SOUTH ASIAN PORNOGRAPHIES

VERNACULAR FORMATIONS OF THE PERMISSIBLE AND THE OBSCENE

Edited by
Darshana Sreedhar Mini and Anirban K. Baishya
South Asian Pornographies

*South Asian Pornographies* is the first consolidated volume that explores the relationships between pornography, obscenity, law, and desire in South Asia. Focusing on case studies from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh while gesturing towards other countries in South Asia, the authors of this volume come from fields as varied as history, literature, media and communication, and the visual arts. This book proposes that as a geo-political location, South Asia has a unique relationship to pornography, given the multiplicity of cultural and legal-censorial regimes that define the obscene and the permissible. South Asian case studies can demonstrate how pornography in the region is often defined in oblique terms, finding reflection in various modes of popular (and sometimes underground) culture, bypassing legal and censorial constraints. Like questions of identity that can only be answered in the plural (identities rather than identity), this book demonstrates how a range of pornographies constitutes the force field of sexualized media in South Asia. It will be of interest to researchers and advanced students of Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, History, Sociology, and Social and Cultural Anthropology. The chapters in this book were originally published in the journal *Porn Studies*.

**Darshana Sreedhar Mini** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. Supported by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), her book titled *Rated A: Soft-Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India* (UC Press, 2024) explores the media-ecology produced by Malayalam soft-porn films by mapping their transnational journeys. Her research interests broadly include South Asian Cinema, Feminist Media, Global Media Cultures, and Migrant media. Her work has been published in *Feminist Media Histories, Film History, Porn Studies, Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies, South Asian Popular Culture, South Asian Film and Media, Journal for Ritual Studies*, and *International Journal for Digital Television*.

**Anirban K. Baishya** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *Viral Selves: Selfies, Platforms and Digital Image Culture in India*. His research interests include new media and digital cultures, social media and political culture, media aesthetics, surveillance studies, and global media. His work has been published in the *International Journal of Communication, Communication, Culture & Critique, South Asian Popular Culture, Porn Studies, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, and *Media, Culture & Society*. 
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Notes on Contributors

Michiel Baas is a senior research fellow with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. He has published extensively on the topic of men, masculinities, and sexualities in India. His most recent book is titled Muscular India: Masculinity, Mobility and the New Middle Class (2020). In earlier scholarly work he investigated questions of migration from India to Australia and Singapore while in his most recent project he is developing an anthropological approach to artificial intelligence.

Anirban K. Baishya is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled Viral Selves: Selfies, Platforms and Digital Image Culture in India. His research interests include new media and digital cultures, social media and political culture, media aesthetics, surveillance studies, and global media. His work has been published in the International Journal of Communication, Communication, Culture & Critique, South Asian Popular Culture, Porn Studies, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, and Media, Culture & Society.

Arnav Bhattacharya is a PhD candidate at the Department of History and Sociology of Science. His dissertation tentatively titled From the Kamasutra to Scientia Sexualis: A History of Sexual Science and Medicine in Twentieth Century India explores the history of the production, consolidation, and dissemination of medical and scientific knowledge on sex and sexuality in colonial and post-colonial India. His project interrogates how the history of Indian sexology through the course of the 20th century came to be increasingly intertwined with myriad issues such as medico-legal jurisprudence, social and sexual hygiene, public health initiatives, and sex education. He situates his scholarship among larger global histories of sexology and argues that factors like racism, Orientalism, and colonialism were not only instrumental for sexological knowledge production in India and also influenced Euro-American histories of sexology. His research has been funded by various research bodies and institutions within the University of Pennsylvania, as well as the American Institute of India Studies (AIIS) and the Huntington Library, USA.

Spandan Bhattacharya is Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at BITS Pilani, Hyderabad, India. He holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His co-authored book on Bengali cinema, Tollygunge to Tollywood: The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined (2021), provides a study of the contemporary Bengali film industry and the
larger media landscape from which it emerged. His co-edited volume, *Film Studies: An Introduction* (2022), brings together discussions on film elements, global film histories, critical and theoretical debates in Cinema Studies and Indian cinematic forms, aesthetics, and histories.

**Tupur Chatterjee** is Assistant Professor in Global Film and Media at the School of English, Drama, and Film at University College Dublin, Ireland. Her research interests include global media cultures, media industries, media architectures, streaming platforms, and feminist media studies. Her work has been published in journals like the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, *Porn Studies*, and *Synoptique*.

**Ketaki Chowkhani** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Manipal Centre for Humanities at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India, where she teaches India's first ever course on Singles Studies. Her writing on gender, sexuality and singlehood has appeared in the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, *Journal of Porn Studies*, *The New York Times*, *Square Peg*, *The Hindu*, and in edited volumes published by Routledge and Cambridge University Press. Dr Chowkhani has a PhD in Women's Studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India, where she researched sexuality education and adolescent masculinities in urban India.

**Rohit K. Dasgupta** is Senior Lecturer in Cultural Industries at the University of Glasgow, UK. He is the author of *Digital Queer Cultures in India* (2017).

**Rahul K. Gairola**, PhD (University of Washington, Seattle, USA) is The Krishna Somers Senior Lecturer in English & Postcolonial Literature and a fellow of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, Greater Perth, Western Australia. He is the co-editor and author/co-author of five books including *South Asian Digital Humanities: Postcolonial Mediations across Technology's Cultural Canon* (2020); *Migration, Gender and Home Economics in Rural North India* (2019); and *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belonging* (2016). He is the co-editor of special issues of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *South Asian Review*, and *Asiascape: Digital Asia* and previously taught at the Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India, and Queens College and York College, The City University of New York, and Seattle University, USA. He was appointed Digital Champion for the State of Western Australia by The Digital Studio at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and is a lifetime member of Pembroke College at the University of Cambridge, UK. He is Editor of the Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAAA) South Asian Book Series and is currently working on two book projects with Routledge, a book project with Oxford University Press, and several research essays for blind peer-reviewed journals.

**Charu Gupta** is Professor at the Department of History at the University of Delhi, India. The focus of her work is gender, sexuality, masculinity, caste, religious identities, and vernacular literatures in early twentieth-century north India. Her publications include *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (2002); *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (2017); and *Contested Coastlines: Fisherfolk, Nations and Borders in South Asia* (2008, 2018). She is presently working on social histories of particular genres and subjects through life narratives in Hindi in early twentieth century north India.
Lotte Hoek is a media anthropologist whose research is situated at the intersection of anthropology and film studies. She is the author of *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (2014) and the co-editor of *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories* (2021). She is one of the editors of the journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*. She is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

Kareem Khubchandani is Associate Professor in theater, dance, and performance studies at Tufts University, Medford, USA. He is the author of *Istyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (2020), co-editor of *Queer Nightlife* (2021), and guest editor of “Critical Aunty Studies,” a special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*.

Darshana Sreedhar Mini is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. Supported by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), her book titled *Rated A: Soft-Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India* (UC Press 2024) explores the media-ecology produced by mapping the transnational circuits traversed by Malayalam soft-porn cinema. Her research interests broadly include South Asian Cinema, Feminist Media, Global Media Cultures, and Migrant media. Her work has been published in *Feminist Media Histories, Film History, Porn Studies, Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies, South Asian Popular Culture, South Asian Film and Media, Journal for Ritual Studies*, and *International Journal for Digital Television*.

Bijleeraj Patra is pursuing his PhD on book history from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India, and has completed M.Phil. from CSSSC. His research interests include book history, visual culture, Bengali literature, sexuality, pornography, and manuscript culture.

Natalia Di Pietrantonio is the inaugural curator of South Asian art at the Seattle Art Museum and an affiliate faculty member for the School of Art + Art History + Design at the University of Washington, Seattle, USA. Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow at Scripps College and at the Bard Graduate Center.

Anubhav Pradhan is Assistant Professor with the Department of Liberal Arts at the Indian Institute of Technology Bhilai, India. His work straddles urban planning, heritage, history, and writing as well as colonial cultural contact and the intersections of empire and modernity. He is Deputy Editor of *South Asia Research*, Council Member of the Committee for Publication Ethics, and Board Member of the Association for Literary Urban Studies. His major publications include *Articulating Urbanity: Writing the South Asian City* (forthcoming, 2023); *Literature, Language, and the Classroom: Essays for Promodini Varma* (2021); and *Kipling and Yeats at 150: Retrospectives/Perspectives* (2019). He has designed and anchored elective workshops on South Asian urbanisms at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, and the School of Environment & Architecture, Mumbai, India, and has previously taught at Ambedkar University Delhi, South Asian University, Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, and the University of Delhi, India. He also served Primus Books, Delhi, as their Senior Marketing Editor.

Pallavi Rao is Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA. Her research interests include cultural studies, the political economy of media, contemporary South Asian media industries, and anti-caste and feminist media studies. She has also
published her research in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry, South Asian Film and Media*, and *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* on caste and patriarchy, popular Hindi film, and India’s digital media and entertainment culture.

**Ricky Varghese** is a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist based in Toronto. Currently, he is also a senior research associate at the Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada. He is the editor of *Raw: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking* (2019) and *Porn on the Couch: Sex, Psychoanalysis, and Screen Cultures/Memories* (2023) and the forthcoming *Sex and the Pandemic* (2024).

**Subha Wijesiriwardena** is a feminist activist and researcher from Colombo, Sri Lanka. Subha works with CREA, a global feminist human rights organization led by feminists in the Global South. Subha works on CREA’s strategic objective in fostering the collective resilience of feminist movements to anti-gender and anti-democracy forces. This includes coordinating a global cross-movement challenging criminalization strategy. Subha is the co-founder of a “Collective for Feminist Conversations”, a group dedicated to creating online and on-ground spaces for conversation, to bring broader audiences into the fold of feminist histories, theories, and practices through campaigns and events. She is the co-author of ‘Not Traditionally Technical: Lesbian Women in Sri Lanka and Their Use of The Internet’ published by the Association for Progressive Communications and Women and Media Collective, 2018, and the lead author of ‘Acts of Agency: Exploring a feminist approach to abortion research in Sri Lanka’ published by SAGE in *South Asian Survey*, 2020. Most recently, she has contributed to the journals *Porn Studies* and *Anti-Trafficking Review*. 
Introduction—Towards an incomplete repertoire of South Asian pornographies: challenges, potentials and futures
Darshana Sreedhar Mini and Anirban K. Baishya

Why South Asia?

South Asia as a geo-political location has a unique relationship to pornography, given the multiplicity of legal-censorial regimes that define the obscene and the permissible. One of this book's central assumptions is that what we now call 'South Asia' is a region that has been produced by such encounters with the colonial 'Other' and the tectonic aftereffects of such encounters. In conceptualizing South Asia this way, we draw on what Kelly Pemberton and Michael Nijhawan, writing in the field of religion and ritual, call the 'shared idioms' and 'vital elements of identity formation' in South Asia – an 'ongoing process and the historical product of creative human interventions' (2009, 8). It is in such historically situated interventions that the chapters in this book locate the work of the pornographic and the obscene. It is important to note here that Pemberton and Nijhawan’s use of ‘idioms’ denotes a plurality – there is no singular idea of South Asia or South Asian-ness, even as we note commonalities. To push it even further, we must be wary of imposing a pre-determined, monolithic idea of sexual culture even in any one of the individual South Asian countries. Rather, much like its languages, religions, cuisines and people, the sexual cultures and erotic artefacts of South Asia are multifarious and diverse. As Purnima Mankekar points out in the context of India, ‘There is no singular “Indian” discourse on erotics. At the close of the twentieth century, discourses of the erotic proliferating in the Indian public sphere drew upon […] preexisting genealogies or existed in uneasy tension with them’ (2012, 175 and 177). Like Mankekar we are keen to note continuities and breaks, mutations and radically new enunciations. Such a scholarly exercise must plot its steps on both temporal and spatial axes.

In tracing the intersection between porn studies and South Asia as a constantly evolving relationship, this book addresses why attempts to study localized erotic regimes in global contexts need to grapple with the contingent histories, regional variations and overlapping conventions contained under the label of the pornographic. While one of the critiques against the use of the regional label of ‘South Asia’ is its provenance in Cold war alliances and the corollary emergence of area studies as an approach to the non-West from a securitization paradigm, we use South Asia with the awareness of its double origins in colonial expansion and post-war bipolar power structures. Instead of mapping geopolitical stereotypes onto pornographic cultures, we turn our attention to South Asia taking a cue from Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel's introduction to a special issue of GLQ published in 2016.
Writing about the intersection of queer studies and area studies, Arondekar and Patel assert that such scholarly glance at area studies’ Other is ‘no longer a simple effect of ventures [...] into terrain whose purchase was in objects routed through ethnographic avidity or fervor or the bona fides of local habitations’ (2016, 153). To be sure, no reader will find in the pages of this book, an ‘A–Z’ compendium of each and every particularity of pornographic cultures and practices in every nation in the South Asian region. The term ‘nation’ is crucial here – area studies as an approach is rooted in processes of imperial expansion, processes that were replicated in the organization of nation-states in the twentieth century. Indeed, any use of the term ‘South Asia’ invokes this fraught history and the attendant national constituents – Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and so on – that resulted from it. Readers will of course encounter these national taxonomies and particularities in this book – particularities that inform area studies as well. But our use of ‘South Asia’ does not resonate with the same configurations of space and time as those that inform area studies-based approaches. It would serve readers well here to pay heed to Anne Murphy’s pronouncement that ‘such divisions must be construed in heuristic terms, not as instantiating enduring boundaries or categories of meaning’ (2017, 91). While recognizing the loaded criticisms of area studies, Murphy still finds in the term South Asia some ‘utility as a way of conceptualizing space and culture’ (91). Similarly, writing about incidents of official and unofficial censorship of media in South Asia, Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella note that the frame of South Asia allows them to:

explore the commonalities that result from their shared history of colonial subjugation, to account for their different locations in distinct national polities, and finally to examine the more recent connections and contestations brought about by regional liberalization in the 1990s and beyond. (2009, 2–3)

Consider, for instance, the following scenarios. In Pakistan, the sale of video pornography is an offence under Section 292 of the Pakistan Penal Code. In 2011, a hacker claiming to be from Pakistan defaced the official website of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority with demands for a blanket ban on all websites containing explicit material (Popalzai 2011). This led to a ban on pornographic websites in Pakistan by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority in 2011, which instead improved the sales of porn CDs and DVDs (Hasan 2012).

In October 2018, the Indian government’s telecom department issued a notification to internet service providers to ban 827 websites for hosting pornographic content including Pornhub, Tube8 and YouPorn (Singh 2018). This was not the first time that the Indian government tried to ban and regulate pornography. For instance, the Information Technology (Guidelines for Cyber Café) Rules 2011 required cyber-café owners to equip computers with filtering software to avoid access to pornography (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology 2011, 5). They were also required to keep a log of all websites accessed by the customers for at least a year (2011, 3–4). Furthermore, café owners were also asked not to build cubicles with a height of more than four and half feet. Computers had to be placed with screens facing outwards so as to reduce privacy, and minors were not allowed inside cubicles if not accompanied by their guardians and parents (2011, 4). In the absence of legitimate ID, the internet user could be photographed through a webcam (2011, 3). In 2013, lawyer Kamlesh Vaswani petitioned the Indian Supreme Court for a ban
on pornography, following a 2012 Delhi rape case. Vaswani declared porn to be ‘worse than Hitler, worse than Aids, cancer or any epidemic. It is more catastrophic than nuclear holocaust, and must be stopped’ (Biswas 2015). This culminated in the government instituting the Cyber Regulation Advisory Committee chaired by the then Telecom and IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad. Steps were taken by the committee to authorize the Internet and Mobile Association of India to compile a list of sites that host pornography (Jayadevan and Alawadhi 2014). In retaliation, Pornhub announced that they were launching a new site with an altered URL ‘in response to Pornhub getting censored and blocked in India’ (India Today Tech 2018). In 2015, the government attempted a ban after the supreme court verdict that blamed pornographic content for having promoted instances of sexual assault – the ban was recalled after public outcry.

In Bangladesh, carrying, selling and distributing pornography are prohibited under the Pornography Control Act of 2012, unless it is meant for educational or artistic purposes (Jillani 2012). In Nepal, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology issued a notice in September 2018 banning digital pornography. The immediate reason for the ban was, as in the Indian instance from 2013, protests against the increase in sexual assault against women. Harsh fines of up to $4200 and prison sentences were imposed on perpetrators and internet service providers who refuse to comply (French 2018). The list of banned websites numbers 24,000, including sex-positive websites, queer platforms and educational websites (Kayastha 2018). Media rights groups were at the forefront in demanding that the distinction between obscene and pornographic is blurred and any ban on these websites is curtailing people’s options to choose and explore their sexuality.

It is clear from such instances that the battle over the pornographic landscape remains deeply fraught across several, if not all, South Asian countries. Perhaps the rise of internet-based pornography has accentuated these tensions, but they are definitely not new. As Charu Gupta points out, the genesis of such laws and regulations can be traced back to nineteenth-century colonial India, when obscenity laws first began to appear, with Sections 292, 293 and 294 of the Indian Penal Code being ‘explicitly designed for the prevention of any form of obscenity […] any visual or written material that was “lascivious or appealed to the prurient interest”’ (2001, 30–31). She further points out that British India was also a signatory of the agreement for the suppression of obscene publications in 1910 as well as part of a 1923 conference in Geneva that culminated in the Obscene Publications Act, 1925 (2001, 31). The shadows of such colonial-era regulatory effects linger on in the penal codes of contemporary India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which were all part of the Empire’s dominion. In contemporary South Asia, new problems and tensions in digital pornography fuse with earlier, deeply entrenched, colonial-era attitudes. Not everything related to pornography in South Asia needs to be seen through the lens of censorship and its subversion, but it is a major force to reckon with. The cartography of South Asian pornographies would remain incomplete without cognizance of the productive aspects of power – the fact that power ‘traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse’ (Foucault 1980, 119). In charting the territory, we must scale the layered vertices of time and the expanses of space. Thus, echoing the work of Murphy, Kaur and Mazzarella, the regional category of South Asia that is at work in this book invokes multiple temporal and spatial registers – of now separate geopolitical entities and nations that are tied together by longer histories of colonialism and fractured modernities.
Why ‘South Asian’ porn studies?

Conversations on sex, let alone pornography, remain constricted in the South Asian context. Not only are academic studies of pornography stuck between the ‘extremes of pro and anti standpoints’ (Attwood, Maina and Smith 2018, 1), but porn work – even academic work – in South Asia carries actual risks, both legal and otherwise. Thus, the thrust of this book can be said to be two-fold: first, a sustained attempt at looking at the origins, effects, affordances and formal properties of South Asian pornographic forms; and, second, to move away from what David Church calls ‘the broadly Eurocentric contours of current research on porn studies’ (2017, 261). We do not presume to have provided the ‘global canon’ (2017, 261) that Church hopes for (or even a regional one), but we do hope that this book will provide a methodological breadcrumb trail, if not a new path for interrogating pornographic forms from different cultures. This hope is not the sign of a paradigm shift but one of translation – the hope that the discipline itself, and not just its texts, is rendered relevant for those situated at its frontiers.

In many ways, this book deals with the problem of how to speak about sex and sexuality in the South Asian context – and by speech, here, we refer to not only linguistic utterances but also legal, moral and censorial ones. Consider that almost none of the chapters in this book deal with the porn industry, strictly defined. Now compare that to the industrial focus of a number of books in the area of porn studies. For instance, Linda Williams’ (2004) edited collection *Porn Studies* begins by claiming that it is markedly different from earlier studies of pornography that were predominantly embroiled in the pro-versus-anti-porn debates. In the introduction, Williams points out the status of still and moving image pornography as ‘fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture’ (2004, 1). The grounds for such an observation, for Williams, lies in the sheer overabundance of pornographic films as compared to the volume of films produced in Hollywood, which makes them ‘emphatically part of American culture’ (2004, 1–2). Similarly, in *The Pornography Industry*, Shira Tarrant outlines one of the goals of her book as the explanation of ‘industry basics – who works in porn; how much they earn; rapid technological changes that are shaping production distribution, and user access; along with often-elusive revenue data’ (2016, 1–2). Consider also the predominance of the United States (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, Europe) in such studies. To turn again to Williams’ (2004, 2) introduction to *Porn Studies*, part of the rationale for the book lies in the centrality of porn in American culture. Such rationalizations are repeated in the invocation of Justice Potter Stewart’s famous pronouncement about pornography – ‘I know it when I see it’ during the 1964 Jacobellis v. Ohio case (Tarrant 2016, 3; Gorfinkel 2017, 36 and 153) and the First Amendment (Strossen 1999, 13; Harchuck 2015, 9; Tarrant 2016, 3; Gorfinkel 2017, 72) – in many studies of pornography, almost as if these constitute the primal scene for the discipline of porn studies. While these rulings and laws are crucial, as is their investigation, we point towards them to emphasize that they too are rooted in historical and cultural specificities. This again is a question of scale – of the fraught negotiations between the universal and the particular – of codification and vernacularization. If issues such as the Potter ruling and the First Amendment are also spatially and temporally specific, then their predominance in porn studies must be translated, if not questioned. For researchers of pornographic cultures located elsewhere, they become important for their conceptual offerings (the interplay between legal codification, morality and ethics,
the concept of freedom of speech, etc.) and not necessarily for the specificities of their social location.

So, what would the primal scene (if at all we can think of one) of South Asian pornographies look like? What would be the historical ramifications of such a scene, and of what use would it be to researchers of pornography located outside that region? In the pages of this book, readers will find conceptual wisdom along with the particularities of the region. In terms of the question of the porn industry that we raised earlier, we must stress that it is not as if there is no porn industry in South Asia. But one would be hard pressed to find translations of equal value for terms such as ‘porn industry’, ‘porn-star’ or ‘hardcore/softcore porn’. Note that there is no previous work on pornography in South Asia – Bhrigupati Singh’s (2008) essay on the soft-porn morning show in Delhi; Namita Malhotra’s (2011) monograph on porn, law and technology in India; Lotte Hoek’s (2014) book on cut-pieces in Bangladesh; Darshana Sreedhar Mini’s (2016, 2019) work on Malayalam soft-porn; Anirban Baishya’s (2017) essay on cellphone pornography in India; Ketaki Chowkhani’s (2016) essay on women’s porn use in urban India and Tupur Chatterjee’s (2017) essay on Sunny Leone (both now subsumed in this volume), to name a few. But in each of these cases, readers will notice that the infrastructures and the circuits of the pornographic are not as easily translatable to the image of the ‘porn industry’ or its alternatives drummed up, for instance, by AVN, Naughty America, Deep Throat and Candida Royalle (and there are immense internal variations within these as well). At the same time, we would also like to caution against exoticizing South Asian pornographic cultures – these are places of contact, exchange, adaptation and influence. But these are also, in the spirit of Miriam Hansen’s definition, arenas of the vernacular, and as Luzia Savary points out in the context of colonial-era reproduction manuals, such South Asian vernaculars must be ‘understood as a new creation, linked to the specific historical and linguistic context in which it was forged’ (2014, 383). Or to introduce a specifically porn studies pun to the issue – one definitely does not know ‘it’ when one sees it. Translating porn studies for each historical and cultural location, then, must start from places of contact and exchange, mutations and borrowings. The authors featured in this book may be working on very specific themes and areas, each specialized within their own disciplines – but collectively they translate the porn studies ‘code’, providing a methodological extension for the field.

In the process of editing this book, we have also come to the conclusion that a ‘full’ representation of South Asia is never going to be possible – not only for logistical reasons but for the very nature of the field. By virtue of commonalities forged through colonial subjugation and similar patterns of economic liberalization in South Asia in the 1990s, the pornographic in South Asia is mediated via material cultures, infrastructures and digital exchanges. Colonial regulatory structures seep into the post-colonial idealization of reproductive sexuality, positing this as the norm. On the other hand, the private sphere is cultivated as the dedicated realm for conjugal intimacy and is forever perched on the precipice between obscenity and transgression. Thus, speaking about pornography in the South Asian context brings up more absences than voices, and where we did find representation from spaces outside India, there were also withdrawals. These were often because of where our authors (or their subjects) were located. Thus, legal and censorial factors have impacted the shape of this book in more ways than one. The conflicts and tensions between censorship and obscenity and between permissibility and speech (even research)
have only intensified in the last ten years, while we worked on the special issues of the *Porn Studies* journal (2019, 2022), that eventually took the form of the book. So, while this book does feature a bevy of fantastic chapters which we outline later in this introduction, we also want to use this space to talk about such issues not as mere absences but to hold up a methodological mirror for future work. The case of Pakistan as it pertains to this issue is illustrative. For a time, we did have a chapter based on the experiences of obscenity laws and para-pornographic cultures in Pakistan. The author wanted to track the making of a film on *mujra* dancers – a form of sexually suggestive and expressive dance found in India and Pakistan, with the latter having become the hub of this form in the last few years. However, the paper did not take off because the author and the filmmakers were concerned about the security of their subjects. That film turned out to be *Showgirls of Pakistan* – a 2020 documentary by Saad Khan and Joey Chriqui that we have since watched with great interest. Thus, while Pakistan continues to remain an absence in terms of a dedicated chapter from the region, *Showgirls of Pakistan* provides us with an opportunity to explore what is specific about the Pakistani context as well as its greater resonances for studies of South Asian pornographic cultures.

While not strictly pornographic, *mujra* as it exists today – in between the stage and the web – is often framed as such. *Mujra* emerged as a court dance during the Mughal period and was performed by courtesans called *tawaifs* (Syeda 2015). But as is often the case in the South Asian context, British colonial intervention criminalized the dancers, who were then forced to the margins of society to survive. This is the historical context that the film directs our attention to and especially the problem of labelling erotic performance with the category of pornography using a Western lens. *Showgirls of Pakistan* shows the negotiations that performers make while they partake in such erotically charged dance movements. The filmmakers follow three performers – Afreen Khan, Uzma and Reema Jaan – as they go about their daily lives. The narrative is creatively interspersed with sequences from Pakistani films, and the documentary also relies on existing footage of the dancers including interviews they have given on television shows. Performing for an all-male audience, the dancers are constantly monitored by different government departments who send their officials undercover to check whether there are any violations. The instructions for the lessee and owners of the performance space include ensuring provisions for full censor rehearsal, compliance to the script and the prevention of any additional dance moves or music other than what has been permitted. This often means that recordings of the performances are kept for safekeeping and any minute violation can lead to bans and cancellations that prevent the dancers from performing in big theaters for a while. This level of scrutiny is captured in an exchange Afreen has with her dress-maker, who advises her that a body suit with a plunging neckline might land her in trouble and promises to make a dress that can give her the look she wants without any objection from the censor. Further, the film showcases how the women support each other as they fight the moral police and patriarchal structures and navigate an unsafe workspace in which a number of dancers have been shot at, sometimes with fatal consequences.

The practices underlying *mujra* in Pakistan are thus calibrated to accommodate risks and to perform in immersive, often erotically charged performances under restrictions that foreclose physical contact between dancers, insist on mandatory full-body suits and forbid see-through dresses. We see the dancers daringly expose the hypocrisies and moral
compunctions that frame *mujra* dancers as sex workers. For instance, to a reporter who refers to *mujra* performance as vulgar, one of the performers says, ‘If the upper-class women dance on television, it is performance, when we do, it is *mujra*’. When a cleric claims that moral values are destroyed because of *mujra*, she asks him whether he has ever seen her dance. In the backdrop of their performances are the arbitrary arrests of dancers like Anjuman Shehzadi for ‘vulgar dancing’. The documentary centerstages the voices of the performers amidst the pushback they face from hosts of programmes such as the *Hum Log* telecast on Samaa TV and Azadi News. *Mujra*, as it appears in its contemporary form, stands between performative tradition and a global, modern culture – an in-between-ness that is a site of tension between the desire and the law. The film is also testament to changing patterns of media consumption in Pakistani society. Hira Nabi has noted that, alongside *totas* [pornographic bits], the early 1990s saw the outpouring of Pashto films in the CD-R market which were not specifically pornographic but included ‘very, very sexually explicit, or very suggestive dances’ (2017, 276). And, as Farida Batool Syeda has observed, ‘The 90’s in Pakistan saw the widespread use of hands-on and user-friendly digital technology, which helped evolve the mujra dance genre into a low-cost and speedy informal industry’ (2015, 17–18). Syeda (2015, 127 and 137) also noted the extensive use of mobile phones for the digital life of mujra and its circulation. We see some of this reflected in *Showgirls of Pakistan*, albeit in more ‘updated’ forms.

Much of the film’s footage is drawn from social media videos and recordings taken by the documentary’s subjects, showing how digital media offer performers the potential to connect their offline performances with the micro-celebrity status afforded by social media platforms. In fact, the film starts with footage of Afreen as she interacts with her fans online, reading their comments live while updating them on her life as a dancer. The camera is focused on her feet, as she interacts with the audience in the soundtrack, asking them what they would like to see her upload on social media. The soundtrack of Afreen speaking with fans in a dark space without revealing her face allows the transgressive pleasures associated with engaging in stranger intimacy, as in camming, although without the visual as the main frame of reference. We then move to the all-male patrons of *mujra* as they watch Afreen gyrate her hips and the camera focuses on her breasts. The relative freedom that Afreen enjoys is possible only because she is in Lahore, unlike the other two performers we encounter in the documentary. However, in all of the vignettes, the digital modern world is at odds with conservative morality. What we encounter is a neoliberal assemblage of competing forces, some erotic and aspirational (Afreen, for instance, wants to make a music video like Rihanna’s), others repressive and censorial. It is in the thick of this tangle that discussions of porn also enter the film.

When rumors emerge of porn clips of her circulating in public, Afreen says, ‘Why would anyone want to make porn in Pakistan where wearing sleeveless dress can take your life?’ Showcasing one of the clips, she jokes with her friends that the only similarity between herself and the performer in the clip is that they are both blond and that even if it was of her, she does not find it a big deal. In the ensuing exchange, Afreen’s choreographer finds ways to prove that the clip is not of her – it shows a performer with breast implants before Afreen had these. The vignette aligns with Syeda’s observations about mujra’s multiple sites of production, distribution and consumption as well as innovative (and sometimes exploitative) practices such as compensating for the lack of Pakistani men in the videos ‘by
juxtaposing the images of white heterosexual porn stars, acquired from the net or VCDs in the market, with exposed Pakistani women dancers’ (2015, 19) – also reminiscent of practices in Bangladesh and India (Hoek 2014; Mini 2016).

It is intriguing how discussions of porn attach themselves to the film outside the narrative text. Selected by VICE for its non-fiction collection, *Show Girls of Pakistan* was referred to as ‘Pak porn’ during the 17th Annual Hot Docs Forum by BBC’s Nick Fraser – the film’s director, Saad Khan, responding that this was equivalent to slut-shaming the film’s performers (Mallett 2016). The film offers a case study to discuss not only pornography and obscenity in Pakistan but also the ways in which ‘porn’ becomes a catch-all term that supports many different claims – those of moral conservatives, Western critics and the filmmakers themselves. What we encounter in the form of *mujra* and in *Showgirls of Pakistan*, then, is a microcosm of what we have been calling South Asian pornographies. *Mujra* today is simultaneously specific to the legal and censorial conditions in Pakistan as well as symptomatic of the nature of pornography, obscenity and sexual cultures in contemporary South Asia. As a novel disciplinary formation, South Asian porn studies must contend with the multiple entanglements of obscenity, desire, sexuality, morality and the law.

The range of chapters in this book attests to these long – and wide – genealogies of any imagined South Asian-ness. Like questions of identity that can only be answered in the plural (identities rather than identity), the chapters in this book demonstrate how a range of pornographies constitutes the force field of sexualized media in South Asia. In fact, the term ‘South Asia’ in this book points towards a larger, shared ethos more than strict geopolitical boundaries. What would a South Asian ‘ethos’ of the pornographic look like? If porn studies – itself a relatively nascent field – have now begun to coalesce around certain shared ideas or directions of research, what might a focus on the region offer us as researchers of erotic cultures and practices? Erotic material from the South Asian region can demonstrate how pornography is often defined in oblique terms, finding reflection in various modes of popular (and sometimes underground) culture, bypassing legal and censorial constraints; in other words, social censure and state censorship outline the limits of the obscene and the permissible. While this is not unique to only South Asia, it highlights the fact that understanding the pornographic in this regional context is impossible without accounting for censorship and obscenity. Obscenity is key here. ‘Asheelta’ (Hindi), as it is called in many Indian languages (including phonetic equivalents such as ‘oshliota’ [Bengali], ‘asheelathaa’ [Malayalam] and ‘osleelota’ [Assamese]), is a broad term that, as Lotte Hoek points out, ‘indicates social distinction and sexual mores within a single term, combining the English terms vulgarity and obscenity’ (2014, 3; original emphases).

While not all directly censored or banned, much of the kind of material that is examined in this book reveals a kind of a pornographic unconscious, which in turn is directly related to what Kaur and Mazzarella term ‘cultural regulation’ – ‘the performative, the productive, and the affective aspects of public culture’ (2009, 9). Censorship understood thus is a relentless proliferation of discourses on normative modes of desiring, of acting, of being in the world (2009, 5). The work of censorship (and subversion of censorship) might be a general feature of media forms across cultures, but in the particularity of South Asia they reveal the edges of the elastic pornographic spectrum. Edges allow us to observe and test the limits of any phenomenon – if centres are where phenomena cohere and norms become apparent, edges are where we can observe them dissolving into other forms, activating
resonant energies with their magnetic charge. Obscenity/asheelta with its conceptual elasticity performs this dynamic work in the South Asian context. Such edge-work is not a symptom of the weakness of the phenomenon but rather an invitation to extend scholarly vision to its outer limits. ‘South Asian Pornographies’ with a focus on erotic forms across the spectrum, including ones that may not immediately register as pornographic to the unsituated eye, is such an invitation. This is as much a disciplinary issue as it is the general understanding of erotic cultures. In fact, we would go on to say that the ‘Utility of South Asia’ (to echo the title of Anne Murphy’s article) is to extend the disciplinary boundaries of porn studies.

This play between porn and not porn is also where we locate the other focus of this book – that of the vernacular. Asheelta is one such vernacular that does the work of the ‘shared idiom’ of cultural life in South Asia, à la Pemberton and Nijhawan. But the vernacular for us is not just a lexical issue but one of everyday lived reality and practice. Language contextualizes the world of ideas in the material conditions of the world that it emerges in. In that sense, language itself is practice, and the term ‘vernacular’ describes this aspect of language in praxis. The vernacular is the grey untranslatable area that appears when we move from one cultural context to another. For Barbara Cassin (2014), the untranslatable is not that which cannot be translated but that which is continuously translated. Hoek (2014) points towards this when she treats the Bengali ‘oshleel’ as an additive word-form that in the English points towards both the obscene and the vulgar. But this lack of fixity in meaning also creates a problem, which according to Cassin is ‘a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed’ (2014, xvii). Seen through this frame, the vernacular is the surplus in the abstract idea of language but becomes language through practical usage. As Cassin points out, language is ‘not a fact of nature, an object, but an effect caught up in history and culture, and that ceaselessly invents itself’ (2014, xix). In that sense, all language is vernacular, and being seen as formal or normative language instead of vernacular is only an historical effect of power.

We pay attention to language here primarily because in the South Asian context the category of ‘vernacular languages’ reverberates with the timbre of the colonial encounter. One only needs to turn to the school system in South Asia where students are educated either in ‘English’ or in ‘vernacular’ mediums (meaning education in any of the indigenous Indian languages). This immediately raises the ghost of the colonial past which, as Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan points out, posits ‘English as a literary and cultural system’ against which ‘vernacular, bhasha and language literatures’ are in a perennial contest (2018, 314). While we do not intend to plot pornographic cultures on the same scale as linguistic ones, the ramifications of this contention are deeper. In this, we come very close to Miriam Hansen’s postulation that the vernacular describes the ‘dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability’ (1999, 60). If language is a kind of practice, can other forms of practice be subjected to the same tests and codes as language? Can we say that pornographic and erotic cultures in South Asia are also untranslatable vernaculars that require us to constantly recontextualize the meanings of pornography in its historical and cultural particularities? The chapters of this book and the clusters they are divided into aim to answer such questions.
South Asian pornographies: plan of the work

Section I – “Before Pornography: Sexology and Popular Sexual Discourses” – traces the popular histories of sexuality with a focus on vernacular publication practices. These chapters demonstrate how the regional dynamics of ‘South Asia’ inflect pornographic cultures outside Euro-American contexts. Sexological and sex-educational discourses – both past and present – emerge as strong concerns in this section. Sexology, as it was practiced in South Asia in the early half of the twentieth century, took the shape of an elite bourgeois project to cleanse the sexual by circumscribing it within a disciplinary paradigm.¹ In the pages of the inaugural issue of the Bombay-based International Journal of Sexology (1947–1955), the editor A. P. Pillay explored debates around the way female frigidity and ‘ideal’ orgasmic feminine subjects came to be discussed. Through the global network of knowledge sharing that Pillay forged through the International Journal of Sexology, channels of contact and communication were opened between sexologists and contributors from around the world, as well as the English-language readers from Berlin, Switzerland, Sydney, and Tel-Aviv (Ahluwalia 2018). As Sanjam Ahluwalia has pointed out, the journal’s reference to Western sexologists like Havelock Ellis, Margaret Sanger and Magnus Hirschfeld was compounded by a significant absence of contributions from Pillay’s contemporaries in India like R. D. Karve, G. S. Ghurye and Sitaram Phadke. Magnus Hirschfeld’s visit to Bombay drew significant interest from the middle class and was widely reported (Fuechtner 2013). Yet global connections and the intermixing of ideas from Hindu scriptural texts, Ayurveda, baazaar [street] literature, social reform and santati sastra [science of progeny], literature made sexology an eclectic space.²

This was often counterposed to the cheap literature that was available in the bazaar and meant for the masses. Through a normative, reproduction-oriented framing and the use of medico-scientific language to steer the attention of the reader to the pedagogical handling of information, sexology provided a strong anchor by which to incorporate scientific discourse on sexuality into the otherwise popular consumption of erotic media (Gupta 2002; Ahluwalia 2018). This worked to reinsert middle-class respectability, stressing a scientific approach to sexuality as a knowledge system, although in an oblique way presenting the same pleasures and anxieties in the guise of science. Sexological tracts were a crucial part of the landscape of global and local connections that democratized sex in popular discourses. These developments are tracked in two chapters of this book: Charu Gupta’s ‘Cast(e)ing and Translating Sex in the Vernacular: The Writings of Santram BA in Hindi’ and Arnav Bhattacharya’s ‘Purging the Pornographic, Disciplining the Sexual, and Edifying the Public: Pornography, Sex Education, and Class in Colonial Bengal (1930–1950s)’.

In her chapter Gupta explores the work of Santram BA, a caste reformer who also wrote widely on the topics of sex and birth control. Gupta emphasizes that Santram’s writings on sex cannot be separated from his anti-caste writings, and they must be read as ‘metaphors for the churning going on in caste and gender relations in late colonial India’. For Gupta, then, vernacular language print media offered a vibrant space for conversations on sexual health and eroticism – themes that were often clubbed along with pornography by colonial-era obscenity laws. As Charu Gupta points out in her chapter, the vernacular offers ‘a corporeal presence and nearness of lived experience’ that is key to the study of sex and sexuality. While Gupta’s observation is made in the specific context of Hindi sex-manuals, she
draws attention to the cruciality of lived experience, which, when read alongside Hansen’s insistence on aspects such as idioms, dialects and translatability, outlines the conceptual spine of this book. Elsewhere, Gupta (2002) has argued that the categorization of sexological tracts and erotic media with the sex advice literature often became blurry as it morphed through various layers of translations and cultural mediations. A. Bhattacharya’s chapter expand on this.

A. Bhattacharya tracks the relationship between pornography and sexology by analyzing the works of the Bengali sexologists Abdul Hasanat and Nripendra Kumar Basu. As he points out, sexology gave way to a range of positionalities on sexual science among local sexologists that often varied significantly in the way they approached conjugal sexuality, class and respectability. Among those sexologists who advocated birth control and sex education in Western India, R. D. Karve highlighted the supremacy of Western sexological tracts and a rational approach steeped in European sexology (Botre and Haynes 2018). Karve’s contributions included books such as Adhunik Kamasatra [Modern Kama‑sastra] and editing the journal Samaj Swastya [Social Health], one of the first magazines in India to feature a sex advice column (Botre and Haynes 2017). As a critic of marriage, which he found to be constraining for both men and women, Karve supported the legalization of prostitution, while Samaj Swastya featured female nudes on the front cover and male nudes on the back to emphasize the relevance of nudity in promoting physical health (Heath 2010). Karve’s ideas were radical for the time and different from other sexologists like Abul Hasanat, A. P. Pillay and Nripendra Kumar Basu. A. Bhattacharya shows how Basu’s lack of a moral stance on pornography was influenced by his view that the popularity of the erotic literature stemmed from the cheap accessibility of these printed materials. In fact, one imperative that united these varied sentiments among sexologists was the realization of the difficulties in maintaining a ban on erotic material.

The expansiveness of the sexual and the pornographic is something that also structures Section II of this book – ‘Art, Print Culture and Literature at the Edges of the Pornographic’. Bijleejaj Patra’s chapter ‘A Short History of the “Blue‑Photo”: Bengali Sex Magazines and the Visual Empire of Printed Images (1940–1970)’ shifts the focus away from sexological tracts but sticks with print culture. Patra discusses sex magazines such as Nara-Nari (1938–1950s), edited by Sukanta Kumar Halder, and Natun Jiban (1944), using these to chart the vernacularization of desire mediated via print technology in the early twentieth century. ‘Blue‑photos’ captured women in a nude or semi‑nude fashion, in side‑poses and long shots which diluted their immediate identification. Patra also traces the circulation of ‘blue‑photos’ in the way male bodybuilders [Sharircharchakari] doubled‑up as semi‑nude models for sex magazines, while the ‘blue‑photo’ tradition can also be glimpsed in the practice of nude models working with art students – art education itself being part of the matrix of colonial modernity. Photographs of the female form used in art education also became part of photo‑series in sex magazines. Unlike the exhibition of the face to individu‑alize muscular male bodies, female nudes often had their faces occluded from public view. The facialization of the muscular male body and the facelessness of the ‘arty’ female nude can be mapped to the gendered politics of respectability in modern Bengal.

Print culture also remains a concern in Spandan Bhattacharya’s ‘Reading Anandalok: Obscenity, Cinema and Other “Prohibitive” Pleasures in 1970s–1990s Bengali Print Culture’. His chapter explores how the infrastructures of cheap print technology caused the North
Calcutta region of Battla to emerge as the hub for the erotic literature in the early nineteenth century, including a range of material that drew from contemporary sex scandals in the form of novels and farces. Similar to the point about obscenity (ashleelata) being a structuring principle for the pornographic, S. Bhattacharya undertakes a practical unpacking of the term ‘apasanskriti’ – roughly translated as ‘crass/bad/decaying culture’ – as it relates to the illicit undertones in Bengali print culture between the 1970s to the 1990s. Curiously, however, the material he examines in his chapter would not be considered pornographic at first look – the magazine Anandalok is owned by a major mainstream press and carries articles and images related to mainstream Bengali cinema. However, as S. Bhattacharya astutely demonstrates, the magazine’s tabooed status as ‘apasanskriti’ drew on a longer history of print culture including the publication of erotic stories, gossip, mysteries and scandals.

Perhaps the best example of the concerns with South Asian pornography’s long durée in this book can be seen in Natalia Di Pietrantonio’s ‘Pornography and Indian Miniature Painting: The Case of Avadh, India’. Her chapter locates how the practices of eighteenth-century European collectors shaped the taxonomy used to classify the indigenous Rāgamālā miniature paintings produced in Avadh. Taking the instance of Richard Johnson’s collection of Rāgamālā images, Di Pietrantonio argues how they were seen as obscene and pornographic at different points in time, contingent on the demands of archival processes and institutional locations. As Di Pietrantonio astutely points out, ‘Obscenity and pornography were legal categories imported to India from British imperial policies’.

The last two chapters in this section turn us towards the written word and the circulation of literary texts. Anubhav Pradhan’s “‘Raped, Outraged, Ravaged’: Race, Desire, and Sex in the Indian Empire’ undertakes a close reading of August Brancart’s nineteenth-century erotic novel, Venus in India or Love Adventures in Hindustan, that narrativizes the sexual exploits of a British army officer stationed in India. Pradhan calls the novel a ‘watershed in South Asian pornography’ for its awareness of racial and geopolitical realities of the time, including anxieties of miscegenation and the presence of British women in the midst of native men. In doing so he locates how interracial desire is manifested in the text and the curious ways through which India emerges as a site of deviance that can lead British men in the line of duty. Di Pietrantonio and Pradhan’s chapters deal with completely different objects and techniques – the former focusing on visual artefacts, the latter on the written word. But, taken together, both authors offer us useful insights into the erotic frisson produced by the colonial encounter. The Avadhi miniatures and the pornographic text that are the subjects of Di Pietrantonio and Pradhan’s chapters, respectively, have their provenance in different circumstances at the hands of different creators. But they are also each other’s obverse – one rendered pornographic by the imposition of Victorian attitudes on already existing objects, the other generated by ‘the imaginative space of the colony’ – what Anjali Arondekar describes as ‘an imagined breeding ground for a spectrum of imagined sexual vices that in turn vivify the rhetoric of an evangelical civilizing mission’ (2009, 105).

Finally, Kareem Khubchandani’s ‘Between aunties: sexual futures and queer South Asian aunty porn’ explores a selection of South Asian diasporic novels, suggesting that in these, desire is encoded as a continuum coexisting with aunty attributes such as cooking and gossip. Khubchandani’s chapter, in many ways, is in conversation with his project on Critical Aunty Studies, a collaboration that brings together scholars working in this area, and two
special issues (Text & Performance Quarterly 2022; South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 2023) that draw on a colloquium organized in 2021. Exploring the genre of ‘aunty porn’ and also using the figure of the aunty as a ‘method’, in alignment with the broader Critical Aunty Studies project, Khubchandani locates how gossip and the surreptitious intimacies that emerge through erotic embodiment are woven into the mundane aspects of interactions between aunties. Tapping into literature film and visual art – what he calls a ‘promiscuous archive of aunty representation’ – Khubchandani forces us to rethink pornography in the South Asian context, not just as a form of representation but as a form of lived intimacy between aunties that allows queer desires to manifest in otherwise stringent social structures. He provides us with a framework for disentangling the queer erotic realms that allow aunties to ‘invent pleasure, play and autonomy beyond the sexual scripts prescribed to them’.

Section III – ‘South Asian Porn and the Digital Turn’ – is the first section of the book strictly based in the contemporary. Sections I and II cohere around different timelines – Section I focused more or less on the period of twentieth-century print modernity, while Section II is more cross historical. This structuring, while aware of historical specificities, is ultimately concerned with the theatics of sexual cultures that are more analytically productive when examined outside of a strict linear, chronological unfolding. The digital turn, however, is a thematic that is more historically concentrated by its very nature. Even so, the focus on historicity does not disappear altogether in this section, because clearly the tussle between an imagined erotic space and civilizing mission did not disappear with the end of the colonial rule. Vestiges of the colonial era lingered on and continued to shape both legal and moral attitudes towards gender and sexuality in post-colonial nation-states. Rahul Gairola’s ‘The X Factors of Sex: Hijras, Victorian Law, and Digital Porn in Postcolonial India’ begins with this premise in his exploration of the interconnections between colonial-era laws and the current landscape of digital pornography as it relates to hijras. As subjects that did not fit the neat binaries of male/female, hijras challenged the ‘British biopolitical order’ and were subsequently pathologized by both ‘the British Raj and the postcolonial elite’. Such attitudes, Gairola notes, ‘inaugurated a historical precedent for pathologizing transgender’ people in contemporary India. Gairola builds upon this complex history of colonial pathologization codified as law and examines how it reverberates in the landscape of digital pornography. Although ‘Digital India’ might seem far removed from this history of colonialism and colonial-era laws, Gairola’s study of digital pornography offers us a much-needed diachronic view that can bridge our understanding of older and newer articulations of law, sex and pornography.

Ketaki Chowkhani’s chapter, ‘Pleasure, Bodies and Risk: Women’s Viewership of Pornography in Urban India’ examines the absence of women’s experiences in narratives of porn consumption in urban India. Chowkhani’s focus is on the pleasures and risks that women negotiate as they watch female bodies in intimate postures. While the risks women navigate include being seen as sexually available and loss of reputation, Chowkhani shows that women also actively reimagine what they want to hold on to in the material they have watched. Many of the respondents Chowkhani interviews mention how watching pornography was tied to space, where one can then set aside time to engage with the material in a safe zone. There are different measures of safety used to ensure that their consumption of porn is not flagged – this includes constantly be on guard to ensure that the internet
history is always deleted, use of proxy servers, and that parallel windows are used while browsing material in public computers so that the porn site is not visible to anyone sitting close to you. Thus, many women associated access to pornography itself as a way to locate desire outside monogamous relationships, and the practices that they employ are very much a product of the digital habitus.

Lotte Hoek’s ‘When Celluloid Pornography Went Digital: Class and Race in the Bangladeshi Cut-Piece Online’ examines what happens to celluloid pornography in Bangladesh when it transitions into online digital platforms. In what can be read as an extended epilogue to her book Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh (Hoek 2014), Hoek zeroes in on the digital afterlife of Bangladeshi cut-pieces (sexually explicit ‘bits’ spliced into the film-reel during exhibition) that were produced illegally by Bangladeshi action filmmakers. An interesting question Hoek raises in her chapter is how traces of locality are addressed and marked in spaces of digital consumption. For instance, in the case of VCDs it is quite common to find ‘Pakistani mujra or scenes from Pashto cinema, South Indian soft-porn clips, and music videos from across South Asia’ alongside Bangladeshi cut-pieces. Hoek notes that despite certain ‘national’ characteristics, there are formal affinities between such pornographic bits from various parts of South Asia, emerging from the conditions of cinema production and distribution in the region. In formulating cut-piece pornography this way, Hoek argues for a ‘pornographic region, which is associated with particularities of narrative, aesthetic and, significantly, particular types of bodies’ (original emphasis).

These questions re-emerge in Darshana Mini and Anirban Baishya’s ‘Transgressions in Toonland: Savita Bhabhi, Velamma and the Indian Adult Comic’, albeit in relation to pornographic comics. Focusing on two adult comics, Mini and Baishya explore the dynamics of class, gender and taboo as they relate to the figure of the ‘bhabhi’ (sister-in-law) and ‘aunty’ – both short-hand notations for married women who form the centre of the comics’ sexual fantasy. While part of their argument is formal, related to the affordances of the digital comic book that circulates online, their chapter also focuses on the idea of the region in the Indian imagination and how it operates through matrices of language and visual cues.

Patra’s focus on muscularity in the previous section is also echoed in this section on the digital, in Michiel Baas’ chapter ‘Capitalizing on Desire: (Re)Producing and Consuming Class in Indian “Gay” Pornography’. Baas interrogates gay pornographic expression through an ethnographic exploration of the practices and experiences of fitness trainers and body-builders as they fashion their identities to capitalize on their erotic and sexual potential in order to cater to an all-male clientele. Expanding on his previous work (Baas 2020) that locates the space of the gymnasium and use of bodily capital by fitness trainers as a way of moving beyond limited social and cultural capital, Baas shows how fitness trainers occasionally move to porn, explicit photoshoots and sex work to utilize muscular capital, working with and through their bodies. This, as Baas shows, is underlined through patterns of (homo)erotic layering found in photographs featuring muscular men as well as consumption models that open up a range of options – an example being OnlyFans – to explore the possibilities of partaking in a continuum of bodily practices.

Overlaps between homoerotic (self-)representation and digital platforms are also the subject of Rohit Dasgupta’s discussion, “‘Grindr is basically interactive porn’: Ethnographic Observations from Kolkata on Queer Intimacies and “Pic-exchange” on Grindr
and PlanetRomeo’. Dasgupta uses digital ethnography to map social media use by young queer men in Kolkata, in order to interrogate porn consumption practices. Training his lens on the queer networks forged through the sharing of self-made explicit images, he locates affective encounters that allow for an interactive exchange of intimacy. By sharing explicit pictures and digital footprints in the form of animated images, users explore variations of phatic communication in order to engage in fleeting intimate encounters that border platformed intimacies and porno-cultures. Together, the chapters in this section explore how such regionality operates within the space of the internet through various registers including linguistic indices manifested as tags, search terms and comments.

The final cluster of chapters in this book are collected in Section IV, ‘Feminist and Minor Approaches to South Asian Pornographies’. In some ways the nomenclature here is a bit of a misnomer – all the authors in this volume are attuned to queer and feminist approaches as well as minoritarian concerns. Nonetheless, the chapters in this section more directly address the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and caste, and/or debates about them. In ‘#PatriarchyKaPackup: Mediating Sexual Discourse and the Casteless Feminist Subject in Indian Performance Poetry’ Pallavi Rao addresses how performances touching upon the erotic require a balancing act whereby any traces of pornographic have to be suppressed while simultaneously directing attention towards questions of desire and pleasure. Focusing on female slam poets utilizing urban performance spaces, Rao examines the erasure of identity categories including caste and class in their performance as they narrate instances of sexual violence and pleasure. Rao juxtaposes the castelessness embodying the universality of experiences in upper-caste female subjects’ performances with the politicization of identities of Dalitbahujan women. In doing so, she demonstrates how performance poetry’s ‘localized articulations of mediated erotics’ allow for a kind of sexual confession where sexual action is displaced offstage and reinserted through the soundscape, supplanting the visuality of the sexual act with an aural component.

In what seems like a sharp U-turn from slam poetry, the next chapter, Tupur Chatterjee’s “I am a porn star! Sex and Sunny Leone unlimited in Bollywood” explores the transnational stardom of Sunny Leone, an Indo-Canadian actress with a former career in porn, whose entry into Bollywood set off a series of debates and readjustments in the India media sphere. Leone’s initial stint was in the reality TV show Bigg Boss (the Indian equivalent of Big Brother), which set off a moral panic about the mainstreaming of pornography. However, Leone has been able to negotiate such hurdles by carving out a space for female stardom that does not necessarily fit into the template of the chaste female star of Bollywood. Rather, as Chatterjee demonstrates, while Leone no longer works in the pornographic industry, she also doesn’t disavow her pornographic career as an object of shame. Instead, Leone presents a unique case in which porn works in some ways as a form of capital – at least in the sense that it allows Leone to build on (albeit with modifications) her star image. Drawing on Linda Williams’ work, Chatterjee suggests that Leone is a mascot of transnational onscenity [that] brings to the fore the centrality of porn in the economies of global cross-cultural exchange and forces us to rethink previous paradigms of both ‘pornography’ and stardom, two domains that have more or less remained mutually exclusive in the sub-continent.
Recalibrating South Asian attitudes towards sex and pornography continues in “We give sex a good name”: An Interview with Paromita Vohra – an extensive conversation between filmmaker and sex-educator Paromita Vohra and the editors of this volume. The interview covers a range of topics pertaining to Vohra’s experience as an artist, filmmaker, sex educator and creator of the multimedia portal Agents of Ishq (AoI). Vohra walks us through her journey as a curator and the stakes involved in understanding sexual pleasure and desire through a feminist lens. The conversation takes the reader through the messy realities that stall, condition and discipline bodies, making sexual violence the dominant paradigm in understanding the body in the South Asian context. Vohra’s work instead directs us towards the multisensory aspects of love and sexual pleasure, as seen in her installation ‘A Love Latika’, which she describes as ‘an electronic forest of erotic poems’. As an exploration of ‘public privacy’, the installation invited visitors to collectively partake in what they would otherwise consider deeply private moments of listening to erotic poems. The same sense of collectivity is also seen in AoI, both in user-submitted columns and in collaborative multimedia pieces. Of special note is a fascinating collaboration on the idea of consent in which AoI produced a series of videos with lavani artists (lavani is a Maharashtrian song and dance performed by women and using sexual innuendos). These videos work through different relationship scenarios to explore what counts as consent and the conditions which can signify violation. As Vohra states, the basic premise for AoI is to normalize conversations about sex, using popular culture as a reference point for initiating discussion about sex. This includes conversations on porn and porn-adjacent forms. The eclectic material that is presented by AoI in essays, images and videos envisages an intersectional space, which doubles up as a platform for sex education in India.

Ricky Varghese’s ‘Confluences: Of War Porn and Nationalism, at the Limits of Memory’ takes us to the edges of the pornographic in South Asia. Our earlier invocation of this book as a kind of scholarly ‘edge-work’ is stretched to its limits in this chapter focusing on questions of violence and brutality. Varghese’s meditations, to use a sexual pun, push edge-work to the realm of edge-play. They build on Prabha Manuratne’s (2014) work on war porn that explores how wartime violence ‘becomes consumed, sexualized, and talked about, primarily by subscribers and users in the Global North/West’. In the process, Varghese interrogates the prevalence of videos of caste and religion-based violence in contemporary India. Comparing the aesthetic of such videos to Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) pornography in India, Varghese notes that there is a ‘voyeuristic quality to the aesthetics’ of both lynching and MMS porn videos. Thus, Varghese raises questions that extend into the arena of nationalism and right-wing violence and how the enactment of such violence on screen raises deep-rooted memories of historical trauma and the politics of otherness in South Asia. Varghese’s immediate point may not be about pornography proper (sex-films, magazines and the like), but it allows us to draw an important link between the power of virtual mediation and the viral nature of online circulation. If the ‘pornographic unconscious’ has to do with the limits of ‘cultural regulation’, Varghese’s chapter offers us a chance to understand how the pornographic unconscious operates in images of violence as well – despite contextual differences, objects such as those explored by Gairola, Hoek and Baishya and Mini, it would seem, have something in common with the kind of images Varghese writes about. Blood, semen, the digital apparatus and the space of the internet itself emerge as the objects (and perhaps objective) of the climax.