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## MUTED QUEERSCAPES: INTERSECTIONAL RESISTANCE QUEERING OF WORKPLACE LAW USING POETRY

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### Abstract

This article interrogates the dissonance between India's post-377 legal promises and the lived realities of queer-trans communities navigating casteist, ableist workplaces. Through 27 participatory poetry workshops (2020–2022) in Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Visakhapatnam, West Bengal, and Wayanad, disabled, and able-bodied, Dalit-Bahujan, Adivasi trans participants redrafted the Transgender Persons Act 2019 and Industrial Disputes Act 1947 via erasure poetry, body-mapping, and crowdsourced protest verse. Framed by Akhil Kang's critique of Savarna queer movements (2021), Gee Semmalar's trans labour praxis (2020) and Sudipta Das's *Crippling the Margins* (2022), this work positions poetry as "jurisdictional counterpractice"—a neurodiverse, caste-conscious challenge to legal and corporate "inclusion". Case studies from Sayantan Datta's workplace audits, the Centre for Law and Policy Research's intersectionality report (Kothari & Ors 2022), and the Queer Tech Workers' Demand Charter (2022) reveal how poetic subversion queers judgments like *Navtej Johar* (2018) and *Dr Malabika Bhattacharjee* (2020), centring disabled, Dalit-Bahujan futurities beyond pink capitalism.

**Keywords:** poetic resistance; caste; disability; neurodiversity; POSH Act; Navtej Johar.

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## [A] PROLOGUE: THE LOCKED GATE AND THE DUPLICATE KEY

In a cramped room in Hyderabad, a Dalit trans woman holds a black marker over India's Transgender Persons Act 2019. She strikes through the hollow promise—"No establishment shall discriminate"—until only two words remain: "Discriminate employment". For her, this erasure is not destruction but revelation. "Your law is a locked gate," she writes. "Our poems are duplicate keys cut from stolen iron."

This act of poetic defiance mirrors Agyeya's prison writings in *Shackles* (1946), where he reworked colonial censors' redactions into revolutionary verse:

*These walls cannot hold syllables.*

*What you blacken with ink, we bleed into song.*

### The verdict that changed everything—and nothing

When the Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality in *Navtej Johar* (2018), Savarna pride parades erupted in celebration.<sup>1</sup> Yet in Bengaluru's tech corridors, a Dalit gay IT worker found himself cornered by human resources personnel after reporting homophobic slurs. "Changing teams didn't heal the PTSD", he says. "Therapy came from my savings." His story mirrors the Centre for Law and Policy Research's chilling statistic: 63% of Dalit queer workers *avoid* reporting harassment, knowing that grievance committees are stacked with Savarna managers (Kothari & Ors 2022).

The *Navtej Johar* judgment (2018), while historic, echoes the global paradox of legal victories divorced from material change. As noted in *Queer Judgments* (Ferreira & Ors 2025), decriminalization often becomes a "Savarna alibi", masking how caste hierarchies persist in queer movements. The UK's *HJ (Iran) & HT (Cameroon)* asylum case (Powell 2025) reveals similar fissures: queer refugees face state-sanctioned erasure when their identities do not fit colonial binaries. In India, the Transgender Persons Act 2019, hailed as progressive, became a cruel paradox for many. A trans healthcare worker in Visakhapatnam, forced

<sup>1</sup> "Savarna" refers to Hindu castes historically included in the fourfold varna hierarchy (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras). B R Ambedkar, in *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946), critiques the Brahminical framing of this system, arguing that the Shudras—though classified as Savarna—were originally Kshatriyas degraded through Brahminical sanctions and exclusion from Vedic rituals (eg *upanayana*). This exclusion entrenched their subordinate status *within* the varna order, distinct from Avarna communities (Dalits, Adivasis) positioned entirely outside it.

to handle toxic chemicals without protective gear during her transition, recounts:

*Termination (of employment) left no paper trail—just scars from their ‘inclusive’ workplace.*

## Poetry as legal surgery: cutting through the lies

### ***Erasing the state’s fiction***

In workshops, participants performed radical surgery on legal texts. The Industrial Disputes Act 1947’s edict—“Workers shall maintain discipline”—became a damning indictment when redacted to “*Shall discipline.*” For neurodiverse participants, this exposed how “discipline” criminalizes ADHD rhythms and autistic sensory needs under capitalist productivity.

These acts mirror the *Queer Tango Futures* anthology’s call to “dance the image of our imagination” (Batchelor & Ors 2021). Just as tango’s embrace disrupts gendered hierarchies, poetic redaction unmask the law’s violent choreography. A nonbinary participant in Chennai rewrote the Factories Act 1948: “*Overtime is not a choice when your bones are clock hands.*”

Disability justice frameworks, as Mia Mingus insists, demand “moving together at the speed of trust”. Yet workplaces pathologize neurodivergence, as seen in Esmé Weijun Wang’s *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019), where psychosis is framed as a “productivity defect”. A workshop participant with schizophrenia scribbled on the Minimum Wages Act 1948:

*My hallucinations are more honest than your HR policies.*

### ***Body maps: where the law leaves scars***

Using crimson paint on stick figures etched in Bengaluru, workers mapped violence onto their bodies:

- ◇ “Wage theft” marked as “amputation” at the wrists.
- ◇ “Deadnaming” etched as burns across the chest.

A Muslim trans teacher in Hyderabad drew arrows pointing to her throat:

*Every “DEI workshop” feels like swallowing broken glass. They praise my resilience but deny me pronouns.*

These maps resonate with *Queer Judgments*’ analysis of *Re Imogen* (Stagg 2025), where Australian courts pathologized trans youth autonomy. Both

contexts reveal how legal systems reduce marginalized bodies to sites of surveillance, not sovereignty.

## The Savarna saviour complex and the cure

Corporate India’s rainbow capitalism, argues Akhil Kang’s PhD thesis *Caste in the Rainbow* (2024), reduces inclusion to “diversity lanyards and pronoun pins” while maintaining casteist hierarchies. Their fieldwork exposes how Dalit queer employees are funnelled into “pinkwashed” CSR roles—tokenized, underpaid, and barred from leadership. A poem from the workshops skewers this hypocrisy:

*Your allyship is a yagna  
where we’re the sacrificial dal.  
My labor is your CSR trophy—  
polished, displayed, uneaten.*

Telugu feminist poet Jupaka Subhadra’s *Kongu* (2022) echoes this critique, reframing Savarna feminism’s co-option of Bahun labour:

*You wear my hunger as pendant gold—  
a curated ache for your museum shelves.  
But my calluses write histories  
your silk cannot smother.*

## Rewriting the Constitution in margins

The Calcutta High Court’s *Dr Malabika Bhattacharjee* ruling (2020), extending POSH Act (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013) protections to queer individuals, offered fragile hope. But as a disabled Dalit trans participant notes: “Laws see our bodies as checklists—*caste + gender + disability*—never as whole humans.”

The Queer Tech Workers Demand Charter (2022) reframes justice through collective poetics:

1. Amend POSH: “*Hear our screams, not just whispers.*”
2. Redistribute time: “*Let deadlines dissolve into dandelion clocks.*”

This charter aligns with *Queer Judgments*’ vision in *X, Y and Z* (Danisi 2025), where the Court of Justice of the European Union expanded refugee protections beyond heteronormative trauma narratives. Drawing from Sudipta Das’s analysis of *Begumpura*—the 15th-century Dalit

utopia of caste-less equality—the demands reimagine workplaces as sites of radical interdependency. As Das writes, “Begumpura is not a place but a verb: the act of dismantling gates” (2022).

## [B] EPILOGUE: THE POEM AS PICKAXE

In a final workshop, participants buried copies of the Transgender Persons Act 2019 and planted verses in the soil. One line, borrowed from Chand’s “What is Queer?” (2020) and *Tedagadu* (2019), became their manifesto: “Queer is the resistance to epistemological violence.”

Telugu feminist Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) reverberates here:

*We are not footnotes in your epics.*

*Our rebellions seed forests where your laws crumble.*

For these poets, the true verdict lies not in courtrooms but in the act of rewriting—a reminder that the law, like poetry, is malleable. As the *Queer Tango Futures* contributors dance “like it matters” (Batchelor & Ors 2021), Bahujan trans communities wield verse as a pickaxe, chipping at casteist-ableist capitalism until new worlds emerge.

### About the author

**Yerram Raju Behara** is a non-binary disabled poet and expressive arts practitioner whose work centres queerness, disability, and anti-caste resistance through hybrid forms like blackout and found poetry. Their practice focuses on chronicling and re-imagining erased histories of queer-trans communities via community-led initiatives, including a trans-led expressive arts cohort with the Piravi Art Community. In 2022, they initiated *Redefining Queerscapes*, a movement using workshops to transform legal texts into protest poetry, archived in the *Queer Judgments Project*, *Reframe Journal* and multiple anthologies. Their debut collection, *Withering Tempests* (2021), explores queer isolation, and their writings on queer-trans journeys in urban spaces in India appear in journals and queer collectives. As an EQUAL fellow and a collaborator with the Asia Pacific Trans Network, Raju documented systemic healthcare barriers faced by trans youth and led *Queer & Quarantine*, a crisis-intervention initiative, during the pandemic.

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