

26 Invisible to visible: social media and its role in establishing identity of LGBTQ in India

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Abstract

'The rigid and the fluid balance each other': historically, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer (LGBTQ) community has always existed in India, and it has been mentioned in many ancient and mythological scriptures. However, due to the current socio-political milieu it has remained obscure and looked upon with cynicism. Recent years have witnessed a massive dissemination of social media in India, which has allowed the notoriously concealed subject of Indian LGBTQ a major moment of transition from invisibility to visibility.

The World Wide Web has created a unique support system for the community by allowing people to connect in order to engage in a process of dialogue in the form of online activism, that translates into Pride marches and protests. Additionally, it allows the community to question the archaic judicial system, to reject the religious dictums and challenge the draconian social boundaries by standing up against moral policing. Over a period, we have observed innumerable coming out stories and acceptance, of rejecting apprehensions and becoming more ambitious by celebrating one's sexuality with pride.

There is a gradual shift where heterosexual Indians are being acquainted with their LGBTQ and non-binary friends, family members, neighbours, and colleagues, where the minority community co-exists with the heteronormative society. This research paper, along with an accompanying photo series, documents and highlights the positive changes and acceptance brought in due to the advent of social media in India LGBTQ.

The LGBTQ community has become increasingly vocal about their sense of winning over apprehensions. The community is forging ahead with the intent to fulfill their ambitions, which is to create a level ground for everyone to play in unison.

Introduction

Human sexuality is complex phenomenon and a topic of debate in modern times. India is a land of cultural and religious diversity as it has been a melting pot for centuries. However, British colonisation, and the strong political and religious view of the leaders in

the 20th and 21st centuries converted sexuality and homosexuality into an aspect of perverse human nature in India (Bhandari, et al., 1991).

The multidimensional nature of sexuality, which distinguishes between desire, behaviour and identity, is slowly gaining acceptance in Indian society. The frequent same-sex feelings and behaviour in men and women, across cultures and among almost all non-human primate species has been widely documented and scientifically proven (Rao & Jacob, 2012) (Sadock, Sadock and Ruiz 2009). Homosexuality has an ancient history that is traceable amongst primeval records in all major civilizations. This aspect of human behaviour has been existent in Indian culture for centuries. However, the framework to understand and interpret these experiences as gay and lesbian is relatively modern (Joseph, 1996).

Both society and technology are changing, and the present dynamic relationship between society and technology is leading to drastic evolution in the way the latter is used to communicate. As per the World Bank report in 2017, 45.7% of the human population has an active internet connection, i.e. approximately 3.5 billion people have a digital presence. (Bank, 2017). The advent of social networking platforms (SNPs) has led to active online communication between many minority groups in order to support each other. Research has shown that internet use assists operators with similar background and interests in bonding and forming associations. It has also been found that internet use can assist users from dissimilar background in bridging differences. Research has also brought into the limelight the problems being faced by LGBT adolescents. Internet forums designated for LGBT adolescents help them to cope with the special challenges at the turning point in their life concerning their identity, and helps decrease the risk of detrimental outcomes, such as depression or even suicide. (Cerni & Talmud, 2015). In recent years, we have witnessed a massive increase in the use of social media in India, which has allowed the notoriously concealed subject of Indian LGBTQ a major moment of transition from invisibility to visibility.

The research related to LGBTQ community has been sparse and there is very limited data available to understand the demographic and physiographic of the community (Nagarajan, 2014). This paper is an attempt to understand and assess how in recent years members of the LGBTQ community in India are using online SNPs to communicate and connect with each other. Using social media to make their status visible and voice heard. Social media has provided people with non-binary gender identity a platform to express themselves without apprehension, as confirmed by the respondents in India - that the use of digital platforms allows them to illustrate their identity through clothing and appearance.

Review of literature: homosexuality in India: beyond the gender binary

History, mythology, religion, British invasion and post-independence

The idea of defining humans based on physical and psychological traits, especially their sexual orientation, is a relatively modern concept, being just over a hundred years old. In fact, many historians suggest that the very concept of homosexuals - or indeed heterosexuals - is a 19th century European invention. (Bhandari, et al., 1991) (Pattanaik, 2014).

Historically there are innumerable references in ancient Indian civilization about the existence and acceptance of homosexuality. *Kamasutra*¹, one of the ancient texts written by Vatsayayan² in 2nd-3rd century CE contains an entire chapter on *Auparishtaka*³, homosexual sex (Bhandari, et al., 1991). Other Ancient texts such as *Manu Smriti*⁴, *Upanishads*⁵ and *Puranas*⁶ too have mentioned homosexuality (Chowdhury, 1996). The presence of homosexual iconography in Hinduism is widely documented in ancient scriptures, temple art and performing art as depicted in Fig.1 of *Ardhanarishvara* from 6th century. (Pattanaik, 2014).



Fig 1. *Ardhanarishvara*, 6th century; Government Museum, Jhalawar, Rajasthan, India.

Cultural and religious background has a profound influence on the present-day sexual behaviour pattern of individuals. According to Kinsey et al., (1948) (1953) these cultural and religious factors are often the primary source for validation and rationalisation of gender identity and sexual preference in present times. Factually, most religions were

¹ *Kama sutra* - The most prolific and celebrated text written in India on Hindu erotology.

² *Vātsyāyana* is the name of an ancient Indian philosopher, known for writing the *Kama Sutra*, the most famous book in the world on human sexuality. He lived in India during the second or third century CE, probably in Pataliputra

³ *Auparishtaka*- Sanskrit word for Mouth Congress.

⁴ *Manu Smriti* is an ancient Hindu legal text.

⁵ *Upanishads* are ancient Sanskrit texts that contain some of the central philosophical concepts and ideas of Hinduism.

⁶ *Puranas* are Hindu religious text, which has narrative stories about Lord Bramha.

tolerant or indifferent towards homosexuality. However, research reveals instances of the selective use of religious ethics and percepts to justify personal acrimony or prejudice and create intolerance against homosexuality (Boswell, 1981).

According to Leela Gandhi (2002), the '*catalogue of sexual irregularities*' was an established feature of ancient India. Same sex eroticism was tolerated in Indian culture for centuries. (Pattanaik, 2014). However, homosexuality was declared a crime in the Indian Penal Code, which was enacted in 1861 by the erstwhile British rulers who found this to be objectionable. Section 377, originally drafted by Lord Macaulay in the early 1830's reads: 'OF UNNATURAL OFFENCE: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished by imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall be liable to fine'. Fortunately, in a historic judgment, on 6th September 2018 the Supreme Court of India stepped in to strike down section 377 that had criminalised homosexuality as an unnatural offence⁷ (Malhotra, 2018) (Kirby & Thakur, 2018).

Homosexuality became a concealed subject in post-independence India, as the Gandhian philosophy became the cornerstone for every individual. Gandhi, writing about his life and sexuality in his autobiography, advocated celibacy. He also included remarks that extended to homosexuality.

The reader should know that even persons of note have been known to approve of what is commonly known as sexual perversion. He may be shocked at the statement. But if it somehow or other gains the stamp of respectability, it will be the rage amongst boys and girls to satisfy their urge amongst members of their own sex. (TENDULKAR , 1951)

Gandhi offered these writings when he was himself avowedly celibate. Famously, he even adopted a practice by the 1940s, of sleeping with a young female relative in openly accessible living quarters, to demonstrate his mastery over the sexual passion that he decried.

Perversion of homosexuality in India.

The occurrence of homosexuality has been under medical scrutiny for a long time as it has perplexed scientists from an evolutionary perspective. However, research confirms that homosexuality is indeed very common in the human population (Bailey & Zuk, 2009)

In the post-industrial society, the medical profession has played a central role in relating homosexuality with deviance and travesty (Bhandari, et al., 1991). Members of the LGBT community in India constantly experience violence, rejection and discrimination in spheres such as education, employment, healthcare and access to social services. (Badgett, 2014)

⁷ Section 377 was abolished after the abstract was submitted. It was a historic decision by Supreme Court of India headed by Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra. It was announced on 6 September 2018. https://www.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2016/14961/14961_2016_Judgement_06-Sep-2018.pdf

There is a lack of Indian psychiatric literature systematically investigating issues related to homosexuality. Data on prevalence, emotional problems faced, support groups and clinical services available are sparse. Research into these issues is crucial for increasing our understanding of the local and regional context related to sexual behavior, orientation and identity in India. (Rao & Jacob, 2012)

In the 21st century, many countries and cultures have accepted homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality rather than a debauchery, crime or mental disorder. (Sadock, Sadock, & Ruiz, 2009) The American Psychiatric Association, in 1973, and the World Health Organisation, in 1992, officially accepted its normal variant status. Many countries have since decriminalised homosexual behavior including India in 2018 and some have recognised same-sex civil unions and marriage (Rao & Jacob, 2012).

Gender identity and related issues with homosexuality in 21st century urban India.

In the Indian context, sexual orientation and gender identity are entwined, and not necessarily a distinct concept (Badgett, 2014). Despite having a long history of homosexual existence in India, it is assumed as a recent and western phenomenon (Bhandari, et al., 1991). Despite the supportive response of 30% of Indian respondent in WVS, some of the prejudices embedded in social response and triviality related to homosexuality still exists in 21st century India. The matter further is compounded as the idea of sexual identity itself is an ambiguous one, even amongst the general gay population (Joseph, 1996). The recent event of the Transgender Bill in India⁸ has highlighted the complexity of the issue of sexual identification, as per Supreme Court order the 'self-identification' should be protected as a fundamental right. However, the present bill advocates state authority to determine the sexual identity of the person without any medical or legal process (Hindu, 2018).

India, with a current population of over 1.3 billion has no confirmed data to measure the actual population of LGBTQ. While conducting the research the latest official census data published by the government of India available is from 2011, which confirms the total population of LGBTQ at 4.88 lakhs, which is an under-reported figure (Nagarajan, 2014) (Roy, 2011). Other data presented by the Naz Foundation in the petition against section 377 stated that 7-8% of the total population of India is of LGBTQ (Malhotra, 2018).

From 1990 to 2014, the share of Indian respondents in the World Value Survey (WVS) who believed 'homosexuality is never justifiable' fell from 89% to 24% i.e. from an overwhelming majority to a clear minority. With 30% of Indian respondents broadly supportive of homosexuality in 2014, 70% remain in the range from somewhat opposed to completely opposed (WVS, 2014).

The mainstream social response in India is still in opposition to sexual minorities in India, forcing many members of LGBTQ to remain closeted (Nunez, 2017). The impact of

⁸**Transgender Bill in India is still been debated. The Lower House (Lok Sabha) of Parliament had passed the bill in December 2018, which has caused a massive public uproar in the LGBTQ community. At present, the Bill has been withheld in Upper House (Rajya Sabha).

striking off section 377 from the Indian constitution is yet to be documented. However, it is a massive boost for many members to come out and accept their preferred sexual identity as it is not a crime to be gay in India. Also, the majority of respondents of the primary research accepted that in the last five years, the Indian gay community has moved into, and flourished, on what has probably been the most accepting space they could ever have hoped to find – the internet. They are forming NGOs, online communities, WhatsApp groups, calling up helplines and meeting regularly to evolve strategies for their cause (Hindu, 2018).

Social media and its role in making LGBTQ visible in India

In India there are 460 million internet users, it is estimated that there will be around 358.2 million social network users by 2021. A substantial increase from 2016, when this figure stood at about 216.5 million. Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the country. There were about 195 million Facebook users in India as of 2016, placing India as the country with the largest Facebook user base in the world. Other popular networks include WhatsApp, Instagram, and Skype (Statista, 2018). Research has shown that minority groups like LGBTQ are using online SNPs like Facebook to communicate and create support groups (Cerni & Talmud, 2015).

Subjugation due to homophobia in India has helped give rise to a whole universe of online options that help the LGBTQ community to connect. Unlike other groups who may be minorities within society, homosexuals do not necessarily have queer parents or family as a primary support system, which can lead to extreme isolation in the worst cases (Nunez, 2017). Primary observational study of the online profile of LGBTQ respondents have confirmed that they use Facebook to meet and interact with queer people, and also use it as an avenue to express their fears and desires. In the absence of family support, online groups and social media have offered accessible alternatives to form a community outside of family. Primary research had revealed online platforms like *Gaysi*⁹ and *Gaylaxy*¹⁰, and publishers like *Queer Ink*¹¹ have helped create spaces for LGBTQ people to interact, share and collaborate. Numerous digital influencer from the LGBTQ community are working towards creating awareness and a digital eco system to support each other. Alexander Balakrishnan in Fig. 2 is a popular Indian blogger who covers wide range of online content on the young urban gay community in New Delhi.

⁹ <http://gaysifamily.com/> - Gaysi Family was started in 2011 as a blog to provide a voice and a safe space to people from the South Asian Subcontinent that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer.

¹⁰ <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/> Online WhatsApp support group for LGBTQ in India.

¹¹ <http://queer-ink.com/category/q-india/documents/> Online LGBTQ support group working in this field from past two decades.



Fig. 2 Alexander Balakrishana is a popular Indian gay blogger

Many online SNPs are providing support beyond the virtual world, for example Facebook provides Gay Housing Resource Assistance. It provides LGBTQ people who moved out from their families with other LGBTQ roommates. The norm in India is that many people live with their families until they get married. However, if that is not the trajectory you are on because you are LGBTQ, it can be really challenging to convince your family to let you go out and live on your own or live with roommates (Nunez, 2017).

Sartorial expression of gender on social media in India

Before the 19th century, gender distinctions in dress were not nearly as marked as they have become since. (Laver, 1938) One of the main reasons for the sharp divergence in the way men and women dressed is attributed to the fall of European aristocracy and the corresponding ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. The gender differences in European clothing were strongly demarcated. These European sartorial conventions later appeared in the colonised countries like India. Prior to the British invasion, the clothing in Indian sub-continent was draped and unstitched for both men and women. The

differences were subtle, and the sartorial demarcation was not as evident as it was in European raiment (Tarlo, 1996).

The imperialist view of Indian male dressing was graceful, pretty and effeminate, the same as their female counterpart. Later, during the colonised period in India, male members of society adapted the European way of dressing, as it was deemed fit for redefining their stand as equal, creating a stark contrast between male and female dressing in Indian society. (Tarlo, 1996) While this sartorial transition of binary identity was made, the third gender went unrecognised. The present day Indian sartorial conventions are a crossover of British influence over existing Indian costume. (Bhandari, et al., 1991)



Fig. 3 The adapted masculine identity of the model

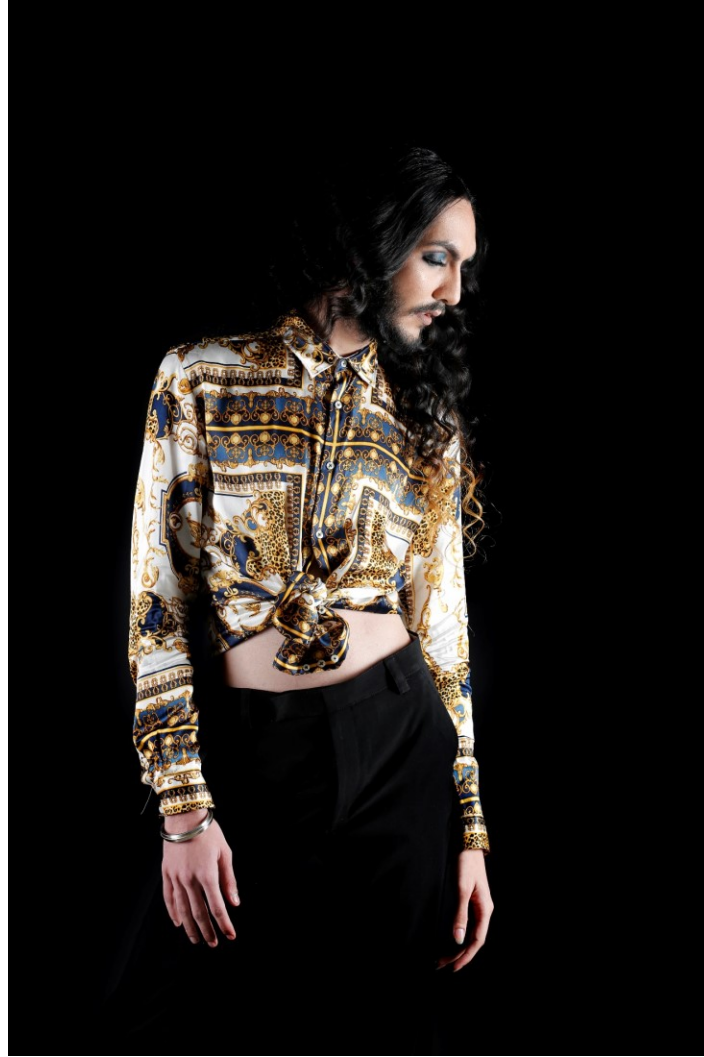


Fig. 4 The factual effeminate self of the model

Since homosexuality was a crime in India until September 2018, the sartorial evolution of the community in India has not evolved organically. Often, large sections of homosexuals hide their gender identity by adopting the identity given to their biological sex, as shown in Fig. 3. Here the subject conceals the actual identity with the socially accepted masculine identity assigned at birth, and Fig. 4 depicts the actual gender preference of the same person.

Gender identity in the queer community is very diverse and, often, misrepresented in mainstream media. Indian cinema has frequently shown overly effeminate gay men, which has created a homogenized identity for the entire gay community in India (Bhandari, et al., 1991). The stereotype has oversimplified and standardized the diverse nature of LGBTQ identity. However, these conventions are being challenged, for instance the Indian fashion industry has been active in bringing out diverse issues of the LGBTQ community, and providing a medium to express their identity.

The advent of social media allowed queer fashion to experiment, and explore dominant conceptions of gender. It offers space to rethink heteronormatively, and for some the possibility to live, at least temporarily in space and time, outside of its bounds. The majority of respondents confirmed that it is easier for them to express their sartorial preference on SNPs compared to the physical world.

Methodology

The methodology used to evaluate the hypothesis was multi-faceted. Considering the complexity of the topic, and the dearth of secondary data on the LGBTQ community in India, a multi-pronged research approach was employed. Several studies on the subject by various authors were consulted to formulate the guidelines for the present research. Personal interviews with a random stratified sample-set were undertaken to ascertain the common issues faced, and the different ways online SNPs are used to communicate and formulate support groups by LGBTQ. Additionally, a control group was interviewed to assess how SNPs are used to express their sartorial identity. The conclusions were drawn by analysing data collected through all the above means.

A draft questionnaire was made, attempting to capture details such as age, profession, sexual orientation, discrimination faced, coming out stories, clothing preference and usage of online SNPs. The questionnaire comprised multiple-choice questions where demographic and psychographic segmentation was carried out. A pilot run was conducted on a focus group to ascertain validity of the data captured. The observations from the pilot run were incorporated as amendments to the questionnaire to reach the final version of the questionnaire.

Along with the survey and in-depth interviews, empirical data was collected through online and offline controlled group observations. Active social media users from the LGBTQ community were randomly identified. With their consent, their online social media profiles were followed for a period of 2 weeks, and an observational form was maintained to capture the data. The information revealed was further analysed to assess how the respondents are using social media to communicate and create visibility for the members of LGBTQ community in India.

Analysis and findings

Demographic details of the sample set

The questionnaire was distributed to random stratified sample set through the snowball method of data collection. 117 participants responded to the electronic survey. The findings of the survey revealed that most of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 45 years. The majority of respondents were students (44.1%) or young working professionals (47.1%) living in urban cities.

Gender identity and related experiences

52.9% of the respondents identified themselves as gay, 14.7% did not want to label themselves to any specific category and only 5.9% of the participants were lesbian. The data collected confirms that the lesbian women are more apprehensive to express their gender identity compared to gay men. Additionally, the survey results revealed that many lesbian and bisexual women are overlooked due to their sartorial preference, which is similar to cisgender women. Fig. 5 shows a 22-year-old lesbian model who has similar clothing preference as cisgender female.



Fig. 5 Sartorial preference of 22-year-old lesbian woman

One of the objectives of the survey was to assess the extent of discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community. 67.6% of the member confirmed that they were subjected to some form of discrimination at some point in their lives. The respondents were also asked to confirm their experience of establishing their gender identity and if they encountered confusion at any point. To this 58.8% confirmed that they have never experienced any kind of confusion regarding their gender identity whereas 41.2% reported otherwise. This goes out to prove that despite the effort of many NGOs and private support groups a major section of the queer population finds it difficult to establish their gender identity.

Social media as a means to express gender identity through clothing

All the respondents had access to the internet and had an online profile on various SNPs. All 117 respondents confirmed that they use social media to communicate with other members of the LGBTQ community. 93.7% respondents have used online dating applications to meet suitable partners. 67.6% participants confirmed that it is easier to express their gender identity on online forums like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. 97% of the respondents believe that the acceptance of LGBTQ has increased in the past five years, and that social media plays a critical role in connecting the community and providing visibility.

Responses from in-depth interviews revealed that most of the participants felt that the acceptance of LGBTQ has improved in Indian society. Observation was made that the construction of online identity through fashion and clothing has a wide spectrum and diverse manifestations among members of the LGBTQ community. In a few of the cases, the projection of gender identity on SNP was entirely different to the one expressed in real life, as shown in Figure 6 where the model has documented different sartorial expressions and the contrast of his gender identity.



Figure 6 Identity: The construction

Most of the respondents confirmed that they find social media a safe space to express their true self, as they have encountered reservations expressed by their family members and workplace colleagues.

Further observation of the focus group revealed that the content shared was on a wide range of topics relating to the LGBTQ community. Both visual and textual content are shared on a regular basis with suitable hashtags and appropriate messages. All the participating members of the group confirmed that they have participated in Pride

marches and posted pictures of their participation on social media, making it an essential instrument to express the invisible aspect of their identity.

Conclusion

The LGBTQ community has always existed in India and will continue to flourish and fight for their civil rights. There was always a strong sense of connection within the community, through common meeting grounds, however the invasion of social media completely changed the landscape of how people could connect. (Bhandari et al., 1991; Johnson, 2015). The research conducted proves that digital communication has paved the way for the LGBTQ community to freely and safely transmit their viewpoint, thus creating a positive impact and giving them visibility that was long overdue. 'Social media constitute an arena of public communication where norms are shaped and rules get contested' (Dijck, 2013).

The results from both primary and secondary sources have confirmed that the general acceptance of LGBTQ has improved in past five years, social media had played a crucial role in connecting, and giving discernibility to the Indian LGBTQ community, but still a large part of the community are closeted due to social oppression. SNPs have also provided a safe space for sartorial expression in a heteronormative society. Additionally, it emerged that there is a wide spectrum of gender expression within the community, which is highlighted on social media. By striking off section 377 and making homosexuality legal in India, the government has given a lot of faith and confidence to the LGBTQ community. However, there are many areas which require immediate legal and social attention, which will make the community truly visible.

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List of Illustration

Figure1 *Chandra, P* Ardhanarishvara (Image), Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ardhanarishvara/media/33339/153447> (2019, February, 17)

Figure 2 Model's own Gagan Plaha

Figure 3 Author's own

Figure 4 Author's own

Figure 5 Author's own

Figure 6 Author's own Model Surya Pratap Singh