At first glance, the suggestion that Indian feminism could make epistemological interventions in the discourse of queer theory might seem improbable, given the tenuous relation to questions of sexual citizenship that informs feminist theory in India. Although contemporary feminist scholarship in India has been successful in pointing to the symbolic deployment of women’s bodies by ideological state apparatuses, it is questionable whether these critiques have fully considered the heteronormative operations of these apparatuses and the ways in which the ideology of heterosexism operates in tandem with patriarchy.

The most obvious example of not only an exclusion, but also a heteronormative foreclosure of questions pertaining to sexual citizenship, is the work of Indian critic Madhu Kishwar. In Manushi, a journal that has addressed the political issues facing Indian women (and of which, incidentally, Kishwar is the editor), she has argued that sexuality is an insignificant issue in the Indian context in comparison to the more serious issues facing the nation state. Thus Kishwar remarks: “Such issues [lesbian desire] are not as important in a third world context since Indians face more crucial, more economically basic life-and-death issues.” Hence, in an essay entitled “Naive Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian: Deepa Metha’s Fire” (1992), Kishwar labels Fire, a film depicting a lesbian relationship between two Indian housewives, as ‘un-Indian,’ stating that the film “does a big disservice to the cause of women” because it will “inhibit Indian women from expressing physical fondness for fear of being permanently branded as lesbians” (11).1

In Kishwar’s brand of feminism,2 a constructed notion of ‘Indianness’ cannot be reconciled with sexual citizenship since, according to Kishwar, Indian women experience more severe forms of violence than compulsory heterosexuality. ‘Indianness’ and
‘queerness’ are thus rendered entirely discrete, resulting in a framework in which the denial of sexual rights cannot be conceptualized as a form of violence. In this essay, I suggest that the theoretical intersections between postcolonial and queer theory have not yet been able to adequately resolve the problematic that constructs national identity as separate from sexual citizenship in nations such as India. To begin, I want to consider two examples of conceptual ‘indiscretion’ that have attempted to resolve the separation between queer desire and postcolonial subjectivities, namely Gayatri Gopinath’s work on queer diasporas and my own earlier work on sexual citizenship in India. I will argue that, despite the attempt to bring discrete theoretical discourses into conversation with one another, these works, my own earlier work included, inadvertently privilege western epistemological categories over postcolonial subjectivities.

In the latter section of this paper, I offer what I consider to be a more useful theoretical model for addressing the intersection between postcolonial and queer epistemologies. There, I come to the central purpose of my essay, which is to outline some of the critical and political tools that Indian feminism may have to offer to queer theory. In Excitable Speech (1999), Judith Butler has pointed out that “theoretical positions are always appropriated and deployed in political contexts that expose something of the strategic value of such theories” (20). I want to think about how a dialogue between feminism in India and queer theory as it is theorized and practiced in the U.S. academy could force a rethinking of some of the important interventions that queer theory has made.

Drawing especially on the theoretical work of Indian feminist Kumkum Sangari, who has argued against the privileging of ‘community’ as a bulwark against state majoritarianism, I outline some of the critical and political tools that Indian feminism can offer queer theory. Through a transnational comparative framework, I think of how the mobilization of sexual citizenship in a different part of the globe might inflect the ways in which sexual identity categories are theorized in the West. Particularly, while queer theory’s critique of a minority-based identity politics has been an important achievement, especially in the context of the mainstreaming of gay movement in the U.S., I wish to imagine another theoretical indiscretion beyond the distinction between state and non-state centered interventions that much of queer theory is invested in.

I contend that this discretion might finally be overdetermined, obscuring not only the fundamental connections between the two, but also ultimately placing the onus of agency almost exclusively on a vaguely defined notion of community. In drawing on the work of Indian feminist Kumkum Sangari to interrogate the anti-statist ideology of contemporary queer theory, I attempt not only to avoid the theoretical trap that I criticize in several current works in queer and postcolonial studies, but also to reverse the traditional epistemological frame of ‘applying’ western theoretical frameworks to postcolonial contexts.