

LGBTQ: India and a Global Perspective

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Abstract

The present-day research on LGBTQ in academics is important to show a major breakthrough from the earlier silence on homosexuality. The researchers literally play the role of vanguards championing the equal rights of the sexual minorities in India. Although, all of them are fervent about creating an apparently egalitarian society, a legion of researchers is denounced by the others for their excessive dependence on western materials. On the other side, those who primarily focus on indigenous alternative sexual people and rivet all attention on native sources fan the hope of an independent alternative sexual space. But this writing is certainly a bilateral collaboration; the title offers a glimpse of it. In this writing, the position of LGBTQ people in India have been analysed in connection with other countries.

Keywords: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.

Though the state legislature had passed a law to prohibit the alternative sexual practice but there is no record of grave punishment so far in India for such behaviour. Despite that, in 70s and 80s many of the alternative sexual people were distressed by the conservative sexual policy of India, they became desperate to migrate to the US and European countries where the LGBT movement had already sparked by that time. Many of those who could not relocate to the progressive countries gradually became misanthropists and they chose to live in isolation. However, Suniti Namjoshi was one among the Indian expatriates who after pursuing a successful administrative service in India; left for a living in Montreal not only for studying but for living true on her sexual orientation. Her poems in *Flesh and Paper* encapsulate her

lesbian desire and relationship with Gillian Hanscombe, a renowned poet, novelist and a feminist activist. However, Suniti Namjoshi says “Many were taken out of the letters, between us and woven into an interconnecting text. It’s not just that our identities as lesbians, our political awareness and our literary backgrounds corresponded; the structures of our imagination also corresponded, and this despite the fact that Gill grew up in Australia and I grew up in India.” She differentiates her conservative upbringing from her lover Gill’s because Gill brought up in a socially liberal country. In her poem ‘various reasons’ Suniti expresses “But stone wall do not a prison make/ And by upbringing and birth I’m not a citizen/ Of a police state.” The stone wall symbolises the external constraints that could not imprison her inner freedom and desire. She declines her membership from a ‘police state’ because she does not just want to be a citizen of a country based on her birth place and upbringing.

Because of India, before and after,
What could we uncover?
the history not for taking:
the family not for joining:
the cause not for naming:
and lover, what could we discover
in any country or poetry?...

In the preceding lines of the poem “Because of India,” Suniti Namjoshi poses a question how successful the Indian lesbians have become to live a life of joy and satisfaction? India has always been a country where the history leaves out the archive of alternative sexual people, the speculation of non-existent homosexuality and also there is a dismissal of ‘naming’ the alternative sexual behaviour to keep the people blindfolded. The poet asks her Australian lover Gill what identity could they discover in any country or in poetry whether being a visitor or a citizen if they do not cultivate a new set-up for the lesbians? So, they want to percolate their

idea of reformation among the lesbians and suggest them to carry about the “goddess” they worship to “plait for her a new liturgy”. The carrying about of the goddess can only bring in a requisite change in the age-old ritual and custom.

... We can
-I/ You- press dreams and theories, bellies,
Breasts, hair, hips, lips; and words; all
Plaited now, until tomorrow. I have
told her, lover, to expect
fresh flowers for her feet.

Another interpretation can be made regarding the goddess as a symbol. In Hindu religion, the goddesses are imagined as the epitome of ideal women. Based on certain beliefs and faith the Indian women build up the image of goddess in their mind, idolize her and follow her like sheep. But in the poem Suniti urges the women to carry about the ‘goddess’ to worship her with new rituals. The carrying about of the goddess helps the women acquire knowledge and ideas to ‘plait’ a different ‘liturgy’ for the goddess. If the women are constrained to perform a ritual with limited learning they might not be able to ‘discover’ inner self and only in the act of carrying about the goddess they can introduce themselves with the bigger world and thus their perspective on life will change. The main purpose of the poem is to motivate the women to share strength, power and knowledge to ‘discover’ the goddess within them. Suniti and her ‘lover’ Gill could manifest the innate ‘goddess’ through their individuality and self-discovery and therefore Suniti asks her lover ‘to expect fresh flower for her feet’.

Onions and opinion come cheap in Bombay
The Gujratis in the neighbourhood
want to know why you’re still single,

though eligible.

Shantabai

goes one step further.

She thinks

a man without wife and kids

is cremated by the Bombay Municipal Corporation

upon death

The above-mentioned lines of R. Raj Rao's poem "Opinion" shows the intensely inquisitive mind of Indian people who intrude into others privacy without any hesitation. Your neighbours, housemaid, and relatives – all would be nosey if you are 'eligible' but not married. They will keep a vigilant watch upon you to find out the cause of your single-living. Not only in India but some other south Asian countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Srilanka and Middle Eastern countries where people live in an institutionalized family, the single-living gay men are constantly enquired for being unwedded. In fact many of the gay men are tongue-tied to express their orientation to their parents and thus they often engage in heterosexual marriage. The gay people of European countries or the US are definitely lucky for not being judged or even questioned for living alone or living with another gay companion. In fact, gay villages in US like Manhattan, West village, Chelsea, The Castro, Boystown, West Hollywood, Philadelphia, Palm Spring, Fort Lauderdale, Allentown are the residences of a sizable gay population and gay married couples. In India transgender marriage is sporadically happening and also some of the gay, lesbian couples have started live-in relations in big cities but they surely are not welcomed by their friends, family members or acquaintances. In fact Indian Parents are worried about the future of their gay sons, they fear for who will take care of their sons in old age?

Apart from US many of the cities of Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and even Asia build up a social network for LGBT people and those cities provide gay lodgings, B&Bs, clubs, pubs, restaurant, cafe and even gay tourism. In fact “In a world where what used to be considered the “private” is even more commodified and marketed, queerness has become both an object of consumption, an object in which nonqueers invest their passions and purchasing power, and an object through which queer constitute their identities in our contemporary consumer-oriented globalized world.” Cities like Barcelona, Berlin, Manchester, Prague, Amsterdam, Stockholm, London, Paris, Copenhagen, Tel Aviv have become popular business spot with countless hotels, saunas, private beaches, events, festivals and even sex industries (adult entertainment, prostitution, strip clubs, pornography, men’s magazines, fetish, BDSM, adult movie theatre, sex shops). Capitalist globalization began to disperse throughout the world and without an exception, gay bars and hotels are proliferating in the big cities of India, private parties, shows, events are also being organized. Gay sex trade has become rampant in all over India; in the poem “Bomgay” R. Raj Rao captures a booming male-escort business.

Family members

From England, America and Canada

Visit you at Bombay

Which they call Bomgay.

Some of them are sex tourist,

You their post-colonial pimp

Hungry for pounds and dollars.

The modern LGBT movement started with the Stonewall riots that took place in 1969 in New York but Europe had been in limelight for LGBT issue decades before the Stonewall

riots. Denmark was the first in the world to legitimize same-sex partnership in 1989 and Netherland came first to recognize same-sex marriage in 2001 and then the other countries gradually bring in similar progressive laws and civil rights for LGBT people. India also took part in the movement, the intellectuals, writers, artists, activists joined hand in hand to fight against Section 377, a colonial law that criminalized same-sex love. Vikram Seth, a prominent writer and an openly gay public figure expressed his anguish in the verse “Through love’s Great Power” when The Supreme Court reintroduced Section 377:

To undo justice, and to seek
To quash the rights that guard the weak -
To sneer at love, and wrench apart
The bonds of body, mind and heart
With specious reason and no rhyme:
This is the true unnatural crime.

The gay people of India now are officially not criminal. But had they ever been criminal? Have you ever heard of any gay man persecuted in India? Except some sporadic incidents, there is no major case of torture, imprisonment and persecution of gay people. In European countries, especially in Germany and Greece, the gay people underwent inhuman torture; they were burnt, mutilated and even beaten to death. The African countries except South Africa, Benin, Cape Verde, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Djibouti, Madagascar and a few others, there are thirty four major countries still remain terrible in terms of punishing gay men. It is unfortunate that even in 2017 more than hundred men were abducted, imprisoned and tortured by the authorities for being gay or bisexual in Chechnya, a part of the Russian Federation. An independent media and Human

rights group informed that gay men were sent to concentration camp in Chechnya and one eyewitness described to *Novaya Gazeta* that there was a "closed prison, the existence of which no one officially knows".

Many countries especially the Islamic countries vehemently deny the existence of alternative sexuality. Despite the fact, Afghanistan has an institutionalized form of bisexuality. The prepubescent boys are often kidnapped to be sexual slaves for adult men, typically in a militia, the military members do not have access to women, they often kidnap little boys, humiliate and rape them but they never receive any punishment for such a terrible crime. The horror of paedophilia is rampant in all over Afghanistan, the adult men hire little boys to dance in female clothes and engage with them in sexual acts. In Afghan culture there is a tolerance for these activities which the Afghans locally call "Bacha Bazi", it is never considered as an expression of LGBT identity, it is rather an expression of male power and dominance and the boys are assumed as adopting female roles in the relationships. Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* exposed "Bacha Bazi" by introducing the character of Shorab who was bought by a Taliban and became a permanent sex-slave. Greater international pressure is immediately needed to stop this malpractice. In Iran the law of "honour killing" indulges the fathers and grandfathers to kill their offspring for sexual misconduct and violation of rules. Therefore, the Iranian children are being taught at home that the world is much hostile to LGBT people and they should abstain from the thoughts of homosexuality. Egypt is widely known for the biggest number of gay people serving prison sentence but despite the existence of a similar kind of punishment law; no gay man in India had ever been put in jail.

The indigenous alternative sexual people, the hijras, kotis, dhuranis had never been paid attention until the LGBT movement started in India following the US. The references of hijras can be found in *Mahabharata* and also in the ancient Indian text on sexuality, *kamasutra*. Other than India the hijras live in Pakistan and in Bangladesh. Social exclusion has always been a

part of their life, their struggle, pain and poverty reflect in the recent book *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* written by an Indian hijra, A. Revathi. India shares the culture of men wearing female clothes with many other countries, in Jatra and in some folk theatrical tradition men were hired to play female roles. In Japan's Kabuki theatre and in Chinese opera female impersonation is a popular art form, in Renaissance England women were not allowed to act on stage, the men used to play the female roles in the play of Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights. The Asian countries Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, the whole of Europe and America and some Oceanian countries continue the tradition of drag performance and it is evident that the drag and all other cross-dressing performances are directly related to homosexual culture.

The LGBT people are being connected globally with a sense of solidarity and support. The LGBT movement of India received an organized structure by following the US, the strategies of political activism, cultural activities, Pride March, art, literature, media, research – all worked in a synergy to abolish the penalty law for the homosexuals. In fact, the LGBT people of the progressive countries come to support those who live in sexually repressive countries where homosexuality is strictly forbidden. The LGBT people from all over the world are so connected now that the protest rallies were conducted in New York and in Amsterdam when anti-gay purges happened in Chechnya and also; when the anti-homosexuality Act, known as “Kill the Gays” bill was passed in 2014 in Uganda, the US activists criticized the political “scapegoating” of homosexual people and in all the Pride Marches, at least one participant walked with a protest banner against the Ugandan law. In India when the participants of the Pride March walk with rainbow flags, many of the road-side viewers and heterosexual people take the whole matter as another western fad and they do not accept the flag as it is designed and introduced in the US but the flag is now worldwide accepted and its variety of colours probably be the best representation for diverse sexual identities. Sometimes

people allege that the indigenous alternative sexual people of India cannot relate them with US-influenced LGBT movement but the spontaneous joining of them in the Pride March and other cultural activities prove those people wrong.

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