Queer Expressions In The Online Space

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Summary

This report tries to explore the ways in which youth from the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Trans* community have used the digital medium to engage in social and political processes. It makes an attempt to look at the various technologies that they have used. The report also seeks to understand whether the community perceives digital technology as a support system and how have they used the internet to project the community in the mainstream society. The report also looks at the flipside of using digital technology and who gets to access it. Throughout this process the paper seeks to explore what it is that makes the virtual space an important site for queer activism.

Introduction

In the contemporary age where identities have emerged very strongly in the society, several of these identities have also gained visibility and have been politicised in the virtual, internet space. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans* (LGBT) community in India which is largely invisible in the physical domain and continues to struggles for civil rights and freedoms is one such community. The issues of the community are increasingly getting visible on the internet and social media platform with young people expressing their sexual and gender identities online. Erotics: Sex, rights and the Internet (2011) talks about how the Internet can critically facilitate the freedom of opinion and expression hence providing a more open space for non-normative expressions and dissemination of less accessible information. Hence, it would not be completely incorrect to say that digital revolution has brought about a certain degree of change in the organising of the community.

Post 11th December 2013 things have changed a lot for the Indian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans* and the queer community in general. With the Supreme Court overturning the High Court's decision to decriminalise sexual acts "against the order of nature", the community has again come under scrutiny. Although the Court has claimed that the community itself is not criminalised but their sexual acts are, the fact that their basic freedom of expression is infringed upon is reflective of the fact that they do not enjoy complete citizenship rights. In such a scenario, it remains to be seen what it means to express citizenship rights in the virtual world when there is no similar freedom to express it in the "real" world.

Coupled with this, is the fact that surveillance on the online space has increased manifold in the recent times as is reflected by the instances of people getting booked as law breakers for making statements on the internet or on social media. How does then the youth of the LGBT community become a digital citizen?

Digital Citizenship

''Digital citizenship'' is the ability to participate in society through the medium of internet technology. A digital citizen is defined as one who uses the internet regularly and effectively to express their social, political and civil membership in a political community. The internet provides for interactive as well as broadcast communication thus enabling new forms of participation which could change or replicate the existing social relations (Mossberger, et al., 2008).

This research seeks to explore the idea of LGBT youth as digital citizens and how they use digital technology to ascertain their identities and express themselves as citizens. What is it that makes the online space accessible for/to queer politics?

To explore this condition further, an attempt has been made to understand how the digital revolution has changed the way the community has organised itself; and, in addition, what forms of information technology the youth from the community have engaged with. An attempt has also been made to understand the kind of identities that they aspire to construct about the community on the basis of gender and sexualities through the online space and which ones get more visibility over the rest.

What further has been examined is whether there is a trend or politics behind this construction. Taking this question further, an exploration has been done regarding the kinds of issues that get focused on in the online space. The idea of digital technology as a potential support system for a marginalised and an invisible community has also been examined. Finally, the question of accessibility and self reflexivity of the community in the virtual world has also been examined.

Methods

This research has been largely exploratory whereby I have tried to delve into the ways in which the LGBT community has used digital technology to organise themselves and represent their issues to the mainstream society.

For this purpose, I first conducted an online survey which was put up on popular LGBT pages on Facebook. Later, several people also shared it within their own networks through e-mails, chat forums and messengers. The online survey gave a broader perspective of the internet using population within the community and the issues being raised in the online spaces and the nature of these fora.

This was followed by in-depth personal interviews with people from the community who were selected by the process of sampling. I have used a combination of two techniques of non- probability or non-random sampling, namely Purposive sampling and Snowball sampling. Unstructured interviews have been used for the purpose of this research. The interview guide used for the purpose of the research included questions regarding the usage of information technology, creation of identities online. An attempt has been made to make the interview sample as inclusive as possible. Hence respondents from several genders, sexual orientation and class backgrounds were chosen.

I have also visited several blogs and Facebook pages used by the community to understand the kind of issues and discussions that come up on these fora.

Having being closely associated with the community, my personal experiences, observations and networks have also contributed in a large way to the way this research has shaped.

Sample and location

The respondents of the online survey came from the following Indian cities: Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Leh, Coimbatore, Ahmedabad and Kharagpur. The interviews were mostly conducted among people based in Mumbai and one from Bangalore. The interviews have been face-to-face, telephonic and over Skype. I had also got in touch with the participants through social media, especially Facebook messenger.

The survey had 51 respondents of which there were 16 indentifying as females, 31 males or cis-males, 2 as androgynous male and 1 as gender queer. The educational qualifications have been graduation and above with only one college drop out.

Among them 13 participants in the interviewwere between the age group of 20- 35. I had also spoken with a woman who is over 40 years of age to understand how technology has changed the organisation of the community. Among the 12 participants there were 4 men, 5 women, 2 female to male transgender, 1 trans* butch and 1 *Hijra*.

Among the 5 women participants, Gazal Dhaliwal was born male who suffered from Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) but underwent Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) to become a woman who identified as straight. She has expressed her identity and spoken about issues of LGBT and GID through her blog and her short film available online. Two of the other four women identified as bisexuals and the

other two as lesbians. All the women largely belonged to upper middle class to upper class, educated back grounds and used social media to organise and forward issues of the community both personally and professionally. Antara** is a writer on a very popular blog which talks about LGBT issues. Sonal has featured in a very popular reality TV show showcasing her own life as a lesbian woman and has also worked extensively with the LGBT community to organise them and bring their issues to the mainstream. Shruta has been working with the community and has conducted research on issues pertaining to health and development of the community. Raj is a queer feminist who is part of a LBT collective.

All four men identify as gay. One of the men, Harish Iyer has been voted as the most influential gay personality in India, he is also a child sexual abuse survivor and has been extremely visible in both online and offline media. The second participant is Nakshatra, who is a young upcoming gay film-maker, actor and entrepreneur who has used digital technology to a very large extent. The third is Aditya Shankar, a man who was born in a small town but moved to Mumbai and is now based in Toronto; he was one of the initial members of the LGBT support group in IIT Mumbai and has used the online social space to *come out* through a video on YouTube. The fourth gay man Ankit Bhuptani, is an ardent follower of *Vaishnavism* and expresses both his religious and sexual identity very firmly on both the online and offline space.

The two female to male (FTM) transgenders came from different backgrounds; while Christy Raj hails from a lower-middle class background, Sidhant More comes from a relatively upper-middle class background. However, both have expressed their identities and have been vocal about the issues of the community particularly the transgender FTM community both online and offline. The trans* butch, Arayan also came from a upper middle class background and was extremely interesting because of the two Facebook profiles he had and how he asserted his gender identity in both of them. The male to female transgender *Hijra,* Urmi, is one of the community leaders and a contact person for the Hijra community. She, like most other *Hijras,* comes from a lower-middle class background. As compared to other respondents, she has limited access to digital technology but provided a perspective from the *Hijra* community and their accessibility to digital technology and online spaces.

Limitations and Ethical Dilemmas

The problem of analysing the contemporary is that it is very dynamic. The Supreme Court verdict of the IPC Section 377 brought in several new dimensions to the research which were not anticipated at the initial stage and hence did not feature in most of the interviews. Hence, most of the references made on it have been personal observations.

Another difficulty which was faced while working with queer gender and sexual identities is the inadequacy of language to express identities which are more complicated than the ones found in the binary. I have at all points used the identities and pronouns that the participants use for themselves even if they may not fit into the conventional definitions.

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**Name changed

Further, my point of entry into the community and my personal location influenced my access to the participants of the research. While I got a lot of access to several people from the upper and upper middle class it was difficult to access people from the lower class and caste groups. Even the relatively lower class people were accessible as they are community based workers. Although, I tried to look for a Dalit queer activist, none could be traced who actively used information technology to express their identity. Nor did I manage to talk to any person who was disabled and queer.

Also the fact that both the survey respondents and the interviewees were contacted via online networks, limits the scope of the research in terms of the participants chosen for the research.

Learnings/ Observations

Organising in the digital age

93 per cent of the respondents said that they believed that information technology has brought about a change in the way in which the community has organised itself. The internet, especially social media has blurred the divide between the public and private sphere. It becomes a "critical public sphere for claiming citizenship rights and civil liberties" for people who have limited access to the public sphere, in the conventional sense, because of their societal location (Kee, 2011).

Chayanika Shah, one of the founding members of Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), an LBT feminist collective, says that technology has brought about a big difference to the way the community is organising itself. She further explains that in mid 1990s when the LBT people were first organising and meeting up, communication had to be done through letters or landline phones. Communication was especially difficult for persons who were assigned female gender at birth because they had limited access to public spaces and even at home they did not have a private space of their own. They had to live in a constant fear of their families finding out. Men had easy access public spaces so they found ways of meeting and communicating. But the coming of the internet and mobile phones has changed this as there is a certain degree of privacy that women can also have now. While the relationship may not be one of causality, the organisation of the community and the growth of the internet have come together to give rise to more dialogues and discussions between the community and the society.

Popular technologies

Among social media websites, Facebook seems to be the most popular site to raise issues about the community and spread awareness. 80 per cent respondents of the survey claim to use Facebook for networking. Every person interviewed for the purpose of this research confirmed to have an account on Facebook, which they used for bringing the community together and for dissemination of information. Another popular site for the Indian LGBT community is Twitter with close to 30 per cent of the community using it extensively. 9 per cent use Tumblr, 27 per cent use blogs and 27 per cent use other sites like Quora to engage with issues of gender and sexuality. Around 18.2 per cent people have also used YouTube to share videos to spread awareness on issues about gender and sexuality.

Chat forums online have also been very popular for networking purposes among the community. With the coming in of smart phones, applications such as Whatsapp and Grindr have also been used to not just to meet people but also to spread information and awareness about events and news.

The recently initiated Q Radio, is the first online radio station in India tailored for the LGBT community has been created so as to make the community and its issues mainstream and enable a dialogue between the community and the society.

Bound together by the Net: Using technology for Socio-political purposes

If queer politics is about challenging the essentialists' ideas of sex and gender and understanding how gender can be constructed and performed then the very act of creating a profile on the internet and asserting ones queer identity can be seen as a political act.

Social media has forever given the scope for creation of identities as per individual choice. One of the first platforms was the Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs which developed during the 1970s. It was a real time virtual world with role-playing, interactive fiction and online chat. MUDs gave its participant the scope to develop an avatar (http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/MUD-Multi-User-Dungeon, last accessed 11.02.2014). People could represent themselves as they wanted through avatars. They could change their gender, be richer, thinner and dress the way they want to as the "real" self was hidden behind the avatar.

With the development of platforms such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), MySpace and more recently Facebook, the 'digital virtual' space has become an inextricable part of the everyday reality of the participants. It becomes difficult to say where human bodies end and technology begins. While participants share the smallest details about their lives and their emotions, they also consciously construct their lives for public viewing. Even though in this kind of social media the "real" self and the virtual self are hardly separate, performance of gender and sexuality becomes possible by the act of user generated content (Doorn, 2011). Arayan who has two profiles, one straight and one queer, says that the queer profile gives him the chance to portray what he really feels. While both the profiles may have similar photographs and information, the fact that he can use his desired name and pronoun in the queer profile makes all the difference to him. It allows him to perform his gender on his own terms thereby giving him a sense of confidence to come out eventually. Sherry Turkle (2011) writes in *Alone Together* that creating a profile on a social networking site or building an avatar for gaming could over time feel like identity itself. She further adds that creating an avatar of a different age, gender and temperament could be a way of exploring oneself. Thus the virtual space makes it possible for people to constantly live their queer politics.

Another such political act of performing one's sexuality could be perhaps the "Gay for A Day Campaign" through which thousands of people, including straight people, protested against the Section 377 verdict by putting up pictures of them kissing someone of the same sex.

Besides allowing people to perform their identities, digital and information technology has been used most widely for networking and meeting people. It has also been used very widely for acquiring as well as disseminating information about events, latest news about the community, issues concerning the community to name a few. The online survey reflected that the community has used the online space to discuss issues of homophobia, sexual and mental health, legal rights, relationships, social acceptance and crimes to name a few.

The respondents in the interviews have said that they used the internet as a source of information to discover more about their gender and sexualities. Aditya says "Since we are not talking about it in society I was just reading gay authors, watching gay movies, trying to find some solace. When you are actively hiding from people you need some place you can vent out and internet was really helpful." Sidhant, a female to male transperson who is in the process of transition now says that he had done all his research about transitioning through the internet. Since, the trans* community is further invisiblised within the LGBT spectrum, he found it extremely difficult to find someone who could guide him. However, the internet facilitated this process by connecting him to transmen across the world. Gazal used her blog to provide people information about her experiences of Gender Identity Dysphoria and her transition to becoming a woman.

Sharing personal narratives and experiences have also been common on the online spaces, so as to speak about homosexuality in a normalising tone and make a non issue out of it. Harish says, "When

we try to make an issue out of an issue then we categorise it as something else and not a normal issue. Discussions about sexuality are facilitated in the social media and it makes it absolutely normal for relationships." While politicising personal life and building consciousness has been a very popular strategy in feminism, several LGBT activists and persons have used it in their own way to facilitate conversations about sexualities, both within and outside the community. In fact, several respondents have shared that until they met other people from the community and heard their stories in online spaces they felt that they were the only ones experiencing homosexuality. Sharing of common experiences in the online space plays a huge role in providing support and comfort to the people of the community.

People have also used online spaces to come out. Aditya confirms that he came out to the world as a gay man with a video on YouTube. People have used the online space not just to come out to others but also to themselves. There have also been people who have used chat forums to come out to their friends. Shruta shares that she came out to herself while arguing with people online on issues of the LGBT community. Nakshatra believes that one day, when society becomes more accepting people will come out by putting up a status on Facebook.

Several people from the community have used internet technology for political mobilisation and interventions. Gazal says, "Any change is all about numbers. When a larger number of people want a change there is a higher possibility of that happening. Until a while ago, people from the community were scattered but today thanks to the internet people are coming together and there is a growing number hence the possibility of change increases." Nakshatra spoke about his experience of writing an open letter to a national political party questioning their views on LGBT issues. This intervention resulted in the party including LGBT agendas in their manifesto. Although, on a regular basis using internet technology for bringing about political change might take a back seat, it gains momentum when significant events take place. The best instance is that of the recent Supreme Court verdict against IPC Section 377. People came together in large numbers to express their dissent online as well as offline. Several of the gatherings that took place were largely publicised and organised through the medium of digital technology and the internet, including the worldwide protest called the Global Day of Rage organised on 15th December 2013. Several online petitions were signed and opinion polls were conducted. While the same large scale protests online may not have persisted for long but people are still talking about the issue online. The widespread dissent on online media also got extensively covered by the mainstream media which has resulted in several dialogues that reached people who did not have access to digital technology. Another very interesting trend that went around was to encourage people to flood a prominent political leader's website with queries related to his take on the issue. While it might be too farfetched to say that the party declared their official stand just because of the campaign, they did declare their stand on it the very next day (13th December 2013). Several politicians used social media to get the opinions of the youth on the issue after the SC verdict.

As Aditya says "There is a social versus political change. Now if you want a social change internet and mass media helps as you can interact with people, make them change their opinions." However, political change according to him is tougher to bring through online interventions because policy makers are seldom internet users. But, it can also be seen that several politicians belonging to the youth brigade have used social networking and internet as a space to interact with public and get their reactions. But it remains to be seen whether online campaigns do bring about any change in policies, considering that the faction of digital citizens in India is considerably low.

However, even as the community has started discussing their issues, it is interesting that while certain issues get a lot of focus, several others hardly ever get addressed. For instance, although feminists would largely agree that homophobia is a product of patriarchy, in most of the online conversations outside the queer feminist circle, the issue of patriarchy hardly ever gets raised. While homophobia is a widely discussed issue, the articulation around it is not very nuanced. It usually stems down to the

understanding that homophobia is due to the lack of awareness. Also issues of intra-community marginalisation do not get much focus in most of the platforms. As a result, issues like transphobia and biphobia hardly get spoken of. This perhaps is a reflection of the identities that get more visibility online and how identities get played out in the online space consciously or unconsciously. Raj believes that this could be because people tend to look at these concerns only from their own perspective rather than deconstructing the underpinnings.

Thus the online space has facilitated queer politics at several levels. At the simplistic level it has helped in engaging with the civil society and the state and at a more complicated level it has helped in the creation and performance of identities.

Real Identities, Virtual Spaces: Construction of identities online

As was discussed in the earlier section, identity creation becomes an inherent part of online space. It gives more scope to create, play and perform oneself. Doorn (2011) has written that while the earlier articulations argued that virtual is the absence of reality it has been seen constantly that virtual cannot be seen in opposition to the real. Several works today look at the virtual as "an immanent and immaterial form of agency or potential: effectively but not formally or materially existing within the interstices of everyday life." While people may not be present physically, that the virtual is an embodied experience cannot be denied if one understands that the "materiality" of the body as "performative" through discursive practices (Butler, 1993). Embodiment exceeds the mere material body. The transcendence of the physical space could provide for subversive performance of gender and sexuality. Arayan says that while his straight Facebook profile denotes his presence in the world, his queer profile denotes his existence. The latter gives him the scope to perform his identity more strongly. With internet now becoming available on mobile device, it is no longer necessary for one to spend time in front of the computer to be able to go online. It makes the move from the virtual to the physical more fluid thus making it easier to use the online self to manage the tensions of everyday life.

While most participants would refrain from consciously constructing identities on the online space, the way they perform their identities leads inevitably to their identities getting constructed in a certain manner. Several respondents who have participated in the research have answered that more than creation of particular identities online, the idea is to create positive images so that more people get the courage to come out and express their sexualities openly.

People have refrained from portraying one stereotypical image of the community. Harish says that the "pansy" gay guy is as much a part of the community as much as the "muscle Mary"; hence he doesn't adhere to stereotypes. Nakshatra says, "Positive portrayals are needed, people who are not being laughed at but are respected. Right portrayal of the community would not just lead to acceptance from the mainstream but also encourage more and more people to come out and be an active part of it." Shruta adds that when more people from the community become visible on the social media and talk about themselves it would show that the LGBT community is not only about sex.

However, responses from participants who belong to marginalised communities within the larger LGBT spectrum have reflected that perhaps unconsciously certain identities get more space even in the online world thereby projecting a certain image of the community. Sidhant says that he would like more trans* identities to be visible both online and offline because in the Indian context when people say trans the popular misconception is that of a Hijra. An examination of the content on the internet shows that identities such as lesbians, bisexuals and a large section of the trans* community is for the most part invisible. For instance, while YouTube has a few videos of young Indian men coming out, there is no such video for Indian women. It has also been observed that women and trans* persons are less visible on Facebook groups in terms of posts shared. Even on a page dedicated to Indian

Transgenders, the only identity that was discussed was that of the Hijra community. Hence, marginalisation prevalent in society often gets replicated in the online space as well.

A thought provoking trend that has emerged post the Supreme Court verdict on Section 377 is that several community members who also belong to minority religious communities have started asserting their religious identities online. The reason behind this being that since a few of the appellant belonged to the religious minority who were viewed as homophobic. Hence, it fell upon the people from these groups to justify that the entire religious community isn't homophobic. Thus, identities have consciously or unconsciously seeded into the projections of the community.

Supported by the Net: Digital technology as a potential support system for the community

94 per cent of the respondents of the online survey have said that the internet is a good space to talk about issues of sexuality and gender. All the respondents in the interview have agreed that digital technology could be a huge support system or at least have the potential to be a support for the community. Harish says "technology does act as a support system as there are many smart phone apps, no one feels lonely. It is not only for sexual needs but also for socialising to know that there is someone who feels desire like you. It puts a sense of normalcy."

The virtual space has also been considered as a huge support system because it gives the possibility to seek help by being faceless or without coming out. As has been argued earlier, the blurring of the public private divide by the virtual has contributed to this in a major way. Being able to be in touch with people from the community and share their problems and experiences without being present physically has been a boon for the community. It gives the scope to control how much of their identities they want to reveal in public and to whom.

Internet has helped people from different organisations and collectives to network, organise, delegate responsibilities and disseminate information. For several LBT collectives this tool could be a non expensive way of disseminating information as they lack the HIV-AIDS related funds that many organisations working with gay men have.

However according to some, the idea that digital technology is a support system is totally subjective. For instance Urmi puts forth that "It can be a support system, but we have to know how to use them and have the capacity to use them. Financial capacity is a big hindrance for several people of the hijra community. To add to that, since most hijras are beggars or in sex work, it is not feasible for them to use expensive phones. Community leaders and activists have however made use of smart phones and internet for their official work. But the larger hijra community has not found technology as much of a support." Christy Raj says that he finds that the working class trans* community on whom he makes his films do not get to see his films so he does not believe that technology is a complete support system for the community.

Unsafe Virtual Realities: the dangerous cyberspace

While a section of the LGBT community has used digital technology to gain visibility and information from it, a very large section of the community has also acknowledged the flipside of it.

One of the most heinous cyber crimes that have come to light is perhaps cyber rape. The issue came to light with Julian Dibbell's work on "A Rape in Cyberspace", where he described how a "cyberrape" took place in an MUD called LambdaMOO by an avatar. It also focuses on the social issues and the emotional trauma that was caused by this act (Dibbell, 1993).

While during the course of this research I did not come across anyone who is known to have been sexually violated, there have been instances of rape fetish shared on queer confession pages. However they have not been taken very seriously. Since it is difficult to know the confessor behind the confessions, at most times it becomes impossible to take any action against them.

Nakshatra says that individuals should use technology and not get used by it. Sonal acknowledges that the online space is not the least private and safe. She narrates the experience of her photo with her partner being shared on an online poll about lesbian couples. She feels that the online space is especially unsafe for women. Raj also believes that the abuse faced on the online space is very gendered and sexualised. Cyber stalking is extremely easy and prevalent. While gay men have several smart phone apps to meet other gay men, there is no such popular app for women and Sonal believes that the reason is that women themselves feel `scared of stalking. Christy Raj also confirms that the internet is a very dangerous space and he lives in a constant fear of his videos and films being misused.

58 per cent of the respondents in the online survey have claimed to have faced harassment because of expressing issues of gender and sexuality online.

Accessibility and Identities

57 per cent of the respondents of the online survey said that they do not believe that the online space is equally accessible to everyone. 52 per cent responded that it is important to be articulate in English in order to be able to express and access the online space.

On the question of access, the response has been very mixed. While the people from the upper classes of the community feel that with the coming in of cheap smart phones, the online space has gained a very high accessibility even among the working class and rural population the story seems to be otherwise when narrated by people belonging to lower class and people with rural backgrounds and even women to some extent.

Antara** says that in this day and age even working class people can have easy access to smart phones and cheap internet recharge hence if one wants to access information over internet it can be easily done. Shruta also adds that people have the option of not just typing in their own language but also typing out in *hinglish* or using English alphabet to write Hindi words.

On the other hand, Aditya who was born and brought up in a small town in Bihar believes otherwise, "Technology is not at all inclusive. It is pretty elitist. It is also marketed in that way. Even today, one does not have an alternative to an English keyboard in India. So if somebody doesn't know English he/she would not be able to use technology. Technology is only accessible to people who know English, is of a certain educational background and a certain class." Christy Raj who works as a community media person feels that because of his inability to converse in English, people do not take his work seriously. Urmi further adds that smart phones besides being operable in English, also have complicated technology and hence become further inaccessible to the Hijra community, majority of which belong to the lower class and educational background. Not just language and class location but also one's gender location plays a huge role in one's accessibility to technology. Raj for instance says that the electronic space is often a mirror of the public space. Just like more men are visible in public spaces the same is reflected in the electronic public space. Having access to technology and language is a privilege which is not perhaps as easily available to cis-women and trans-people as much as it would be available to a cis-male.

There has been an effort to include regional Indian languages such as Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali and Marathi by several blogs as well as community media online. Ankit, the founder of GALVA Mumbai, who uses spirituality to reach out to people from smaller towns and cities about issues of sexuality say

that he gets a positive response when he approaches people in their own language hence he also translates a lot of his work online into Hindi and Gujarati. He further adds that when we talks to people in India through the lens of spirituality, he gets more acceptance.

However several of the respondents believe that interventions that are taking place through the internet and digital space needs to be supplemented with efforts at the ground level as well. Sonal believes that technology doesn't really help the community from lower class; hence, if one desires to work with the community being only online is not fruitful. Aditya and Harish believe that the online space can create agents who would carry forward the information that is online to the mainstream. Harish says, "If there are a certain number of people on the internet and you can reach out to them, they in turn will reach out to another number of people. It creates a chain reaction of thoughts which catapults into a big mammoth of social activism channel. It moves from social media goes into television, newspapers, radio, etc. So people get informed about the issue irrespective of whether they have access to digital technology or not."

Reflections

Digital technology has changed the way of communication, networking and organisation drastically today. It goes without saying that the growth of digital technology at large and information technology more specifically has facilitated the dialogue between the LGBT community and the mainstream society to a very large extent. While this study is inadequate to comment on whether this organisation and awareness building is enough to bring about any political change or change in terms of public policy for the community, it has led to much visibility. Visibility and access to the public domain is essential for the community. During the interviews people spoke about socialising much more than about political engagement on the internet. But for the LGBT community socialising is equally important because people need others who share similar feelings. Further, such visibility leads to conversations about sexuality thus breaking the taboo surrounding it to a certain extent. Although initially I was of the view that the community concentrated more on the social aspect and not so much on the political aspect to bring about change, through conversations with the community I realised that the social aspect was perhaps equally important to the community.

However, as and when they feel required, people from the community have used information technology for political engagement as well. While people might continue to criticise online political engagement and call it slacktivism, it does provide a platform for awareness programmes which could spill over into the offline space. Especially today with the judicial institution of the country calling the community "a minuscule minority", people have openly expressed their dissent.

What is interesting is to understand what makes the digital space an attractive site for queer politics. Is it because it allows people to define who they are, the way they want to? Or is it because it is easily accessible to a large section of the society? Or is it because it allows one to access the public sphere without having to physically go out in the public? While I do not have any concrete answers to these questions, it cannot be denied that the virtual space has played a very important role in queer politics of India.

Annexures:

Online Survey Questionnaire:

1. Name (optional)
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Current residence:
5. Sexual Orientation:
6. Caste:
7. Languages known:
8. Educational qualification:
9. Occupation and organisation:
10. Are you part of any LGBT group, collective, organisation, etc?
11. What are the social media sites that you are part of? Facebook, twitter, tumblr, others (specify)
12. Do you contribute to blogs and opinion pages? Yes/no
13. Do you openly express your gender/ sexual identity/ orientation on the above mentioned platforms? Yes/ no
14. Do you use the social media platform to raise issues on gender and sexuality? Yes/ no
15. What are the websites and mediums that you use? Facebook, twitter, blogs, youtube, others (specify)
16. What are the issues that you raise? Health, legal rights, relationships
17. Do you think the online space is a good space to make visible the issues of gender and sexuality? Yes/ no
18. Have you ever faced any online or offline harassment for expressing your opinions or raising an issue on LGBT online? Yes/ no
19. Do you think the online space is equally accessible to everyone across caste, class and genders? Yes/ no
20. Do you think it is important to be articulate in English to be able to express one's opinions on these social media platforms? Yes/ no
21. Do you think Information technology has brought about any change to the LGBT movement? Yes/ no

Interview Schedule

1. Types of digital technology used
2. How have identities been created?
3. Is technology a support system for the community?
4. What are the issues that get highlighted on the internet?
5. Has digital technology bought any change to the way the community has organised itself?
6. Does digital technology enable socio-political engagement of the community?
7. Does digital technology have the scope to empower the community?
8. Is digital technology equally accessible to people across class, caste and educational background?
9. What are the flipsides of using digital technology?

Glossary

Biphobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of bisexual men and women.

Butch: A homosexual women having stereotypically masculine characteristics.

Cis-males: male with a male gender identity

Come out: The process by which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals recognize, acknowledge, accept, and typically appreciate their sexual identities

Gender queer: A term which refers to individuals or groups who "queer" or problematize the hegemonic notions of sex, gender and desire in a given society. Genderqueers possess identities, which fall outside of the widely accepted sexual binary. Genderqueer may also refer to people who identify as both transgendered AND queer, i.e. individuals who challenge both gender and sexuality regimes and see gender identity and sexual orientation as overlapping and interconnected.

Grindr: a geosocial networking application geared towards gay, bisexual, and bi-curious men.

Hijra: In the culture of South Asia, *hijras* /eunuchs are Designated Male at Birth people who have feminine gender identity, adopt feminine gender roles, and wear women's clothing.

Homophobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of people who identify or are perceived as lesbians or gay men, including the fear of being seen as lesbian or gay yourself. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbians and gay men, to verbal abuse, to acts of physical violence.

IPC Section 377: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code dating back to 1861,[1] introduced during the British rule of India, criminalises sexual activities "against the order of nature", including homosexual acts.

LBT: Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans

Muscle Mary: a homosexual man who practises bodybuilding

Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS): The term given to an operation and procedure which physically the TG community transforms the genitals using plastic surgery, often called a "sex change operation" in popular culture.. MTF SRS is called a vaginoplasty while FTM SRS is termed either a genitoplasty or a phalloplasty.

Trans*: An umbrella term which refers to cross-dressers, transgenderists, transsexuals and others who permanently or periodically dis-identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans is preferable to "transgender" to some in the community because it does not minimize the experiential specificities of transsexuals.

Transphobia: The irrational fear and hatred of all those individuals who transgress, violate or blur the dominant gender categories in a given society. Transphobic attitudes lead to massive discrimination, violence and oppression against the trans, drag, and intersex communities.

Vaishnavism: one of the major branches of Hinduism along with Shaivism, Smartism, and Shaktism. It is focused on the veneration of Supreme Lord Vishnu. Vaishnavites, or the followers of the Supreme Lord Vishnu, lead a way of life promoting differentiated monotheism (henotheism), which gives importance to Lord Vishnu and his ten incarnations.

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