

Zameen Aasman Ka Farq —As far apart as the Earth is from the Sky—

A note on collaboration, and my role within the project

In 2009, on my first visit to India, I was deeply moved seeing men casually express affection in public for the first time. Early conversations with Indian friends around the meanings of male-to-male affection—and my intention to build a project around it—quickly made it clear that my photography alone would not be enough to produce nuanced representations and meaningfully engage with my questions around homosocial intimacies.

How could I convey the humanity I perceive in heterosexual, cisgender men expressing platonic love? How do queer identifying collaborators navigate public affection? How do I visualize the emotional and often unspoken, that exists beyond the surfaces my gaze and my camera can register?

I began initiating conversations, many unfolding in streets, parks or open fields. While navigating the challenges these environments bring about—and often communicating through translators— each conversation taught me how to ask more sensitively, and most importantly, how to listen.

I have approached every collaboration with the same tone and spirit. I soon learned that each held the same potential for depth and beauty—whether meeting a scholar in an elegant Mumbai apartment following a friends' introduction, encountering someone by chance in a rural village lane, or connecting through a gay dating app. As we set up the audio recorder, we explained the themes of our conversation, and asked for permission to use my collaborators' words and images in exhibitions and book form. Sometimes, based on their need for privacy, we agreed to use a pseudonym, not to not make a portrait, or not to share an image on social media. Throughout, my only explicit request to my collaborators has been to speak from the heart. For many, it was the first time they had been asked to speak about their emotions. Several have described our meeting as cathartic—as a rare moment of being seen and heard without judgment. Some, who initially requested anonymity, changed their minds after our conversations and asked to be photographed or named.

As a white European, my appearance and limited familiarity with Indian cultural references and norms meant that I would always remain, to some extent, an outsider.

Notwithstanding these limitations, being an outsider unexpectedly also proved to be an asset: many collaborators shared that they felt more comfortable opening up to me than they might with someone from within their own community. To address concerns around privacy, this often meant that we discussed my translators' backgrounds and personal connections in greater detail.

Growing up queer in a bicultural household in Germany, I spent much of my adolescence searching for ways to bond with male friends, and to find community. The nearly decade-long making of *Zameen Aasman Ka Farq* is fueled by an attempt to claim, and elevate what long eluded me. While my demeanor in making *Zameen* was consistently rooted in a sense of openness and inclusivity, my role *within* this work shifted early on—from that of a researcher to that of an interlocutor. As I listened to my collaborators speak with deep emotion about the affections that inspired this work, I became more interested in creating an archive that represents their experiences with nuance and holds space for their voices to be heard, rather than explained by me. *Their* voices carry the work. When they asked me “When will you finish writing your book?” I have replied: “It is you who is writing the book.”

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