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Forbidden Sex Texts

new india's gay poets

Hoshang Merchant



Same-sex relations are still illegal in India, the penal code still abiding by a colonial law which considers same-sex relations 'unnatural'. There is a parallel belief that it is against the 'Indian' tradition according to both the Left and Right politics. No love outside heterosexual mono/polygamous marriage, or one that is not spiritual, is accepted. Any articulation of love outside these two templates sees social rejection, violence, punishment or judicial action: a visible gay or lesbian category in India is perceived as a threat to mainstream Indian culture.

This book attempts to investigate Indian discourses on the love that dares not speak its name to propose a historical dis/continuity, since a sense of Indian history without any acknowledgement of same-sex, homoerotic relations is a deeply problematic one. The author reads Indian myths, folk tales, religious and legal documents to propose the position of same-sex love in Indian society. He discusses films and short stories, novels and plays to gain an insight into the subtleties and intricacies of same-sex relationships; simultaneously, he examines the effects of sexuality on the lives of its proponents.

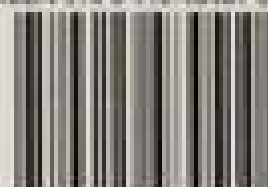
Linking the performative with the personal, the volume examines the roles of the West and East in creating constructs through social icons, and emphasises the liminal and hybrid qualities of gender. It examines the work of those who tried to change society's outlook by sticking to their own, and not just that, but actively writing and/or making films, staging plays about them —Imrat Chughtai, Sunil Namjoshi, Vikram Seth, Adil Jussawalla, Sultan Padamsee, Dinyar Godrej, R. Raj Rao and Bhupen Khakhar, among others. The volume will be of interest to students and academics of literature, sociology, gender studies, queer studies, popular culture and cinema, as well as social historians and cultural theorists.

Cover: 'Yayati', Oil on Canvas by Bhupen Khakhar. Used by Permission.
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the art of Bhupen Khakhar (1935–2005)

Surrealist Poem

It is not my mother in the garden:
It is my father coming out of the sea

And anything I say will be used against me.

Bhupen Khakhar was a Gujarati chartered accountant who, after retirement, distinguished himself as a painter and teacher at the Baroda School. The Baroda School led by Khakhar and Gulam Mohammed and Nilima Sheikh is characterised by cityscapes peopled by men and women engaged in scenes of daily living. This Indian reality is outdoors while being indoors. (We can always peep into our neighbour's houses in a crowded Indian city and in Sheikh's and Khakhar's paintings.) It seems to me the courtyards, half-open doors, roofless homes are hearts and minds opened up for inspection (Indian notions of psychological privacy too are less rigid than western ones). This reality, at once material and psychological, assumes a surreal quality when the canvasses are washed blue or green as in a Chagall; Indian themes/western techniques, e.g., the oneric vision, especially in Khakhar's Indian homosexual themes. Though trained in western techniques and languages, both Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar write in their native tongue, viz. Gujarati. In art, though its influence is on the wane, the Baroda School was supposed to have ushered in a new renaissance in painting in India. Khakhar and Sheikh hope also to resuscitate Gujarati letters.

When I telephoned Bhupen for a story, his remarkably childlike voice wondered in equally childlike innocence: 'Would just any story do?' The public expects titillation but the artists had to educate their taste. Homosexuals are whole people and homosexual life and letters do not exist in a vacuum from the mainstream.

Poetry holds, unlike science, that A can be A and not-A at the same time (in science A cannot be not-A ever).

F. Scott Fitzgerald defined 'Genius (as) the capacity to hold two contradictory ideas in one's mind at the same time and yet retain the capacity to function. Dag Hammarskjöld said, 'Forgiveness is a child's dream that what is broken will be made whole again and what is soiled will be pure again.' By that token, poetry is forgiveness and the poet is a dreamer, a child and a genius.

Jalaluddin Rumi said, 'To the sacred everything is sacred, to the profane everything is profane. 'Again, A can be not A, the sacred is profaned, and the profane made sacred in childhood, in the dream, and the genius of art.

The Oedipal Complex of Freud simply states that the (western) male child wishes to kill (castrate) the father and marry the mother. When this wish is not fulfilled, the son turns homosexual because of the father's immaturity in *not* relinquishing power to the son.

In India, however, we do not have to live out this intense family romance due to the surrogate parents (aunts and uncles, elder siblings) in the Hindu undivided family. What we have is the four ashrams where sons assume responsibilities at the age of 25 just as the father (who married in his time at 25) is ready to retire at 50. So there is no father-son conflict or castration of the son.

The Puranic myth of Yayati used by Khakhar, however, is against the grain, where the son gives new life to the dying father and sacrifices himself. I read this as a homosexual act of son giving life to father in a sex act.

Bhupen Khakhar is India's first openly gay painter. I am India's first openly gay poet. No one has a problem with homosexuality as a sexual act. It is homosexuality as an identity which is frightening.

Khakhar lived in Khetwadi, Mumbai with his widowed mother. He became a chartered accountant but his heart was always in painting. After a few night classes in painting at the J. J. School of Arts in Mumbai, he started painting non-controversial themes. One of his first portraits is of 'Father and Mother Going on Jatra' in the Parsi portrait style of Eos Studios (Fort). Then, as he secretly cruised the city streets, he started painting what critics now call the 'Series on Trades', e.g. the *bidiwallah*, the *watchwallah*, the *Phoolwallah* and so on. Khakhar of course, was less interested in the *bidi* and more interested in the anonymous *bidi* seller. One way to capture a thing is to dream it. One way to keep a dream is to paint it or write a poem about it. Then a forbidden or secret or ugly passion becomes beautiful. It becomes aesthetic. And no blame attaches to it. And the mother will never know what the gay son is up to looking at these innocent looking paintings.

The next big painting Khakhar did was 'You Can't Please All', a depiction of the Indian tale of the 'Man Who Found a Donkey'. He was leading the donkey when someone suggested he should, instead, be led by the beast. Another suggested he ride it. As he was riding the beast, he followed another suggestion and ended up carrying the beast on his head. The beast dies of exhaustion in Khakhar's allegory. A Khakhar character stands naked behind a covered balcony, watching the scene. What does one do with the beast gifted us by nature, viz. our sexualities? This is the allegorical burden of the painting. But more interesting is the parcelling of space on the canvas to depict the various stages of the narrative where we see all of society at work. An antisocial longing is socialised by art or by social living. Leisure is social but pleasure is always antisocial. The antisocial artist is naked behind a covered balcony in a corner of the painting. The world then becomes his dream.

What happens here is two streams of art theory meeting and parting. One stream is from Ajanta; also found in fourteenth century European painting depicting city scenes or a story with, say, Christ (or Buddha's) Passion at the centre, allegorising human suffering elevated to a divine level. This Aristotle calls 'mimesis' or imitation, which means that there is one single, solid reality out there which the artist perfects by depicting on canvas. So it is not a presentation but a re-presentation of what is out there. The other school says that there is no reality; there are no facts, only interpretation. Interpretation goes according to one's own private reality in one's own head. It is the reality created on canvas in a painting or in words on paper in a poem. It depicts the artists' dreams, longings, visions. There is an interesting story about Max Ernst's father objecting to young Max not putting in their cherry tree in his painting of the family's garden. So Max axed the tree saying: 'Now my painting looks more like reality!'

These are large canvases. The draughtsmanship is amateurish. The donkey lies dead in the middle of the canvas. Who was it I heard drowning in my sleep? asks the surrealist poet.

The second canvas done in the West on his first sojourn there (now lost) is called 'Guru Purnima'. We have reproductions of it and don't be surprised if the huge canvas surfaces on the London art black market now that Khakhar is dead and art prices are soaring. The painting depicts nudity for the first time, just like our Naga sadhus and Digamber Jain *munis*, among others, are licensed to display themselves in all their nakedness because *guruji* is always beyond the body. But Khakhar has a *bania* sense of mischief. He is always wryly smiling at Gujarati, and by extension, Indian hypocrisy. The ladies are at the periphery cooking the *bhog* or *prasadam*. The good looking boys, the *chelas*, have to do *seva* by pressing

gurujī's limbs. This, of course, is a metaphor for masturbation. In *Ghalib* we have the couplet:

My limbs swelled with pride
When he came and said: Press my limbs!

So, 'Guru Purnima' is an elaborate allegory of a teacher's passion for his disciples and vice versa and the transcending of that passion into Hindu *seva* at *Purnima*, the full blossoming of the moon of one's faculties. It is human and funny that to transcend sex, one has mostly to go through sex, whether it be a learned man or a layman (refer to Jeffrey Kripal 1995).

The nudity in the painting is the personal freeing of Khakhar's own self with the death of his very aged mother. The dutiful gay son was freed of his bondage to mother and could now freely express himself in life and in art. He gave up his practice, set up shop in Baroda at the School of Fine Arts and could now openly live with an older man, *Ranchodbhai*, as a lover (an echo of the father whom Bhupen had lost early in life?). There are several portraits of *Ranchodbhai* in gauzy, see-through, very Gujarati dhotis without underwear, I might add. This was an everyday part of Bombay bania life and no one noticed it except curious, naughty growing boys and girls.

An aside. I remember a Gujarati boys' joke from my Bombay boyhood. A fat man sits in a dhoti in the Bombay suburban train. One schoolgirl tells another, 'See! This man is pregnant.' The other, cleverer than the first, says 'not with a human child but with a baby elephant. See! the baby's trunk is already protruding below his belly!'

It is this repressed Gujarati middle-class milieu where sex comes out as a joke that Khakhar comes from.

Around Khakhar, arose at Baroda what is now loosely called the Baroda School. Part of the group were the Gujarati-speaking Memon painter Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and his wife Nilima Sheikh. A married Moslem male, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh was attracted, through Khakhar, to the Hindu myth of the *Ardhanariswara*. Ghulam draws an oddly neutered being, his hands on his neutered private parts, his face a mask taking flight. Art critic Geeta Kapur, painter Vivan Sundaram's wife, sees this taut, expressionless face as the face of an Egyptian boy pharaoh, oddly sexless, possibly Amenhotep's. Amenhotep declared the new religion of Amon-Ra, the sun god, and after he died, his stelaes were removed from his monuments. What the artist and art critic are saying here is that differentiated sexual identity comes from an amorphous polysexual

perverse', to use Freud's phrase. The great bisexual Siva is the forerunner of all later constructions of masculinities and femininities in Indian culture. We are here dreaming not our personal history but world history.

Another great painting of Khakhar's is 'The Night Journey'. It is a strangely arresting painting. It is now owned by the *Times of India* and hung at its Bori Bunder Office behind the editor because it is too sexual. The visitor who faces the editor is unsettled by it. Bhupen sold it there for Rs 9 lakh because he needed the money and now it is out of public circulation. 'Hung in a rich man's bathroom', as the phrase goes. I'll describe the painting for you. There are naked fishermen out on a night fishing trip netting huge phallic fish, their bodies bare, their fish-like phalluses open to the moon and the night cold. A Khakhar lookalike sits alone, naked and a naked transvestite, a hijra, dances wearing a blue, star-spangled saree over his head. This is the fate of the aging, passive homosexual, the *koti* or the queen who cannot participate in the sexual fun and games of the young. Repression had delayed his coming out, only to find a very youth oriented gay culture riddled with ageism. The cobalt blues in the night scene are so powerful, the dance movements of the figures at play and rest so arresting that we are mesmerised as if we are voyeurs pulled into a private dream. Of course, the pleasure boat is also the ship of death.

This is the surrealist oneric vision or dream vision or night-journey where modern repressed man sees the glimmerings of his true face only in his dreams. Of course, at the centre of French surrealist poetry of the 1930s, is a woman, a female muse, a reaction against all the boys of Jean Cocteau's films like *Orpheus* (1950). But Khakhar is gay and Indian so he puts the Indian bazaar *chakka* firmly at the centre of his image and self-image.

I could make sense of my dreams only in the light of Khakhar's painting. Once I dreamt that a devoted student of mine, now married, with whom I have had a 20 year platonic relationship as a teacher, was naked with me and between our legs on the ground flowed a river-like liquid of urine, semen or blood, I did not know which. It troubled me because I had worked consciously for 20 years not to have any libidinal attachment to a boy 20 years younger to me. 'The Night Journey' explained the dream. I wrote a poem. I was liberated from a haunting nightmare.

Homage to Bhupen Khakhar

I

A man's trickle of urine
becomes your Yamuna

a free floating world of love
on a boat
where man can grasp man
and be transformed

Transformed like your winged Yayati
Giving youth to an old Puru
on the earth which becomes
your pink bedsheet

Or where doing the Seva
the disciple is subdued by the master's foot
in upstanding love and mastership

II

Last night I dreamt
I touched my married student
who stood upright for me in my dream
Even in dream I withheld orgasm

This morning I read
Your innocent world again
The tear, the urine trickle
Has become the Yamuna
and on this river I float my boat

(for Giri)

What I did here is use art for interpreting life. Of course, art is a totally useless activity. 'Poetry makes nothing happen', says W. H. Auden. But poetry gives us wisdom and keeps us from future folly. Hopefully. There are boys who fall in love with a father figure like a teacher but they play their love games amongst themselves. The liberator (the teacher) is not going to taste liberation himself. He is the discarded old man of Khakhar's painting. But in the dream, in art, in the poem the metaphor shines through and becomes its own meaning like God's light in that almond tree in Sinai.

Bhupen Khakhar's paintings are disturbing not only because they openly display sexual bonding between males, but also because this bonding is not between social equals. We have teachers loving students, older men loving younger men, upper classes looking for love among social inferiors, father loving son. In the last category comes the Puranic myth of Yayati which Bhupen loves. King Puru is old. He wants his son's youth. In Bhupen's retelling of the myth, the father copulates with the son and sucks out his life. This is a parody of the son breathing into the

father's nostrils at the Kshatriya death ritual. In Khakhar's painting, the father grows pink and healthy and rises winged, the son becomes sickly green with a sagging scrotum and dies. The first Indian Freudian psychologist Dr Girindrasekhar Bose says that while in the West the son loses to the father, Indian fathers willingly castrate themselves by going into the *vanaprastha* ashram voluntarily at 50, handing over the keys of their kingdoms to their 25 year-old princelings. Yayati, the exception, in the Purana tells the dissenting story, the story that is artistic and hence interests artists.

The wings of Yayati in Bhupen's painting show another surrealist transformation: from beast to man to angel. This is the ultimate alchemy dreamt of in medieval alchemy books. So what appears to be love is actually power in this Hindu family. The wise son submits to an unreasonably powerful father. Read: He turns gay.

Another surreal shift is a time shift here. The future (son) is eaten up by the past (father). In life, as in the Oedipus myth, the effect (being gay) is seen before we know the cause (psychological Oedipal conflict).

Khakhar himself was dying by then. I'd write him poems and he wouldn't reply. He was the first to give me a short story in Gujarati for my anthology of gay stories from India (1999).

Pages from a Diary

When we left the Garden he was impatient to reach home. I was crossing the road slowly. Jitubhai had already crossed over, weaving his way between the rickshaws with not a worry for himself; then he waited on the other side impatiently. I was halfway to the other side and had just managed to avoid the last cyclist in my way, when he asked, Where is the scooter?

I said, Next to the Acharya Book Depot. So we will have to go round the circle.

Come, walk a little faster.

He was soon standing near the Acharya Book Depot. Immediately he said, Which scooter?

The grey one.

There are three here.

Here, this one.

I had to obey the authority in his commanding voice. I ripped out the scooter key from the back pocket of my trousers and started the scooter.

Which way?

The lane next to the fire-brigade station.

Impatience, curiosity and eagerness to arrive were Jitubhai's. That's why he had been commanding me. I too was aware that this relationship was to last no more than half an hour. Both of us would forget each other within a day. There was no joy nor excitement in my mind. There was a weariness, a monotony in the chain of happenings in such relationships.

I knew what kind of house it would be. A house with a rexine-covered sofa, a mini-swing, a ceiling fan, and walls painted white or grey. Lost in thought, I reached the third floor. He had already climbed a staircase ahead of me. I saw him press the bell of room number 305. I climbed the stairs and stood behind Jitubhai. He too was breathless. The door opened three inches.

Jitubhai Key.

The door shut. Two minutes later a bunch of keys was held out by the fingers of a child. She wore bangles on her wrist. Jitubhai took the key.

He unlocked the house right opposite. Inside, an office table, under it a mattress gathered into a roll. Jitubhai switched on the fan. The glass window was shut. The typewriter on the table was covered. Since I wasn't certain where to sit, I pulled out the chair that was pushed into the space under the table and sat on it. The lower fringe of his shirt touched my mouth. Once in a while it flapped across my face when the wind blew.

Jitubhai, Wouldn't you like to stay here? :

I shuddered at the thought of spending the night in that room with no ventilation. I lied. I have to catch the morning bus to Ahmedabad at six.

Go from here.

I have to collect some office papers from home. Besides, I haven't told my people at home, either.

We both knew that this first encounter was also the last one. Jitubhai took off his cap and shirt and stood close to the chair. For the first time I looked at his face in the stark tubelight. An illness years ago had scarred it. The shining head, the sweat-drenched and pock-marked face looked ugly. Moreover, the thin lips made it look cruel too.

A hoarse voice emanated from the tall strong body.

The building-gate closes at nine every night, so be quick.

With this he moved the typewriter with a jerk, and sat on the table. Before my eyes now the white vest, the white dhoti and the phallus that sprang from it. I looked up. The pock-marked cheeks had been smiling. Both eyes were shut to a slit, like the eyes of a Chinese.

He said, All well?

I said, Let's skip this today.

Jitubhai, Why?

Some other time.

You know as well as I do that...

What?

We shall never meet again.

He caught my hand. Involvements, allurements, attraction had disappeared from my heart. I was thinking of paintings. A complete canvas full of white vest, the white dhoti and the slight transparency that revealed the phallus. I tried to get up from the chair. He took my hand, made me sit and said,

What's wrong today?

I'm not in the mood.

What happened to your mood. Did I do something?

No, just feeling off.

Jitubhai : Come on, for my sake.

I stayed there till nine for the sake of a man I would never meet again in my life.

~ (Bhupen Khakhar, *Bombay Dost*, vol. 5, 2 and 3)

Now there is only silence. My dreams continued. My letters to him continued. But the silence from his side was deep and disturbing. Because of prostate cancer he had been neutered, his voice had become strangely high-pitched and he joked about finally becoming the eunuch at the centre of his painting, 'The Ship of Death'. He had invited my young Baroda-born colleague Makrand Paranjape on a boat journey down the Yamuna from Delhi, ending up on the Ganga Ghat at Benares where all good Hindus long to go at the end. Makrand, in his squeamishness, had refused. But I got a poem:

Benaras Cycle

At night

The embers glow

In the orange embers glows a phoenix heart

At dawn

The city of Kali

becomes a golden dawn-fairy

Stone has conversations with water

Over the ages

Water wins

A blue death

I have come to this city of dung
And water
To wash away my sins

My sins are dark indeed
Black as the city at night
In which glows my phoenix heart

The Siva linga
At the golden temple
is a brand: glowing red hot

It brands
Sinners
And cools passion

Everything melts like water in water
The rock-solid ghats
The dying, the dead and their quick mourners

Morning
is just a pale white rag
A naked newborn city wears

On its way to sin.

(for Manu Parekh)

Dirge for Bhupen Khakhar

I

A few years before death
Bhupen the painter meets Makrand the poet
'Let us go for a boatripe down the Ganges
upto Benares'
says Bhupen.
Makrand tenses up even re-telling this story
Think again it's a once in a lifetime chance
A historic boattrip with a great painter'....

II

A few months before death
Bhupen gets a letter from Hoshang the poet:
I couldn't make sense of my dream
of sleeping with my student
Then I saw your Guru-poornima:
The guru orders and gets sex to go....

III

A few days before death
Our boat breaks free of its moorings
Bhupen remembers his friends with his last breath
(Makrand and Hoshang among them)
The boat serenely, effortlessly floats to sea
A drop of water has reached the ocean
Both the river banks have caught fire from the mere passage
of a boat

Towards the end, Bhupen often asked his nurse, the feminist Bina, why Hoshang and he had never met. The Hindus believe that it is good karma if a good man remembers you, of all people, on his deathbed.

I include excerpts from Yashodhara Dalmia's review of Khakhar's last show from *Outlook* (25 March 2002). In her article, 'Forlorn Faces, Close-Up: A Post-9/11 Dread Fills Bhupen Khakhar's Poster Faces', Dalmia says that, 'There is no face which is intact. From a distance they look like the scarred and fractured landscape of another planet. At close quarters, the wounded, splintered images are of people. Bhupen Khakhar, in his recent show at the Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi, conjures up scenes of everyday life with his characteristic irony. ... the humour is dark, almost forbidding.

In one dramatic painting ... only two faces which emerge from the darkness — one shooting the other shot at. The twist ... fact that the faces are the same, ... the villain and the victim.

In... *Muslims Around the Mosque I and II*, we see them huddled in fear around mosques... seem to be seeking refuge, whispering the day's events, exchanging information, perhaps the only place where they are free of fear. The even flow of the canvas ... broken at many places by inseting smaller ones which create a tension. paintings are marked by homo-eroticism where the diminutive copulating figures, rather like those Mughal miniatures, reveal their scurrilous activity only under the microscope. ... grey and black however echo Goya's *Disasters of War* series....

... Khakhar's oeuvre has been on the marginalized in every sense of the term. Beginning with the vulnerabilities and the quirkiness of the ordinary middle-class man, he went on to make paintings depicting homosexuals which often led to his works being confiscated by art institutions. To observe Muslims who exist in large numbers in cities like Baroda and Ahmedabad in Gujarat and who are shunned in paintings In observing the mosques in these cities, Khakhar was to come across a

whole panorama of life. An alternative culture with its lyrical calligraphy, its single-minded devoutness and its covetous underlife ...

... Khakhar who introduced the kitsch, the calendar, the popular into art, questioning its sanctity. He made life into a scum parade and the street into a marvelous theatre of the absurd. His boundaries ... expanding and drawing energy from the street. According to him, 'Every time you see objects of popular art they change according to the times and introduce some new element. They don't remain stationary but go on changing. That's what I like about them. They are like the Simenon detective novels where under the guise of a suspense thriller he expresses something very existential. Once you are drawn into the book, it's too late to leave it because you've already crossed 30-40 pages.'

... Khakhar would have with him large cut-outs of film stars made under his supervision by a hoarding painter who was also a colleague at the art college in Baroda. These looming figures of Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan have now entered the gallery.... Amitabh Bachchan's back has the face of the massacred hero with a bloody stream running across. It could be the face of any man ...

Like Khakhar, I have my own poem on Gujarat:

Gujarat

How far does one go into history
to find kindness
When Yezdagird fought and was defeated
the Arab conqueror praised his valour

Then the Knights understood each other...
Under the cover of night sheltering a fire
We stumbled on a stretch of sand
It was India we had gained and after Iran
We called it Sanjan

Our women took to the saree
Our men to the pugree
Our tongues spoke Gujarati
And the Hindus took us to their hearts

When the Mughal conquered
He sowed the local nobles into animal skins
One a stag, another a bear, a third a buffalo
for weren't they heathen?

When they planted 300 hybrids of mango
The tribals toiled in their gardens

Whose wives warmed their beds
in bed, man and beast are indistinguishable

[I am not angry
I am made gentle by history
Do fall into this gentleness...]
How far does one go into history to find kindness?

And then there was Vali
Who came out of the Deccan
To love boys, Hindu and Turk, indiscriminately
For Love does not discriminate

He found God in boys' eyes
And when the man died
His men made him into a god
And built him a mausoleum, for wasn't he Poet?

Then came the suffering
God on the Cross...
He was fair when I was dark
O Lord take away this blackness
How far does one go into history to find kindness?

Let everything burn said the Sufi
Let everything burn said the Saint
Let everything burn said the leaders
So the mob, their heads on fire
Burnt our mothers, mine and yours

The tomb of the Saint is now dust
No bones rest there/only the word
The word is on the wind
And no body hears

The women poets lament their brother
The children are again asking for sweet words
But there is no sweetness here no sweetness
How far does one go into history to find kindness?

For Vali Gujarati

In my dream
a resurrected man:
My lover erect
Christ reborn

Concentration camp victims begging a body
from their liberators....
He sits up in bed by the support of arms
He will walk on his hands
Finally he will be erect
His palms turned upto stars
Begging mercy from his Creator....
In the dark a man walks towards us
His hand bears a lamp
The other cups the flame
It is the poet out of the night coming
towards us/singing the night of the world

(after Jameela Nishat)

In Memoriam: Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003)

1

Hello, I'm Bhupen
The high-pitched voice
would giggle into the phone
Then cancer took away that voice

2

He had also lost his testicles
to the surgeon's knife
He grew breasts
They wished a male cancer
would disappear
If one became female

3

He painted 'The Man with Five Penises'
And he thought Hanuman sodomised Rama
But no one would hang that on their walls
So they just embrace

4

Hardy plastered the pages
of his *Jude the Obscure*
with pigs' testicles

thrown at Jude by Arabella
to trick him into marriage

5

In India married women wear white sarees
Sing 'Allah tero naam' like Nanda
Then come out of the satsang chanting
Kill! Kill! Kill! in the Moslem bustee

6

Tick tock tick tock
Went the pendulum of Hanuman's tail
Tick tock went the clock at the clockmaker
Bhupen cruised
Tick-tock took Bhupen's mother
Then his lover Then his balls

7

Art is not art s/d Woolf
Unless it is first androgynous

8

Wilhelm Reich had his Orgone Box:
If you fuck out your fevers
you won't fuck up families and nations...
(They put him in a strait jacket)

9

Plastic flowers are sweeter
Yes, because they don't wither

10

Sweet account keeper, artist brother
Your Yayati grows wings His scrotum greens
As his son fucks him pink into health

11

And when the body went
Your Avolokiteshwaras swim red and gold
in the jism of the mind

12

Bend your boat Lethe-wards
Sweet old siren Eunuch song and singer
Who feared Mother Fare well upon the Flood!

Now we find your Lithium blue
Pumping in our blood.



Appendix A Note on Bhupen Khakhar's (implicit) Critique of Gandhism

Bhupen Khakhar's was from the Daman coast, the same Gujarat shores where Gandhi made salt.

Now I know the difference between you and me
It is the difference between the sky
and salt of the sea

- (Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poem on Gandhi)

Is 'difference' a critique? Or is it a circuitous similarity, a belonging with interleaving leaves as in a book with two contradictory ideas bound together in it? More on that later.

The 1930s and 1940s when Khakhar was born and raised, saw the heyday of Gandhism in western India (Bombay-Baroda) and generally India (with pockets of resistance among the Moslems, the Marathas and the Maharajas – the nexus between the last two finally felled Gandhi to Godse's bullets).

The 1950s, 1960s, 1970s saw Nehru and Indira's India undercut Gandhi. Gujaratis still wore the Gandhi cap and the (transparent) dhoti. Women wore khadi. (This was before Dhirubhai Ambani's 'polyester' era.) State repression grew. With it grew personal rebellion – sexual and social. Amitabh's angry young man in Khakhar's cut-outs from Bollywood films bleeds from behind the cut-out which shows an angry mask. Women were called *Manibens*, from Mani Bhavan, Laburnum Road, Girgaum, where Gandhi stayed while in Bombay. Gays were called 'Mangubhai's. It is the *Mangubhai's* of the khadi *topi* and dhoti variety that Khakhar represents in their sexual and political ambivalence.

Gandhi had a British gay in his ashram, C. F. Andrews. The two had a voluminous correspondence on what to do with one's overriding sex urge. Turn it into *seva* was Gandhi's prescription. So we have the sexual *guru-seva* in Khakhar's

'Guru-parva' painting which is slyly humorous as well as shocking, the humour undercutting the shock.

In the representational arts, those of the painters' and the film directors', the dress is the man. Then he moves in space and his actions undercut the appearance. Khakhar's 'Gandhian men' are not what they seem. Teacher seduces student, tailor seduces customer right there on the shop floor while taking 'measurements', neighbours and friends of all ages and faces seduce each other. It is Hieronymus Bosch's 'Garden of Delights' transported from thirteenth century Flanders to Indira Gandhi's rudderless ship of the Indian state.

What about the minorities — not just the gays (who are doing very well, thank you) but the Moslems? In a recent documentary on Gujarat lesbian low-life, *Manjuben Truck Driver* (by a Parsi woman film director, Sherna Dastur [2002]) the eponymous lower middle class truck-driving lesbian, a mannish 'butch' or a 'dyke' wishes to wear the latest fashion — a Taliban suit! Does she realise that the first target of the Taliban would be the lesbian or gay woman?

In his post-9/11 paintings Khakhar showed his persona watching gay activity portrayed in miniscule microscopic size against the looming background of a mosque. Where we are (the setting) undercuts what we do; what we wear contradicts what we are, i.e., the eternal artistic and philosophic conflict between appearance and reality. After all, Oscar Wilde was right: identity is style, not substance. The difference or connection between the sky and sea salt.

