

## The Silent Opposition: Dissent and the Sexual Subaltern in India

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*The paper engages with the postcolonial discourses of exclusion and dissent arising from the “queer” community in India, by adhering to the theoretical developments in subaltern studies on the politics of the marginalised. Moving beyond Foucault’s perspective of sexuality and gender, it delves into the very nature of the rigid socio-cultural structures in India, and the protest methods of the marginalised groups in destabilising the structures. The paper delineates the significant disagreements of the Indian “queer” with the country’s system of mainstreaming heteronormativity where “queer” subjectivity is structured through subaltern experience. The proclivity to dissent against the mainstream sexual and gendered identity arises from two distinct sections - civil society and academia, other than the larger queer community itself. The first section maps the intellectual positions on the sexual subaltern and leads to exploring the “silent opposition” drawing on the major movements and protests by the “queer” community in India. The paper presents a picture of who the “queer” is in India, and if their objections can be heard, by engaging with the leading subaltern scholar Spivak’s question: can the subaltern speak? The findings establish a link between the experience and the expression of the subaltern, by locating the dissent within the queer ‘body’ and the politics of sexuality outside of it. The research draws from the familiar strains of dissent that are present in the intellectual and academic dialogue in India today, the popular opinions against the dogmatic Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (which criminalises homosexuality under ‘unnatural sexualities’), public forums such as VoicesAgainst377 and the larger body of subaltern discourse.*

Key words: subalternity, alternative sexuality, dissent, marginality, identity

The mainstream discourse on sexuality and gender is a relatively new area of scholarship in the Social Sciences that has been largely censored, by deeming it subversive. Even later, the concept of 'alternative sexuality' claimed a departure within the mainstream discourse. The queer community in India is a growing collection of progressive and liberal voices, demanding equal rights and justice for all citizens. However, it is also a relatively recent uproar, especially following the Supreme Court's decision to uphold IPC Section 377<sup>1</sup> as a law. This archaic ruling not only sets our country back by centuries, but it also brought to the forefront a very substantive issue, concerning post-colonial 'governmentality'.<sup>2</sup> It polarised the nation on an *agree-or-disagree* basis, whereby the public opinion are categorised according to legitimate perceptions, propagated by the triad of partisan vote-bank politics, news media dependent upon television viewership and the fundamentalist religio-cultural revivalism.

The queer in India, which is still primarily perceived by the 'larger social whole'<sup>3</sup> as solely the transgender or *hijdaii* community,<sup>4</sup> and are overwhelmingly prejudiced to associate them with deviance, perversion, mental illness and so on, outside of the liberal intellectual deliberations. This is because "gender" is a more visible aspect of one's identity and is subject to different forms of marginalisation. While sexuality, sexual identity and expression may be contained within a private space and in intimate contexts, the social perceptions overlap and merge, when engaging with the gender-sexuality spectrum. The external identity is therefore crucial to the self-perception of the group. For example, the transgender community in India has a long and rich narrative past of their own, ranging from mythology to historical facts -- the *hijda* in India being a social category that requires a methodology of investigation through self-exploration. Thus the contextual transgender identity is not limited to gender location or sexual preferences. Instead, contextual analyses allow identities to develop upon social roles outside of the prescribed options of gender and sexuality ideals in Indian society. Some arguments within the contextual paradigm (Wood 2011:23) consider gender as neither innate nor stable, arguing that it involves "outward expressions of what society considers masculine or feminine". However, this myopic view of the gender sexuality spectrum has resulted in the creation of a history of silence on the incidence and location of the queer and has been relegated to the fringes of society.

There has been a considerable change in our approach to the discussion on queer identities, queer spaces and queer politics in India after 2009. The approach shifted from the legal and health-related focus to a more inclusive dialogue that

allowed a wider “alternative” space for expression – legitimising voices that had been previously silent or ‘silenced’. The following is a brief excerpt of a ‘silenced’ narrative, from an interview with a transman, who had spent the last fifteen years of his life trying to come to terms with his gender, sexuality and his battle to gain the support of his family. I had asked him during the interview, why he chose to stay with his family even though they do not support his decision to identify as a man:

*I came out to my family as a transman when I was twenty five. I wouldn't have, in a different circumstance, but my family was trying to get me married. As a young graduate “girl” from a respectable family, I was meant to become someone's trophy wife. The very thought of it had almost driven me to kill myself. I even tried a few times, but I always failed to understand why I had to die to be able to exist. So, one day I gathered all my courage, and I told my family the truth. I still remember the day vividly, and it still breaks me: I told my parents and my grandmother that I had something to tell them, and I told them that I was man, a man who was trapped inside the body of a woman, that I had felt like that since I realized I was different as a child. At first they did not quite understand, so I tried to explain as much as I could, from what I myself had learnt from my experience and education. Then came the denial – my father got so angry that he left the house as he wanted to hear no more of it, my mother was crying and howling, and praying to god to “cure” me of my terrible disease. My grandmother decided that it was more an issue of psychological problems and tried to convince my mother to take me to a doctor. That day is still fresh in my memory. It took them seven years to come to terms with my reality, but they haven't accepted it yet. I do live with my parents, but my father hasn't spoken properly to me since that day, in fact he still does not look me in the eyes when we do speak. My mother battled with the conviction that I may be cured one day. My grandmother died three years after I came out. She wasn't supportive either, but had accepted my deviance as someone accepts a deviant in the family. My mother still thinks she passed away from the shame of it all.*

*Now I have the responsibilities of the family, and I look after my parents like any dutiful child would do, despite the fact that they have chosen to let me sacrifice my true self. That day when I told my family the truth, they gave me an option – to either leave them, leave home and never come back, or in essence sacrifice my dream of transitioning and realizing the dream of truly becoming my “self”, in exchange of not being married off to a stranger. I chose to stay with my family, because the other option meant I would never see them again. And even though my family did not take my side, I love them and that will always be on*

*top of all other things. People sacrifice far more for their loved ones, and I have always had the support of friends who have helped me in my journey and in my self-realization. And I know my family loves me too, but they are simple people, whose lives are deeply entwined in society and its laws: their denial only reflects the social parameters of accepted behaviour.*

*I don't regret not transitioning, as I would have not been able to afford the medical procedure then, and now it is too late for me. I'm a "forty year old spinster" in society's view, and I have found a niche where I can operate comfortably within that identity. I have a partner who understands me and loves me, and although my parents won't accept her, she has brought happiness back into my life. So, although I will not have the same things in life as everyone else, I am content with what I have made for myself.*

The imprint of hegemony and subjugation is present in the narratives of subaltern experiences where the context of *silence* invariably takes precedence. The manifest systems of exclusion within society embedded in the processes of social institutions, in particular, are found in the family. Although the "alternative" identity develops from within the conventional social structures, the identity itself stands in *opposition* to the prescribed ideal type of gender, gender expression and by extension, gender experience. So the expression of the dissenting identity is silenced and coerced to conform to the accepted norms. The above narrative thus brings forth the tools by which familial/social coercion is effectively enforced on a transgender identity, and keeps the individual from transitioning physically into their desired body, thereby controlling their expression and experience.

### **Sexuality and the Subaltern Identity**

In the classical discourse, sexuality is the assumed biology of individuals while categorising the differences based on psychological and cultural attributes. However, recent attempts at defining and exploring sexuality have surfaced with large space for ambiguity within the understanding of sexuality (Borisoff & Chesebro 2011). The concept of heteronormativity in their writings is crucial to the discourse on sexuality, from the cultural and political perspectives, as the politics of gender and related identity is deeply embedded in the phenomenology of the gender identity (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia 2003). From this discursive level on gender identity, emerges the queer theory that has been striving to gain a foothold in mainstream gender and feminist studies (Namaste 1994). But, the pertinent question here is to delineate queer theory as a discourse on sexuality. Johnson and Henderson (2005) argue that queer theory *does* challenge the modern systemisation of sexuality as an apparatus of knowledge which structures and organises the personal, institutional, and cultural life of individuals. Thus queer

theory stands to incorporate the subversive into the mainstream discourse of sexuality (Eguchi 2012).

The central argument of this paper arises from Spivak's discussion on the subaltern experience, by drawing attention to experiential parallels from marginalised narratives. Her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' might evoke a straightforward affirmative or a negative answer, in contrast to a more nuanced reflection. Spivak argues that the "subaltern" is essentially the *marginalised* – and the agency of the exclusion is the determinant factor in the kind or the nature of the marginalised experience. Spivak's critique of the subaltern approach comes from her idea of *ethics of representation* – the responsibility of becoming the voice of someone else's narrative, or "speaking" on behalf of someone else. She argues that the postcolonial understanding of the marginalised rests on a critique of how historically, the subaltern have not been depicted in their voice. By addressing the ethical problem of "silence", the paper attempts to retain the narrator's voice, as a literary tool rather than provide disconnected evidence to fulfil an objective clinical approach. The narratives used as examples in this paper suggest paradigmatic departures through an exploration of the "queer" everyday life. The plurality of human conscience and experience opens up multiple conceptual possibilities. The narratives in the paper accommodate the post-modernist equations of different "sexualities", and deviates from using sexuality as a single and a reductive concept through exploring different experiential possibilities.

The following narrative is an excerpt from an interview with a cisgender pansexual man whom I met as the lover of a transwoman respondent. He provided some insight into how he feels about his social expression as a pansexual individual:

*My life is not a very interesting story. In fact, it is quite boring... normal childhood, loving parents, lots of friends and good times. The story is a bit different now, because I found out that love does not happen according the guidelines and laws of society, it just happens. When I met her (his lover), she was with someone else. But the moment I saw her, I wanted to speak to her, and get to know her. I don't know if it was love at first sight, it could be, but she intrigued me and I could not escape that strong desire I felt for her. She was very nice, maybe a bit apprehensive at first, but she didn't let her prejudices or mine come in the way of our friendship. Then one thing leads to another, and we discovered that we were in love. Like real love! But society had other plans. I felt betrayed by my family, when I told them that I wanted to marry her. They did not accept her. That was the toughest day of my life, because I left everything and everyone. I have a good job in a good company; I can look after both of us. But what makes me sad is that I can't be happy with everyone by my side. They said that I was being selfish by demanding that my family support my decision to be with a*



*transgender woman. They only understand the word hijra, but they don't know how to look beyond and at her, like I see her. My friends posed me horrible questions: who asked about her private parts, and about our sexual intimacy. I felt doubly betrayed and alone in the world, but then I realized that now I didn't have to be alone, because she was with me. I love her more than anything else. We are alone together, and we are just fine with that.*

*There are many like us. We are not really alone, if you think about it. But society wants us to remain hidden, and behind a thick veil, which keeps us separate from their world. I don't understand why. We don't disturb anyone; we don't create troubles, or commit crimes. I know people have very skewed ideas about transgender people, because our culture does not allow exploration by containing them in a single category of hijra. But every human being is different and varied. And I hope someday we can all live like human beings, and not genders, races and classes.*

Sexuality and its discontents are all around us in society, existing as symbols, traditions, norms and mythologies. However, a general correlation between these cultural subtexts is its foundation in the popular narrative (Gamson & Dawne 2004) which indicates further the need to engage with oral histories and existing stories arising from individuals, who are otherwise subject to social control. Society understands and controls sexuality through a system of regulations -- described in Foucault's evaluation of the functionality of "sex". However, "sexuality" pervades this modus operandi due to its intrinsic interrelation with the human psyche, and the humanist view is seldom the most effective. This picture brings us to the uneasy alliance of Freud and Marx, where the individual would emerge as the elementary source of discourse on the "gender" and "sexual identity". However, it takes a more cultural and sociological nuance, due to its proximity to the pedagogic nature of socialisation. Both gendered and sexual identity is dependent upon its cultural-historical contextualization, whereby the identity adopted by the individual is premised upon the existing social systems. [This is not to entirely negate the biological aspect of gender, but to accommodate the non-normative as a category of equal importance for this study].<sup>5</sup> The experience of sexuality in an individual is mainly internal, as we can observe from the narratives. The innate quality of this experience makes it difficult for the externalities of identity -- gender expression, superficial looks and personality to match with the existential dichotomy.

### Locating the Opposition

There is potential for developing a nuanced discourse on sexuality, its boundaries, its history and its evolution in Indian writings, arising from its rich cultural histories. The unique composition of different faiths, ethnicities and races has made it

impossible to consider the entire nation state as a homogenous entity. The demarcation of mainstream and alternative, in any of the social, political or intellectual realms, for instance, shows immense regional incongruence. As a majoritarian Hindu nation, there are different representations of diverse faiths and separate cultures that together constitute India as a nation. Political scientists have often argued that the Indian model of democracy is an exemplary system and an effective republic par excellence. However, their observation assumes an entitlement to unmitigated representation, which itself is a fallacy.

Sexual marginality is not a socially viable issue, similar to caste, class or race, which receives a lot more attention from the political factions which are the democratic representative bodies responsible for the accountability of those who are part of their ideology. The sexually marginalised are also not an economically viable category; in a tautological cycle, they are the rejects of society and hence cannot contribute to the chain of productive activity.<sup>6</sup> So, the entire premise of the marginal experience of this category rests on identification and alienation of the “deviants”. This “deviance” however is externally adjudicated, and never internally accepted. Every individual has a desire to be a part of their social environment and be a productive part of the structure. As almost everyone is socialised to “want” the same things in life – families and friends, actively work, so as to create a sustainable system of relationships with others in one’s social life – in other words, experience the “normal”. But as society dictates the terms and conditions of how and who can be a part of the “normal” society, those who experience their gender and sexuality outside the prescribed norms are deemed unfit and hence relegated to a marginal existence which is devoid of self-expression, constituting a *silent* category.

But it is important to note that although society decides which aspects of an individual’s self-expression is to be ultimately deemed “deviant” and hence perverse, heteronormativity has enjoyed the status of being the ideal type of gender-sexuality expression. However, delving deeper into the psyche of heteronormativity, one finds it is riddled with incongruous perversities that would otherwise, be also considered neatly perverse based on factors of desire, expression, and queer experience.<sup>7</sup> For an account of a similar incongruity, we can turn to an argument in Sudhir Kakar’s *Intimate Relations*: “...another Bengali, whenever he thought of a particular man, felt with a hallucinatory intensity that his penis and testes vanished altogether and were replaced by female genitalia. While defecating, he felt he heard the peremptory voice of his guru asking, “Have you given me a child yet?” In many dreams, he was a man whereas his father and brothers had become women. During intercourse with his wife he tied a handkerchief over his eyes as it gave him the feeling of being a veiled bride while he fantasised his own penis as that of his father and his wife’s vagina as that of his mother.” (Kakar 1989:131) In this case, the subject is not seen to have a confusion of gender identity, nor an aberration of sexual orientation. However, the sexuality or the experience of sexuality in this subject is transcendent to all regulated

boundaries of heteronormative sanctions. Would that observation render this individual as a *deviant* then? The question arises, therefore, to locate this experience of sexuality in the context of space. As already discussed, this experience of sexuality occurs on both the paradigms of 'public and private' space; wherein the behaviours are regulated into accepted and unaccepted, according to mandates of morality, tradition and law.

Based on Kakar's observations, we may now propose some of the crucial arguments against the "mainstream" understanding of sexuality which positions itself against the "alternative" perceptions. Inevitably questions of citizenship emerge out of the engagement with this space of experiential dynamism. These issues appear, whenever, there is a gap in access to opportunities by different sections of the society, separated by a system of hierarchy dividing categories according to their reach. In the present Subaltern Studies, the difference is seen as a political lacuna by Partha Chatterjee, and a cultural divide in Spivak's work. This essay proposes a difference in sexuality by demonstrating that when an individual is alienated from his identity as a citizen and forced to identify by differentiating solely from the normative ideal, then the relationship between the citizen and the state would be inevitably brought into question. The individual questions the attitudes of the society, and in turn the state which dictates the general social ambience.

My conversations with a homosexual cisgender man are relevant to this discussion:

*What is the most challenging aspect of your sexuality?*

The toughest thing about homosexuality is the stigma, of course. A homosexual man is not man enough, but for me it goes beyond that. You must not forget, my friends or my family know nothing about it. As far as my parents are concerned, they are still waiting for me to get married, have kids, and settle down. They want me to stop going for all the late night parties and spending time away from home. I cannot tell them the truth neither can I live the way they want me to. So I have struck a balance.

*Considering the social stigma, prejudices and the general lack of awareness, how did you come to terms with your own sexuality?*

The day, I first gathered courage to follow my true instincts is also the day I decided to step into the unknown yet exciting possibilities. It was the day my first boy friend invited me to go play video-games with me after school. I knew this was not an innocent offer, I knew he was different, not like the other boys in school. So I went with him back to his house, and I watched him walking around, talking, singing, cracking jokes, and trying to impress me. Of course, I was very impressed. So



when he tried to kiss me later, I let him. I knew then that I was in love, and I also knew then what I wanted sexually. A woman has never aroused me, sexually, quite the same way I have been aroused by men. Not that I haven't tried, but I could never get myself to be physically intimate. It sort of has a negative effect. I knew very well what my sexuality entails, and I made decisions in life accordingly.

*What settlement did you make through these decisions?*

I decided to abandon my dream of studying literature, which made my mother happy because she thought studying literature has no future for a boy. I took up a degree in computers, just like my father wanted and eventually acquired a job in a corporate firm. All this was possible primarily because I don't adhere to the general superficial conception of a homosexual man. But of course, the success of my sacrifice gave me the possibility of a life where I control most aspects of my own sexuality. I AM a man after all, and I cannot belie my true nature in any way. So I maintained a simultaneous existence, where I can gratify myself sexually, without ever compromising my social life.

*Certainly a very contradictory existence, how do you manoeuvre between the two separate spaces of your identity?*

Yes, my sexuality is important to me, which is why I don't consider myself a hypocrite. Hypocrisy sounds negative. How I manage my sexuality has only a compassionate basis. I love my parents and would not want to hurt them. They are old and belong to a more dispassionate generation. It's futile to try and explain my sexuality to them. My father owns a sari shop. The only sexual thing about my parents is me. I am the only evidence that they have exercised their sexualities. But I also love myself. I too want to exist sexually. What you call contradictory is actually quite synonymous.

The two separate existences in my life has one common factor, me. It's all about me and at the same time not about me at all. But my conflict is not with people, only with their perceptions. The narrow-mindedness enrages me, but I also see where it comes from. How many men live their entire lives, denying their realities? How many of them lie with their wives while fantasizing about other men? How many of them die believing they are sick? How many of them have never felt either love or pleasure? So, I choose to live my life best suited to my needs in life. That is pretty much the gist of it.

The narrative here describes how an individual copes with sanctions about self-expression and, at the same time, self-censorship. Examples such as these emerge as important indicators to elucidate the manifest level of the relationship between

the state and the individual, whereby the personal expression of 'selfhood' is *governmentalised*, through official and unofficial means of intimidation, abuse and orchestrated by social representatives of the state. The relationship between these two categories emerge in Foucault's influential study of madness as a perversion of the subjective experience; and his hypothesis on the universality of our knowledge acquired at the cost of exclusions, bans, denials and rejections – at the price of a kind of cruelty with regards to reality.<sup>8</sup> The cruel exclusion of the individual in the narrative mentioned here on censorship of self-expression is manifested at the experiential level and applies to subalterns facing various forms of suppression and exploitation based primarily on the parochial value-systems and cultural modes of conduct. However, the voices demanding a change in the attitude and approach of society are few and faint.

### Can the Subaltern be heard?

On the subject of subaltern voices, Spivak brings to the forefront the concept of 'ethics of representation', developed in post-colonial thought. The idea suggests that we may begin to engage with the subaltern histories, but there is a tendency in that approach to encircle a teleological impasse, where the subaltern is not only rendered silent, but the attempts at bringing the subaltern voices to the forefront are inadequate or irresponsible. As discussed before, the responsibility of "speaking" on behalf of someone has both its advantages and disadvantages, according to the subaltern studies approach. First, it is understood that the subaltern may not have the ability to speak for themselves and hence require a voice outside of the subaltern experience that can speak on behalf of the silenced. Second, the ethics of representing the reality of someone else, or an entire community, is incident upon the degree of separation and attachment with the subaltern experience itself. For this, one would require a second glance at the origins of the category of the subaltern. The concept of the subaltern developed in the Gramscian discourse as an understanding of the proletariat, or the subordinate social groups:

The word "subaltern" in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank', and the term is used 'as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way. Before the publication of *Subaltern Studies*, the 'subaltern' was virtually overlooked in Gramscian scholarship. Guha and the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group is primarily responsible for introducing Gramsci's concept of the subaltern into the current discourse. By the 1990s, the influence of *Subaltern Studies* reached beyond India and South Asia, as intellectuals from various regions adopted similar research projects and modes of investigation. Beyond the scope of the *Subaltern Studies* publication

series, subaltern studies' now encompasses a recognisable mode of investigation and field of study focused on marginalized members of society and closely linked with postcolonial analysis. (Green 2011: 387)

Although the conceptual mooring of subaltern thought was embedded in the discursive departures of the 1980s, the theoretical background was paved by Foucault's engagement with power and its subjective correlations. Thus to establish the sexual subaltern as a category, it is necessary to locate it spatially, both in its historical as well as contextual parameters. Foucault was predisposed to a nominalistic approach – 'that is, he was interested in observing how subjects and objects come into being in the context of specific discursive formations' (Murdoch 2006:30). Despite having engaged with the individual subjectivity, Foucault chose to decentralise the human subject from his own history, thereby locating the spaces of this dispersion. This affective dispersive space would 'account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.' (Foucault 1980: 22)

Foucault's 'actuality' of the state of being in its spatial context makes it pertinent to investigate social history cases. In this paper, I have studied individuals who have conscious identities of deviant sexualities and/or genders and provided narratives of experiential sexualities that are marginalised by the larger society. The non-normative was, therefore, located and based on its deviance from the heteronormative ideal. Once the gender and sexuality attribute percolate into the conceptualisation of the non-normative category, the discursive regimes also contribute to its formation. The initial argument, expressed here, has been derived from Queer Theory (Namaste 1994, Seidman 1996), following the postmodern engagement with purpose over essence. But as my fieldwork progressed, a political category arose, which emerged due to the contextual interaction of individual and knowledge. For Foucault, these are to be considered as 'breakpoints' in the development of new discourses; for him these shifts in discourses produce "new kinds of knowledge, along with new objects to know and new modalities of power" (Foucault 1980:22). But to create new knowledge, the prerogative was to locate this category not only historically, but also contextually in a social setting along with all its manifest repercussions:

While we consider continuities in the means by which both individualised subjects and whole populations are 'known', we also encounter some discontinuities, most notably in the attention Foucault gives to the particularities of discrete spatial zones as his theoretical gaze shifts from the institutional to the societal realm. (Murdoch 2006: 31).

This paradigm shift from the institutional to the societal, in Foucault's body of work, allocates 'actuality' to a theoretical position. However, the shift necessitates a closer look at the context of Indian society and its history to locate the 'subaltern actuality' in its manifest form. Here I would provide the example of a woman who expressed the struggles of being homosexual in a society obsessed with heteronormativity, and how the pressures of being "normal" coerced her to follow a life of deep dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

*I didn't know what a lesbian was till I was in college. In those days, there was no Google or Wikipedia, or even Facebook. Whatever information there was came from either textbooks or our elders. And neither of those prepared me for how I felt as a young adult. I went to an all-girls school, and we were kept under strict supervision of the sisters (nuns) who taught us. We were given lessons on how to become good respectful wives, and how to conduct ourselves as "ladies" in society. School education did not feature any references to sexuality or sexual desires, it was forbidden, taboo even. So as I grew up, I began to develop feelings for my classmates, and as every retrograde disciplinarian situation outcomes volatile results, I too had several intimate relationships in school. However, I did not know if that meant anything to my sexual preference, we were kids and we experimented – that is how it was largely viewed. Because some of those classmates went on to become happy wives, or at least that is the impression I got. Nobody thought much of it. But as I went on to college, and began to develop friendships with boys, I realized that I felt no desire to be with them. I tried, I even had a fairly long relationship with a boy, but it did not work out. This was when I began to study about sexualities and preferences, and that is when I understood myself – for the first time in my life, it was a huge relief. I knew who I was and what I wanted. But it was my own realization, and nobody else had any interest in my preferences. I was forced by my family to marry when I was twenty-three, and thus began my suffering. My husband was aggressive and abusive, and my sexual unresponsiveness made things worse. I was raped and beaten several times, and nobody interfered despite my desperate calls for help. My family deemed the matter as "private", and refused to take me back. I had a degree but no way of using it to my advantage.*

*Within a year and a half, I was pregnant, and the cycle of abuse continued. I tried to reach out to old friends, but they denied our intimacies. I had never felt so alone or so hurt. I had no friends, nobody to talk to, and I was a mother to a child I felt no connection to. My husband slowly stopped the beatings once our daughter began to understand the fights. But he never showed any affection for me, and that made it easier for me to make up my mind. I began to search for*

*jobs, and took a school service exam. After two attempts, I finally got my B.Ed degree, and got an offer to teach at a local secondary school. I left my husband's home the day I started work, and never went back. My husband's family refused to let me take my daughter or give me the official papers of separation. I am technically still married to my husband, but it has been eleven years since the day I walked out. My daughter and I are closer now than we have ever been; she understands my struggles and supports me, though she still lives with her father. She loves my partner, and we have a strange but effective bond together.*

The account demonstrates the complexity of experience and expression of sexual identity that goes through a process of reparative deductions, whereby the undesired elements of individual consciousness are regulated through morals and ethics. The ethical conscience represents fetishism towards a binary system of repression. Most of the respondent's recounts, such as the above narrative are based on the experiences of exclusion in a particular cultural context. In such situations, the need to experience the preferred identity is so deeply entrenched, that it drives many marginalised individuals to adopt behavioural and emotional excesses, which is then rationalised through deep-seated insecurities. The examples of such excesses abound among poor respondents begging on the streets of Kolkata. They are usually draped in feminine clothes, wear glistening lip and nail varnishes, and are found knocking on car windows asking for money. The desperate beggars wear the same cynical expression that stems from a lifetime of stigma and dissociation. Their overt disposition is a reminder to society, of the nature of exclusion they face as a separate social category. But at the same time, their roles and the act of putting a "mask on a mask to become real" is, in essence, a reflection of the subjective consciousness to project different selves and identities.

The following narrative is an excerpt from a transwoman, whom I met on the streets waiting for a busy traffic signal to change from the green light to red so that she could resume begging. I had a friendly conversation with her, and amongst other questions, I wanted to know why she puts so much effort on her fancy dress and makeup on a sweltering hot day:

*I put on makeup every day, even on the hottest and wettest of days. I also wear bright clothes and flashy accessories... everyday. You know why? I want you to notice me. I maybe begging for money, but I want you to know that I beg because there is really no other option for me. Your society has left me with no one or no other means of living my life with dignity and respect. I cannot get a proper education or follow a career path, and I have no future in your society. So I beg on the streets, because that is the only thing you would have me do. And even then you want me to be invisible? Never! I look the way I do because I refuse*



*to be reduced to nothing or nobody. I am somebody, and you will take note of me. My loud makeup, bright clothes, will be etched in your mind. So you are reminded that you are responsible for how I must now live my life.*

It is worth noting that when Indian intellectuals look into the historical, cultural traditions to define or explain the causal relations of gender and sexuality perceptions, they tend to refer to the attitudes of society by locating these categorically in the social structure. The above example demonstrates the respondent's caution to apply the spectrum of gender-sexuality differentiation for individual cases in the hierarchical social structure. The layered structure remains an integral aspect of social positioning and 'governmentality', as the following observation reiterates:

When the queer is pointed out in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals, why does Krishna braid his hair as a woman's plait and wear a nose ring like a woman? Why does the Goddess take on the masculine role of a warrior, with a female companion by her side, as she rides into battle on a lion? Why is Shiva half a woman but Shakti not half a man?), they are often explained away in metaphysical terms. No attempt is made to inquire, interrogate and widen vision. Thus is queerness rendered invisible? But the *hijra*, perhaps the most vocal manifestation of queerness in India, refuses to stay invisible. Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by her own family, reduced to a joke in popular entertainment, she claps in the crowded streets demanding to be seen.

(Pattanaik

2014: 31)

There is evidence to prove that more people are beginning to talk about discrimination and the lack of response from the government's side, and not just the queer community themselves. They do not want to discriminate people based on their sexual orientation or gender association; look for positive changes that would incorporate the queer community into the mainstream, and provide equal opportunities for all citizens. A typical response reads as follows:

Now, it is a matter of shame that a nation like India has nothing to offer to the LGBT community. The only member from the LGBT community who made it to the political scenario was Shabnam "Mausi" Bano, who was an elected member of the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1998 to 2003. India hasn't witnessed another politician from the LGBT community. The lawmakers of this nation aren't concerned about this chunk of population. A leader is required to represent them on a mass scale. Somebody has to raise their concerns and address their issues. Till the time a strong voice from among the community comes up, the plight of the community shall remain deplorable. Indian policy makers have a lot to think about. Providing

sufficient and equal opportunities to the LGBT community is the only way forward. If ever India has to free itself from its ghosts and shed the tag of an “intolerant nation”, the time is now. And the first step is to elect a leader from among the community.<sup>9</sup>

Opinions such as these reflect the emerging consensus of society as a whole, taking into account international factors of contextual change. The social media increasingly spreads awareness and knowledge about the community and their grievances. India’s approach to the legalisation of same-sex marriage and rights has been repeatedly challenged by queer rights activists, on grounds of being too archaic and exclusive. On international platforms, India continues to take the traditional path as against a more inclusive and updated ethical stand.<sup>10</sup> Quite clearly, India needs a more comprehensive structured knowledge on the Indian sexual subaltern, to provide a realistic and empathetic approach to solving the problem.

### The Silent Opposition

To conclude the discussion, some of the stories from India, that are being brought into the forefront by various alternative youth media and progressive news outlets needs to be highlighted in the following descriptive list:

March 2016: VAGABOMB, a progressive feminist blog portal, published the story of India’s first openly gay royalty – “Millennials might remember his revolutionary coming out story that got papers from around the country interested in the princely district of Rajpipla in Gujarat. Some may even remember his interview with Oprah Winfrey for her show, Gays of the World.” (Source: <http://www.vagabomb.com/Indias-First-Openly-Gay-Princes-Inspiring-Story-of-Sexual-Awakening-and-Social-Boycott/>)

May 2015: 101 INDIA published the story of love between a young man and a transwoman from Mumbai. The story caused some stir, and opened readership to a new kind of relationship. There was a hue and cry over the appropriateness of publishing such a story, but it was picked up by alternative news media and kept alive despite strong oppositions. (Source: <https://www.101india.com/101-love-sex/love-story-between-transgender-and-young-man-mumbai>)

June 2015: Queertopia’s ‘The Visibility Campaign’ –

Equality for the gender/sexual minority community is discussed every day, but most often, only in terms of legal status. While equality in terms of legal protection is very important, legal equality does not necessarily lead to social equality or equality in representation. There persists major discrepancy in LGBTQI representation or visibility in every sphere of life. How many Indian politicians or scientists can we think of who identify

as the gender/sexual minority? This lack of visibility exists not only in terms of occupation/employment, but also in terms of philosophical approaches in a more aggravated manner. This is only one of the ways in which the gender/sexual community is taught that they have a certain level of success and opportunity predetermined. Therefore, there are very few people that we can think of, who can serve as LGBTQI role models. Ideally, one doesn't need a 'role model' to 'be gay', but society teaches us to look up to 'heroes' while also perpetuating the notions that people who identify as the gender/sexual minority are all alike! (Source: <http://queertopiaindia.weebly.com/the-visibility-campaign>)

More recently, a string of liberal publications have come from other more established sources of print media in India: Anandabazar Patrika, one of India's oldest print news media, published a story locally in Kolkata, about a transwoman and her childhood lover getting married. This story is important, as it portrays a positive image of acceptance and integration for a non-conforming couple. It speaks of how the marriage was sanctified in the presence of religious priests and all family members with complete support from both families, and even neighbours. Rarely does one come across such positive stories, because most of the reported news on transgender and the LGBTQI community in India tends to circle around stories of violence, abuse, neglect and despair of the community. (Source: <http://www.anandabazar.com/abpmetadata/story-of-a-married-life-after-sex-change-1.364200>)

The stories of non-conformity are no longer relegated to the alternative media outlets, as more and more stories are being brought into focus; as support for the community grows on one hand, and on the other we still have to coax the dialogue on non-conformity itself. Especially for the discourse on masculinity and gender roles in India,<sup>11</sup> it has to be delicately tackled with the preconditions of subjectively associating patriarchy and gender-sexuality experience. In June of 2016, Mission for Indian Gay and Lesbian Youth Empowerment held its third LGBT youth leadership summit in Mumbai, following two successful events in 2014 and 2015. "The Indian LGBT Youth Leadership Summit is a pioneering initiative primarily aimed at identifying and grooming high potential individuals within the LGBT youth of India, and preparing them for future leadership roles. Now into its third year, the summit is an opportunity for bright young LGBT-identified Indians to come together on a single national-level platform, interact among one another, as well as with successful role models from the Indian LGBT community from diverse fields." (Source: <http://mingle.org.in/leadershipsummit2016.php>)

Given the evidence from the list of narratives, one may infer that the queer community in India, despite being numerically small, is not a powerless group

unable to voice its opinions or issues. Yet the Indian government is not swayed in favour of decriminalizing homosexuality, or integrating queer identity into its social order. The rejection of any alternative expression and/or experience is still widely censored and silenced, especially within the rural and largely illiterate sections of the population. The abuse and violence is real, and perpetrates all social classes, in both rural and urban India. But the voices of support are growing, even though the government has actively separated the gender and sexuality components of the queer identity, by upholding transgenderism as an act of “god”<sup>12</sup> and simultaneously relegating sexual non-conformity as an individual perversion equivalent to being criminal.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.lawyerscollective.org/vulnerable-communities/lgbt/section-377.html> for details on the Indian Penal Code, in particular Section 377 – pertaining to the criminalization of homosexuality as ‘unnatural’.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, M. (1988), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (LH Martin, H. Gutman, & PH Hutton, Eds.). London: Tavistock.

<sup>3</sup> The expression “larger social whole” is used here to move away from Tönnies’ structured and institutional idea of the community and civil society to make it more relevant for the perception of the fluidity of gender and sexual identity in India. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, [translated and edited by Charles P. Loomis], Copyright 1957, The Michigan State University Press, pp. 223-231.

<sup>4</sup> The colloquial term for transgendered persons, in particular transwomen who form the age-old tradition of the ‘third-gender’ identity in the Indian context.

<sup>5</sup> The intention here is to put forward the idea that the biological gender, or simply put ‘sex’ of a person, is simply a chromosomal combination resulting in specific biological categorization; however, the ‘becoming’ of the gender rests upon its cultural simulation and pedagogy, dependent on history and its chronological political composition.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the *chain of productivity* is being held in a particular context here, where the participants are constitutionally responsible as citizens to aspire for the ideal types. Moving away from the Marxist to the Weberian perspective, these ideal types that govern the institutional politics of the real world appear sculpted by patriarchal myopia and begin to affect the mechanism of social ‘everyday’. The fabric of cultural environment emerges from the dominant powers in society, while historically the categories of exclusion have been focused on identifying the deviants of a narrow structure of ideal type. And, as with any other form of exclusion, sexual and gendered exclusion is also based upon a restrictive format – that of the heterosexual cisgender identity – is finally deemed as the ideal type of citizen. A deviance from the identity association is considered an aberration, by choice and hence a sin, or by “god’s deliverance” as is believed in cultural contexts. This brings one back to the

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chain of productivity analogy, where the argument holds, as in our society much of the vocally identifying “queers” are kept away from the mainstream ‘everyday’, except for in some liberal media and publishing outlets; even primetime television has been shy of portraying queer characters or homosexual content.

<sup>7</sup> This comment is a reference to another case study related to this research, where I explore a heterosexual incestuous relationship, a dynamic that is fundamentally relegated to the “perverse” space within social definitions. The incongruity in the nature of perversity works differently for “queer” and straight individuals, so to speak. The social space within which the incest is tolerated, or other such heterosexual perversities (as defined under IPC Section 377) such as sexual intimacy outside of procreation purposes, are understood as “private” matters. On the other hand, a “queer” individual finds their sexual preferences discussed with much more rigour and is subjected to a wider range of intolerance by the same social structure that turns a blind eye to heterosexual perversities.

<sup>8</sup> From the Lecture (Foucault 1988): Foucault referred to his *Madness and Civilization*, where he engaged with the concept of insanity, as an indicator of tolerance of the state when dealing with a subject who is positioned outside of their own experience of subjectification.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/articles/queer-voices/power-to-the-lgbt-community-awake-up-call-for-india/> See link for the quote and for further reading on current topics of discussion on the LGBT friendly platform.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/at-unindia-votes-in-favour-of-resolution-that-excludes-lgbt-families/>

<sup>11</sup>For example, cross-dressing is routinely confused with transgenderism and requires more insight from cross-dressing individuals themselves. It only highlights the gaping lacuna in thought and knowledge on the subject, and a deliberate rejection of the Western discourse on the subject. Recently, an online media outlet QUINT published a story about a man who loves to wear sarees. His story highlights the dilemma of gender experience, sexual expression and identity questions for non-conforming individuals.

<http://www.thequint.com/videos/2016/04/19/celebrating-versatility-the-sareeman-of-india>

<sup>12</sup> The state of Kerala has adopted its first Transgender Bill of Rights - <http://thelogicalindian.com/news/kerala-unveils-indias-first-transgender-policy/> States anyone identifying as a transgender individual will have access to rights and protections against discrimination.

<http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/NewsDetail/index/7/7381/Reservation-Scholarships-for-Transgenders-New-Draft-Bill>

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