rote learning practices is the mechanical replication of knowledge as is (like a doctrine or law). Similarly, it lowers the possibility of a subjective relationship with knowledge. In such a case, knowledge ensures its unaltered longevity in the confidence of its reproduction. Thus, knowledge is synonymous with memory. Since knowledge is a crucial tool that organises structures and ideologies, hetero-patriarchy and cis-normativity too must rely on memory and replication to ensure that they continue to be performed and passed on:

> Women are most often the repositories for generational logics of being and becoming, and then become the transmitters of that logic to the next generation…forgetfulness becomes a rupture with the eternally self- generating present, a break with a self-authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non- hetero- reproductive future.[13]

Women, Halberstam theorises, are instrumental in passing on the 'generational logic' of family and being in the world.

Nitya Rao's study of rural North India describes the household as a site of "gendered co-performance," in which men and women collectively reproduce the roles of male provider and female housewife.[14] Furthermore, Parvati Raghuram demonstrates how domestic labour itself is organised through intersecting caste and gender hierarchies and spatial divisions.[15] The context of India—where rote-learning is embedded strongly in the cultural fold as a means to replicate subjectivities through transmission of education,[16] and the domestic space is shaped with gendered performance—is especially conducive to studying how gender relations within a domestic set-up can often rely on the capacities of women to (rote) learn. Women are expected to fashion their being in a specific manner according to the logic of the family, by picking up the rules at their face value and constantly *remembering* to execute them. The film *Sister Midnight* captures the absurdity that unfolds when a woman refuses to memorise the rules of domesticity and, indeed, how to be a woman.

Sister Midnight is a critically-acclaimed dark punk comedy film about the strange occurrences that surround a woman after she gets trapped in an unhappy marriage in Mumbai. It follows Uma, who is frustrated and persistently irritated after she gets married. What appears at first to be her unease with expectations of domesticity later reveals itself as a kind of vampirism that brings her closer to wildness. While a later section of this article will discuss Uma's proximity to the wild, here what stands out is her total rejection of normalcy through her indifference towards the gendered expectations of a married woman. For example, in a scene that shows the night of her wedding, Uma hastily takes off her saree and jewellery, slips into her nightie and dozes off. The absurdity of the scenario is presented with the implication that the audience (especially South Asian, in this case) would expect certain stock behaviour from the bride and groom either through scenes of consummation or coquettish, awkward behaviour. Uma either disregards the passed-down knowledge of how to be a bride/wife or has simply *forgotten* the rules. In a later scene, she stares blankly at some vegetables, flour and other cooking ingredients, utterly confused about what to make of them. Her attempts to utilise her commonsense to prepare a meal fails catastrophically since she lacks the

slightest muscle memory of handling the ingredients. Uma befriends her neighbour Sheetal, who tries to teach her some of the things she has to 'learn' as a married woman, including cooking. Uma selectively follows some of Sheetal's lessons but with the same befuddlement with which she had stared at the vegetables.

Uma's reluctant acceptance of domestic gender norms resembles the mechanical and detached nature of rote-learning that prioritises unquestioned internalisation. Throughout the course of the film, Uma keeps on forgetting what she has learned and keeps on distancing herself from the idea of being a woman, to the extent that it becomes evident nthat she is no woman at all. The revelation of her identity as a vampire supersedes the presumption of her identity as a woman. In this tacit erasure, gender is revealed as a set of repetitive acts: how to fold clothes 'properly,' how to serve food in a particular order, how to clean, host guests, speak softly, anticipate the needs of others or regulate one's own body within the domestic space.

How can we perceive this act of forgetting as queer? Halberstam suggests that the forgetting of hetero-patriarchal logic can be a rupture in the sense of futurity that tradition takes for granted. Eve Sedgwick, similarly, argued that queerness helps break the presumed teleology of family that is operative in heteronormativity.[17] Heteronormativity justifies itself through the "paranoia of the inevitable," claiming that because something has continued to happen in the past, it should be repeated in the future. Queerness dismantles this idea of temporality and refuses to treat the heteropatriarchal family as inevitable. Uma, by repeatedly forgetting and failing in becoming a woman, ruptures the logic of temporality. Her existence outside of any cis-hetero logic of how a woman should be queers cis-hetero-normativity by simply forgetting it.

The peculiar politics of memory and forgetting extend beyond the domestic sphere. History has systemically deployed tactics of erasure and selective amnesia to suppress narratives that do not serve the powerful. States, religious institutions, educational systems and patriarchal social structures strategically preserve memories that legitimise their authority while simultaneously erasing histories of dissent, marginality and resistance. Similarly, official archives or school curricula often represent a selective remembrance, pushing the experiences of women, queer communities, lower castes, racialised populations and other marginalised groups to the periphery. As a result, many de-colonising projects justifiably create archives or other modes of preserving memories that have been hitherto erased. Yet, that does not exhaust the possibility of looking at forgetting as a radical act of reclamation. A form of forgetting can be imagined that disregards any authoritative logic and refuses repetition of inherited norms, identities and affective attachments. Forgetting, in these terms, constitutes an active practice of disidentification, creating new subjectivities that are no longer governed by the demands of inherited memory.

American historian Norman Klein, in *The History of Forgetting*, rejects the empiricist project of simply recovering and preserving the past, instead proposing 'selective forgetting' as a way of understanding how societies construct their realities. Drawing on Borges, he describes selective forgetting as a literary tool through which "fictions are turned into facts, while in turn erasing facts into fictions," emphasising that forgetting is an active process in the production of social imaginaries rather than merely the loss of information.[18] Forgetting, or rather active forgetting, is then a rejection of all the memories that were supposed to be (rote) learnt and replicated to keep normativity in place.

MERIT AND (CIS-HETERO) NORMATIVITY

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021) is a Bollywood romantic comedy-drama that gained some popularity by challenging traditional genre expectations, notably with the inclusion of themes of trans acceptance. At the end of the movie, Manu, the male romantic lead, is finally able to win a fitness competition called G.O.A.T when he gets inspired by looking at his lover, Maanvi. As Manu is declared the champion and the lovers run towards each other, Manu tells Maanvi, "You are the real G.O.A.T!" The resolution of the film is that Manu has not only emerged victorious in this competition but is now a better person since he is no longer transphobic towards his girlfriend, who is a transwoman. The revelation of Maanvi's trans-ness, along with Manu's and others' reactions to this, form the central conflict. Evidently, when Manu overcomes his transphobia, the conflict is resolved. However, the other not-so-subtle implication in this whole narrative is that Maanvi *deserves* and *merits* Manu's love and his family's acceptance. Her credentials are expressed in various ways, ranging from being an extremely attractive cis-passing woman (the character was played by a cis-woman) to being a great dancer and a hard-working Zumba instructor. When Manu calls Maanvi "the real G.O.A.T," he is complementing all her credentials, to which he was hitherto oblivious.

Maanvi's credentials also include coming from a similar family background as Manu in terms of class, caste and region. The film places Maanvi in contrast with another trans-femme character, Roopa, who is substantially less privileged than Maanvi and, most importantly, not cis-passing. Roopa's place in the narrative is to prove that Manu adores and is altruistic towards her (signalling Manu's kind disposition, which makes his eventual transphobia a rectifiable character flaw). The latent implication is, however, that Roopa is only worthy of receiving altruistic and sisterly affection, and will never be the object of romantic and sexual desire. We are led to understand that Maanvi, in contrast, comes from a "respectable family" and is conventionally attractive *because* of her proximity to cis-gender standards of beauty. Her resilience is conveyed through metaphors of athletic prowess, which allows her to be Manu's equal. In some senses, this film is an important example of Hindi commercial cinema because it depicts a trans character as a desirable romantic lead. Noted film critic Shoma Chatterji called it a "well-structured love story between two social and clinical unequals using some melodrama to arrive at a happy closure acceptable to all."[19] However, the film highlights our fascination with merit, credentialism and legibility. Maanvi is legible and acceptable as a transwoman because her transness is otherwise illegible—hidden, decorated, assimilated. Queerness, in this case, is shrouded by merit to make it palatable.

Liberal democracies have tended to favour meritocracy as a necessary step towards ensuring an egalitarian society, where an individual's talents, efforts and skills are to be rewarded, rather than their social class. Yet, as American political philosopher Michael Sandel points out in his 2021 book *The Tyranny of Merit*, meritocracy may be neither neutral nor emancipatory.[20] Other than obscuring the host of effects that systemic privileges and luck play in deeply unequal societies, meritocracy instils the notion that success is entirely deserved and anyone left out of success must be at fault. In the Indian context, merit is often cited as the reason to discredit affirmative action for lower caste individuals—so much so that contemporary invocations of the influential anti-caste thinker B.R. Ambedkar in debates about 'merit' often obscure the structural critique at the heart of his work, claiming that he "advocated for a social system in which a man's

rank is determined by his merit and achievements" favouring instead his arguments for institutional measures designed to counter inherited social disadvantage.[21] On the other hand, several anti-caste scholars have vehemently disagreed with such discourses, pointing out that merit functions as a means through which upper-caste privilege masquerades as objective excellence. Rather than measuring ability, merit often records accumulated historical advantage: "In India, meritocracy is a cruel, a cynical illusion, a carefully engineered facade that maintains and perpetuates the caste-based stratification under the guise of fairness and equality."[22]

Many contemporary queer aspirational narratives celebrate the accomplished and exceptional queer individual who secures recognition through productivity and professional achievement. In such cases, queerness becomes understandable as long as the queer subject proves their merit according to the metrics of capitalism and the modern state, which they might anyway be forever left out of. Similarly, the celebration of conditional visibility fails to separate queerness from other systemic prejudices and will invariably side with them. For example, in May 2015, mother of prominent queer activist in India, Harish Iyer,[23]made headlines by publishing a matrimonial ad that read: "25-40, well placed, animal-loving vegetarian groom for her son … caste no bar but Iyer [Tamil Brahmin caste] preferred."[24] This ad was heavily criticised as it pointed out the many ways queer success-narratives have sidelined questions of caste prejudice. A 2015 Al Jazeera report noted that preferences for higher-caste communities such as Iyers are commonly specified in Indian matrimonial advertisements, and the phrase "Iyer preferred" reproduces caste-based exclusion within an otherwise progressive gesture.[25] This is especially noteworthy because marriage in India remains largely endogamous, and as Ambedkar's groundbreaking work has described, endogamy is the fundamental creator of caste.[26]

A study by anthropologist Akhil Kang shows the barriers to inter-caste queer love and argues for the need to "recentre desire and intimacy into caste to imagine queer (im) possibilities of dalit love."[27] Kang suggests that queer desire, intimacy and aspiration cannot be abstracted from the material and historical relations of caste in which they occur. Similarly, when queer success stories are ensconced in the language of merit, they can obscure the caste-based distribution of the very resources that make such achievements possible. As a result, queer politics organised around merit risks reproducing the caste-neutral fiction of merit itself, unless it asks whose histories, resources and social privileges are being converted into 'achievement.' Given that, in India, merit is tied to the polemics of caste hierarchy, narratives of queer success that bank on merit inevitably remain in a problematic association with caste supremacy.[28]

In embracing failure as a "queer art," Halberstam suggests that things that are conventionally antagonistic to merit, such as failure, forgetting, unknowing or refusal, can be valuable because they disclose the limits of all kinds of organising principles that seek to measure human worth with accomplishment.[29] As a result, any act of queer celebration can reclaim these de-merits for their radical potential to splinter the biases of prevailing social systems. An example of such radicality unfolds in the narrative of the short film *Geeli Pucchi* (2021). As a standalone short within the Netflix anthology film *Ajeeb Daastaans*, it is a Hindi socio-political drama that engages in intersectional exploration of caste privilege, patriarchy and same-sex desire. The film follows Bharti Mondal, a lesbian and Dalit factory worker who is repeatedly denied promotions at work

despite her competence and technical expertise. In one scene, one of her colleagues makes it clear that she should accept the consequences of being a 'Mondal' (a last name common among Dalit communities). Her plans for a possible promotion are further curtailed when Priya Sharma gets the job. Priya's lack of technical knowledge is overshadowed by her upper-caste social capital. She is also well-liked by her colleagues because of the arbitrary value attached to her palm-reading abilities. Regardless, Priya and Bharti eventually develop feelings for each other. They share some tender moments, and Priya confesses that she feels immense shame towards her identity, especially since she is married. Bharti consoles her and tells her that there is nothing wrong with accepting who she is. However, Bharti is repeatedly treated as disposable when she meets Priya's family. She soon finds out that Priya has hidden Bharti's lower caste identity from her family members and seems to be at home in her marriage, as she is complicit in planning a child with her husband. Rendered invisible by her workplace as well as by Priya's actions, Bharti grows bitter and dejected. Bharti is framed in this scenario as a subject for whom any language of merit, either professional or romantic, is simply inaccessible. She becomes the ultimate queer and Dalit subject of failure.

Bharti's apparent failure accentuates everyday caste and heteropatriarchal hierarchies. When she visits Priya after the birth of her child, Priya's mother-in-law, who objects to the idea of Priya returning to work post her maternity leave, turns to Bharti for her opinion, since "she comes from a family of midwives,"—yet another allusion to her caste identity. She is then served tea in a separately marked vessel. This makes the hierarchy even more explicit, recalling the everyday practices of segregation historically associated with untouchability. Bharti, however, does not display shame or discomfort. She picks up the cup with an air of confidence, transforming the object of caste-based exclusion into a moment of self-assertion. She recommends that Priya indeed remain at home and not return to work. She returns to the factory to discover that Priya has resigned and that she can finally assume the position permanently. Bharti, therefore, does not secure the promotion through merit, and she does not find her desires reciprocated by Priya. Moreover, she is never included within the symbolic spaces of institutional belonging (at a birthday celebration at her office she is made to serve cake to her superiors). Bharti's 'success' in ultimately obtaining the data operator position is therefore ironic: she inherits a position through luck that turns caste-based and gendered labour divisions in her favour. Halberstam's theory of failure may be used to cast the film's resolution as a *refusal* of success, rather than a deferred success story. Bharti's merit is essentially irrelevant to institutional recognition.

Priya's marriage, on the other hand, offers neither fulfilment nor freedom, and queer intimacy cannot flourish within the intersecting violences of caste and heteropatriarchy. Bharti neither overcomes the system nor becomes its exemplary subject. She exposes the phantasma of liberation achieved through institutional recognition. The film projects a narrative of radical affirmation precisely because it refuses to equate dignity with success. Bharti does not prove that she merits inclusion. She is contained in her personhood and never doubts her capacities either as a lover or as an employee. She endures and adapts in a system of values that will always fail her. This resolution mirrors Halberstam's insistence that the critical force of queerness does not actualise by assimilating and internalising the normative but by exposing the myths such norms are built upon.

As mentioned in the introduction, my own engagement with failure comes from my personal recognition of its transformative possibilities. Throughout my adolescence, I experienced my body as constantly failing in many ways, mostly because I could never perform or present myself as the ideal and aesthetic feminine subject. My relationship with my body was shaped by the repeated attempts to discipline myself into becoming a 'woman' worthy of recognition within heteronormativity. Even, feminist discourses of empowerment that celebrated confidence, independence or self-love were incapable of changing how I looked at my body. It was the realisation of my queerness that disrupted these systems of aspiration in a way that conventional feminist affirmation could not. Once I recognised that my affective life was completely indifferent to cisgender men, the very standards against which I had measured my failures ceased to exist. One can say that queerness relieved me of the burden of performing an identity whose rewards were never promised to me in the first place. This reflects Halberstam's argument that lesbianism frequently operates as an anti-aesthetic within capitalist visual culture. The failure of the lesbian, especially the masc or non-feminine lesbian, operates as an anti-aesthetic because the masculine gaze remains one of the principal mechanisms through which femininity is commodified. Halberstam refers to Guy Hocquenghem's idea that "Capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed normal people, just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class."[30] More importantly, Halberstam remarks that capitalism marks homosexuality as a form of failure because it does not conform to the expected connections between productive labour, heterosexual reproduction, family and consumption. The homosexual subject is consequently represented as socially and relationally "incomplete" because their desires do not fit capitalism's normative model of how sex, love, family, production and consumption should be connected.[31]

A similar narrative of failure shaped my educational trajectory. In school, I repeatedly failed to master subjects like mathematics and the applied sciences, disciplines that occupy a lucrative and default space within the Indian meritocratic imagination. My inability to succeed within these fields was initially experienced as personal deficiency, precisely because we dwell in a social environment that equates scientific achievement with intelligence. Yet this succession of failures eventually compelled me to think of something that meritocratic culture rarely allows: What forms of knowledge genuinely sustained my curiosity and political commitments? When I chose to pursue humanities, I certainly did not discover a space free from institutional hierarchies or neoliberal pressures. However, it at least presented a possibility to frame questions of history, language, power, memory, caste, gender and sexuality as objects of inquiry. The humanities offered, however imperfectly, the potential to articulate subjectivity as a mode of political practice.

According to Halberstam, failure acquires political significance precisely because it interrupts the progressional logic of capitalism, heteronormativity and meritocracy. Halberstam does not valorise failure as suffering or as learning opportunities that might bring us closer to success. Failure opens up alternative ways of knowing and living that transgress normative value systems. My failures did not so much reveal hidden talents waiting to be rewarded by another institution. They weakened my attachment to the institutions in the first place. In both instances, failure functioned as an epistemological break and symbolised a kind of refusal, however unintentional, to keep letting myself chase futures imagined by others.

The Pakistani film *Joyland* (2022) explores trans desire in the midst of patriarchy, unravelling the fiction of success encoded within cis-het familial obsession with what Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism.'[32] The film received an overwhelmingly positive reception in India and earned widespread critical acclaim from Indian audiences and reviewers for its shared South Asian themes.[33] *Joyland* is set in contemporary Lahore and follows Haider Rana, an unemployed man living in a conservative household rife with patriarchal expectations of masculinity, marriage and reproduction. Haider is often taunted by his family members for not living up to the ideals of masculinity and for being a constant failure. Parts of the film's beginning highlight Haider's inability to get a job and have a son as a matter of familial and social shame. Finally, Haider gets a job as a back-up dancer in an erotic theatre. Here, he meets Biba, a hijra performer, with whom he falls in love.[34] It is Haider's encounter and eventual romance with Biba that gradually interrupts the structure of normative success. He is initially ashamed of his job at the erotic theatre and yet it becomes the first space he starts to experience the joys of desire and vulnerability. His success, both in terms of the relationship and the job, can only take shape in the socially-rejected, queer world of erotic theatre. His success, not unlike Bharti's, is both ironical, since it can only take place in the margins, and radical, puncturing the inherently restrictive logic of social success. His initial failings at masculinity lead him to experience the world in new ways. Halberstam argues that failure can create forms of knowledge that may be unavailable to successful subjects because failure takes away the compulsion to be complicit.[35] Haider's incompetence halts the logic of hetero-masculinity.

Meanwhile, Biba is perhaps a more radical subject of failure. As a transwoman in Pakistan, she exists outside of the state's notions of respectability and legibility, and has very few avenues of success accessible to her. However, she does not romanticise this marginality. She craves visibility, financial independence, artistic recognition and the bodily affirmation of her gender. She even refuses to be an object through whom Haider experiments with his sexuality. In one scene, where Haider and Biba try to be physically intimate, she gets extremely upset that Haider wants to be the receptive sexual partner. Her anger results from disgust she feels at Haider's inability to perceive her subjectivity and his placing of her according to transphobic standards. Despite this, their relationship signals towards a space untainted by obsessions with marriage, reproduction, domestic stability or social recognition. In an evocative conversation about wanting to visit the ocean, both Haider and Biba visualise the ocean as a space that lies outside of Lahore's social order. Unlike the architecture of the home, the ocean becomes a symbol for free abandon and treasured uncertainty. At the end of the film, it makes sense that Haider chooses to move towards the ocean instead of going back to suffocating domesticity. Biba and Haider's decision to abandon familial and professionally secure lives in Lahore for an uncertain future near the ocean imply that they have permanently failed to belong within structures of legibility. However, the hypothetical success of continuing to locate themselves within normativity would have been catastrophic for their affective beings. It is failure that eventually liberates them.

Joyland critiques success by becoming a tragedy of success. While queer and trans deaths are often framed as tragedies of failing to attain normative happiness, here tragedy befalls the supposedly 'successful' family. Most of the other characters are depicted as being trapped and suffocated by normativity. Haider's family achieves

everything society demands, yet they experience alienation, resentment, despair and violence. The tragedy is that of a socially sanctioned success. This is in keeping with what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism'—an attachment to fantasies of the good life that turn adjustment to suffering into an apparent accomplishment.[36] Biba and Haider, on the other hand, as failed subjects, remain outside this promise of normative success. Failure is a crucial narrative tool that frames them as radical queer subjects, and offers them the path towards liberation.

POSSIBILITIES OF WILDNESS

Halberstam's argument in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* is that we need to re-conceptualise wildness as an epistemological condition that unsettles the very frameworks through which knowledge is organised. Halberstam asks if wildness can be reclaimed as a site from which all civilisational logic, whether of queerness or the gender binary, can be interrogated. He thinks of the wild "as an epistemology, a terrain of affirmative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity and as a merging of anticolonial, anticapitalist, and radical queer interests."[37] Wildness, in these terms, is a critique of the orderliness of all classificatory knowledge systems, especially gender and sexuality, that segregate and assign subjectivities and ways of being. Just as failure and forgetting interrupt the presumed linearity of time and narratives that are burdened by them, Halberstam describes 'bewilderment' as an aesthetic and epistemological practice that achieves a necessary dis-orientation. Wildness urges us to suspend our desire for certainty. This section of the present article reads selected films through this discourse of wildness, to understand what alternate forms of being can emerge when queerness is celebrated as a state of wildness. That state is not wild because it is against or within nature, but because it creates a juncture to critique all that is accepted and rejected through presumptions of naturality and order.

In a conversation with Rizvana Bradley, Halberstam says, with regard to the gendered factors that dictate human relationships with the wild, that masculinity is presented as a 'natural' mode of inhabiting the world with a rather toxic relationship with its environment.[38] It is the masculinist imagination of autonomy and mastery that sustains the extractive logic of colonialism and capitalism. On the other hand, womanhood is positioned to be almost synonymous with nature as a resource that needs to be managed and extracted.

Uma, in *Sister Midnight,* upends this strange human and animal/nature dialectic by simultaneously being 'closer to nature' while, through her unabashed display of vampirism defying all rules of naturalness and order. In other words, when we see Uma leaving the confines of her household at night to hunt for animals and drink their blood, or stuff bird corpses in the drawer, she is more at home with nature, because the stifling domestic world stands in sharp contrast to the wild world of vampirism. On the other hand, she is repeatedly criticised as being weird and "not a woman at all," because she defies all naturalised logic of what it is to be a woman. Uma also develops unexplained emotional bonds with certain animals; the animals are happy that she feeds them the bodies of people she has killed and, in some magic realist instances, the birds she had trapped as prey get reborn as fantastical beings. Gendered perceptions created in *opposition to* the wild are thus reshaped *in the* wild. Uma's

relationship with the animals, as both their ruthless hunter and the one that makes their magical rebirth possible, also unsettles her relationship to the wild and moves beyond all binary gendered imaginations of the wild (men as the extractor and women as the proximal). Uma's relationship with nature is symbolic of her relationship with gender—it is absurd. However, her absurdity, which becomes the sole reason for her happiness but also the reason for heteropatriarchal ridicule, represents a critique of the disciplined performance of gender that is expected from women.

Halberstam and Bradley suggest that wildness does not necessarily promise liberation or emancipation, but foregrounds the possibilities of dissolving the binary separating human and nature. In dissolving that binary, all other binaries that shape and categorise human life are dissolved too. For example, as Uma embarks on her journey to negotiate and finally escape domesticity, the only friends she makes along the way are another quirky and disenchanted housewife, a hyper-optimistic transwoman and a withdrawn lift-man, whose beings are considered *against* nature: the oddball, the queer, the rebel. These 'unnatural' and 'wild' friendships are what Halberstam, alluding to Stockton's work on the queer child,[39] describes as "'sideways' relations, relations that grow along parallel lines rather than upward and onward," as substitutes for heteronormative social structures.[40] Uma's bonds with other species—such as a flock of goats who become enamoured with her—also appear 'sideways' because they defy all logic of transactional relationships. In many cases, as the lines between Uma's womanhood and vampirism dissolve, the boundaries that separate her from these other species or her friends also seem to blur in what Stacy Alaimo calls 'trans-corporeal' relationships, where "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world."[41] In *Sister Midnight*, domestic relationships are exposed as vapid and conditional, whereas the substitutive ones seem to open a terrain of solidarity.

Halberstam conceptualises wildness as more like 'un-place'; it is not a geographical location that can be discovered, named and classified, but a practice of defying the strongly held logic of the spatial, epistemological and the normative social. In *Joyland*, two locations emerge as important examples of this un-place. There is the eponymous amusement park, where the characters, including Haider and Biba, experience temporary moments of joy and abandon. This gaudy venue is a place of refuge and, at the same time, a metaphor for the impossibility of joy within the realms of domesticity and heteropatriarchy. The second location is the ocean—an unfathomable expanse of possibilities that Haider and Biba dream about. Neither place functions as a stable destination. They are horizons of possibility to imagine space and by extension, existences that are not tamed or controlled by the architectures of family, gender or reproductive obligations. The ocean appears as an incomplete imaginative elsewhere. At the end of the film, Haider's sea is like an un-place that exists outside the coordinates of success, kinship and social recognition. Here, living otherwise is at least possible, even if it is never fully resolved. Halberstam declares that "It is this notion of existing without explanation, without a niche, outside of an orderly and inevitable scheme of life … that captures what I am calling wildness."[42]

These un-places serve as formulations of wildness that establish "vocabulary, narratives, and figurations for the inevitable *disorder* of things, the ways of being that resist expert knowledge, that fail to resolve into identity forms, and that find expression in the practices of…eccentrics and recluses."[43] In a slightly different manner, in *Geeli*

Puchhi, un-place features in Bharti's relationship to both the factory and Priya's home. Neither space allows her unconditional belonging. The factory renders her labour visible but weaponises her caste to make her professionally subordinate. In Priya's home, her caste dictates the everyday practice of offering her a separate cup. It is precisely this cup that becomes a beckoning for un-place. When Bharti picks it up, drinks from it with confidence and delivers the ultimate act of revenge (that is, advising that Priya should not come back to work), she refuses the meaning assigned to both the object and her own position within the space. Her reclamation does not involve finding a new place of belonging but brings attention to the classificatory logic through which existing spaces determine who belongs where, rendering them meaningless.

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui offers almost the inverse of the un-place that *Geeli Pucchi* imagines. Maanvi's transness is reconcilable by becoming completely in-place. She is made to legibly belong in Chandigarh, in Manu's family, in the gym and within the heterosexual romance that structures the film. Her acceptance depends on her usefulness. She is a successful Zumba instructor whose classes revive the gym. When she is forced to leave her job because she is outed as a transwoman, the film highlights that the gym has made a mistake because no other instructor can fill the classes as well as she did. Finally, she inspires Manu to win the bodybuilding competition. Maanvi is someone whose value is demonstrated by how successfully she inhabits the places offered to her. Her transness is one aspect of an otherwise highly normative and socially legible subject. This distinguishes her from Bharti or Uma. Where Bharti reclaims by disrupting the meanings assigned to a space, Maanvi's narrative culminates in demonstrating that she can occupy the existing space without fundamentally unsettling its logic.

Halberstam's conception of wildness helps us think of queerness and, by extension, fighting for queerness as a practice of unsettling the spaces, classifications and norms that make identities legible in the first place. India's Transgender Persons Amendment Act makes legal recognition dependent upon definitional and medical forms of legibility. Such conditions of recognition can inspire reclamations that prioritise legibility with queer-aspirational narratives, as modelled by Maanvi in *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, where being in-place is an imperative for human rights. This essay does not question the necessity of legal belonging but asks what forms of reclamation can take place within and beyond our proximity to ideas of legibility, credential and order. Halberstam's 'wildness' and 'failure' are epistemological categories that invite caution towards aspirational narratives that equate emancipation with being 'in place,' socially useful or meritorious. They offer ways to investigate the presumptions that surround systems of gender exclusion.

CONCLUSION: POTENTIALS OF DIS-ORDERING

During nationwide protests that followed India's Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), one of the most powerful slogans was *Hum kagaaz nahi dikhayenge* (We will not show the papers).[44] This was not simply a refusal to comply with bureaucratic procedures but a complete refusal to prove legitimacy and legibility through documents, disavowing classificatory logic itself. Similarly, when protests erupted against the Bill, many voiced opposition against the logic of medical scrutiny to ascertain gender identity.

These cannot be reduced to fights over rights of inclusion; they demonstrate a struggle against the authoritative impulse to classify, verify and *order* lives to create a hierarchy of credentials and worthiness. Halberstam's ideas of wildness and failure propel us beyond the taxonomic logic of civilisation and ask us to embrace a necessary act of dis-ordering.

I use 'dis-ordering' as an extension of Halberstam's vocabulary; Halberstam's phrase, 'disorder of desire,' may be loosely defined as a way of living, feeling and loving that refuses to follow neat categories and demands for socially acceptable behaviour. Dis-ordering, here, refers to the active interruption of the classificatory systems through which bodies, identities, spaces and forms of life are organised into binaries of natural/unnatural, successful/failed and belonging/exclusion. A politics of dis-ordering, therefore, rejects all rationales of legibility that emerge from state, market or family. Historically, queer lives have adopted many methods of dis-ordering, such as creating families and caregiving communities that exceed the demand for biological kinship, or through communities organised through solidarity rather than lineage or prestige. Similarly, cultural productions of queerness are frequently inventive, creating new aesthetic forms and affective utterings that seek to challenge commercialised and tokenistic languages of 'diversity' or 'inclusion.' These practices are important in an age of pink capitalism where some iconographies of queerness are co-opted within the market logics of production.[45] The latter, like aspirational narratives, may provide temporary and conditional visibility, but they narrow the queer political imagination by equating liberation with marriage, consumption, property owning or even citizenship. This essay has explored forgetting, failure and wildness as possibilities for a radical dis-ordering, considering, specifically, what they mean with respect to queer reclamation in India.

To "read Halberstam in India" is to examine how his concepts of wildness and failure acquire different meanings in relation to how identity, merit, belonging and social legitimacy are organised in India. Caste, gendered labour, heteropatriarchal family structures, educational meritocracy and the demand for social respectability shape queer existence in ways that cannot be treated as incidental cultural variations. The Indian context, represented here through queer representation in cinematic narratives, is a site where Halberstam's arguments take on culturally-specific implications.

The first section of the essay looked at how forgetting can become an act of resistance and how memory can have contradictory political functions. The revolutionary potential of forgetting is represented in the character of Uma from *Sister Midnight.* Uma's failures to remember and perform the rituals of domestic femininity constitute a refusal to embody the gendered knowledge through which womanhood is produced. Forgetting is a tool to deny the inheritance and retention of gender norms. The following section discusses how merit, in India, is often organised through cis-hetero normativity as well as caste. In *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui,* we saw that trans recognition was deemed acceptable, subject to respectability and legibility. The film was analysed in relation to discourses of meritocracy and how it manifests in India. Conversely, in the film *Geeli Puchhi*, Bharti's caste and sexuality place her outside of conceivable promises of professional and romantic merit. Her eventual procuring of Priya's position is a cruel irony that exposes the instability of structures that recognise success. These examples show that reading Halberstam in India is a recognition that failure at normative

successes can sometimes be a refusal of the exclusions that normative meritocracy can take for granted. The section on radical subjects of failure extended this argument through personal reflection as well as a discussion of the film *Joyland.* It discussed how failure to inhabit and be included within structures of marginalisation can lead to finding alternative modes of being that resist the very assimilatory impulses that make marginalisation possible in the first place.

Finally, Halberstam's ideas on wildness were discussed with respect to all four films to understand how orderliness is imposed through institutional, spatial and epistemological order. In *Sister Midnight*, Uma's equations with animals, magical beings and other socially marginalised individuals unsettle distinctions between human and animal, natural and unnatural, normative and aberrant. In *Joyland*, the amusement park and the ocean operate as un-places or spaces outside of social order that open possibilities beyond the demands of family, reproduction and recognition. Bharti in *Geeli Puchhi* picks up the cup of tea (the cup marked separate due to casteist practices) with aplomb and self-assurance to deliver her ultimate statement of revenge. In doing so, she disrupts the meaning that hierarchy assigns to the spaces she occupies. *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* offers an inverse possibility. Maanvi is made to be in-place within Chandigarh, the gym, Manu's family and, most importantly, heterosexual romance. Her acceptance in these places is made possible by her network of inherited privileges, including social capital, cis-normative beauty and athletic abilities. Maanvi's presence within these systems does little to disrupt the classificatory logic of social structures and merely indicates the conditional ways she can be included within them. These films, therefore, showcase different ways in which orderliness can be either challenged or compromised.

Ultimately, reading Halberstam in India involve going beyond concerns of recognition and identity. Such a reading reveals how queerness and gender resonate with the troublesome nature of meritocracy, success, memory, knowledge and even the category of the human itself. It creates the imperative, amidst queer enquiries and scholarship, to ask: how are marginalised subjects incorporated within prevailing social structures? More importantly, how do we imagine life-forms when such structures no longer form the horizons of our political desire? Failure, forgetting and wildness are methodological provocations to embrace disorder and imagine life beyond classification.

Asmita Kundu is an Academic Fellow at Balvant Parekh Center for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Baroda. She has completed her PhD from the Center for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Her research interests include Queer Studies, Crime Narrative, Crime Fiction, Literary History and Cultural Studies.

1. See "India's Govt Wants to Turn Trans Rights Law into Trans Persecution Law; Queer Groups Prepare to Fight Back," *Queerbeat*, 16 March 2026, https://www.queerbeat.org/stories/indias-govt-wants-to-turn-trans-rights-law-into-trans-persecution-law-queer-groups-prepare-to-fight-back/.
2. See "2018: Section 377 Struck Down," *Frontline*, 15 August 2022, https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/india-at-75-epochal-moments-2018-rainbow-victory-section-377-struck-down/article65730933.ece.
3. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failur*e (Duke University Press, 2011); Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020).
4. Karan Kandhari, dir., *Sister Midnight*, 107 min (Wellington Films and Griffin Pictures, 2024).
5. Abhishek Kapoor, dir., *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, 117 min (T-Series and Guy in the Sky Pictures, 2021).
6. Neeraj Ghaywan, dir., *Geeli Pucchi*, 38 min., in *Ajeeb Daastaan*s (Netflix, 2021).
7. Saim Sadiq, dir., *Joyland*, 126 min (Khoosat Films, 2022).
8. Elizabeth Perry, "Let Go and Move On: 15 Tips to Forget the Past," *BetterUp*, 21 February 2023, https://www.betterup.com/blog/how-to-forget-the-past.
9. Lekshmi Priya S., "8 Inspiring Indian LGBTQ Individuals Who Raged Fearless Wars & Emerged Victorious!" *The Better India*, 23 June 2017, https://thebetterindia.com/106115/list-lqbtq-famous-personalities-pride-month/.
10. Noel Entwistle and Dorothy Entwistle, "Preparing for Examinations: The Interplay of Memorising and Understanding, and the Development of Knowledge Objects," *Higher Education Research & Development* 22, no. 1 (2003): 19–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436032000056562.
11. Brahmins rank highest in the caste hierarchy of India and are usually associated with learning and education. The word 'Brahmanical' can either indicate practices pertaining to religious scriptures or Vedas or, in a broader sense, imply the caste-hegemonic sociocultural structures that continue to exert influence in the Indian subcontinent.
12. Ushree Bhattacharya 2022, "'I Am a Parrot': Literacy Ideologies and Rote Learning," *Journal of Literacy Research* 54, no. 2 (2022): 114.
13. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 70.
14. Nitya Rao, "Male 'Providers' and Female 'Housewives': A Gendered Co-performance in Rural North India," *Development and Change* 43, no. 5 (2012).
15. Parvati Raghuram, "Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India," *Work, Employment & Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 607–617.
16. See Raghuram, "Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India," and Bhattacharya, "'I Am a Parrot.'"
17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).
18. Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure, 83.
19. Shoma A. Chatterji, "Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui Breaks a Glass Ceiling," *The Citizen*, 15 December 2021, https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/7/21226/chandigarh-kare-aashiqui-breaks-a-glass-ceiling.
20. Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

21. Drishti Ias, "Celebrating Dr. B.R Ambedkar: Architect of Social Justice," 15 April 2024, https://www.drishtiias.com/blog/celebrating-dr-br-ambedkar-architect-of-social-justice. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) played a central role in drafting the Constitution of independent India. There, he incorporated provisions for affirmative action, including education, public employment and political representation for historically disadvantaged communities. His critique of caste is developed in such works as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948). His advocacy of political representation and affirmative measures should be understood within a broader project of achieving substantive equality.
22. Vaibhav Kharat, "Merit: A Savarna Tool to Reinforce Caste Hegemony," *Round Table India*, 21 September 2024, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/merit-a-savarna-tool-to-reinforce-caste-hegemony/i.
23. The surname, Iyer, refers to a Tamil Brahmin caste community; caste identities such as Iyer have historically been significant in matrimonial practices in India, where advertisements frequently specify preferred caste or community backgrounds. Such practices refer to caste-based endogamy to maintain caste purity and pride.
24. Nandini Kumar, "Harish Iyer Finds a Suitable Boy, And It All Just Adds Up," *Mumbai Mirror*, 16 June 2015, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/harish-iyer-finds-a-suitable-boy-and-it-all-just-ads-up/articleshow/47682094.html.
25. Al Jazeera. "Indian Mother Places Matrimonial Ad for Gay Son." 20 May 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/20/indian-mother-places-matrimonial-ad-for-gay-son?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
26. B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (Columbia University, 1916).
27. Akhil Kang, "Savarna Citations of Desire: Queer Impossibilities of Inter-Caste Love," *Feminist Review* 133, no. 1 (2023): 88–104.
28. In India, debates about 'merit' are closely tied to caste hierarchy because caste has historically structured access to education, occupations, social status and material resources. See Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste (B.R. Ambedkar, 1936). Ambedkar conceptualised caste as a system of "graded inequality," in which social and occupational positions were inherited rather than determined by individual ability or achievement. Following the constitutional inclusion of affirmative-action measures, commonly referred to as "reservations," for historically disadvantaged communities in education, public employment and political representation, there have been sustained debates over the relationship between merit and social justice, with critics frequently presenting reservations as departures from meritocratic selection. Scholars such as Ashwini Deshpande show that this opposition can obscure the unequal social conditions through which educational and professional achievement is produced and recognised, and highlight caste disparities in access to education and employment. Treating merit as an entirely individual and caste-neutral attribute risks making the accumulated advantages associated with social privilege appear as the outcome of individual ability. See Ashwini Deshpande, "Merit, Mobility and Modernism: Caste Discrimination in Contemporary Indian Labour Markets," *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 433–455.
29. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 50.
30. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Duke University Press, 1993), 94.
31. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 95.
32. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).
33. See Chintan Girish Modi, "'Joyland' crosses the barbed wire between India and Pakistan," *Himal Southasian*, 14 July 2023, https://www.himalmag.com/joyland-queer-film-pakistan-saim-sadiq/.
34. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, a *hijra* refers to (usually trans-femme) individuals who are transgender, intersex or gender non-conforming, and who usually live together as groups within a traditional unit.
35. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 25.
36. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
37. Halberstam, *Wild Things*, x.

38. Harvard Book Store, "Jack Halberstam Presents 'Wild Things' with Rizvana Bradley," YouTube, 29 October 2020, https://youtu.be/cuKZ4PkBeng?si=sJ26tD8Smip-lwCy.
39. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009).
40. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 73.
41. Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Indiana University Press, 2008), 238.
42. Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 22.
43. Ibid, 15.
44. See Kenny Bhatia, "'Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge' ('We Won't Show Our Papers'): The Narratives of Bodies and Belongings at the Anti-CAA Shaheen Bagh Protests 2019-20," *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, n.d. doi:10.53007/SJGC.2023.V8.I2.203.
45. See Eric Smialek and Kiersten Beszterda van Vliet, "Rainbow Capitalism," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ STUDIES*, 2nd edition (Sage Publications, 2024), 1062–1065, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071891414.n371.