

## QUEER ACTIVISM ON INTERNET

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### ABSTRACT

Internet is providing opportunities for sexual minorities. It is a place for activism of the kind least heard. Sexual minorities network on it. Building social capital, disseminating information, protesting, the use of Internet for the cause of sexual minorities is enormous. In the West, studies on the interplay between LGBT and Internet has already claimed considerable acceptance. There is huge literature existing on this area. In a society where things related to one's sexuality cannot be openly acknowledged, since oppression and shaming is so high. In such a situation, a place like Internet, where people can communicate by secrecy can heavily contribute to people who wanted to communicate their sexuality and problems related it intimate elements in life. Here comes the social significance of Internet for sexual minorities. In India, there is a dearth of scholarship. This area of research hasn't so far found any visibility in academia and public sphere in India. Their issues need more attention and acknowledgement. This paper investigates the trends emerging in the trajectory of queer movement in India and the diffusion of Internet in to almost all social spaces. The paper identifies some concerns as well the prospects of Internet for the cause of queer movement in India.

**Keywords:** Queer, Internet, Cyber sexuality, lifestyle activism, LGBT, heteronormative sexuality.

On 26 June 2015, a verdict by *United States' (US)* Supreme Court legalised gay marriage across US and Facebook decided to celebrate it. It unveiled a new feature dubbed "Let's Celebrate Pride", which automatically put a rainbow filter over Facebook profile picture. The timing coincides with LGBT Pride Month, which just got a major new event to celebrate during the month.

27 June, *Norwalk Connecticut, US;* a news anchor from India posted a comment in her Facebook timeline. The comment was in the background of the Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage. She believed people who have faith only in heteronormativity and spreads prejudices

and violence against third sex; are likely to put rainbow filter over Facebook profile picture, while misunderstanding that it is just another wonderful feature of the Facebook Company. And she thanks the Facebook owners for doing something for a genuine cause amid her strong distaste for corporate capitalist.

Many friends in Facebook have DP in rainbow cover. Their friends too had it. Why people in India celebrate a judicial decision pertaining to LGBT in USA? In India growing sympathy towards queer issues have been spotted more in social websites.

Internet is a powerful weapon for the queer. There are a growing number of people, though their sexual orientation is straight, who support people with different sexual orientations. Primary source of such support comes from a single place. Internet platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Social media sites provide super easy way to celebrate queer pride. It is risk free and all pervading. There are opportunity structures in Internet platforms, which somehow support genuine third sex causes. If so, what is interesting about third genders in cyberspace? They find a place to build solidarity where neither stigmas nor prejudices exasperate them. Queer activists find new ways of solidarity in Orkut (now closed in India), YouTube, Facebook and other social media sites. Connected spaces are like a firewall for sexual minorities. It gives cozy enclaves for queer activism. They roam around uninterruptedly like birds in the sky because it is wide open and they are more likely to experiment in connected spaces because of anonymity and absence of old social cleavages therein. Sexual minorities, who find it difficult to form real intimate relationships, are migrating to Internet. A random perusal of blogs, Facebook communities, Twitter profiles, YouTube videos and other social platforms are testimony to the fact that there are treasured third sex enclaves that require more attention that is serious. These issues were not subjected to stringent analysis, despite the claim of rising power of sexual minorities to connect with like-minded people. Stories and news of queer identity in Internet goes just like stories of dam break.

Queer refers to a political and personal identity category that is inclusive of a range of sexualities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, hijra, kothi, to name a few. The term was popularised in the 1990s after activists and academics reclaimed the word from being a “hurtful slur” for those with “unusual” sexual orientations to something that was a positive affirmation of identity<sup>i</sup> (Thomas 2000). Queer has been widely utilized by Indian scholars and activists to characterize the struggles of sexual minorities in India, even though its historical and cultural roots are set in Western theorizing and LGBT political struggles. Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick pioneered critiques of gender that deconstruct and transcend the hetero-normative gender binary, thus expanding culturally constructed notions of gender to incorporate gender variance and transgender identities<sup>ii</sup>. Queer movements in contemporary India operate in a status

of semi-invisibility, as the traditional culture still conveys strong concept of heteronormality that penetrates all sections of society.

What makes LGBTI<sup>iii</sup> politics more profound in social websites in India?<sup>iv</sup> Indian queer engage in the discourse of sexuality by confronting the social institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and hetero-normativity and exposing the restrictions caused by their normalising effects on gender, sexuality, class, caste and religion. Indian queer comprises a broad spectre of gender variant against Heterosexual binaries in Indian context. The answer is a petite story, which I came across during student life. I was a postgraduate student of Political Science in a reputed government college in Cochin, the industrial capital of Kerala. Many times, those days I have been exposed to incidents in which hostel inmates brutally beat same sex lovers. Every now and then, there would be bigger noise by the fall of night in the hostel premises. I saw hostel inmates rushing into the lone college playground located just in front of the hostel. They used to beat and abuse some people. Someone told me that they are gay. I didn't understand anything. After all what is gay? Young hostel inmates showered a whole lot of aggressive brutalities on ill-fated same sex lovers, who came in there to share their 'solidarity' at the square. People looked at them with contempt, prejudice and misconceptions. Such people were locally labeled 'flute' in Cochin area. In Trivandrum they were called in some other name and in different Indian cities they were known in different labels which are often full of aversion, prejudice and abusive. In the campus, there were stories of this and that are lesbians and gays that they share intimate relations. Hailing from a remote area of Kerala, it was quite strange those days and unbelievable for young people like us who have always reasons to believe that 'intimate relationships' exist only between men and women. It was quite strange for us, when inmates of girls Hostel complain that by the fall of nights, men appear nude in front of the room window. Such people were labeled 'showmen' in the vicinity. At times, there came in news of gigolo, i.e., a young man paid or financially supported by an older woman to be her escort or lover.

It was disappointing; however, I was not able to understand what those people were doing in the lone playground. However, something went like stench from a corpse. Same sex love is a superstition in a rational society in which strictly a kind of hetero-normative sexuality is superimposed. Indeed, on the other end of the spectrum, it showed the magnitude of the discrimination that one community- perhaps the dominant culture, plays on the minorities.

Nevertheless, as society progresses, strange stories are likely to occur such as men and women making extra marital relations, people having many at a time, pre-marital sex and post-marital sex. Now, use and throw culture has almost engulfed us in the phantom advances of commoditisation and consumerism. Life and sexuality is like re-fillers; they are just thrown out after use without any kind of emotional attachment or personal nostalgia.

Yet, among the evangelists and apostles of all moral empires and spiritual fortresses, the rights of one section seem inadvertently significant: the rights of marginalised sexual minorities that stands at the periphery of the hetero-normative sexual social hierarchy. Surely, as society grows up, illiberal attitude intensifies just as if concrete walls. It is then very difficult to wipe out after institutionalization of such prejudices except as if a demolition by bulldozers. It then needs iconoclasts who unleash counter-revolutions. But it is quite unlikely in contemporary world. Education we get make all of us shrink into ourselves. Middle classes are more prejudiced. Never ever, people bother about installing a more progressive and inclusive society that is more liberal towards every individual who have their own reason to do things that majority frowns upon. Comparable is the way society deal with lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and inter-sexes, (LGBTI). Intolerance prevails as if truth. Plight of same sex lovers is disappointing in particular. Gay lovers escape oppressive regimes, lesbians run away from small towns, women leave their villages to become men, hijras move to the city. They move to Internet also because it has no stigma, prejudice and oppressive architecture.

In the last couple of years, queer movement found its fiesta corners in Internet. To them, net is probably the most comfortable space they could have ever discovered<sup>v</sup>. Internet has become increasingly accommodative to the sexual minorities. They could find more sexual self-expression in connected spaces. Queer activism in the secret conduits of Internet is like political dissent. Use of label sexual dissent is deliberate as it implies the fact that an act of dissent is more demanding in the architecture of Internet. Demanding in the sense that while dominant culture remains oppressive to alternate sexual preferences, which are also socially forbidden in India, social media has been iconoclastic which has power that is more destructive to most accepted sexual norms.

Political institutions always arbitrated the sexual behaviour of human society. Sexuality and power intersect in myriad of ways. Such thoughts on human sexuality rest at the core of personal identity. One may just perceive the story of third sex and general election 2014. Transgenders and eunuchs were casting voting rights as 'third gender' for the first time in sixteenth general election 2014. Election Commission recognised their gender as "others" in the voters register. The recognition comes 15 years after third sex was granted right to vote in 1994. Thereby third genders are increasingly believing that the key to politics of presence among their community is getting recognition as an alternative gender based on which they can fight for other rights<sup>vi</sup>.

Public rules, institutions and ideas have always negotiated sexuality. In India, it was a test of enquiry for the seers in the past. In ancient age, if epics are to be taken in to consideration, sexual diversity was a virtue of social inclusion. But sexuality and power goes in antagonistic ways in contemporary times.

Lesbian and gay movements are increasingly demanding equal rights of citizenship as heterosexuals. Sexual politics has been thereby hitting that of a movement by which sexual minorities are gaining access to mainstream culture. While doing so, no one can deny the fact that Internet becomes indispensable for sexual activism and in particular lesbian, gay, bisexuals, transgender and intersex (LGBTQI). One could call it queer politics in social media. There are considerable differences among the community itself regarding terms such as queer, third sex, transgenders and what makes each of them and how they are different. But this enquiry just call it queer in connected spaces, which involve all sexual minorities irrespective of their ideological differences.

Many marginalised sexual minorities are finding their story telling power through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and assert sexual rights only because Internet offers them a space that otherwise not feasible in the stiff, stigmatised and proscribed Indian society. A random perusal of blogs, Facebook communities, Twitter profiles, YouTube videos and web portals are testimony to the rising power of sexual minorities to connect with like-minded people and form queer identity.

Sex texting in Facebook, erstwhile Orkut, chat applications, sexually explicit streaming videos, etc., are more common on Indian Internet. It is all on the background of a largely inflated social culture in India. Culture is like water bubbles. It includes everything. But just a small burst could make it nothing. While considering the highly rigid social norms on sexual behaviour, one would also find reasons for growing Internet related sexual expressions. One could not just dismiss it as Internet sex, but rather it is a political dissent. It is dissent in the sense that one could destruct the rigid social norms on sexual behaviour, which was super imposing stereotypes and prejudice.

Internet provides spaces for virtual queer community free from the prejudice of the offline world. The social web is so much more than just a place to share news and pictures. It is a place to reclaim the language, which was colonised. It is a place to reclaim the time and space which was once lost to feudal hierarchy on sexuality. It is also a place to reclaim identity, which was relegated to insignificance by a superimposing high culture. Therefore, websites, portals, social networking sites steered to the cause of sexual minorities are aplenty.

Sahodaran<sup>vii</sup>, started in 1998, is one of the longest-running MSM interventions in India and the first community based organization (CBO) for MSM established in southern India. It provides a sense of community activism. MINGLE<sup>viii</sup> is a nationwide advocacy group and think-tank that pushes for LGBT equality in all spheres of public life in India. It acts as an influential and impactful think tank like any other organisation part of the intelligentsia in India, but its focus remain confined only to third sex issues. The group runs a Facebook<sup>ix</sup> page and it is suggestive

of the standards, efforts and quality of the mission it upholds. Social profiles give story-telling power, which articulate survival issues and spread awareness.

Online magazines and social platforms are channels of resistance. They tell stories of people, which mainstream media often overlooked. For example, BombayDost, India's first registered LGBT magazine, launched in 1990, runs a website<sup>x</sup>. It deploys friend power to the advantages of the community. Pink pages, first online National Gay and Lesbian LGBT magazine is available in website<sup>xi</sup> and features articles in varied topics and provide common platforms for the LGBT communities. They spread awareness, critical information and facilitates connection. Facebook<sup>xii</sup> page of Pink Pages has a good number of followers, but are mostly transgenders. They are protected enclaves with higher community standards. Facebook page, The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association describes that GALVA-108 is a non-profit religious organization providing information and support for GLBTI Vaishnavas and Hindus. A link available in the page navigate users to web page<sup>xiii</sup> that reads "this website is ..... dedicated to the teachings of Lord Caitanya, the importance of all-inclusiveness within His mission and the Vedic concept of a natural third gender".

For sexual minorities, social platforms are like closed enclaves. It gives them strong protection like a bullet proof against oppressive architecture, so they are unidentifiable and not attackable for the predators. They reclaim identity, language and solidarity in the social caves in Internet. It is a safe haven for marginalised sexual minorities to search for new relationships that cannot be screened by the draconian Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). They are not trackable in the sense that they have higher privacy and anonymity. No one could easily sense what are they doing in the walled corners in cyber space.

Facebook<sup>xiv</sup> page QueerCampus has 581 likes by end of August 2013. Page description reads "we use the term queer to refer not just to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people, but to any identity or outlook which questions stereotypes". Internet provides a free space where one could say anything according to one's conviction. It gives an uncensored public sphere. Facebook organising of Delhi Queer Pride Committee's first Queer Bazaar was inspiring for those who wish to mobilise third sex. 'A fun and safe space to hang out, have fun, play exciting games, win prizes and shop till you drop', says a page. Facebook<sup>xv</sup> page created by Delhi Queer Pride is a proof to the newfound unrestricted social space LGBT group finds to gather and share solidarity. In the page, followers express their willingness to participate in the pride match. They said either 'going' or 'declines'. There is easy way of communication. No one could stop then from sharing information. A look at the timeline is well depicting the success of the programme because people communicate in ease maintaining anonymity. It gives them visibility in invisibility. MINGLE<sup>xvi</sup> is a nationwide advocacy group and think tank that pushes for LGBT equality in all

spheres of public life in India. MINGLE (Mission for Indian Gay & Lesbian Empowerment), the first of its kind in India, consists of academicians, students and professionals from fields as diverse as arts and sciences, journalism, law, medicine, management and engineering. Group runs a Facebook<sup>xvii</sup> page, which has scores of likes and shares. Facebook posts are suggestive of the standards, efforts and quality of the mission it upholds. Internet gives them a space to maintain standards, strategy and mobilisation.

Queer mailing lists are popular ever since Internet in India. It was used for secret communication. Yahoo Group LGBT-India, US-based Desi Dykes for queer South Asian women, Gay Bombay- a local site, mailing list was used by sexual minorities for communications on a clandestine basis. Internet facilitates exclusive third gender support system such as dating sites, matrimonial sites. Planet Romeo<sup>xviii</sup> is an online platform for the gay and bisexual male and transgender community. Tolerance, respect, openness, freedom of expressions are the cherished values of the community, says its webpage. Shoe and Pink Sofa for women<sup>xix</sup> a leading third sex web based support system, outlines ten words, i.e., private, safe, friendly, comfortable, useful, contemporary, socially aware, uniting, local and authentic. These words, within the framework of love, friends and community, guide the brand direction and the ongoing development and business of Pink Sofa, says its webpage. Mumbai has groups like Rainbow Pride Connection that use email lists and groups to post information about parties and social events for queer women. The website calls for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Conferences<sup>xx</sup>. Gay Bombay continues to thrive as a social space for gay men and their families and parents. Online presence of the group eases out activism in a rigid society. The mailing list in the web page of Gay Bombay<sup>xxi</sup> says, 'Your Yahoo Groups gives you a safe-space to meet, interact, and share ideas with other members on the group. Your Yahoo Group gives you the space to express yourself without' [...].

Queer Azaadi Mumbai<sup>xxii</sup> is a loose collective, hosted on a WordPress blog that organises yearly Pride March in the city. Page has links for online fund raising. Donations are possible using PayPal. Webpage of 'gaysi'<sup>xxiii</sup> says it as a team of gay group. An inspection of website gives lot of hybrid terms that are both expressive of queer pride as well its commitment to maintaining anonymity. Broom, Baby Sher, The Cathartist, Chicklet, Gaypocalypse, KareemPuff, Lady Jughead, MJ, Pink Freud, Queer Coolie, Sherlock Homo, etc., are team members contributing to the group. They are well articulated and strategic in using social websites. But their names are put in codes. They try to maintain anonymity. Internet gives queer activists visibility in invisibility. It is too much required in a social landscape where prejudice kills people. When survival is difficult, anonymity is like a gift from god. Internet just does that. Jiah: The Magazine for Women with Heart, is a Pune based online magazine, from the women's group Birds of a

Feather (BOAF). Facebook page with 1300 likes by August end 2013, says it is for lesbian, bisexual, transsexual... for all queer identified women<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Thiru Nangai, a Tamil Nadu-based matrimonial website for transgender people, initiated by Kalki Subramaniam<sup>xxv</sup> is hosted on a blog and also active in a Facebook page that says (Thiru Nangai - Daughter of God) 'one is born a women, one becomes one', has 7864 likes by end of August 2013. Sahodari foundation, a movement of transsexual people<sup>xxvi</sup> successfully uses Internet to find out alternate social space outside the unreceptive and impervious social structure. In fact, from Humsafar Trust,<sup>xxvii</sup> one of the first queer NGOs to go online, now the web has become one of the safest terrain of the most invisible and distanced social groups, i.e., third sex. In connected spaces third sex is just like asylum seekers due to political persecution. They find trenced enclaves therein due to sexual persecution.

Plenty of chat options fascinate users in Internet. Many user specific platforms are used for chat. However, one thing that strikes is the way in which such platforms are available to denizens of connected spaces. One should go to [chat-avenue.com](http://chat-avenue.com) and see there are different types of chat options fascinating its users. Fact is that gay chat, lesbian chat, girl chat, boy chat, adult chat, etc., thrill users with wonders. Just a username is more than enough to be connected. 'Gay & Lesbian Chat' is an app in Google Play store. It says "Join Now and show off your lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) Pride!". It could be downloaded to Samsung Android and exhibit one's LGBT pride. 'Gayvox' is the gay and lesbian dating network that could be downloaded from App Store. The fact is that Internet provides enormous opportunities. It could help meet new people, build relations, and show one's queer pride. If one searches with key word such as gay India, lesbian India in Facebook, one would get plenty of profiles, pages and groups. Go to [gaydia.in/in/](http://gaydia.in/in/) and see how gay social networking sites work in India. See [onlylads.com](http://onlylads.com) and find out state wise gay and bisexual people in India. What does one understand while going through all these social profiles? Our Internet landscape is fragmenting. One reason found was queering connected spaces.

Correlation between sexual minorities and social platforms are symbiotic. The relation has fascinated both academics and popular imaginations. The correlation is a sort of productive one. It helps sexual minorities take important decision pertaining to their life, body and sexuality. Many projects explore the intense relationship between sexuality and Internet. The point is that transgender people have greater benefit out of social websites. Everywhere transgenders make use of social websites to their advantage. EROTICS project studied it in India, Lebanon, Brazil, South Africa and USA<sup>xxviii</sup>. And found some disturbing trends. More importantly, it underlined that censorship regimes are arbitrarily imposed on people. Censorship laws are bringing troubles to queer activism in Internet<sup>xxix</sup>. EROTICS project, for instance, looked at the impact of



regulatory frameworks and control mechanisms on the actual lived practices, experiences and concerns of Internet users in the exercise of their sexual rights. Definitely, it could have negative reflections on the future of queer activism in cyber spaces.

### **Queer in fragmenting net**

Sexual strangers to sexual citizens, Internet reproduce a completely new level of abuse to sexual minorities, says Shehla Rashid on a 5 March 2013 article posted on the website of Internet Democracy Project. Online stalking is a serious problem. Internet has become intrinsically sheltering to the sexual minorities to find sexual self-expression. Here they can be imaginative like everyone. In fact, the only question is- whether it is a paper tiger.

Literature says that there is a close relation between sexuality and identity. While finding pleasure in texting and interacting in Facebook, Orkut (now closed), Chat forums, etc., third sex habitually gets more of everything. They get identity. Pride and confidence are increased. They also get a tribe feeling. Activism based on sexually explicit streaming videos in YouTube, Vimeo and Netcafe are rich with symbols and metaphors that cultivate self-confidence among the community.

Digital media enables particular kinds of sexual role-playing, be it Lesbian, gay and bisexual. Cyber relationships and digital sex are examples of online role-playing. They do it for the purpose of sexual expression that is otherwise imputed in offline world. Most of them do it in anonymity. It is more required as public sex is a stigma in Indian society. In fact, sexual expressions in social web raise a more critical demand for anonymity. Social platforms just do that. It gives protection through username and passwords.

Anonymity in chat rooms and online communication serves as a ‘disinhibitor’ and enlarge sexually plain acts. The long list of female profiles with female friends and male profiles with male friends are much astonishing to a person unknown to an unmarked world of sexual dissent. Similarly, many among us get unthinking surprise when we pass on through the long army of male friends in a female profile as well as female friends in a male profile. The growing Facebook friendship gardens are safe havens for sexual dissent of this sort. Sexual dissent is a road to freedom. It is a space of an alternate sociability and a domain where alternate lifestyles and sexual preferences are pursued despite one’s physical location or shortcomings.

Website committed exclusively to the transgender cause in India provides a social space that has no social restriction and taboo on sexual expression. For sexual minorities, SNSs are like pen to writers. They communicate, build solidarity and spread awareness. Through platforms, they speak to the wider world at least among the community, which was quite impossible prior to social media. Sexual dissent in connected space is about discursive practices and discourses that

vigorously attack ‘gendered’, ‘raced’, ‘ethnicised’, marginalised social order. It characteristically fosters deep-rooted counter culture and alternate narrative. Play of sexuality in net has assumed political significance. It is in the sense that rigid Indian society approves play of relationship, happiness, intimacy, emotions, pleasure, feelings, loneliness, aesthetics, passions, love, etc., only within the frame of social norms and socially approved manner. However, they are full of stigma and prejudice. Internet culture sweeps into spaces that fulfill the sexual fantasies and wishes of individuals that are otherwise, unimaginable within the unbending and inflexible Indian social order. Internet by now unleashes a new kind of cultural commodities and all our suppressed feelings, shame, trauma, stereotypes, stigmas and taboos find big expressions and flow of exchanges in Internet. Now, social web mirrors an alternate space for marginalised sexual minorities for organising sexual activism.

### **Social firewall or digital isolation**

Perceiving Queer<sup>xxx</sup> politics in contemporary India is a delicate process of cultural understanding. Queer movements in India operate in a status of semi-invisibility, as our culture still conveys strong concept of heteronormality that penetrates all sections of society. Queer refers to a political and personal identity category that is inclusive of a range of sexualities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, ‘hijra’, ‘kothi’, to name a few among the many. Queer includes a broad spectre of gender variants against heterosexual binaries in the Indian context. The term was popularised in the 1990s after activists and academics reclaimed the word from being a “hurtful slur” for those with “unusual” sexual orientations to something that was a positive affirmation of identity<sup>xxxii</sup>. Queer has been widely utilised by Indian scholars and activists to characterize the struggles of sexual minorities in India, even though its historical and cultural roots are set in western theorizing and LGBT political struggles.

In Hindu and Vedic texts, there were descriptions of heavenly forces transcending gender norms and manifesting multiple combinations of sex and gender makes. India was a natural home of third sex but eventual exposure to foreign influence eroded the friendly ecology of third sex. People of third sex, despite have been constructively incorporated into ancient Indian society and Vedic knowledge systems; eventually became most discarded social groups distanced from mainstream<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

In contemporary time, in search of solidarity, usually gay, lesbian and transgender people risk getting into places and situations that are problematic, like public toilets and parks. Here they are easy bait for extortion by police officers and brutal treatment by a whole lot of misinformed people. They are usually victimised under public stereotypes. In the attempt to uphold basic rights, minority sexual communities are trying their best to keep up their right against

namelessness, anonymity and to freedom of speech, to articulate emotional vibrancy, to sexual health, to resist stigma against marginal sexualities.

In 2009, adult consensual and homosexual relations were decriminalised in the Indian Penal Code and there were about 2.5 million gays that were likely benefited from this ruling reported BBC on 14 March 2012. This ruling by the Delhi High Court was seen as a landmark in the Indian gay rights movement. According to Indian law, homosexual relations are legal only between consenting adults over the age of 18. The Delhi High Court ruling in 2009 overturned old colonial law, which described a same-sex relationship as an unnatural offence. Indian media has celebrated the 2009 Delhi High Court ruling on decriminalizing same sex relationship and leading media entities have upheld the ruling. It is perverse to penalise adults for their sexual choices, reports Times of India<sup>xxxiii</sup>. It is not a crime to be gay, headlined Hindustan Times<sup>xxxiv</sup>. The Indian express opined that Constitution does not allow law to be held captive by popular misconceptions and prejudice<sup>xxxv</sup>. Same-sex marriages are not recognised. However, there was one case of a court in Gurgaon, Haryana recognising a lesbian marriage in 2011<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Despite the High Court rule that decriminalised consensual sex between gay men by repealing Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, public display of affection is still a stigma for such people<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Supreme Court verdict in 2013 making same sex love an offence under Indian penal code makes serious survival challenge to the communities. It also calls for strong queer movement in India. At present, the movement is invisible to a significant extent.

There is a near unanimity among the larger public in maintaining prejudice towards such movements. Despite protection under law, homophobic attitudes persist in Indian society and the LGBT community faces discrimination from their families, employers, police and society in general. LGBT communities in India are sexual marginals that are often out of the Indian mainstream and stay away from public gathering. There is some openness towards homosexuality in urban areas but it remains a taboo in rural areas. Many queer members work as sex workers. They are a common sight and can be seen begging at busy junctions and in commercial parks. India has an estimated 700,000 hijras, aravani<sup>xxxviii</sup> or transgender women generally get little or no schooling, their families often reject them and they join marginalised communities where their employment options are sex work or ritualised begging, says Fabrice Houdart<sup>xxxix</sup>.

A lesbian in India who lives openly in a same-sex relationship or display so-called masculine traits has usually been excluded from social system. Usually their families beat them to death and this is something occurring regularly in rural India. They face discrimination in employment and lack access to already limited services. Hijras, khotis<sup>xl</sup> (or feminised men) gay men, and lesbians are rejected by society, often at a very early age and in a violent manner because of their

femininity (in the case of men). They are considered as a threat to the patriarchal society, which imposes colonial laws and oppressive social norms.

Yet, among all this oddities, new forms of identity as well as intimate relations are fomenting all the time. Be it sexually active women, teenage adult homosexuals, closeted and open bisexuals, people with multiple sex partners, part-time or full-time sex workers, cross-generation lovers, devout nudists, hard-line body modificationists, etc., all have found a common ground to build their solidarity through platforms in Internet. New sexual communities, sexual counter cultures, sexual discourses and even new hybrid sexual subjects announce arrival of an unprecedented and vibrant sex revolution in India.

Internet has been arguably the medium for a different kind of sociability for queer people seeking a safe space to socialise, express and in some cases to organise. Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick pioneered critiques of gender that deconstruct and transcend the hetero-normative gender binary, thus expanding culturally constructed notions of gender to incorporate gender variance and transgender identities<sup>xli</sup>.

Now, queer politics finds its momentum in India on the backdrop of Supreme Court ruling on criminalizing lesbian and gay sex under section 377 of IPC. Internet is their Pandora Box. Internet has turned a jovial space for sexual minorities. They found refuge on monitors and touch screens, where they slept, and shared, constructed identity. They are rather more artistic and inventive in social websites.

What does it mean to think of a social situation where community behaviour is more and more Robinson Crusoe like? The fake lesbian social profiles in Facebook, the lone Twitter profiles of gay activists, self-expressing third sex YouTubers do nothing to bring in more appeal to the larger public. Majority of sexual minorities in Internet engage with lonely encounters. They are not able to bring in a more coalition.

Lesbians, closeted gays, castrated third sex live in digital isolation. They are not able to widen and expand community circles. It is almost difficult to trace community wise exchange between different sexual social formations in Internet. Many third sex individuals act as digital nomads in Indian Internet and operate via Facebook, blogs, social networking sites, etc., and narrate deeply personal journey of encounters with alternate life. India still lives as a society where LGBTI people are usually subjected to vicious attack in the street, bullied in schools, unrepresented in the media and oppressed in many other ways. There are reasons to be more open about sexuality and sexual orientation. Openness needs to be used to destruct prejudices. Let us stop making sexuality into a commodity.

Right wing brigades speak to the conservative fold. Casteist speaks to his or her own caste community. Militants on to their own colonies and net is getting balkanized day after day. A digital firewall of isolated micro public segregated the queer in to social islands of identity formations. Inter-public solidarity seldom comes in to reality where as net has potential for intra-public solidarity. Instead, net furthers social cleavages. Queer similarly does not bring in more inter public interaction in connected spaces. The social profiles and their confined activities are evidential. Until and unless queer activism cultivates alliances and collaboration across different digital micro-publics with similar interest, the political significance of connected spaces remain to be publicized as mere fairytales.

Since its beginning, one of the defining characteristics of queer as a critical, scholarly and political perspective has been that it resists definition. On the one hand, this reluctance towards precision reflects the queer theoretical position that unambiguous categorisations are problematic as such.

### **Cyber sexuality, lifestyle activism and political choice**

In the physical social world, sexual identities and deprived sexual minorities are discriminated, silenced and marginalised. Cyber sex provides them a platform for intimate relations and therefore, cyber sex is a political act. Script, writing, printing press, radio, Television, etc., has often served as a tool of empowerment for the marginalised women, sexual minorities, third sexes, racial minorities and political dissidents across time. In the contemporary digital age, cyber presence too is a tool of political empowerment and sign of selfhood and identity assertion.

Social media ecology unsettles many traditional social structures and attributes that hinder queer and sexual minorities from attaining a liberated social space. The choice of Internet sweeps over to the inhospitable social spaces of queer and they are far ahead of using social technology for purposes that destabilise the established social positioning. In addition, queer and sexual minorities are more likely to use digital platforms for contentious purposes in which they assert their identity, sexuality and self than that of other mainstream identities.

Easy access to dates and effortless opportunities to network and collaborate provides significant opportunity frames and makes contentious claim possible in the lives of 'critical' queer groups using social media. In the connected spaces, sexual minorities discovered a new social house that allowed them particular contentions, frames, opportunity structure, which they were not necessarily experiencing outside virtual life. Sexual minorities subjected to the private sphere did not enjoy access to the public sphere outside home, but experiences collective action problem since they have not been getting mobilisation structures, identity frames leading to diffusion of contentions to new avenues of social houses especially onward to the patriarchal structure. With

the rise of connected spaces, they are able to connect with the world outside, via digital platforms and they get an alternative space and ability to find a place for expression about private life.

Good or bad, judge according to one's moral standard. A glance at most of dissenters' profile reveals evidence for sexual activism getting new space and site of contentions in Internet. Queer are more expressive, assertive and articulate in online space than in offline. In offline social house, they are more likely to be controlled, limited and restrained by compulsions of patriarchy, ideology of hetero-normative gender binary and power. A bird's eye view of social networking sites are a testimony to the fact that gender has new dimension in Indian Internet and this is likely to occur more among queer communities.

Of all the repressed groups, the sexual minorities, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people are probably some of the biggest beneficiaries of digital social spaces in India. It is because in social media sites, they are inherently invisible, anonymous, with free access, unrestricted freedom and no barrier ecology. With blossoming private and secretive possibilities of immense life world in the Internet, writing on sexual minority subject matters has flourished over the years. Sexual minorities seem to have more room to speak out and share thoughts and solidarity. The text and text-based sexual material, video, etc., online are acting as replacement of reasonable sexual encounters, discursive practices and counter cultures with its own particularities.

Two literary perspectives on sexual dissent are important. Victimisation perspectives are skeptical of heteronormative sexualities. It takes to mean heterosexuals behave and focus on how third sexes, girls and women as people and as a gathering are offended by virtual rape, online harassment and cyber prostitution. In this viewpoint, the heterosexuals seek sexual stimulation and force it on the queer and feminine and here collective agency is meaning to be online for all types of reasons however not for sexual ones that are important in respect of sexual minorities and women.

The liberation perspective focuses on the choices computer mediated communication offers to queer people that actively look for presence online. Appearance does not matter, it is simple to seek out mates and obscurity minimises group action, the physical distance between the parties and therefore the computer's off-switch stop dangerous or harmful things. From that viewpoint, sexual provocation frees queer to explore their sexualities, additional safety and to get solidarity form virtual social spaces.

Cyber sex is dynamical since the definition of and attitudes towards sex, that net technologies would have brought forth. The sex revolution at net tend to bring about newer sex alternatives and identities on the web, day and night that was not possible otherwise in offline social world.

They stayed up later than Internet monitors did, they slept in Internet, and they are much more artistic and creative than Internet inventors would not have imagined. Several cyber sex practitioners became sex dissidents or sex liberationists because of their sexual practices are frequent target by authorities.

The ACE Model examines three variables, i.e., anonymity, convenience and escape that lead to varying tendencies both adultery and activism<sup>xlii</sup>. These sex dissidents typically produce new counter cultural discourses from their own sexual practices and from the debates waged against alternative Internet spaces. Such reflections and reinterpretations of their own different sexual practices have provided Internet practitioners a wealth of various sexual views and values that serve to counter attack existing titillating culture.

The web could be a social, cultural, commercial, academic and different world system whose legitimate purpose is to learn and empower online users, whereas lowering the barriers to the creation and therefore the distribution of expressions throughout the globe. As video interactive technology advances, cyber sex is on the leading edge of gap up extra space for differing views and practices. As privacy and freedom of expression prop up, the elementary human rights are recognised.

In short, queering the connected spaces are survival questions for sexual minorities. Of course, there are pockets of sexual dissent in social media landscape. However, it is not enough. Queering though vibrant in Internet is in its formative years. They are just pockets and live in cozy enclaves. Still they are not able to build larger alliances with loosely networked issues publics in India's social media landscape. The point is to erect more awareness and build alliance. Therefore, anonymity and clandestine operations are not solution though useful. I myself encountered this problem. Queer communities are not willing to share outside their cemented camps. Let us hope their miserable plights are going to be ended soon. And social media could be more useful for them.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Calvin Thomas, (ed), 'Introduction: Identification, Appropriation, Proliferation', in *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> See the writings of the both the writers, Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990 and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

<sup>iii</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) communities in India are sexual marginals that are often out of the Indian mainstream and stayed away from public gathering and the town square. Their struggle for identity is called queer politics.

<sup>iv</sup> To read more about Indian queer, see, Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (eds), *Because I have a voice*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2009., Suparna Bhaskaran, *Made in India: Decolonization, queer sexualities, trans/national projects*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004 and Nivedita Menon, (ed), *Sexualities*, London ; New York : Zed, 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Iyengar, Swaroopa, '**The Internet: India's Different Gay Divide**', *Wired Magazine*, San Francisco, available at <<http://archive.globalgayz.com/asia/india/gay-india-news-and-reports-200-9/>>, accessed on 05 August 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> This idea has been at the centre of writings of many scholars who specialised on queer studies. For examples, Anne Philips, *The Politics of Presence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998., Nancy Fraser, 'Social Justice in the age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation' in Grethe B. Peterson (eds), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 19, Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Pres, 1998, pp. 1-67 and Iris Marian Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

<sup>vii</sup> [www.sahodaran.org](http://www.sahodaran.org)

<sup>viii</sup> <http://mingle.org.in/>

<sup>ix</sup> See, Mingle, <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mingle/198339490185626>>, accessed on 18 August 2013.

<sup>x</sup> [www.bombaydost.co.in](http://www.bombaydost.co.in)

<sup>xi</sup> [www.pink-pages.co.in](http://www.pink-pages.co.in)

<sup>xii</sup> See, Pink Pages, <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pink-Pages/118442488809>>, accessed on 18 August 2013.

<sup>xiii</sup> [www.galva108.org](http://www.galva108.org)

<sup>xiv</sup> See, QueerCampus, viewed on, <https://www.facebook.com/qcampusonline/info>, accessed on 18 August 2013.

<sup>xv</sup> See, <https://www.facebook.com/events/460572877327787/>

<sup>xvi</sup> See <http://mingle.org.in/>

<sup>xvii</sup> Mingle, <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mingle/198339490185626>>, accessed on 18 August 2013.

<sup>xviii</sup> [www.planetromeo.com](http://www.planetromeo.com)

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.pinksofa.com>

<sup>xx</sup> [www.rainbowprideconnection.net/](http://www.rainbowprideconnection.net/)

<sup>xxi</sup> [www.gaybombay.org](http://www.gaybombay.org)

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://queerazaadi.wordpress.com/>

<sup>xxiii</sup> <http://gaysifamily.com>



<sup>xxiv</sup> [www.facebook.com/jiahmag](http://www.facebook.com/jiahmag), accessed on 02 September 2013

<sup>xxv</sup> <http://sahodari.org/thirunangai/>

<sup>xxvi</sup> <http://www.sahodari.org>

<sup>xxvii</sup> <http://www.humsafar.org/>

<sup>xxviii</sup> *EROTICS: sex, rights and the Internet, An Exploratory research study, association for progressive communications (APC)*, 2011, (APC-201107-WNSP-R-EN-PDF-0102) accessed on 01 November 2014, p.26.

<sup>xxix</sup> Jac sm Kee, *EROTICS: Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet (APC)*, February 2010, available at (APC-201102-WNSP-IP-EN-PDF-0095), accessed on 01 November 2014.

<sup>xxx</sup> Indian queer engage in the discourse of sexuality by confronting the social institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and hetero-normativity and exposing the restrictions caused by their normalising effects on gender, sexuality, class, caste and religion

<sup>xxxi</sup> Thomas 2000.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Scholarship on this area is available in many writings. For example, see Amara Das Wilhelm, 'Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions through Hinduism', Xlibris, Corp, 2010 and Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The Times of India, Delhi, 3 July 2009, Front Page 1

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Harish V Nair, 'It's not a crime to be gay', *Hindustan Times*, 02 July 2009, available at <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/it-s-not-a-crime-to-be-gay/article1-427683.aspx>>, accessed on 29 August 2013.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Vinay Sitapati, Sexuality Equality, *Indian express*, 03 Jul 2009, <<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/sexuality-equality/484498/>>, accessed on 29 August 2013.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Dipak Kumar Dash and Sanjay Yadav, 'In a first, Gurgaon court recognizes lesbian marriage', The Times of India, 29 Jul 2011, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/In-a-first-Gurgaon-court-recognizes-lesbian-marriage/articleshow/9401421.cms>>, accessed on 31 August 2013.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> IANS, 'Indian gays and lesbians romancing in toilets, stores', *Mid Day*, 23 December 2012, <<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/indian-gays-and-lesbians-romancing-in-toilets-stores/193742>>, accessed on 25 August 2013.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Hijras and aravanis are, descriptively speaking, transgender/transsexual women's identities in South Asia.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Fabrice Houdart, 'From India: Sexual Minorities and the Gender Agenda', 17May2012, <<http://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/india-sexual-minorities-and-gender-agenda>>, accessed on 18 August 2013.

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<sup>xi</sup> Kothis are effeminate gay men who mostly come from working or lower middle classes and largely identify as the passive sexual partner, though not exclusively.

<sup>xii</sup> See Sedgwick 1990, Butler 1990.

<sup>xiii</sup> K S. Young, Cybersexual Addiction, 1999,

<[http://www.netaddiction.com/cybersexual\\_addiction.htm](http://www.netaddiction.com/cybersexual_addiction.htm)> accessed on 14 December 2014.