



# Negotiating Intersectional Non-Normative Queer Identities in India

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## ABSTRACT

Academic work dealing with queerness in HCI is predominantly based in the Global North and has often dealt with one identity dimension at a time. This work-in-progress study attempts to complicate the notion of queerness in HCI by highlighting how in the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural context of India, LGBTQ+ movements and spaces are deeply fractured on the basis of various identity intersections. We interview 18 LGBTQ+ activists, lawyers, and allied activists in the Delhi, India to understand the issues faced by queer Indians from minority groups and their use of social media and discuss how they negotiate their non-normative identities to create safe spaces, gain access to resources, and engage in care work. The argument that we are bringing into HCI scholarship through this paper is geared toward a future endeavor for designing safe space for marginalized groups in the global south keeping in mind negotiations of power, legitimacy, and resources.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.**

## KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+; Queer; Queer Theory; intersectionality; identity work; care work

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Queerness in HCI has been discussed from Western, mostly North American perspectives and is approached as a homogeneous category with studies rarely taking into account how people's intersecting identities impact their experiences of queerness. Few studies have been conducted in the Global South that approach queerness from a multicultural, multi-religious intersectional perspective in HCI (a rare exception is [23]).

In mainstream societies across South Asia, queer individuals are marginalized and often have to face stigma, persecution, threats, and physical and sexual violence [34]. This is further complicated by the individual's gender identity intersecting with their other identities in terms of their caste, class, ethnicity, religion. Menon [20] cites the necessity of taking these identities into context when attempting to understand and design for the lives of the LGBTQ+ individuals in South Asia. India is a diverse, multi-cultural society, yet most (visible offline and online) LGBTQ+ spaces have traditionally been observed to be dominated by Hindu, Upper Caste, Gay men [31]. Our objective in this paper is to highlight the issues faced by queer Indians from minority groups and their use of social media to create safe spaces. After presenting participants' intersectional experiences of queerness, we discuss how they negotiate their non-normative identities to create safe spaces, gain access to resources, and engage in care work.

We complicate the notion of queerness in HCI by using the following research questions to guide our work.

- Q1. How does queerness and marginalization play out in multi-religious and multicultural settings?
- Q2. How do multiply marginalized queer communities use social media to strategically navigate their context?

We interviewed 18 LGBTQ+ activists, lawyers, and allied activists in the Delhi-National Capital Region of India. We find that the LGBTQ+ movement and spaces in India are deeply fractured along the layers of caste, religion, ethnicity, and urbanity. Queer participants belonging to minority intersections struggled to find reflections similar to their intersectional identities, owing to a dominance of majoritarian identities in these spaces. We briefly describe the efforts of these participants to use social media to share resources and create safe spaces for other minority queer people. We

also discuss some unique negotiations our participants undergo in order to gain access to various resources crucial for their work and survival.

## 2 RELATED WORK

Since the early 2000s, HCI research has begun looking at queerness through largely two separate lines of scholarships [32]. Theoretical research advocated for the “queering” of HCI, i.e., the use of queer theory to challenge and resist essentialist readings of gender and sexuality in HCI research and media technologies [16, 19, 32]. For example, Ann Light proposes queering online self-presentation by providing users with strategies that intentionally obscure user identity and refuse to conform to computational approaches [19].

On the other hand, empirical research has examined the experiences of queer and gender-diverse populations on social media platforms and in everyday life. The goal of this research was more instrumental - for example, providing design implications to alleviate marginalization, support self-determination in identity formation and presentation, and promote community support [3, 5, 8, 10, 14, 15, 18, 23, 28, 30, 35]. Research on identity work has particularly looked at how the queer population have to continuously negotiate their identity within peer groups [4] and families. Gray [12]’s ethnographic account of rural American youth captures how identity work involves the negotiation of both family relationships and visibility.

Recent work in the Indian context has captured how technologies, especially the Internet, mediates queer practices in Indian contexts [21, 22], capturing how online communities form as resistance to the mainstream. For example, Dasgupta [7] explores how gay queer men challenge ‘Indianness’ through the creation and use of digital spaces. Other studies show how technologies facilitate transnational Indian queer activism [26].

Recent meta-analyses have found that identity-focused work on queerness in HCI examines only one dimension of identity at a time, even in studies with diverse participants [3, 29]. Further, queer work in HCI has focused primarily on the United States and Global North contexts, with little attention to queerness in the Global South. A rare exception to this trend is Nova et al.’s recent examination of the social media experiences of Hijra people in Bangladesh [23]. The work that we intend to present here will expand and nuance notions of queerness in HCI through an intersectional examination of queer identities, activism, and social support in India.

## 3 CONTEXT

Although the number of openly LGBTQ+ individuals in India were relatively low until the 1990s, India has had an ancient and commonplace tradition of homosexuality and gender-nonconformity until its colonial invasion [20, 24, 27, 34]. The British introduced Section 377 in India in 1862 to penalize sexual activity “against the order of nature” [13]. This regulation criminalized all forms of sex other than peno-vaginal intercourse, even if it was among consenting adults [20, 34]. The regulation was interpreted and applied primarily to target and criminalize homosexual intercourse, thus encouraging homophobia that was largely ignored by the mainstream society in pre-colonial India [34].

From the late 1980s, growing awareness about the AIDS epidemic made it increasingly legitimate to talk of sex and non-normative sexuality within contexts outside the realms of law, demography, and medicine [20]. International funding for HIV/AIDS prevention further played a significant role in initiating public conversations around sexuality and mobilizing queer communities across the country [31]. By the 1990s, a range of political assertions that implicitly or explicitly challenged heteronormativity came to the fore. Activist movements such as AIDS BhedBhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), NGOs such as the Naz Foundation India dealing with issues of sexuality along side AIDS awareness and prevention, telephone helplines and other safe spaces further helped with the political articulation of non-normative sexual and gender identities and discrimination against such individuals in mainstream society [2, 17, 20, 31]. Therefore, in recent history, mobilization and activism around LGBTQ+ issues in India has been closely associated with the issue of AIDS. Due to the presence of section 377 until 2018 (when it was struck down by the Indian Supreme Court), LGBTQ+ mobilization was carried out covertly under the banner of AIDS awareness [17, 20, 33].

## 4 METHODS

Our study consisted of 18 in-depth semi-structured, in-person interviews of LGBTQ+ activists, allies, and other stakeholders (e.g. lawyers and activists) in the Delhi-National Capital Region, India from October 2018 until July 2019. The purpose of the study was understanding how marginalization among the LGBTQ+ communities plays out in a diverse country like India. Participants were recruited by identifying LGBTQ+ activists in Delhi and then conducting snowball sampling to reach other activists and stakeholders involved in queer organizing. We also reached out to activists and organizations whose work had been featured in established print and online publications. Those who consented to participate in the study were interviewed at their choice of location (n=17 in person and one interviewee via Skype).

India is a diverse, multi-cultural society, yet most (visible offline and online) LGBTQ+ spaces have traditionally been observed to be dominated by Hindu, Upper Caste, Gay men [31]. To gather a diverse set of queer experiences, we intentionally sampled for LGBTQ+ participants at the intersections of various identities. Sampled participants included founders of queer activist organizations (n=7), student queer activists (n=3), lawyers (n=2), individuals were engaged in different capacities of allyship such as activism and programmatic support (n=6). In terms of their gender and sexual identities, 4 participants identified as queer cis-women; 5 identified as queer cis-men or as gay; 1 identified as trans-femme; 6 allies identified as straight cis-women and; 2 lawyers identified as straight cis-men and in terms of their educational background, all of them had advanced postgraduate degrees.

Interviews to LGBTQ+ activists initially asked about the general trajectory of their activism career and focused on acceptance (as a queer individual), negotiating their intersectional identities, and motivation behind their activist work. They were then asked about the various streams of their work – how they conceptualize and carry out their programs, activities and stakeholder outreach – and the role their online presence on social media plays. Finally they

were asked about personal and organizational challenges. For the allies, the interview questions ranged from the specific work they did to support the multi-cultural, intersectional LGBTQ+ community in India, how they engaged with social media in the course of their work and the opportunities and challenges they faced in line of their work. We also interviewed two lawyers with experience in social justice and public interest litigation to understand the legal ecosystem after the decriminalization of (Section 377 in 2018) consensual sex among same-sex adults in India and the challenges the LGBTQ+ community has to contend with to exercise their rights in various domains.

Interviews were conducted in English, with some participants occasionally speaking colloquial Hindi during the interview. The interviews lasted for an average of 2.5 hours and were audio recorded with participants' consent. They were translated and transcribed in English. The transcriptions were then shared with the participants to approve the text for data analysis. None of the participants objected to the interviews. While the founding members of these organizations provided their consent to share their and their organizations' names for wider publicity, some of them requested access to the camera-ready version of the published study before publication, which we will make available once the paper is accepted for publication.

In addition to the in-person interviews, the first author also attended public events to understand the work done by these organizations, the issues faced by the larger LGBTQ+ community and the variety of discourse around these issues. Attended events included public events in-person (pre COVID-19 pandemic) and online events and panels (post COVID-19 pandemic). We also closely followed their social media posts. This was done from April-October 2020. While we stopped collecting interview data as it reached theoretical saturation in 2019, attending these events provided many critical intersectional insights that complimented our existing interview data. Therefore we transcribed those conversations and used them for our data analysis as well.

We used the grounded theory approach for analysing our data. We began the initial coding of our data by engaging in line-by-line coding and followed it up with incident-to incident coding, which involved working with small segments of text. Finally, in order to sift through our entire data and categorize it incisively and completely we practiced focused coding [6].

In terms of author positionality, the first author identifies as a straight, middle-class, upper-caste Hindu cis-woman belonging to the dominant majority in India. The second author is a disabled, transgender non-binary, middle-class, upper-caste, and non-practicing Hindu from India. The third author identifies as a straight, middle-class, Muslim cis-man from Bangladesh. The fourth author identifies as a middle-caste, middle-class, cis-gendered atheist man from India. While the first author collected data, transcribed and coded the interviews, and led data analysis and writing, the second author's contributions were more experiential and reflection-based from growing up queer in India. The other co-authors' contributed to the discourse and writing of the paper from a theoretical perspective, situating the South Asian LGBTQ+ experiences within HCI.

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Layers of Representation

In the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural context of India, we find that LGBTQ+ movements and spaces are deeply fractured on the basis of identity intersections and corresponding challenges. Our preliminary analysis found that dimensions of caste, religion, ethnicity, and urbanity brought extra layers of complexities.

LGBTQ+ spaces are often portrayed as being caste-less, although caste remains a major point of contention in India. Although the caste system is officially prescribed only by the Hindu religion, the caste system is observed on the basis of formal and informal internal hierarchies among Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs too [1, 25]. A queer Dalit participant said, "this is a Savarna [upper-caste] tendency. Privilege enables upper-caste [queer] people to universalize themselves and their experiences." In an Instagram Live event on the recent decriminalization of homosexual acts by the Supreme Court of India (section 377), a queer Dalit participant said:

"Celebrating 377, we are not free, our desires are still compartmentalized. Some of us are having difficulty surviving your definition of pride. How caste operates [in online dating today]... [people] flaunting their caste identities because they think its valuable and sexy... it's all cultivated - the desire for these bodies - when caste becomes racialized in this form."

Participants belonging to religious minorities, such as queer Muslim people, found mainstream LGBTQ+ movements to be predominantly Hindu, upper-caste, male, gay and urban, and struggled to find their experiences reflected in these spaces. They shared that this invisibility incorrectly promoted the notion that one has to negate their queer identity to be a practicing member of a faith. Instead of rejecting one identity for the other, participants reported negotiating shifting identities to their advantage. However, such narratives rarely get visibility in the mainstream spaces.

Participants who identify as ethnic minorities, particularly from the North-Eastern states of India, remarked that because of their intersecting ethnic and queer identities, they were often fetishized as being exotic. Historically, the North-East states of India have been disconnected from the rest of the country on account of political insurgency and connectivity issues. Further, North-Eastern Indians are often mis-identified to be of 'Chinese' origin owing to their facial features. As minorities in every mainstream culture, they feel "othered" everywhere they go.

Thus, the different dimensions of a queer person's identity can often be at odds with each other.

### 5.2 Safe Spaces

LGBTQ+ communities have a long tradition of creating safe spaces to find their identity reflected, to protect themselves from harm, and to find community support. However, queer participants from minority caste, religious, and ethnic backgrounds reported that they had to seek and even create separate safe spaces that reflected intersectional experiences of marginalization. A gay Dalit participant said,

My student tells me [in a moment of distress], “you’re the only Dalit gay person I know. Despite [having] progressive classmates, I can only think of you to reach out to because I can only relate to you.” And that is the power of change – why [one] has to be who they are and so many of us have to continue to express and assert ourselves and be here in these spaces, despite being uncomfortable, despite being extremely violated all the time and being exploited and oppressed because this is the only way we can sustain our lives and our stories.

Another participant founded the Queer Muslim Project in 2017, beginning with a Facebook page that shared information that was attuned to the Indian and Muslim context.

I realized that there was a huge gap, that people here didn’t have access to as much information. Even within Islamic theology there is such interesting feminist work and queer-inclusive work that’s happening – it’s still 1) in English and 2) still limited to western academia. And in South Asia, not only India but Pakistan and Bangladesh, people still don’t have access to those resources. It’s still very elite in some sense. So for me the idea was that – this work is very close to my heart and I don’t want to give up this work. I was thinking how to start – I had very limited resources, I didn’t have money; I had come back from the US; I was struggling to find a job and so I thought about creating a Facebook page and sharing some of this information. That’s how the Queer Muslim Project was started.

The co-founder of the Chinky Homo Project (an initiative named to reclaim the racial slur assigned to them in mainstream queer spaces), said that their ethnicity became one of the most defining parts of their identity:

I started thinking about being a North-Eastern person in Delhi and to be queer – what does it really mean? I started writing about it on Instagram where I wrote a short 100 word piece. I changed my Insta[gram] handle to Chinky Homo and I was just exploring... People started messaging me. I had no clue it would be so impactful and that led to the initiation of the Chinky Homo Project ...‘Chinky’ is a misplaced identity label which refers to a person with Chinese or Mongoloid features – not Mizo, not Naga [official names for sub-identities based on different states in the North-East]. Homo means effeminate men or “tomboy” girls.

Similarly, participants who grew-up in peri-urban and rural contexts spoke of how there was no public awareness of non-heterosexual sexualities and no queer-supportive and community spaces, which led some of them to believe that their romantic attraction was a phase that would pass. Taking cognisance of this lack of queer spaces in smaller cities, towns, and villages, many organizations started working in these settings.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Our preliminary analysis of data showed that Hindu, upper-caste, cis-men continue to dominate the spaces of LGBTQ+ diversity in India. Almost as an undercurrent, there are intra-community, non-linear power differentials among L-G-B-T-Q-I-A members where some have more autonomy than the others dictated by existing social practices. More specifically, the majoritarian identity intersections observed in the Indian society gets replicated within the queer movement as well. However, recently, individuals from identity intersections of minority religions, oppressed caste and sexual orientation are raising important questions and highlighting their issues within the queer spaces.

Our findings also show how individuals and organizations are using the internet/social media in India in their unique (local/contextual) strategic ways to mobilize communities, to create safe spaces, to aid research, activism and advocacy as well as to conduct different kinds of activities that have the potential to sensitize scores of people and push the envelope on changing the narrative around queer lives in a diverse, multicultural country like India.

### 6.1 Negotiations

Preliminary findings of our study show the different kinds of negotiations our study participants have to conduct in order to create safe spaces and gain access to the various resources crucial for their work and survival.

Key to the survival of LGBTQ+ organizations was how they negotiated with the administration and bureaucracy. Most of these organizations began their work in India when homosexuality or being queer by the way of having consensual sex with same-sex partners was criminalized. These organizations have had to continue their activism work (overtly<sup>1</sup> or covertly) to create spaces for themselves within the very bureaucratic and administrative ecosystem that has for years worked to dismantle their non-normative, intersectional identities.

We also found that work in intersectional identity spaces has a tendency to bother conservative religious groups and political parties in India. Since funding organizations, especially corporate donors (who donate money to humanitarian causes for brand publicity and promotion) usually want to steer clear of any religious and political controversy that has a potential to hurt their business, this has a potential to impact funding.

Further, due to the lack of personal finances, our study participants had to deploy many strategies in order to negotiate their access to resources and funding for their initiatives. A key strategy was constantly performing their marginalized identities - an act that involved reliving their experiences of trauma, but one that was necessary to elicit resources and funding. Another strategy was choosing whose lives to visibilize and how to reach out to them. A constant struggle for activists was outlining the boundaries of work, a constant negotiation between who they want to serve because of their vision and who they cannot serve due to donor commitments.

<sup>1</sup>For instance, before the 2018 Supreme Court Judgement, these organizations were actively using their social media handles to advocate for repealing Section 377 by collaborating with other organizations on initiatives such as “Voices against 377” to create and share relevant content and organize protests, etc.

Another challenge that many of these small organizations faced was that they relied heavily on volunteers. The trade-offs were clear, while this provided fluidity to their organizational structure allowing them to find ways to adapt to an ever changing social and political landscape, it also led to a lack of sustainable leadership and a dependency on volunteers for initiatives and key responsibilities – who may or may not be invested in the broader organizational vision.

## 6.2 Uses of Technology

Digital technologies such as social media were important as they allowed strategic ways to mobilize communities, to create safe spaces, to aid research, activism and advocacy as well as to conduct different kinds of activities that have the potential to sensitize scores of people and push the envelope on changing the narrative around queer lives in a diverse, multicultural country like India. Different techniques and activities were used to visibilize their life and experiences, such as creating a digital anthology of queer experiences at different identity intersections. Technologies were also important in conducting workshops on awareness generation, training and capacity building mostly with school and college students about gender identity and sexuality with a subtle layer of caste, ethnic identity sensitization (depending on the focal work of the organization conducting the activity) and sex positivity.

Organizations also used online tools to collectively and anonymously ask and respond to questions, concerns and experiences pertaining to queer and trans life and politics, thereby promoting a sense of community-based gathering for listening, learning and growth. Our findings show how the use of live chats, webinars, interviews, and user-generated content exchange on a number of controversial/taboo topics such as sex positivity, intercaste relationships, religious faith and queerness, highlighted the queer experiences of people belonging to minority ethnic identities. While these activities appear generic, organizations found interesting and interactive ways of conducting activities online - especially due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, the Chinky Homo Project is currently doing a pandemic Series where they are archiving LGBTQ+ lives in India's North-East during Covid-19 as stories and photo essays. The use of closed groups over Facebook and WhatsApp have enabled members of these communities to have more personal discussions about their issues. The privacy and encryption advantages offered by WhatsApp further enabled the coordination of regular offline meet-ups to share meeting information, chat, and keep in touch.

Technology also brought about various new challenges to existing initiatives. People identifying as LGBTQ+ have always been targeted with hate speech, trolling, harassment, and more serious cybercrimes such as doxxing and impersonating just for existing and daring to share their queer presence online. Further visibilizing other intersectional marginalized identities, added another layer of violence on. Many casteist or religious slurs and abuses have become normalized to the point that they are not longer seen as offensive by moderators on social media. For example, while social media outlets were able to moderate queer-based slurs, caste-based and Islamophobic slur/abuse often escaped moderation. A key issue here was how technology platforms could create policies to tackle

subtle/lesser known derogatory references. Further, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of these organizations had to move their meetings online which further challenged those living in confined spaces with families, with flaky internet access and other such modalities.

## 6.3 Care work

Almost all the study participants admitted to suffering from mental health issues and political fatigue due to their rather lonely journey of continued activism for the issues faced by their non-normative intersectional identities. For example, having to answer to a section in the queer community that accused them of dividing the LGBTQ+ movement. Some of them reported additive factors such as financial stress and the pervasiveness of the identity-based struggles due to the ubiquity of the internet.

Thus while these activists have been working hard to arrange for resources to do the care work for their communities by creating safe spaces and putting support groups and other resources together, they found themselves in the need for care work. Resources for care-work such as counselling services have been largely inadequate, though some activist organizations are working on putting together toolkits to help introduce care-work into activism.

## 7 FUTURE WORK

While our study is still a work-in-progress, for our future work we intend to interview consenting individuals who are members of these groups and safe spaces to further our understanding on this topic. We also intend to address the question of class dimension to understand how and which platforms, the most vulnerable and the most marginalized queer populations access in India. The argument that we are bringing into HCI scholarship through this paper is geared toward a future endeavor for designing safe space for marginalized groups in the global south with the idea of 'negotiation' - that has still remained understudied in HCI. We hope that the nuances and the situational practices that we have presented in this paper will invite discussions and debates that will de-center a political discourse based on the western notion of agonistic politics [9] and introduce design pluriverses [11].

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