

Social Media and Queer Movements: The Vernacular Missing Link

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Abstract:

In *Intimate Subjects and Virtual Spaces: Rethinking Sexuality as a Category for Intimate Ethnographies* Rohit Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta notes about internet and its resultant social media having an impact on the manner of identity formation, its consumption and the perception it triggers among digital users. Regarding the internet, Steven Jones noted its role in fostering the expansion and advancement of a community free from territorial or time limitations, enabling universal participation from any location and at any moment. Such formation of virtual communities has been on the rise with the emergence and evolution of mobile internet, increasing accessibility of social media platforms. Queer communities have aided increased discussion, exchanges, debates and action plans across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube strengthening call for rights and privileges and developing societal awareness. Queer platforms like Gaysi, Queer Ink and Gaylaxy have opened up avenues for individuals to connect, network and share information with each other.

Basis the theories of media impact, specifically cultivation and agenda setting, this paper seeks to outline the need for queer-oriented social media content in vernacular languages as efforts to enhance the well-being of gender minority communities in rural India.. In doing so, this paper will explore how lack of content is adversely resulting in a lack of awareness about gender diversities among parents alongside a dearth of avenues for victims to communicate their fate or seek help. Post examination of available secondary data, this paper will present findings about the present state of vernacular queer-oriented social media platforms and groups and present recommendations about the future course.

Keywords: Virtual Communities, Queer Social Media, Gender Minority Well-being. Rural LGBTQ+ Experiences, Vernacular Queer Media

Introduction:

Social Media in India

With the introduction of affordable network charges and handheld devices, graph of internet penetration in India has been on the ascent consistently. Internet penetration in the country was estimated at just over 52% with user number being more than 750 million (Kemp 2024). At the start of 2023 internet penetration was recorded at 48.7% with 692 million users. By the close of 2023 India's internet user base grew by 58 million, with internet reach going deeper by almost 3% (Kemp 2023). Thus by the end of 2023 half of India's population had started using the internet, which given the nation being the most populous is a significant proportion. In spite of growth in internet penetration, interestingly social media user base showed a dip in 2023. Kemp (2024) states in the first months of 2024, India had 460 million social media users accounting for 32.2% of the population. During the initial months of 2023 proportion of social media users was recorded at 467 million people accounting for 32.8% of the population. This means throughout 2023 almost 7 million dropped out of social media platforms (Kemp 2023). The trend of internet usage increasing and social media participation declining is indicative that new user were using the internet for other activities not related to social media consumption.

Analysed from the gender prism, Kemp (2024) notes that at the start of the year, female social media users accounted for 31.4% of the country's total social media user universe while male users stood at 68.6%. In comparison, at the start of 2023 proportion of female social media users was 26.5% while male users were 73.5% of the total user universe (Kemp 2023). This

implies a decrease in social media usage both among males and females over the course of 2023. Notably this decrease coincides with the overall decrease in social media user numbers between the two years considered herein. In terms of internet usage distribution between urban and rural India, a Nielsen 2023 report states that internet users hailing from the hinterlands was 44% more than those belonging to urban centers. While absolute figure of urban internet users was 295 million, it was 425 million for rural areas, implying 44% more internet users in villages than cities (ET 2023). Encouragingly the report further outlines expectation that rural internet user base is likely to climb up in the short term future. The Nielsen report further clarified that by the end of 2022, 86% of rural population were using the internet which was a significant scale up compared to previous years. Young users across both urban and rural center displayed strong allegiance to consumption of entertainment and participation in e-commerce activities when online (ET 2022). Though these data points are point to a lessening urban rural divide in terms of technology adoption, it must be noted that these are proportion of internet users and do not necessarily imply social media usage trends. Relevant in this context is a study by Ashhar (2024) who undertook to explore social media addiction among college going students of rural and urban areas. From analysis of data the researcher concluded about urban college student being hooked onto social media platforms more than college students from rural areas. This study covering over 100 students from both regions cumulatively also highlighted differences in social media usage between urban and rural students respectively (Ashhar 2024).

Summing the data points collated above it can be concluded that social media use, notwithstanding the drop in 2023, continues to remain significant within the Indian populace inclusive of skew between use patterns in rural and urban areas. Though internet use overall has increased in rural areas more than in urban centers, not all rural internet users have their presence across different social media platforms. If this be the case, it holds indications about social media penetration being lower in rural India compared to the cities and towns.

Social Media: The Networking Tool

Social media platforms and networking sites have revolutionized communication, empowering individuals and marginalized groups to participate in and support social movements on a global scale (Sarkar & Rashid, 2018). It has been a boon for marginalized communities by amplifying their voices, enabling participation in movements, shaping public opinion about activist actions and mobilization, fostering dialogues between politicians and citizens and creating a space for public discourses (Sarkar & Rashid, 2018). Research about the contributions of the Internet to social movements reveals the diverse use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by different social movement organizations (SMOs) to mobilize participants globally via cost-effective information dissemination about protests and activities (Sarkar & Rashid, 2018). Virtual communication platforms have emerged as catalysts of social change, especially for the LGBTQ+ community (Ferrara, 2023).

In their work *Intimate Subjects and Virtual Spaces: Rethinking Sexuality as a Category for Intimate Ethnographies*, Rohit Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta (2018) explore the transformative influence of the internet and social media on identity formation, consumption behaviours and the perceptions they evoke among digital users. Jones (1998) also observes that the Internet facilitates creation of communities without geographical or temporal constraints, enabling participation from anyone, anywhere, at any time. This phenomenon has led to the proliferation of virtual communities, especially with the evolution of mobile internet and the increased accessibility of social media platforms. The advent of social media has revolutionised information dissemination and community connections (Bailey & Gossett, 2018), reshaping both personal and collective identities while fostering empathy groups and spreading new notions of nationhood (Nanditha, 2020). Social media platforms play a crucial role in uniting queer communities, transcending geographical barriers, and providing safe spaces for marginalised voices (queeringperspectives, 2023). Facebook groups, Twitter hashtags, and

online forums serve as virtual sanctuaries for sharing narratives, seeking solidarity, and celebrating diverse identities, particularly empowering queer individuals across South and Southeast Asia (Shah et al, 2015).

Rationale of Study:

Studying in conjunction with the above-mentioned aspects sum into an interesting perspective aspect viewed from the standpoint of queer activism in India. As has been noted by experts, social media aids in forming virtual communities, strengthening networking and encouraging a sense of belonging among users. This is a boon for queer people and their call for extension of rights and privileges as it can aid in building momentum for movements, cultural initiatives and sensitization programs. The rising graph of social media users augurs well as it implies more queer individuals getting to meet and interact with others and building networks. But when the disparity between rural and urban social media user quantum is considered, scenario of concern emerges. Are members of the queer community hailing from villages and remote areas able to network intra community and find support from others, who can guide and aid? Or are they at the sideline when it comes to the benefits of social media as accruing to queer members? Though internet penetration has deepened the question remains whether rural queer individuals are aware of and able to access social media platforms contributing positively to mobilization of queer community members. According to the Economic Times (2022) there are 85 million smartphones in villages which are used jointly. With such usage pattern it may be difficult for queer people to create and maintain social media profiles thus minimizing their chances of becoming aware about progress of the community holistically and available support systems. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which social media is aiding queer movements and mobilization in rural areas of the country and whether lack of vernacular content circulation through such platforms contribution to low awareness and access of support systems. Basis communication theories like agenda setting theory and cultivation theory this

paper will conclude about the penetration level of vernacular content through social media for queer communities in villages and remote areas and the impact it is having on the lives of non binary individuals from such geographies and the society they exist in.

Queer Activism in India:

Attributable to the colonial regime, queer voices were largely silenced. Post Independence, the introduction of Article 14 of the Constitution, signifying equality among citizens, countered the continuance of Article 377, which penalized queer members due to their sexual and gender orientations. It was in 1977 that Shakuntala Devi, via her book *The World of Homosexuals*, advocated complete acceptance, rather than tolerance and sympathy, for the queer community (Arushi, 2020). Subsequently the All-India Hijra Conference was formulated. In its 1981 session, over 50,000 members participated, making it a significant milestone in India's queer movement history (Arushi, 2020). Nine years after, the first queer publication made its appearance, titled *Bombay Dost* and edited by activist Ashok Kavi Row. With time, this newsletter metamorphosed into India's prominent 'gay magazine' (Arushi, 2020).

On August 11, 1992, police apprehended men from a Connaught Place park on suspicion of involvement in homosexual acts in public place. This sparked protests from queer members, who gathered outside Delhi Police Headquarter near the ITO, demanding release of their brethrens which is widely regarded as the first recorded queer protest (Krishan, 2018). Activists from AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) too participated in protests against police discrimination toward HIV and AIDS patients (Bose & Chothani, 2021). Such instances of uprising of an entire community did usher in substantial changes, with transgender getting legal recognition and voting rights as the third gender via a 1994 judicial ruling (Yadav, 2021).

The inaugural queer film festival in India, *Friends of Siddhartha*, was organised in Delhi in 1993 and subsequently editions were organised in other cities also. Shantanu Nagpal's play, *O*

Come Bulky Stomach, debuted in Delhi in 1994, reflecting on HIV/AIDS and issues related to queer life (Dhall, 2017). Kolkata witnessed the first queer ballet in 1996, *The Alien Flower*, presented by Sapphire Creations Dance Workshop delving into the challenges confronted by gay men due to societal prejudices (Dhall, 2017). Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* raised a national storm in 1998, attracting unprecedented media attention and societal debates and discussions. It prominently placed queer life and issues within the wider public domain paving the way for formation of Sappho, Eastern India's first support group for lesbians, bisexual women and later transgender men, alongside Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) advocacy group (Arushi, 2020 and Dhall, 2017).

Queer activism took a new turn in 1999 with the first-ever pride walk for queers in India and South Asia, organised in Kolkata on July 2 (Dhall, 2017). It was only in 2008 that pride walks were organised across Delhi, Bengaluru, and Puducherry and recorded 2500 participants, notwithstanding political disruptions (Alagarsamy, 2019). By 2018, attendance in the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk swelled to over 5,000 (EPC, 2020).

Legal activism intensified, culminating in the 2009 Naz Foundation case wherein the Delhi High Court decriminalized consensual sexual acts by queer individuals as it was found to circumvent fundamental rights protected by the Constitution (Bose and Chothani, 2021). But the victory was short lived as the Supreme Court reversed the ruling in 2013. But in 2018 the Supreme Court ruled Section 377 unconstitutional marking a historic victory for queer rights in India (Bose and Chothani, 2021).

Despite legal advancements, civil rights challenges persist for queers. They are still being denied rights to marriage, equality and property rights as the next crucial step around which the struggle continues (Kidangoor, 2018). Similarly, adoption rights for queer couples and access to surrogacy are also on activist agendas (Choudhury and Sanjaya, 2022). But in spite of progress and victories discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, in the

work place and societally, continues to be prevalent and should be focused on by queer groups to attain social inclusion of community members (Choudhury and Sanjaya, 2022).

Queer Activism and Social Media:

The authors of *Too Gay for Facebook* emphasize the pivotal role of gender admission in ensuring the psychological well-being of queer people. It aids in increased self-efficacy, relationship satisfaction, and decreased anxiety and depression (Devito et al., 2018). Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are today integral to the identity exploration and coming-out experiences of India's queer community. These platforms help them in expressing identities, sharing personal narratives and challenging stereotypes through inclusive and empowering content. The National Library of Medicine has observed that LGBTQ individuals exhibit a higher level of engagement on social media platforms and are more inclined towards maintaining multiple accounts in comparison to non-LGBTQ individuals (Mavragani, 2022).

On Facebook, LGBTQ+ groups and pages serve as spaces where queer individuals and allies converge, share resources, organise events, and fortify their community bonds (queeringperspectives, 2023). Similarly, Instagram offers a visual platform for creative expression and positive representation of LGBTQ+ identities in India (queeringperspectives, 2023). Twitter plays a crucial role in connecting queer individuals with broader audiences, fostering conversations, sharing news and information, and amplifying voices (queeringperspectives, 2023).

Social media platforms serve as sanctuaries for sharing stories, seeking support, and embracing one's identity, which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and bolstering confidence among queer individuals not only in India but also across South and Southeast Asia (queering perspectives, 2023). Activists utilise encrypted messaging apps to exchange invaluable

information, legal counsel and safety measures, especially in areas with restricted queer rights (queeringperspectives, 2023). NGOs and solidarity groups such as Gaysi Family, Queer Ink India, Gaylaxy Magazine, Sappho for Equality, The Humsafar Trust, Nazariya LGBTQ Resource Group, Orinam LGBTQIA+, Magizhvan Foundation, Queerala, Voices Against 377 and Umang Trust are advancing interests of the queer community via their websites, social media pages and groups (Chinoy & Ray 2022).

According to Bhairannavar (2024) the absence of familiar social settings and the constraints of heteronormative environments prompted individuals to seek connections with men outside their usual circles. This necessitated geographical movement, with men traversing varying distances to encounter anonymity and increased opportunities for same-sex encounters. Such mobility facilitated a defiance of prevailing heteronormative norms within their localities and enabled visibility within the LGBTQ+ community. Instrumental in facilitating these movements was the advent of GPS-enabled dating applications.

Dating apps have played a significant role in community building for the LGBTQ community in India. American dating app Grindr, launched in India in 2011, Tinder in 2014, Scruff in 2016, and Indian apps like Truly Madly (2015) and ekCoffee (2016) sparked an online dating culture (Indianprideclub, 2023). Planet Romeo (PR), launched in 2002, remains a global online community for queer men without geo-tracking, emphasizing prioritization of community building over mere hook-ups (Joshi, 2016). Sridhar Rangayan, a filmmaker and queer rights activist, highlights the importance of pre-defined social spaces for anonymity and acceptance among queer individuals (Joshi, 2016).

The integration of GPS-enabled dating applications has empowered men to adapt to the global technological landscape, navigating it both linguistically and technologically. Moreover, these platforms have become instrumental in addressing the challenges of visibility and the scarcity of suitable locations for sexual encounters (Bhairannavar 2024). By strategically leveraging

these apps, individuals transcend familiar environments, venturing into distant realms across various spatial and temporal scales to fulfill their sexual aspirations. This movement contributes to the emergence of distinct regional and non-metropolitan geographies of sexuality, reshaping the socio-spatial dynamics of smaller cities, towns, and villages (Bhairannavar 2024)

In India, queer activism has gained momentum through online campaigns, viral dissemination of information, and hashtag publicity. Hashtags like #Section377, #PrideIndia or #IndianPride, #LoveIsLove, #QueerIndia, #TransRights, #QueerVisibility, #LGBTQYouth represent episodes of queer movements in India and widely circulated via social media channels like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by the community. There are several posts on Facebook initiated and shared by those who support the LGBT cause. On conclusion of Pride walk Facebook and Instagram pages transform into kaleidoscopes of jubilant moments, painted with the vibrant hues of the community, captured by photographers and celebrated by news stories. TikTok unlocked queer potential by challenging established norms, fostering fluid expressions of queerness and forming queer publics (Duguay, 2023). People integrated sexual identity expressions with digital tools like hashtags and filters to create queer techno cultures, enabling connections and self-representation (Duguay, 2023). The short looping format of posts enhanced storytelling and self-expression through new functionalities and creative references (Duguay, 2023). After 2018 Supreme Court ruling online spaces has nurtured a virtual network of global empathy and solidarity, empowering marginalized groups and inspiring increased political involvement among India's younger generations (Nanditha, 2020).

Vogue India showcased profiles of five queer influencers in an issue inspiring young individuals to pursue their passions and curve their space. The panel included poet and illustrator Priyanka Paul, a former Gender Studies professor of Ambedkar University, fashion illustrator, model, and TedX speaker Anwesh Sahoo, Indo-Canadian queer activist and author Harmeet Rehal and Vivek Shraya, an author and artist (Agarwal, 2020).

Facebook page Josh Talks and its YouTube channel, feature episodes where queer individuals share their personal stories. In one such episode of February 2024, Paras Tomar, an actor, journalist, entrepreneur, and social media influencer, shared his personal journey and confidently stated that he was not ashamed of being a gay man. Another episode, shown on Josh Talks Bengali in February 2024, narrates the account of Tista Das, a transwoman, who admitted not being ashamed of her identity. Such capsules increase visibility of queer people and queerness, promote inclusivity and encourage community members to give up feeling ashamed of their gender in a heteronormative society.

YouTube has emerged as a vibrant hub for LGBTQ content, hosting videos by influencers, bloggers, and notable personalities. This platform enables effective representation, lively debates, insightful analysis, and wide-reaching awareness campaigns. For instance, on 12 January 2023, Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the conservative RSS organization, conveyed his support for the LGBTQ community via the MojoStory channel, potentially resonating strongly with conservative audiences (Agarwal, 2020). Besides, LGBTQ campaign advertisements showcase vibrant, diverse, and inclusive campaigns celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community in full colors. Brands often change their logos to VIBGYOR on social media for Pride Month (BIP, 2021). Notable inclusive ads include Bhima Jewellers *Pure as Love*, Levi's *Proud to Be More*, Titan Raga's *What You Feel Is Who You Are*, UNAIDS *The Mirror*, Fastrack's *The Closest*, Humsafar Trust's *#StandWithPride*, Tinder's *Ritviz-Raahi #PrideFromHome*, OkCupid's *Are you an #AllyOfLove?*, Myntra's *ANOUK, BOLD IS BEAUTIFUL*, Vicks *Touch of Care*, Brooke Bond *Hum Hain Happy - 6 Pack Band* and the Times Group *Out & Proud*. (BIP, 2021).

Media Theories and Social Media:

The above campaigns had been conceived by the respective organizations to stimulate discussions and debates with society about the need for fostering an inclusive environment for

the queer. The role of these media initiatives, from this perspective, seems to be setting the agenda of such deliberations. It was 1972 that Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw proposed the agenda setting theory highlighting the influence of media on what people think about. The proponents clarified that media works with the agenda of not trying to influence people about what to think, rather keep people informed about immediate and sensitivity issue that requires public discourse and reflection. Agenda setting by the media therefore is about magnifying subjects of societal importance and not about influencing the direction of such discourse (Salman et al, 2016).

When companies alter their logo colour, they subtly draw visitor attention to the context and influence them to ponder over achievements and challenges of queer people. It is to trigger discussion without influencing the course of such interactions. For deeper penetration such campaigns are promoted through traditional and new age media, both contributing immensely in defining the agenda of public discourse. Demirsoy and Karakoc (2016) had held that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others are effective agenda setters in present times through content becoming viral and trending. The authors clarify that every topic that is trending on Twitter may not always be high on news value, but it certainly initiates exchanges of information and thoughts with alacrity. With content being often user generated, the rate of engagement exponentially increases drawing people into topics, thus facilitating information flow and awareness enhancement. This in turn outlines agendas which users engage with and take forward to the next level (Demirsoy and Karakoc, 2016). Social media platforms are also utilized for sharing interesting pieces from traditional media, which too contributes to agenda setting and initiation of exchanges and engagements.

The authors point out to the capabilities of social media platforms to produce, store and distribute large quantum of information in a cost effective and real time way which cannot be deleted with ease. Information thus circulated reaches wider audiences globally, eliciting

participation and contributions from a large cross section of society which provides momentum to movements. Gibbs (2021) had concluded about mass media setting the agenda which then gathers momentum through social media. Through analysis of coverage related to sexual harassment cases in the United States, which tumbled out following the #MeToo campaign, it was found that mass media continues to make relevant contributions in societal agenda setting and social media fanning it further. Interesting is a study by Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) which concluded about social media significantly impacting Kyrgyzstan's tulip revolution. Blogs posted on social media platforms emerged as channels through which information, not otherwise published by local or global press, was placed before the citizens for knowledge and awareness. The researchers opined that such blogs, official or unofficial, can aid democratic movements across developing nations including those lacking adequate economic progress.

In the Australian context, power of social media in building cohesiveness was evident during movement for grant of marriage rights for same sex couples. O'Connor (2017) had noted about queer people being ardent users of social media and considered to be frontrunners in realizing the potential of virtual communities and spaces in garnering support for their movements and highlighting their opinions and viewpoints. As such in their demand for grant of marriage rights, queer groups took to Facebook and Twitter to run campaigns and drive opinion in favour of their demand for marriage rights (Ma 2020). 'Yes' was one such initiative via which supporters of queer marriage rights circulated unsolicited messages among Facebook and Twitter users, who on receiving such message were required to click the yes option to show their support for the cause. Significant number of users was tapped and overwhelming support received from them for granting of rights to gender minorities. Even the Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, became an advocate of queer rights which hastened the legislation process and subsequent grant of marriage rights to queer people (Ma 2020). Penny Wong, a senator from Labour Party prominently displayed a picture of her draped in rainbow flag and tears rolling

down which stroked empathy among social media users and rallied their support for legalization of queer marriage (Ma 2020). Such messaging and positioning via social media outlined the agenda, in this case being grant of marriage rights to queer communities, thereby enabling public and political classes to deliberate and discuss on the probable way forward. Cost effective creation of such momentum would have been difficult without social media as it would have entailed high promotional and other costs (Ma 2020). Such cases underline the vital role social media plays in bringing issues of importance to the fore and stimulate interaction around them. Such messaging circulated through social media reaches a wide population, drawing them into the deliberation process.

About cultivation theory, Morgan et al (2017) had explained it as an oft used framework in media studies and among media psychologists, researchers and practitioners to decipher the long term impact media has on formation of global views and perceptions among viewers. George Gerbner had devised this theory in 1969 focusing on the television medium. But as time has progressed and new media channels have emerged, the scope of application of cultivation theory has also widened. Gerbner had postulated that messages circulated by media are homogenous when it comes to reporting about issues related to crime, hate, racial discrimination and violence (Morgan et al 2017). This was specifically outlined in the context of television medium leading to the conclusion that those who watch television for long hours develop a similar understanding of state of affairs globally as they are being exposed to similar messaging pattern.

With the advent of new age media, cultivation theory is finding application in the study of this media form. Mosharafa (2015) had argued that messaging across social media is not homogenous, as different users share different information which is regulated by their individual perspectives. However when they share on behalf an organization or group, their messaging tends to be uniform, trying to highlight specific issues or aspects thus trying to

promote specific viewpoints. As such messages across social media do not necessarily reflect reality, as perceptions of the presenter gets imbibed, creating skewed views about what's happening around (Mosharafa 2015). Explaining the impact of cultivation through social media Miller and Behrn-Morawitz (2020) stated that use of dating applications by gay men influences their outlook towards masculinity, degree of tolerance towards homophobic behaviour of society and also notions about physical dissatisfaction. Stein et al (2021) from their study had concluded about browsing habits of general content on Instagram tend to infuse within users biased notions about the appearance of others and also eating habits not in proper order. Smock et al (2011) highlights that frequent users of social networking sites are being constantly exposed to an reminded about different social ties they share with others thus developing a wider circle of friends enhancing interaction, networking and sharing of information. Exposure to messages and content via such social networking sites creates perceptions among specific communities about different issues and aspects.

Nevzat (n.d.) that social media enabled networking sites cultivate thoughts and perceptions among users as this media form enables anyone to share what they believe in, support, like or align with. Such information reaches several other users easily, which facilitates the formation of judgments. Nevzat (n.d.) argues that actions like sharing, commenting, liking, subscribing or following can be considered as opinions expressed by users as each of these actions are base on a conclusion users have arrived at through consistent exposure to information.

Nevzat (n.d.) explains that social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and others are now contributing in shaping worldview of users as whatever they see or read on social media platforms are perceived to be true by them. As such realities which till now were showcased by traditional media have moved online. Emerging platforms are consistently presenting information and views with users thereby influencing their opinions and outlook (Nevzat n.d.). Hence it is held that Gerbner's cultivation theory formulation which had

proposed that worldviews are developed by viewers of television based on certain assumptions they make while gathering information from the media source, on the basis of which they arrive at certain conclusions and thereafter reaches a judgment making point (Nevzat n.d). This entire exercise has now shifted online where users are making assumptions, reaching conclusions and making judgments basis the information provided to them. As such whatever users share across social media platforms stimulates development of opinions and subsequently it moves towards the judgment making stage. So social media is now cultivating perceptions, opinions and judgments among users which magnify the importance of this medium in present times to sway public opinion and positioning in a specific way (Nevzat n.d.).

Basis the two theories, agenda setting and cultivation, it can be deduced that social media can be utilized by marginalized gender groups and individuals to prioritize equality, press for granting of queer rights, challenge existing stereotypes and promoting inclusivity. This entails consistent positive representations, amplifying marginalized voices, and driving conversations for legal and policy changes. Collaboration with advocacy groups and influencers helps amplify messages and mobilize public support in addition to educating, raising awareness and fostering empathy towards queer people and their difficulties.

Moreover, positive representation can help combat stigma and prejudice, a significant issue faced by the queer community in India. By humanizing and celebrating diverse identities, media can contribute to a cultural shift towards greater inclusivity and understanding. It can also facilitate community building among queer individuals, providing a sense of belonging and support.

Consequences of Queer Visibility in Social Media:

Pranshu Yadav, 16-year-old self-taught queer makeup content creator, committed suicide in November 2023. A standard 10 student of Ujjain Public School in Madhya Pradesh, he had

been sharing makeup-related content on Instagram (Harshi, 2023). Arvey Malhotra, a student of Delhi Public School too committed suicide after being bullied and assaulted (Harshi, 2023). This highlights the challenges queer teens face online, facing bullying and harassment for expressing themselves (Harshi, 2023). It's crucial to address and restrain this negativity and support young individuals in pursuing their passions without fear of persecution. About events preceding the death of Pranshu, Bhandari (2023) notes that the youngster had posted an image, of himself, dressed in a saree, jewellery and makeup on the day of Diwali. This display of admission of one's own gender was not taken well by the majoritarian society, members of which flooded Pranshu's comment box with comments full of hate and even threat of rape. Nine days later the youth was gone forever. Interesting to note the outpouring of hate did not stop with this loss. People continued with their homophobic slurs, calls for self inflicted harms, abuses and name calling to such an extent that family members of Pranshu decided to make the account private (Bhandari 2023).

Similar is the experience of another makeup artist Shivam Bhardwaj, who is all of 25 years and is a resident of Mumbai. Post Pranshu's demise, Bhardwaj had shared a tribute video which attracted comments laced with threat, disdain and prayers of death. Bhardwaj was appalled, and probably felt humiliated, to read comments of people asking him when he would decide to die like Pranshu had (Bhandari 2023). In 2023 GLAAD, a United States based queer advocacy organization had formulated a social media safety index to assess how safe social media platforms are for self expression and self proclamation of queer people. As per the index findings GLAAD concluded that most social media platforms still do not have optimal safeguard mechanism which can prevent cases from cyber bullying and online harassment of queer people who are deciding to use social media to introduce themselves to the world (Bhandari 2023). Though some measures have been taken by Facebook and Instagram to

improve online safety, yet the index pointed out that the current status continues to be below satisfactory levels (Bhandari 2023).

Hailing from Goa, Durga Shakti Gawde had in 2017 opened up to immediate family about being a trans-individual who is gender fluid and non-binary. Yet all hell broke loose in 2018 post Gawde's featuring in a video which explored the subjects of gender fluidity and non-binary identities (Bhandari 2023). In addition to receiving about 300 abusive comments online every day, Gawde was threatened with dire consequences like acid attack, molestation, rape and butchering of the family members. Yet Gawde and Bhardwaj has been able to take hate mongers within their stride and continue being active about their gender, interest areas and professional pursuits (Bhandari). Unfortunately Pranshu could not do so and had to pay with his life.

Chawla and Sharma (2023) mentions, in 2023 the US National Survey on Mental Health was conducted among 28,000 young queer individuals to find out their mental state. As per findings, 41% of respondents informed about having contemplated suicide serious due to harassment and abuses meted out online. Chawla and Sharma (2023) points that parental acceptance of the gender identity of their sons and daughters assumes significance in this context, as it provides queer individuals with a sense of support and confidence to fight against heteronormative mindset and outlook. Parental acceptance of queer life becomes their pillar of strength, even if parent do not openly discuss about it, which prevents youths from tipping over and taking drastic step like ending their lives.

Data presented by O'Driscoll (2021) underlines the fact that not much has changed over the last few years in the domain of cyber bullying and harassment. Previous studies had noted that more than 48% queer students were bullied for their gender orientation either via social media platforms or through text messages. Of this population only 13% could muster up the courage

to report what they were experiencing, which implies around 35% of queer individuals continued to get tormented in silence. Studies have also brought to fore that 10% queer students dropped out of school due to bullying and physical torture, adversely impacting the level of education among queer youths (O'Driscoll 2021). Of the population unsure about their sexual and gender orientations, one in every five youths were found to have faced bullying and intimidation online. Studies conducted among high school students found that queer students were four times more likely to attempt suicide compared to their heterosexual counterparts and primarily because of societal victimization which left them with a sense of guilt, low self esteem and lack of confidence (O'Driscoll 2021). Also alarming is the finding that 62% transmale and 49% transwoman suffer from depression related disorders due to social reactions to their gender identity and online abuse and harassment.

The outcry for stronger moderation on social platforms is amplifying as queer Indians persist in their advocacy for safe digital environments. The tragic loss of two teenagers due to cyber bullying after they opened up about their sexual orientation, necessitates urgent and enhanced protections, especially amidst a troubling 25% surge in cyber stalking and bullying incidents in 2022 (SCMP 2024). In India, sexual minorities face the arduous task of navigating a societal landscape already fraught with pressures, further exacerbated by lax content moderation leading to a distressing influx of derogatory content. Jeet, the visionary behind *Yes, We Exist* poignantly depicts the harsh reality endured by LGBTQ creators online, enduring a barrage of abuse from death threats to hate speech, primarily on platforms like Instagram (SCMP 2024). This relentless abuse exacts a heavy toll on LGBTQ individuals' mental health, prompting self-censorship or withdrawal from online spaces, with some tragically contemplating self-harm. Despite legal protections, the slow response to complaints and scarce convictions depicts a grim scenario. Jeet's insights highlight a stark contrast: while Instagram flaunts robust hate speech

policies, Meta's enforcement fall short, raising doubts about its true commitment to protecting minority communities (SCMP 2024).

Vernacular Queer Support on Social Media:

Phillipson (2010) had opined that the term "vernacular" carries nuanced meanings, encompassing languages spoken by indigenous populations, regional dialects, and those often regarded as having limited scope and influence compared to cosmopolitan languages. This multiplicity of connotations underscores the complexity of language dynamics and its socio-cultural implications.

Chakraborty & Chakraborty (2024) clarifies that mother tongues often endure the effects of neocolonialism within the Indian linguistic landscape, wherein certain languages promote majoritarian agendas while marginalizing minority perspectives. However, the term "vernacular" does not signify an absence of hegemony. Rather, it encompasses various forms of domination related to class, caste, gender, and sexuality. Shankar (2012) note about the vernacular denoting a specific type of subordination, highlighting the dominated element in contrast to opposing forces such as the universal or the classical.

A concentrated focus on vernacular languages may provoke anxieties linked to regionalism including concerns about parochialism and populist exclusion. This underscores the complexities inherent in the study of vernacular languages and their socio-political implications.

In an article titled *Being LGBT in India: Some Home Truths*, Patel (2016) had opined that vibrancy of queer activism and the significant legal strides, such as the decriminalization of Section 377 has ushered in a positive transformation in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights among India's youth and some sections of citizens. But within the boundaries of family, school, workplace and home, a lack of acceptability of sexuality and gender orientation of individuals

persists as queer lifestyle is largely believed to be against the cultural fabric of this country and therefore is a foreign concept and lifestyle (Patel 2016). Notwithstanding progresses, such outlook and mindset restricts the scope of queer people to openly admit or declare their sexual preferences and gender orientation.

In the article Patel (2016) further explains that while social media initiatives and the admission of queer employees by established corporates have marginally altered mindset, the same has not been homogenous. Gay individuals and their struggles and achievements have garnered more traction, compared to other groups like lesbians and transgenders. Though urban specific queer groups are finding their voices heard across different social media platforms and initiatives of queer groups, those from rural areas are not having easy access.

The concept of the non-metropolitan encompasses a diverse range of spaces, including non-metropolitan cities, towns, and villages. While each component holds a distinct place in the hierarchy based on factors like function, population size, characteristics, and cultural connectivity, they lack the privileges afforded to metropolitan cities, particularly concerning opportunities and characteristics such as large population size, which enables anonymity, identity-based activism, vibrant party scenes, pride marches, urban sexual infrastructure, and a discourse of rights and liberation.

This conceptualization challenges the hegemony of metrocentrism prevalent in the discourse on sexualities, particularly in the context of urban sexualities. By acknowledging and theorizing the significance of urban and rural centers beyond the metropolitan city, it offers a framework to counter the dominant discourses and perspectives emanating from metropolitan-centric viewpoints (Myrdahl 2015).

Bhairannavar (2024) observes that in non-metropolitan cities, the lives of queer men are often influenced by the limited pool of available men and the material conditions of the city, including its living arrangements. The manner in which an urban centre, town, or village

accommodates its inhabitants, the social dynamics of the locality, the presence of single men, and the residential setups all significantly shape queer desires. For instance, cities like Belagavi, Hubli, and Dharwad may attract young single men, but the specific living arrangements within these cities play a crucial role in determining the sexual landscapes of these areas.

Patel (2016) notes that such is only a fraction of the difficulties queers are facing across different parts of the country. Away from such urban centric queer gatherings and movements and spirited debates on various virtual platforms, a large population of queer people continue to suffer in silence in semi-urban and hinterlands having limited means to widely expose their condition or mobilize people for corrective actions. Hence, murdering of gays and lesbians in the name of honour killing is not entirely unknown (Patel 2016). To protect their lives from such horrific end, queer people often run away from their homes under the darkness of the night with no financial and other resources for survival. Lesbians are subjected to repeated rapes, with parental sanctions, in an attempt to arouse within them the attraction for males (Patel 2016).

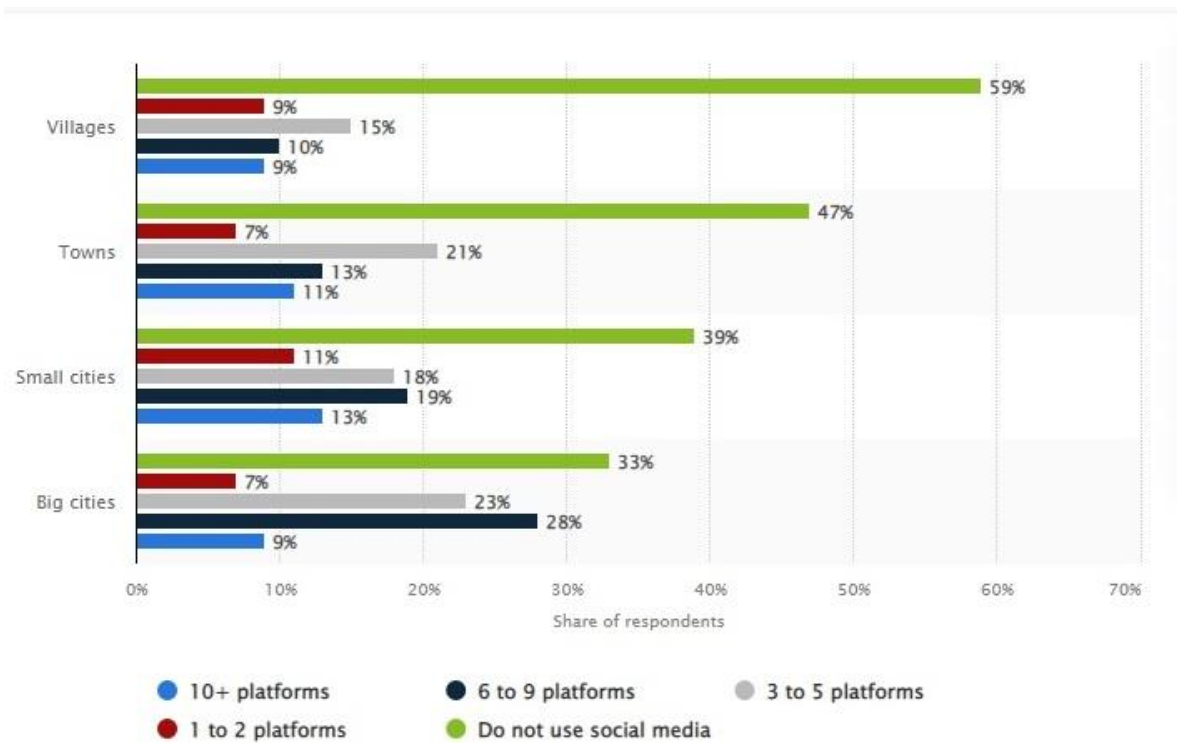
Chakraborty (2024) draws attention to the phenomenon of Pink Migration. This implies movement towards metropolitan centers in India which in itself offers intriguing perspectives on the pattern of individuals "leaving home" in search of a new one. These unfamiliar urban landscapes serve as gateways to survival, anonymity, and a shared narrative of facing discrimination. Within these alien cities, queer individuals from the Zo/Mizo community negotiate their presence by capitalizing on livelihood opportunities offered by the Pink economy or market, where skills are valued, and they can freely express their choices and desires under the guise of anonymity.

Abuse of queer individuals in schools and among social friends has been strongly spoken about by Vyjayjanyti Vasanta Mogli, a scholar of public policy at the Hyderabad based Tata Institute

of Social Sciences, and a transgender person. She observed that when it comes to the provision of fundamental human rights, lesbians and transmen are invariably at the bottom of the pyramid over large swathes of our non-urban areas (Patel 2016). Parents in such localities leave their sons and daughters under the ‘treatment’ of local religious and spiritual figures and also quacks who prescribe and oversee physical torture to ‘cure such individuals of the disease.’ Mogli asserts that accounts of acceptance of sexuality and gender orientation of their wards by parents, which finds circulation via social media, are mostly urban centric developments and does not reflect harsh realities of smaller towns and villages (Patel 2016).

Leading activist and member of a royal family, Manvendra Singh Gohil states that coming out of the closet due to a sudden rush of adrenalin has not worked well in several instances. An acquaintance of Prince Gohil, who had decided to come out post watching a television program ended up losing his job and family. While media cultivation theory appears to be at work here, caution is what activists’ advice. Prince Gohil suggests those planning to admit themselves as queer needs to become financial independent and marginally detached from their loved ones (Patel 2016). This prepares them to handle rejection at financial, societal and emotional level. Heart wrenching is to learn about days when scholar Mogli was confined to a mental health hospital where psychotropic medicines were administered, heightening feeling of depression and dilemma. Psychosexual experiments like confinement with other patients with genuine mental health just to assess how Mogli reacted to their sexual advancements. Admitting that number of such doctors are limited, the scholar requests parents to search for doctor who are proficient and will be able to communicate reality to them (Patel 2016).

Such accounts raises question about the extent to which social media platforms for queer support and mobilization has been able to penetrate the non-urban pockets of our country. Interestingly data about Facebook users, region wise, show high non usage of social media in towns and rural area.



Source: Statista, 2024

The above shows that majority of the rural population does not have or does not access social media. A near majority population of small towns, at 47%, is away from the happening of social media. In tier-I and tier-II cities the percentage of non users of social media platforms is lower than the others, but within them big urban cities have lesser proportion of non users. But when considered singularly, at 33% urban centers appears to have noteworthy proportion of non-users (Statista 2024). The limited penetration levels, implies majority of families across villages and smaller towns do not have awareness, knowledge or interaction about queer life and activism. They are completely unaware of what it means to a gay or lesbian, why it occurs and that it is not a disease. Queer people, born in these regions, therefore face brutal repression because of parental lack of knowledge and interaction about this subject, which could have been possible had social media usage being more.

Yet those accessing social media platforms in villages and small towns, and any of them happen to be a queer person, questions can be raised about availability of material on these platforms

in vernacular languages. As villages and small towns may be expected to not have a universal secondary language like English, it becomes vital to consider the extent to which interested social media users will find reference material in the local language.

Rao and Sharma (2009) shares the story of Manish Pawar initially, who harbored skepticism towards support groups, perceiving them as minimally beneficial for their personal needs. They questioned the necessity of such groups, pondering, "Why do I need them?" A significant factor that deterred them was the linguistic aspect, exemplified by experiences at places like Humsafar Trust, where all discussions were conducted in English. This linguistic barrier contributed to feelings of alienation, distancing the individual from fully engaging with the support provided by these groups.

A cursory search of the leading queer support organizations in India shows their social media handles do not offer content in vernacular languages. Case in point is the Instagram handle of Manipur based Ya-All Northeast having their content in English. Similarly Instagram handle of Vizag based Nestam has more content in English than in Telegu. Gujarat based Lakshay Trust founded by Prince Gohil on its insta handle has content in English. Similar is the case of Queergarh based out of Chattisgarh whose Instagram account has some Hindi content, but English is predominant. It is pertinent to note here that Vizag, Vadodara, Raipur and Imphal are small cities and not small town or village. Hence they can be expected to be able to read the content published in English, which may not be the case for users in other regions.

A notable exception is the Instagram handle of Kerala based queer organization Sahayatrika which has published more content in Malayalam than in English. Announcement of events, sessions by distinguished speakers, coverage in traditional media about the organization's activities have been shared in the local language which will surely lessen difficulties of users in remote areas. The website of Sangama, a Karnataka based queer organization is all done in English and without option for users to choose any other language in which they might want

to read material published. Chennai based queer startup Perriferry and Delhi based Harmless Hugs follow the majority in terms of choosing their social media handles. So dearth in circulation of vernacular content by organizations via social media platforms appears to be absent.

In the article *India's Queer Youth Find Both Hope and Despair Online*, Minj (2024) cites cases of queer from small cities and towns who took to social media to educate themselves about their sexual and gender orientation. They searched through content on the net and also social media platforms to find support groups and networking platforms and opportunities. Minj (2024) narrates account of Jamshedpur based Roshni Singh and Krihal Singh, V. Smitha from Tamil Nadu and Rabi Raj from Belpara Odisha had all taken to internet and social media post encountering ridicule and harassment by friends and family to learn more about who they were and what sexual and gender orientation is all about. The latter is a Dalit person who admitted being gay on social media platform Facebook. Word slowly spread and people started looking differently at him and perceiving him to be a sex monger. He was avoided and ridiculed but social media support enabled him to remain steadfast in his resolve to live his life his way.

Such cases are invigorating and aptly underline the potential of social media in educating the youth about their gender and sexuality, enabling network formation for emotional succour and also making available support groups to look up to for guidance and help when in distress. Given this context, the requirement for increased content on social media platforms in vernacular languages can be argued. This will aid senior generations, likely to be a relative of parents of queer individuals, in learning about gender diversity and becoming aware of its facets so that they can accept their sons and daughters the way they are and protect them from social pressure and deride.

Conclusion

India's journey towards LGBTQ+ acceptance and rights stands as a testament to the resilience and diversity within the community amidst historical challenges and ongoing struggles. The rich cultural tapestry, woven with ancient myths embracing gender diversity and medieval art depicting queer intimacy, celebrates the naturalness and inclusivity of diverse sexual orientations. Despite the shadows cast by colonial influence, particularly through laws like Section 377 that once shrouded the community in stigma and repression, the LGBTQ+

community has navigated through periods of hardship with unwavering determination and resistance.

The landscape of queer activism in India bears the footprints of pioneers like Shakuntala Devi and the echoes of groundbreaking protests and legal battles against discriminatory laws. Milestones such as India's inaugural Pride walk in 1999 and subsequent legal victories, including the landmark decriminalization of consensual same-sex activity in 2018, mark significant strides towards equality. Yet, the journey continues, with challenges persisting in vital areas like transgender rights, marriage equality, adoption, and combating employment discrimination, necessitating sustained efforts for comprehensive equality and societal acceptance.

Social media platforms have emerged as powerful allies, providing platforms for marginalized voices, dismantling stereotypes, and cultivating empathy on a global scale. However, a notable gap persists in vernacular content, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas, where lived experiences of queer individuals often languish in obscurity or fall prey to misrepresentation.

Bridging this gap demands a concerted and inclusive approach uniting social media platforms, advocacy groups, and influential voices. Initiatives like 'Inclusive Newsrooms' commitment to diverse linguistic and cultural narratives represent crucial steps towards ensuring respectful and accurate representation across languages. By amplifying diverse voices, challenging entrenched stereotypes, and nurturing empathy through authentic media portrayals, we can pave the way for a more inclusive society that celebrates diversity and empowers marginalized communities, extending a warm embrace to LGBTQ+ individuals within India's societal fabric. Minj (2024) notes Rohit Dasgupta observing in his book *Digital Queer Cultures in India* about queer culture being presently at the intersection of whether online activities or offline activities is preferred. The availability of cost-effective internet connection is aiding queer people to network, communicate, discuss and debate. Thus, inclusion of increased content in vernacular languages

is vital. It will help spread awareness and understanding further, to impact parental levels, and thereby protect scores of queer people being subjected to social ridicule across the country, probably every day. The development of societal awareness about what LGBTQIA+ members endure in their daily lives can be attributed to the storytelling aspect of social media embedded in the cultivation theory. Frequent stories by online portals, real-life accounts on social media platforms, promotion of LGBTQIA+ events and such can help people realize the omnipresence of queer members globally and therefore aid parents realize that their child is not an exception or inherently diseased. Consistent exposure to such content can influence users' perceptions, attitudes and values towards inclusion. Promotion of queer and gender related materials in vernacular languages will also aid in raising awareness among parents of queer individuals, about their sons and daughters being as normal as any heterosexual person. This is specifically true for semi-urban and rural areas where vernacular languages are principally used for communication. From study results it has been found that parental support can mitigate depression related mental disorders and suicidal tendencies among queer youths to a great extent. A necessary pre-condition of such parental support and acceptance of the gender of their offspring is awareness of parents about gender fluidity and non-binary identity. Such can be achieved only through dissemination of related information in the vernacular languages. Stories about queer movements, about achievements of queer individuals, about parents who have accepted their sons and daughters the way they are and of legal provisions need to be generated and circulated in local languages so that parents can understand the issues and stigmas associated with queer life and also the reality that their children are not diseased and as normal as any other heterosexual being. It will also encourage parents to better comprehend the strengths and special attributes of their children, which will enable them to guide their gay son or lesbian daughter to flourish with their full potential and also protect them from falling hapless victims to online threats and bullies. Parents will also be better equipped with information to

debate and convince other that being gay is not unusual or unnatural, which if pursued in right earnest can help bring about greater social change in outlook and mindset. Achieving this will truly herald a new dawn in the lives of countless queer people who will be able to breathe and live freely without having to worry about societal judgment and ridicule.

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