1. Ambedkarite Expression of Non-Normative Desires: Interrogating Caste-Based Marginalisation in India's LGBTQIA+ Movement

-Anchal Soni & Dhivya Malhotra

Abstract

Non-heteronormative includes a spectrum of desires in the post-colonial world. This paper is a deductive study that attempts to reveal the marginalisation of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi Queerness in the Indian LGBTQIA+ Movement post the scrapping of Section 377. It attempts to examine how location influences the understanding of non-heteronormative discourses. Emphasising Gopal Guru's theory of the lived experience of dalit-queer people in India, the paper aims to situate them within a discursive history of Ambedkarite resilience. It attempts to question the egalitarian principle in the queer discourse by positioning caste as a space that perpetuates differential experience. The research methodology employed incorporates a multidisciplinary approach, comprising interviews with Dalit-queer scholars and students, surveys of queer individuals and their allies, and an archival study of publications by queer collectives. Expanding on the concept of space, this paper also attempts to problematize the supposed egalitarianism of cyberspaces and explore the possibilities of counter-sterilisation there. The urban topography as a safe space for the Pride Movement is studied, comparing metropolises, especially Delhi, with other cities. The paper also critically examines how the LGBTQIA+ movement has been politicised through efforts to integrate queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming individuals from the dominant caste into the Hindutva narrative.

Keywords

- Non-heteronormativity
- Lived experience
- Indian LGBTQIA+ Movement
- Dalit-queerness
- Urban culture
- Queer politics

Introduction

At the 2015 Delhi Queer Parade, a bold poster proclaimed, "Dalit, Queer, Proud." This declaration did not simply delve into the complexities of colonisation or the intersections of subaltern identities in India. Rather, it raised critical awareness of the ignorance inherent in the cis-heteropatriarchal structure we inhabit, serving as a powerful affirmation of resilience against caste discrimination, Islamophobia, tribal injustices, and much more. In a democracy, subaltern identities stand as the system's greatest cynics, and if they don't remain such, they turn to collateral damage of a system that thrives on their silence. These identities also translate as an "electoral minority" that is "not just members of a socio-economic class or followers of a certain ideology but are inextricably linked to ascriptive identities" (De 222). These secluded citizens become dissident citizens when they narrate an alternative discourse of this democracy, speaking from a social location historically and culturally marginalized through "discrete and overlapping patriarchal arrangements'" (Rege 78).

Beyond the hegemony of the empirical, theorising lived experiences includes ethical and moral tentacles. Elaborating on lived experience, Sarukkai writes, 'the experiencer comes to the experience not as a subject who has some control over that experience but as one who has to live with that experience.'(Sarukkai 34) The experience of caste within the Indian LGBTQIA+ movement reinforces this argument, highlighting a discursive history of difference. The marginalisation of the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi Queer is hence a manifestation of systematic violence of Brahmanical hierarchy and Victorian morality. Oyewumi alludes that the Pre-British Yoruba society recognised gender of '*anafemales*' and '*anamales*' as "having multiple identities that were not based on their anatomy". Heteronormativity operates within the state's enforcement to ensure the social reproduction of ideologies and bodies. He quotes Fustel De Coulanges' analysis of the Greek city: "There was nothing independent in man; his body belonged to the state and was devoted to its defence." (Oyewumi 189) Amidst such intermingling of a colonial legacy of othering, as well as the othering prescribed by Manu, among others, gives a connotation to being a Queer in India. At the 2015 Delhi Queer Parade, as a reply to an upper caste individual on the need to bring caste "everywhere" Drubho Jyoti said, "We bring caste up because caste is everywhere and in my everything, Caste is in my shirt; Caste is in my pant, Caste is in my sex, Caste is in my being and Caste is in every part of you too!" This brings the question of obsession with the idea of 'purity' that even a conversation about caste, minorities, and tribals in Queer Parade is considered derailing the movement. A queer lens towards caste and Ambedkarite radicalism in the Indian LGBTQIA+ movement is foremost.

Romancing the City

As we rummage through the social construct of "how we love", the question of "where we love" follows. The topography of a city shapes relationships and popular conceptions

of courtship. Policing, both pedagogical and physical, ensures the social order, where clandestine meetings are a transgression beneath the facade of morality. Kumar asserts that love democratises the city. The public domain may seem more accessible, but it is not. He writes, "Lovers want to transform a city into the city of their imagination…those who are not in love do not inhabit the city"(Kumar 173).

Queer desire, in a similar fashion, culminates within the physical topography. This topography is approached in the following ways in this paper. -

- The City as a manifestation of hierarchies
- The difference between the city and the hometown

Both of these approaches perceive the negotiation of the public domain in relation to the question of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi Queer desire. The cities discussed in the following sections refer to major metropolitan areas.

The City as a Manifestation of Hierarchies

The public realm, in popular notion, is reserved for the "masculine". This includes affairs of corporatocracy, governance, policing, surveillance, military, and violence. The "feminine" is reserved for the home, encompassing ideas of love, romance, family, and conjugal relationships. If the realms of self, home and society are presented through three concentric circles, the *closeted* desire would be central to Society (masculine), Home (feminine) and Self (non-binary).

Kang writes in a personal essay, “I was constantly reminded by my family to not wear my caste on my sleeve. How doing so would attract unwanted attention…Much of my courage (or just plain common sense) to not shy away from confrontations with my daily realities concerning my caste came from me dealing with bullying because of being an out-of-the-closet homosexual.” He continues, “Not only did I try to look and seem masculine, but I would also try to imitate my upper caste friends’ fascination with their cultures.” The performance of caste and heterosexuality has several manifestations. In the interview with Dhiren Borisa, he said, "I used most of my scholarship amount on clothes to sort of camouflage the caste" (Kang).

Social Media sites, especially Facebook, are filled with pages and groups for “Marriage of Convenience”. These groups provide the accessibility of like-minded “lesbians and gays” to marry a suitable partner and disguise their identity under a heterosexual legal contract of marriage. Needless to say, the marriage of convenience also ensures endogamy, as well as perpetuates the class structure. While for queer men closeted in a marriage, the city may become an escape from the doctrine of home. For the queer women disguised as “housewives”, the city shrinks itself to the threshold. Similarly, caste as a structure of dominance either eradicates the marginalised or forces them to

fit into an order.

In 2015, a protest culminated in a call for Shudh Desi Romance. This was in reaction to the Hindu Mahasabha's open threat that anyone found “holding hands” on Valentine's Day would be married off. This protest arranged a mass-marriage campaign, including same-sex marriages. Students and activists were detained as a reaction. This event is a connotation of how cities are also spaces for subservient practices and questions. Grover's study on Delhi's *bastis* and resettlement colonies scrutinises how practices of “courtship" are shaping here with the swift changes in "popular culture" and “metropolitan freedom” which is intermingled with a "close-knit urban network". She asserts the metropolitan topography has people from diverse backgrounds, which is separated from "the surveillance of their kin and neighbours". It is here that the enforcement of endogamy crumbles (Grover 57).

The voyeurism of transvestites and a homophobic gaze often make the urban spaces unfit for queerness. Pride Parades then become a celebration of identities. Before the scrapping of Section 377, it was the Queer Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi who proclaimed their presence in the public domain in Pride and more often than not were “beaten, tortured, raped and killed”. However, “the sexuality rights consultancies and speaking engagements went to Savarna queers.” (Surya 8) The engagements of law, petitions, and courtrooms were dominated by the savarna privileged queers, who had access to education and mental health wellness, while protest marches were the only space for the subaltern to assert their dissidence in urban topography and law. Caste is the premise of all the surveillance in the city space. This entrenched social hierarchy does not merely exist as a historical artefact but actively shapes who is watched, how they are watched, and the spaces where such scrutiny is concentrated. The publicness of the pride parade, distant from the codes of the courtroom, thus makes it a space where the double marginalisation of the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi queer identities can be brought to question the homogeneity of the movement.

The Difference Between the City and the Hometown

Despite being a draconian urban delirium, which is ultimately a manifestation of hierarchies, the city is a liberatory site for immigrants. The closeted non-binary self finds an escape in this urban delirium. The microcosm of middle-class morality and cis-heteropatriarchal norms is left behind in pursuit of freedom. In the interview with Dr Dhiren Borisa, they alludes to John Demilio's essay *Capitalism and Gay Identity*. This essay asserts that metropolis does give a liberation, often with a space to express and explore your queerness, and links the formation of queer identity with the emergence of “cities”.

The curator's note of Queer Muslim Futures said, “Growing up in a lower-middle-class,

Muslim home in northeast India, I had to resort to 'silence' as a means of survival for a substantial part of my life. And then, when I had found the vocabulary to navigate my sexual identity in a metro city, the realisation of modern Indian 'Muslimhood' dawned upon me." Metropolises like Delhi become a melting point of various cultures, which breaks existing hierarchies. However, the irony of caste continues. The caste of the countryside manifests itself as class and capital in Delhi. Contrary to Dr. Borisa's perception of Delhi, Aindriya found Tripura Pride more diverse. They said, "I saw that in Pride Tripura, there were a lot of people who were not very elite and bourgeois. They were from diverse backgrounds, from the rural and remote areas, who had travelled all the way just to attend that. There were many people from the hijra community, as well as those who didn't know English. All of them are Bahujan or tribal people, and they're all fighting for their rights, and not like us, who just talk about a lot of things on social media and don't go out and see the real things. We live in a lot of privilege." Perhaps caste has been replaced by caste markers in the metropolis. An epistemological standpoint is hence necessary to underscore the attempts of the savarna Queer to adopt the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi identity, as reflected in the remarks of "derailing the movement" and the poster "Dalit, Queer and Proud".

Claiming the Third Space: Hate Speech, Internet Dalits, and Sexuality

When public spheres shrink in providing a place for marginal identities, the Internet, as a third space, becomes an expression of alternative historiography. The internet, as a free space of expression, is due to its decentralised nature. However, this very nature of "the new media... transforms it into an effective tool for the mobilisation of emotions by the hegemonic forces." Yet, there are resilient voices, such as those of Internet Dalits. K Satyanarayan eludes the term as a category of "Dalit scholars, intellectuals and activists who are vigilant and active", which has created a serious kind of problem for the mainstream (Solanki 124).

The mode of the blog, stories, and art that the Internet Dalits produce is often personal. "My queerness was not just limited to joy, and my caste to anger…both change positions concerning each other at all times, and both celebrate and fight with each other's 'rawness' at all times", writes Akhil Kang. In his blog, *Desi Underground Gay,* some fascinating narratives of desire and citizenship emerge. These narratives are sometimes anonymous, in the hope of being heard, if not seen. It is the norm of the public domain that has entered the third space of the internet, which is- the more visible the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi (or any subaltern identity) is, the more vulnerable they become to violence. Aindriya Barua, a machine learning engineer and queer Adivasi artist, uses art as a form of expression to convey her resilience.

Since 2020, Aindriya has been working on a Hate Speech Detection BOOT (Build–

Own–Operate–Transfer) that detects hate speech on social media spaces. It can detect offensive and derogatory text, visuals, and audio against Dalits, Queer, minorities, women, and Adivasis in Hinglish (a mixture of English and Hindi language). An intersectional marginalised identity is violated more severely and is more vulnerable owing to limited access to mental health apparatus. Baudh terms this "intersectional subordination". He asserts that a sense of isolation is hinged on such narratives. (Baudh 232) Therefore, a safe means and space in both the virtual and physical worlds ensure a transformation from isolated narratives to "shared community experiences." The virtual space can be manifested as a space where closeted desires find expression, rather than being an extension of the heteronormative and casteist social order.

Personal is Political: Caste, Islamophobia, and *Homohindunationalism*

The 2018 Supreme Court Judgement, which struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and decriminalized homosexuality, was read by many as an act of decolonisation. However, multiple oppressive processes work in nexus with colonialism to routinely marginalise certain queer, trans, and gender non-conforming subjects from queer mobilisation in India, making this act of "decolonisation" incomplete and partial. The Brahminical caste-based hierarchy, which is so intricately interwoven in Hinduism, perpetuates violence in all spheres of personal, political, social, economic, and cultural life in India. Nevertheless, Hindu scriptures are often cited to trace the queer and trans genealogies in Hindu antiquity and bring out pre-colonial and pre-Islamic Hinduism as a "liberal" religion that is accepting of people of all genders and sexual orientations. Such narratives systematically wipe out caste, making Queer mobilisation that locates queerness in Hinduism complicit in upholding the upper caste hegemony. This cooptation of queerness into the Hindutva discourse also in effect marginalises Christian and Muslim queer, trans, and gender non-conforming subjects in the movement by projecting Christianity and Islam as foreign religions that are essentially homophobic and the reason for increasing homophobia in India.

The term "homonationalism" was coined by the renowned queer theorist Jasbir Puar in her 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. According to Puar, Homonationalism is ' … a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.' (Paur 145). Though the term was first used in the context of the "pinkwashing" of Israel and the "US sexual exceptionalism" (Paur 110), in the last few years, we have witnessed the rise of a similar form of Hindu Nationalism in India as well. The Hindu Right has been trying to assimilate the dominant savarna caste queer,

trans, and gender non-conforming subjects into its Hindutva discourse, which promotes casteist, Islamophobic, and nationalist agendas. This assimilation of certain "exceptional" queer subjects as worthy of protection by nation-states in the Indian context will be termed *Homohindunationalism*. The assimilation continues as long as the savarna LGBTQ propagate their casteist and Islamophobic propaganda. This ultimately helps the Hindu Right to project all the Hindu/Indian "others"- including Dalit others, Muslim others, Christian others, Bahujan others, Adivasi others, and Kashmiri others- as queerphobic, while Hinduism is projected as the genesis point of neo-liberal democratic freedom of sexuality.

Two prominent queer/trans activists (both from upper-class, dominant caste backgrounds)- Ashok Row Kavi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi- are known for supporting casteist and Islamophobic politics. The founder of the non-profit organisation Humsafar Trust and the self-proclaimed Amma of the queer movement in India, Ashok Row Kavi, is known to be a supporter of the BJP and the RSS. Over the years, Kavi has argued quite vehemently that homosexuality has never been considered a sin in Hinduism, in contrast to Christianity and Islam, and the "Hindu Nation" had to repeal a "Christian Law" to come out as an inclusive nation. According to him, the primary causes of homophobia in India are Christianity and colonialism. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a well-known Kinnar celebrity and campaigner. Despite her repeated claims that there are no caste or religious distinctions within Kinnar groups, "Tripathi has mobilised her caste positionality to align herself with Hindutva forces and become a dominant Kinnar voice in propagating Islamophobic, brahminical nationalist state violence." (Upadhyay 45). In 2018, Tripathi voiced her support for "the Ram Janam Bhoomi Temple" at the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya. Her comments were condemned by the LGBTQIA+ community in India, who issued a statement stating, "Her position negates the politics of communal harmony that Hijras and Kinnars espouse."

Critiquing the voices of these prominent figures, who have almost a cult following in India, is crucial to mobilising subaltern identities in the queer movement. Row Kavi and Tripathi are those queer subjects that can readily be co-opted into the fold of the nation/state as they project the saffron-washing, Islamophobic, and neoliberal anti-left tendencies that the Hindu Right propagates. These homonationalist subjects are in continuous denial of caste, gender, and religion-based violence and limit the possibilities of decolonising sexualities in India by recolonising them within the Hindu-nationalist discourse.

At the 2024 Mumbai Pride Parade organised by Mumbai Queer Pride Collective, Ambedkarite queers were allegedly harassed by the members of Humsafar Trust, claiming it is "political". The slogan of "Jai Bhim" was revoked, while they also tried to seize the posters of Babasaheb. Ambedkarite Queers argued that the Pride Parade was reduced to a "celebration" rather than a critical event to reflect on the rights of the

community and its heterogeneity (Ramakrishnan).

As argued by Nishant Upadhyay in "Hindu Nation and Its Queers: Caste, Islamophobia, and De/coloniality in India", 'Within the Indian context, decolonising erotics requires challenging homohindunationalist tactics, along with dismantling all colonial, brahminical, and Islamophobic structures.' Thus, queer liberation in India is impossible as long as caste and brahminical structures are not annihilated.

Claiming legal rights: Queer Kinships, Same-Sex Marriages, and Caste

The egocentric, heteropatriarchal familial structure, with a male member at the head of the family tree, upholds a traditional understanding of family based on marital status and blood ties. This familial structure in the Indian context operates in conjunction with the Brahminical caste-based kinship structure of social stratification, which is founded on endogamy. According to Ambedkar, "the superposition of endogamy and exogamy means the creation of caste." The idea of marriage and family as patriarchal, heteronormative, and casteist institutions has been enforced by the state time and again by introducing bills such as The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019 and the Surrogacy Regulation Bill, 2019 which are "exclusivist", "casteist" and "deny the right to chosen families" (Ghosh 56) to regulate the intimacies and sexualities of its citizens.

In May 2015, one of Mumbai's top newspapers, Mid-Day, published a matrimonial advertisement that read:

> *"Seeking 25-40, Well-placed, Animal-loving, Vegetarian GROOM for my son (36, 5'11") who works with an NGO, Caste No Bar (Though IYER preferred)"*

The mother of a prominent queer activist published the advertisement. The emphasis on "though Iyer preferred" and "Vegetarian Groom" draws our attention to the operation of casteist hegemonies in queer spaces. Ambedkar considered marriage "to be a tool for undermining and dissolving all forms of social and economic hierarchies, particularly caste." (Kushwah 39). In the interview, Borisa questions whether the petitions for the legalisation of Same-sex marriage are breaking the caste endogamy or are they just reproducing it, as most of the petitioners are upper-caste individuals.

The non-biological kinship network of Hijra Households is often seen as an alternative model of kinship that needs to be recognised by the state. However, even this queer kinship model is not emptied of hetero norms. Hijra Households follow a guru chela model, which is "imitative of the normative mother-daughter relationship" (Dasgupta and Bakshi 48) through ritualistic feeding of drops of hijra guru/mother's blood to her

"dudh beti"/chela. This reaffirms the patriarchal, heteronormative idea of blood bonds as a base for the establishment of any kinship structure. Caste structures also find a way to get reproduced in the Hijra households. In "Understanding Caste and Kinship within Hijras, A 'Third' Gender Community In India", Ina Goel records the experience of Sharmili, a twenty-four-year-old hijra from the Dakshinpuri area in New Delhi who belongs to the Valmiki community. Goel recounts that Sharmili's hijra guru did not allow her to be in the group for toli badhai or collecting ritual blessings. Sharmili was instead urged to work as a beggar. If she wished to supplement her income, her hijra contemporaries offered her the alternative of sex work. Sharmili believed that her hijra guru barred her from participating in the auspicious dances related to collecting ritual blessings because of her lower-caste position.

While legal recognition of same-sex marriage might be an important milestone the movement endeavours to achieve, it must be viewed with caution and concern as it can also mean the state's attempt to assimilate queer individuals into its heteronormative folds. The queer kinship is incomplete if inter-caste is not considered in same-sex relationships.

Conclusion

Emergence of an intersectional identity is consolidated through its claim to lived experience. Queerness is not limited to sexuality. Caste is a discursive category whose presence is omnipotent in the Indian context, either directly or through 'caste-markers'. The vulnerability of a Dalit body in an otherwise Savarna setting implies a violence of invisibilisation. Asking the question of caste through a primacy of experience implies the possibilities of remodelling a movement based on egalitarian representation. The queer movement, by its very definition, is a subaltern, dissident movement that challenges the established boundaries of heteropatriarchy. If the movement aligns itself with the hegemonic structures of capitalism, Brahminical supremacy, and the homonationalist agendas of the state, it loses the dissident, radical voice that sustains the movement. Hence, it is necessary to weave an alternative historiography of queerness in India, one that is fluid in terms of caste and social hierarchy. A Dalit-queer discourse provides the possibility of theorising an epistemological space that can transcend/annihilate caste, and where desire finds liberated expression.

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