

CULTURE	ISSUE II	RITUAL
	WORDS PAYAL KHANDELWAL	PHOTOS MEERA SETHI
INDIA	GAY POPULATION, ESTIMATED 90 MILLION	
	GAY POPULATION, OFFICIAL 2.5 MILLION	

Artist Meera Sethi’s take on a classic Indian poster redefines what it means to be a man —An Ideal Boy

An ideal Indian male bathes daily, prays mightily, and studies attentively—at least according to the classic “An Ideal Boy: Good Habits” poster, whose colorful drawings and simple instructions are ingrained in the collective Indian psyche. For decades, the paper charts were plastered across classrooms and bedrooms, depicting the types of everyday tasks boys should follow in order to become ‘good men’.

Over time, the poster has become outdated kitsch. But recently, artists have started to put their own spin on the concept. Artist Meera Sethi, born in New Delhi and based in Toronto, crafted a version depicting how a man can be both ideal and gay: he is kind and generous and uses protection. Mumbai artist Priyesh Trivedi’s series shows the original round-faced, neatly-coiffed boy walking out of a sperm bank and lighting a joint. These modern takes on Indian habits have received an outpouring of support—and spin-offs—from Indian youth online.

We caught up with Meera Sethi about her poster and what it means to be an ideal man in India today.

Makeshift: What inspired your take on the Ideal Boy poster?

MS: I’ve had a longstanding interest in the use of charts in India as a tool for education. Aesthetically they are quite charming, with the hand-drawn illustrations and use of typography and color. They also tell many stories about Indian history, politics, society, culture, religion. The original Ideal Boy poster was created as an earnest directive for young boys to grow into valued members of society. Yet look closer, and you see that this is a society that is also patriotic, patriarchal, gendered, heteronormative, and holds a caste—and class-based value system.

I conceptualized and created the poster to validate the lives of queer South Asians and, more specifically, gay brown boys and men. It validates



Meera Sethi's take on the "ideal" Indian male challenges stereotypes about gay men.

Meera hopes to show that the parameters of the modern “ideal” Indian are wider than the original posters suggest.



that you are good enough and, more than that, you are every bit as ideal as any straight boy.

It's still quite difficult for Indian men and women to come out.

As long as law and societies continue to perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism, queer Indian men, women, and transgender people will continue to struggle with internalized homophobia. At some point, we have all had to face the false belief that we are not good enough, not “ideal”. And therefore, rewriting our stories from an affirmative perspective helps to create pride—a hugely important concept in LGBTQ communities.

You've called your poster “a double-take that suggests the unexpected”. Can you elaborate?

For all young Indians, seeing our stories reflected back to us in a way that rewrites a monolithic version of “Indian culture” is quite critical.

Queer desire has always existed but has not always been written into history. For this reason, I was motivated to use the original style of the poster as the means to speak of a different story. It's a way of reclaiming our lives both in the past and the present.

How did you arrive at the habits in your poster?

I selected the particular scenes to illustrate because I wanted to keep within the tradition of the Ideal Boy poster style that highlighted aspects of a “well-rounded” boy who cares for himself, friends, family, and community. In doing so, I also wanted to break the stereotype that says gay men can't be good fathers or in stable long-term relationships, both of which are untrue. I wanted to surprise the reader of the poster who may have been expecting a standard storyline by interjecting a queer narrative.

There is, of course, no one “ideal boy”. However, I think my version comes pretty close!

Other contemporary artists have also been adapting the old “meme” to new realities. Why do you think this piece in particular is so appealing?

These posters became a ubiquitous part of the Indian education system post-Independence in 1947 and have become part of a visual culture intrinsic to Indian identity. Quirky and charming, they lend themselves well to creative revision and are an ideal vehicle for artists wishing to address social change. ⊗

View Meera's work at meerasethi.com