# UNVEILING THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-EXPRESSION IN QUEER INDIA

Leissha Passi

The Shri Ram School Moulsari

## ABSTRACT

The rights which have been obtained by the queer community and their opportunities for self-expression and visibility have grown in India in the past decade, with multiple strides made towards treating the queer community with equality. Queer expression has also increased due to these circumstances and in large part due to increased digital adoption and the opportunities for queer spaces provided through social media platforms. However, there remain fundamental issues pertaining to the expression of queer identity, and the exclusion of those in the queer community from backward castes such as Dalits or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who identify as women. Concerns have arisen that queer self-expression is dominated by upper caste Hindus who identify as men, with an 'acceptable' version of nationalistic queerness which ignores the lived realities of the majority of the queer community. This paper draws upon queer theory, and in particular queer phenomenology and queer digital media phenomenology to examine feminist and queer re-conceptualizations of the identity formation as a method of self-expression, care, and resistance. This paper suggests future avenues for research in the field, to understand the intersections between queer expression and marginalization to ensure that the spaces for queer expression are truly inclusive.

**Keywords:** Queer, Socio-Economic, Dalit, LGBTQ.

## Introduction

The visibility and diversity of queer communities in India has greatly increased in the last decade, especially with the decriminalization of homosexuality by the Supreme Court of India. Awareness regarding the struggles of queer peoples in India, including mental health issues, domestic violence and other similar issues have also been brought to the forefront. In 2019,

Nartaki Natraj became the first transgender person to win the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours (David, 2019). The increase in the adoption of smartphones and social media, has provided the queer community in India with entirely new forums and safe spaces, to freely and safely transmit their viewpoint and played a crucial role in connecting, and giving discernibility to the Indian LGBTQ community (Dimri and Goswami, 2019). The rise in internet usage has also provided safe spaces for sartorial expression in a heteronormative society (Dimri and Goswami, 2019).

It is imperative to the understanding of LGBTQ rights in India, to also study the aspects of gender performativity and the ways in which queer visibility is manifested as a means of creative agency, and the psychology of such expression. Studies into this field provide valuable insight into structural issues of agency, queer rights, social acceptance, and the drivers of individual and collective identity which impacts the day to day lives of the queer community.

It is also important to study identity formation to understand the variations in the manifestations of gender identity and performativity. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have found that the increased adoption of technology and social media, as well as corporate campaigns to spread awareness tend only to impact urban, educated and affluent members of the queer community who identify as men, whereas those from socio-economically backward sections of society as well as backward castes, continue to face pervasive stigmas including honour killings in rural parts of India (Patel, 2016; Paliwal, 2022). This paper explores the theoretical foundations of queer theory in relation to identity formation and gender performativity, with a focus on the Indian context. The paper will also examine the concepts of identity formation through community practice, and critically analyze the various notions of identity which have emerged and co-opting of queer rights by forward castes and nationalist groups.

**Background**

Existing literature in phenomenology regarding performativity, gender and queerness have been shaped by scholars such as Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, and Merleau Ponty. The school of thought underscores gender's inherently socially constructed nature, and the performativity of gender is a social reality continually created through illusion (Dino, 2011). This theory of phenomenology also emphasizes that linguistic constructions create our reality *in general* through the speech acts we participate in every day. By endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact that reality; in the performative act of speaking, we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our bodies, but that "reality" nonetheless remains a social construction (Dino, 2011). Intersectional feminist perspectives to

theories of self-expression and behavioral psychology also stress that the constructions of the self and the boundaries of acceptable performativity in a political scenario, are driven by race, class, ability, and other socioeconomic markers as central to psychical-historical locations of agency, power, and connectivity, with current notions of performativity being dominated by Western, white queer perspectives (Anderson et al, 2021). Therefore, variations in performativity are also heavily dependent on the structural factors of one's larger socio-economic background, which is driven by those with wealth and historically oppressive groups in society (Anderson et al, 2021).

In recent years, the theories of queer phenomenology and the increased focus on digital media phenomenology, drawing on the work of Sarah Ahmed, have also highlighted the tensions and continuous innovation and reconstruction of queer spaces in the online world, resisting capitalist and historically oppressive spaces, demonstrating how queer people utilize media technologies and practices to suitably accompany their everyday lives in relation to different spaces and temporalities (Tudor, 2018; Vitry, 2020). Theories of queer phenomenology have also placed focus on the process of organizing, and how 'queered' bodies which do not align with the vertical lines of capitalist modes of organizing, negotiate these encounters (Vitry, 2020).

The above-mentioned intersectional theories of phenomenology, gender performativity and identity creation are especially relevant in the Indian context, where cultural and regional variations as well as socio-economic, caste and class driven variations are extremely prevalent. Ancient Hindu and Vedic texts document examples of homosexual relationships, and a tradition of acceptance of transgender persons, which has also been cited by Indian Courts to provide protection to the 'hijra' (transgender) persons (Prasad, n.d; Simha, 2012). However, critiques of this notion point to how heavily these conceptions have created an 'acceptable' idea of queerness as a queer identity which is non-threatening, apolitical and non-resistant, non-questioning of institutions and representation in these institutions, and adopt 'respectable', non-sexual modes of living, including their professions (Prasad, 2020). Certain aspects of the queer identity are deemed more socially acceptable than others; this is reflective of existing caste and class hierarchies in society as well (Prasad, 2020). It continues to be the case that the vast majority of LGB peoples, Dalit or lower castes, Indigenous tribes, Muslims and other non-Hindu religions are not represented in the nation's idea of queerness (Prasad, n.d). The following sections of this paper will use the aforementioned theoretical foundations of gender performativity and queer phenomenology to examine individual and collective formulations of identity in the Indian context and critique the ways in which queer identity is also restricted to a palatable and non-intersectional version.

## Discussion

It is crucial relevant to conduct studies of queer self-expression as a mode of documentation and archival alongside better awareness of diverse forms of identity creation, especially given the numerous spaces and avenues for the same created through social media and other online forums. Studies conducted in this space are revealing, in terms of the communities who remain marginalized despite the ostensible notion that the internet has led to widened avenues for queer self-expression (Dimri and Goswami, 2019). In this context, it is also crucial for researchers in the field to draw upon the learnings that new media, social networking sites, both web and mobile, and other related technologies, do not exist in isolation, rather they are critically embedded within other social spaces (Dasgupta, 2019). Similarly, online queer spaces exist parallel to and in conjunction with the larger queer movement in the country (Dasgupta, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to examine the ways in which self-expression and queer identities are formed through community practice, observation, and the psychological constructs of femininity and masculinity, as well as explore the regulation of these individual and collective identity formations are subject to gate keeping and regulation within and outside the community. The liberal rights framework of queer theory has long been critiqued as one that disregards the lived experiences and realities of queer lives, for a notion of progress which is only marked by legislative inclusion which is steeped in colonial, racialised, classed, caste-based and gendered understanding of progress (Das and Bund, 2020). The term "homonationalism" was coined by noted queer theorist Jasbir Puar, to indicate this exact phenomenon – a liberal gay and lesbian rights discourse is used to gain access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship by some "good" queers at the expense of the exclusion of sexual and racial "others" (Das and Bund, 2020). This biased incorporation of queer subjects as protected by the state rests upon specific performances of "acceptable scripts of homosexuality". Homonationalism in such scenarios creates the 'ideal' sexual identity based on homonormative ideologies that reproduce dominant caste, class, racial, gendered and national ideals (Das and Bund, 2020).

In the Indian context, those that tend to be 'othered' are non-Hindu, non-upper caste communities, whose queer identities are often shunned from the mainstream through gate keeping. This aligns with the theories of Sara Ahmed as mentioned above and examining the notion of queerness beyond a socio-historical perspective. In a socio-historical perspective, where gender and sexuality are understood from a socio-historical perspective, and where performing queerness might be understood as naming oneself as "queer" and enacting it through cultural signifiers, Queer Phenomenology provides a new embodied approach to understanding

gender and sexuality, but also any other way in which bodies are made to feel othered in certain spaces, to show "how bodies are gendered, sexualized and raced by how they extend into space" (Vitry, 2020). In the Indian context, examining the intersections between legislative inclusion, homonationalism and Queer Phenomenology can provide crucial insights into the boundaries of performativity and the glaring issues that continue to remain despite increased queer visibility.

As mentioned above, gate keeping and regulation not only from external sources or the state, but within the community are a large impediment to the free formation of queer identities through community practice. Studies conducted in online spaces such as queer blogs, Facebook groups and Twitter circles have shown that online spaces have inherited deep social divisions, with urban, upper-caste, English-speaking Indians, often identifying as men, dominate these groups as managers and members (Paliwal, 2022). They control the content and sideline the voices of historically marginalized communities like Dalits, Muslims, and Adivasis, as well as those identifying as women (Paliwal, 2022). The mainstream discourse surrounding queer rights and activism is centered around individuals who are palatable to the public taste, which actively disregards the role of grassroots and marginalized activists not from the mainstream religion and castes (Prasad, 2020).

These scenarios actively impediment queer self-expression. Community practice and observation is a key element for queer communities to find safe spaces for expression, and feel accepted within their unique social contexts, which are inherently tied into caste, familial support, and religion (Paliwal, 2022; Dasgupta, 2019). Researchers, policy makers, and indeed members of the queer community themselves cannot view queer self-expression as one that is divorced from the other parts of one's identity which are continually socially constructed and dependent on lived realities and observations. It is important to approach further research and policymaking from a deeply intersectional lens, drawing from the works of Dalit queer scholars and other activists from marginalised communities, who have been at the forefront of exposing how caste, class and religious lines deeply shape and construct acceptable sexualities and gender expressions in India, which lie much beyond the purview of decriminalisation (Das and Bund, 2020).

**Conclusion**

Although queer visibility, acceptance and recognition has come a long way in India through the past decades, the reality of the queer community and the vastly different lived experiences of upper caste, educated and affluent members of the queer community as opposed to lower castes, Dalits, women, and those from rural areas who continue to experience barbaric horrors such as

honor killings, family sanctioned rapes, and conversion therapy (Patel, 2016). Queer phenomenology and queer digital media phenomenology as approaches to research, can provide valuable insight into self-expression, queer habituation, generating queer orientation and spaces with deliberate creations of networks of care, as well as challenging and contesting orthodox norms of relationality (Tudor, 2018).

The feminist reconceptualization of the self , has challenged standard philosophical models for their biases and shifted the discipline toward recognizing selfhood as a relational, multilayered phenomenon (Anderson et al, 2021). Drawing from existing research in the field and examining how such research intersects with uniquely Indian social situations of caste and religion can provide important avenues for action in improving the access of the queer community to spaces where they can express themselves in ways which are not necessarily 'palatable' to the state or majority populations. Moreover, an important direction for research is the intersection between queer self-expression and protest movements, drawing from protest movements such as those in Kashmir, the CAA NRC protests, and sedition charges which have been disproportionately levelled against minority, backward caste and queer activists (Das and Bund, 2020), to expose how the idea of queer liberation and queer self-expression is in itself homogenized or essentialized, blocking more diverse and informed queer narratives.

## References

Anderson, E, Cynthia, W, and Meyers, D, (2021), "Feminist Perspectives on the Self", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* , Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/feminism-self/

Das, S, and Bund, AA, (2020), 'The Homonationalist Agenda of 'Good' Queers Who Love the Nation-State', The Wire, https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/homonationalism-india-sedition

Dasgupta, R, (2019), 'Digital Queer Cultures in India', Routledge India, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315207032

David, S, (2019), 'Nartaki Natraj, Bharatnatyam Dancer, Becomes First Trans Person to Receive Padma Shri', News 18, https://www.news18.com/amp/news/buzz/nartaki-natraj-bharatnatyam-dancer-becomes-first-trans-person-to-receive-padma-shri-2014385.html

Dimri, A, and Goswami, P, (2019), 'Invisible to visible: social media and its role in establishing identity of LGBTQ in India', Fashion Institute, Pearl Academy,

https://fashioninstitute.mmu.ac.uk/assets/uploads/2019/07/26-Invisible-to-visible-social-media-and-its-role-in-establishing-identity-of-LGBTQ-in-India-Neha-Dimri.pdf

Dino, F, (2011), "Modules on Butler: On Performativity." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*., Purdue University, http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/genderandsex/modules/butlerperformativity.html

Paliwal, A, (2022), 'Why minorities are abandoning India's trailblazing queer forums', Rest of World, https://restofworld.org/2022/india-lgbtqi-forums/

Patel, R, (2016), 'Being LGBT in India: Some Home Truths', Livemint, https://www.livemint.com/Sundayapp/sAYrieZdZKEybKzhP8FDbP/Being-LGBT-in-India-Some-home-truths.html

Prasad, P, (n.d), 'Tradition And National Identity: Lgbt Status In Contemporary India', The Gallatin Research Journal, https://wp.nyu.edu/compass/2018/04/23/tradition-and-national-identity-lgbt-status-in-contemporary-india/

Prasad, V, (2020), 'The Respectable Indian Queer Unmasked', The Citizen, https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/7/19424/the-respectable-indian-queer-unmasked

Simha, RK, (2012), 'What went wrong for gays in India?', Russia Beyond, https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/03/19/what_went_wrong_for_gays_in_india_15190

Tudor, M, (2018), 'Desire Lines: Towards a Queer Digital Media Phenomenology', Soderton University, Dissertation Series, http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1241670/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Vitry, C, (2020), 'Queering space and organizing with Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology', Gender, Work and Organization, Vol. 28, Issue 3, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12560