Temporality beckons, especially in the here and there of the queer and now. For someone like myself who works on historical archives of sexuality in South Asia (read dead people and undead subjects), temporality has become the bugbear of queer historiographical writing. Reading queer pasts has now become a messy affair where the desire for historical kin rubs up against the sheer diversity of archives, spaces and temporalities. Debates on how to read/write the queer past swerve (to put it rather vulgarly) between an embrace of its munificent incommensurability (divergent temporalities are fodder for theories of queer difference) and a capture of its genealogical sameness (the past surrenders lineages of our queer presents). Such concerns with reading queer pasts are especially pressing for queer lives in postcolonial worlds where the legal right to be here and now is often authorized by the evidence of histories past.

Take, for instance, the continued efforts in India and elsewhere to repeal colonial anti-sodomy statutes that have met with continuous and frustrating state refusals (pace Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code). While it may be easy (and even necessary) to understand such refusals within state-sanctioned ideologies of homophobia and sex-panic, there is a much more vexed attachment to temporality at work. For “unnatural sex” (as act, not identity) to be legalized in India, it must be understood to be both in time and out of time at the same time. That is, if homosexuality (in all its variant forms) is not just a product of Westernization (read colonialism and now globalization), then it must first be in time, “made in India,” present in its historical archives as embodied form and content. Within such a
structure of temporality, to refuse rights and representation to queer subjects in India is to be out of time with its own histories of emergence.

Even, or especially, as such a feverish recuperation and recovery of the past continues to haunt the writing of queer histories in India, I want to proffer a different sightline for the consumption of times past. I want to think of a way to sit with time that bypasses lineages of reproduction or value. I want to imagine a relationship to temporality that is about loitering, stalling, and ultimately queering the process of making time. What I want to think about, tout court, is “timepass.” Belonging to the postcolonial vernacular of Hinglish (potent cocktail of the Queen’s and the people’s English) timepass is a concept peculiar to the natives of South Asia. It encompasses a range of meanings, from killing time, to engaging in casual (often sexual) activities that defy time’s value. To do or invite timepass is to unmoor oneself from the weight of time, to surrender (for better or worse) to the process; all that matters is that time passes and we along with it. Scant scholarly research can be found on the topic, beyond a few socially responsible studies that point to the concept’s presence in disgruntled, bored youth (who have too much time at hand), or in urban collectivities where the inclination to “timepass” has led to an increased proclivity for casual sex.¹ For the purposes of this brief meditation, I am interested more in thinking of timepass as an epistemology for queer historiographical work that reroutes our orientation to the past.

¹ See Craig Jeffrey, Timepass: youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India (Stanford University Press, 2010), and Protima Bedi and Pooja Bedi Ebrahim, Timepass: the memoirs of Protima Bedi (Viking, 1999).
What would it mean to think of times past as timepass, as temporalities of suspension, pleasure, boredom and even surplus?

Let me say more about what I mean. I am currently working on a historiography of a Devadasi diaspora, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (Goan Maratha Society) that moved back and forth between Portuguese and British India between roughly 1860-1961. Devadasi is a pan-Indian term (falsely) interchangeable as sex-worker, courtesan, prostitute and slave. Devadasis are familiar and sought after objects of historical recovery within studies of gender and sexuality as their (lost) stories provide rich counter-examples of sexuality’s diversity and presence in South Asia. My study of the Goan Devadasis echoes, in many ways, such recuperative fervor, but in an almost counter-intuitive fashion. Unlike the familiar histories of loss that accompany the excavation of queer lives, the archive of this collectivity offers a radically different relationship to the past. Most significantly, the archive is abundant, accessible and continuous to this day. It grows and adds to its content even as I put pen to paper.

An examination of this massive, self-fashioned archive (housed in Panaji and Mumbai) reveals an exhausting range of archival genres - novels, short stories, minutes, property deeds, medical case records, biographies, private correspondence to name a select few. Such abundant evidence of sexuality’s past(s) unsettles habits of archival recovery and/or discovery.

I have now spent over a decade reading the materials in this archive, and on every visit to the archive, I leave wondering how to develop a reading practice that breaks with the presuppositions of recuperative historiography? How to narrate the workings of this subaltern archive without scripting it within liberal heroic tropes of visibility and progress? After all, from what we know from its own available records, the Samaj conceived of its archive as a living space of reading, gathering, and regathering again. The Samaj’s penchant for accumulating materials was and continues to refuse the mandate for preservation or reproduction; rather we have an archive that exists to exist, compelling its readers to linger on its archival forms, to stumble, get bored, digress, before the demand for historical utility takes over. Here, the sanctum sanctorum of historical research – the archive – becomes a place of open encounters. Instead of scavenging the detritus of the past for genealogies of the present, we are invited instead to timepass, to dwell in archives as spaces of chancy deliberation than cathartic revelation.