



SEÇÃO TEMÁTICA

Indian Queer Liberation**Movement:** Understanding through Mythology, Religion, History and Contemporary Socio-Legal Scenario

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ABSTRACT: This article pursues a central question: how do gender and sexual minorities in India navigate the overlapping demands of legal recognition, cultural legitimacy, and grassroots solidarity, particularly when dominant frameworks, both of the state and of the Pride movement itself reproduce inequalities of caste, class, and language? Drawing on six years of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata and Delhi, supplemented by unstructured interviews and participant observation at Pride events, and reading through an intersectional feminist lens informed by South Asian decolonial scholarship, the article examines the queer liberation movement in India across its mythological, legal, and contemporary activist dimensions. Pre-colonial Indian traditions across Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Jain frameworks encoded significant gender and sexual plurality, which was systematically criminalized under British colonial rule through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1861) and the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). The postcolonial state retained this colonial residue until the Supreme Court's historic decriminalization verdict in 2018. This study traces queer politics from the 1999 Kolkata Friendship Walk through contemporary Pride activism, foregrounding the lived experiences of interlocutors whose identities intersect with caste, class, religion, language, and region. The article argues that genuine queer liberation requires anti-caste, anti-capitalist, and intersectional frameworks that are deeply rooted in grassroots vernacular realities rather than elite urban homonationalism.

KEYWORDS: Decolonial queerness. Brahminical heteropatriarchy. Homonationalism. Intersectional praxis. Pride ethnography.



Introduction

The term "queer" emerged as a radical, politically charged concept within postmodernist and poststructuralist thought in the 1990s, challenging hetero-patriarchal binary normativity and aiming to destabilize fixed categories of identity (Jagose, 1996). In India, where fluidity of gender and sexuality has deep roots in arts, sacred narratives, literature, and cultural practices, the reclamation of "queer" provided a paradigm through which marginalized, non-normative gendered and sexual identities could resist both colonial and postcolonial moralities and heteronormativity (Vanita; Kidwai, 2000; Dutta; Roy, 2014). The LGBTQ+ community in India continues to assert its presence through cultural performance, community organizing, festivals, and Pride movements that oppose the dominant logic of Brahminical heteropatriarchy (Ghosh, 2024).

This research is informed by decolonial epistemologies developed within South Asian feminist and queer scholarship, particularly the work of Paola Bacchetta (2019), Aniruddha Dutta (2014, 2024), and Nishant Upadhyay (2020). These works question the existence of colonial and post-colonial power regimes over sexuality, gender, and resistance in India. However, there is still a need to differentiate this academic tradition with the incorporation of the discourse of decolonization by conservative religious homo-nationalist streams who use the vocabulary of pre-colonial authenticity to further the exclusionary, upper-caste and majoritarianist agendas. This right-wing co-option has brought about a natural opposition to the term among libertarian progressive Indian movements and this is the very reason why it is avoidable by a good number of Indian-based scholars. My personal practice is in accordance with the anti-caste and intersectional descent of South Asian decolonial thought, which appeals to the most marginalized, as opposed to an idealised or mythical past.

Even though Western discourses tend to define queerness as a contemporary identity of political orientation, Indian culture has a rich range of gender fluidity and same-sex or queer attraction that is precolonial in terms of cultural definition. The fluid sexualities and

non-binary genders are represented in ancient Hindu sacred narratives and literatures, the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Kamasutra, and Puranas (Pattanaik, 2014; Vanita, 2005). They were repressed under the British colonialism, which enforced Victoria moralities. British legal instruments such as, the Indian Penal Code 1861 Section 377 that criminalised acts of carnal intercourse against the order of nature, and the Criminal Tribes Act to criminalize Hijra communities in 1871 (Narain, 2004). This colonial residue remained in the post-colonial state until the historic Supreme Court decision of 2018, which decriminalised consensual same sex relations between adults (*Navtej Singh Johar v. UOI, 2018*).

The 1999 Friendship Walk in Kolkata was the first organised queer Pride rally in India. This was the milestone event in the political visibility of the LGBTQ+ community. What began as a symbolic effort by a few members of the group, evolved into a nation-wide movement, in which the Pride parades grew to be a socio-political and cultural fight which demanded rights, recognition, freedom and liberation of the systemic violence (Dave, 2012). But alongside the growth of the movement came internal contradictions with specific frameworks of the state and the Pride movement often replicating the same hierarchies of caste, class, language and region that queer liberation should challenge. The negotiation of the promise of collective visibility and the persistence of structural exclusion is the central question of this piece, as the so-called representative spaces are defined by the power of elite, upper-caste, and urban-Anglophone groups, yet the gender and sexual minorities in India must deal with those spaces. To address this question, the paper employs an anthropological approach which anticipates ethnographic evidence; the historical and legal context is scaffolding as opposed to parallel strands or equivalent strands of analysis.

Positionality and Methodology

This work is based on six years (2019-2024) of multi-sited-experiential-embodied ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kolkata and Delhi with additional participation in the rural West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. By “multi-sited”, I refer that, this fieldwork is done in different geographically dispersed spaces, not in a single bounded community. Being a queer activist as well as researcher, I have



associated myself with different organizing event of both Kolkata Rainbow pride Walk (KRPW) and Delhi Queer Pride Walk (DQPW) since 2019 until 2024 as well as queer community events, cultural performances, and NGO working sessions and non-federal daily informal interactions were used as the fieldwork.

I held twenty-three in-depth unstructured interviews and open-ended conversational interactions with working-class queer individuals, Dalit-queer activists, trans-queer-kothi-hijra-dhurani individuals, NGO workers, and Pride organisers. Interviews were done mostly in Bengali, Hindi and English but they tended to switch languages. Informed consent to the interviews was recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic coding, which was very sensitive and intersecting with different social markers of caste, class, gender identity, religion, language, and the geographical setting (urban or rural). Names have been changed or pseudonyms used throughout the article, as indicated.

Further interpretation and Data triangulation was obtained by cross-referencing the accounts of the interviews with ethnographic field notes, observation, reflexive field journaling, primary published materials (NGO literature, court decisions, community pamphlets, news) and secondary literature. Member checking was carried out informally by the thematic patterns based on continuous relationship with key interlocutors during the multiple field visits over the study period.

My own positioning requires explicit transparency. I am a Dalit-queer activist researcher who attended Pride events both as an ethnographer and at times as an organiser and co-producer of activist content. Most explicitly at the 2022 Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk, where I was among the activists who composed vernacular slogans in Bengali and Ulti (discussed in detail later in this article).

The dual role of being both a researcher and interlocutor-activist is not here considered as a methodological constraint to be reduced to a minimum, but as a fruitful and generatively analytic stance, which allowed access, subtleties, and responsibility. As a feminist and embodied-experiential queer ethnographer, I see my embodied and experiential knowledge as a data to be theorised and not as an instrument to view the experience of others (Dave, 2012). Further this becomes a practice whereby the body, affect, and social positionality of

the researcher becomes both a methodological tool and a source of analytical knowledge. In the article, I also make it clear when I am discussing the experience of my own experience versus when I am conducting the analysis of others to achieve the clarity of analysis and ethical accountability.

Sacred Narratives, Philosophical Traditions, and Queer Identities in India

Before examining the intersection of sacred narratives and queer identities in India, it is important to clarify how key terms are used in this article. "Religion," "mythology," and "philosophy" are not interchangeable, and their conflation risks importing an Orientalist framework that homogenizes the diverse and contested traditions of the Indian subcontinent. In this case, the term "sacred narrative" or "mythological text" refers to scripturally entrenched narratives and their cultural circulations, i.e. the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, and traditions of this type, whereas the term does not mean organised religious practice, nor does it mean philosophical systems like Vedanta or Buddhist epistemology, though I am aware that these two categories often confuse and intersect in lived practice. I do not consider these texts as set theological teachings like Bacchetta (2019) and Doniger (2009) but as a discursive content, the interpretation of which has always been plural, politically contested, and socially deployed.

Gender Diversity in Indian Texts Before Colonization

The Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Dharmashastras, Natyashastras, and Kamasutra offer a rich and diverse view of gender and sexuality. These texts often represent bodies, roles, and desires in ways that are fluid and not confined to binary categories. The Sanskrit lexicon itself offers over fifty terms for non-binary gender variance and non-normative sexualities. Such as, *ardhanariswara*, *napumsaka*, *kliba*, *pandaka*, *shandha*, *hijra*, *Iravani*, *shikhandi*, etc. terms that encoded a vast spectrum of identities not restricted to the Western heterosexual-homosexual binary (Vanita; Kidwai, 2000; Pattanaik, 2014). The term *napumsaka*, today often translated reductively as



"eunuch," historically encompassed intersex people, transgender individuals, and celibate ascetics, reflecting both gender and sexual ambiguity. Pali Buddhist literature refers to *pandakas* as either effeminate males or gender-nonconforming persons (Zwilling; Sweet, 1996). Importantly, in Sanskrit and other languages, no distinct separation exists between gender and sex, both are reflected by the single word *Linga*, a conceptual integration that challenges the imported colonial binary (Snigdha, 2021).

These non-normative gender classifications were often understood through frameworks of spiritual power, asceticism, ritual knowledge, rather than as stigma or deviation (Senbagam; Vijayalakshmi, 2025). This is profoundly different from modern social exclusion and colonial criminalization, indicating that queerness in Indian religious and philosophical contexts was historically embedded within complex cosmological frameworks (Nanda, 1990).

Mythologies of Transformation, Fluidity, and Devotion

Hindu sacred narratives contain numerous accounts of transformation, devotion, and divine play (*leela*) that invite thinking about queer embodiment. Ardhanarishvara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, represents the ancient philosophical understanding that masculine (*Purusha*) and feminine (*Prakriti*) energies are inseparable, challenging the very premise of a two-gender framework (Pattanaik, 2014). The figure of Mohini, the female form of Lord Vishnu, who seduces both demons and gods and, later couples with Lord Shiva to produce the deity, Ayyappa. This represents divine gender transformation as cosmologically significant rather than aberrant (Reddy, 2005).

The Bhagiratha birth myth from the Krittivasa Ramayana recounts two queens who, through ritual intimacy or *ratikriya* and divine blessing, give birth to a son. This narrative offers one of the earliest textual sanctifications of same-sex love and queer reproduction (Vanita; Kidwai, 2000). In the Mahabharata, Shikhandi, born female and raised as a man, occupies a central warrior role in the defeat of Bhishma, linking gender transformation to heroic action. Vaishnava Bhakti poetry further extends this fluidity: male poets addressed the divine in feminine

voices, expressing homoerotic and devotional longing through the idiom of the beloved (Doniger, 2009).

Islamic, Buddhist, and Jain Approaches to Gender and Sexuality

Islamic Sufi traditions in South Asia employed homoerotic and androgynous metaphors to express spiritual longing. In classical Sufi poetry, the beloved is often ungendered, divine, and all-consuming (Vanita, 2001). Historical records document same-sex desire in Mughal court culture. Homoeroticism developed in the form of art, painting and literature, most notably in the autobiography of Emperor Babur, the *Baburnama*, in which Emperor Babur describes his homoerotic attachment to a youth name Baburi (Penrose, 2006). In Buddhist monastic codes, gender-fluid beings like *pandakas* are described with nuance: their identities were situated within karmic frameworks rather than straightforwardly condemned (Zwilling; Sweet, 1996). Jain Agamas contain references to the *napumsaka*, and Jain literature includes narratives of gender change and sexual ambiguity, even as Jainism's ascetic principles valorize celibacy over sexual expression (Zwilling; Sweet, 1996).

Colonial Erasure and the Rise of Moral Policing

British colonialism fundamentally transformed this landscape. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1861, criminalized all forms of non-procreative sex, leading to the pathologization and moral surveillance of hijras, kinnars, khawajas, and kothis (Gupta, 2006; Narrain; Bhan, 2005). Colonial officials and missionaries framed Indian sacred narratives as evidence of native "decadence and deviance," resulting in the censorship or reinterpretation of queer elements in scripture, art, and public culture (Sinha, 1995). Temple sculptures depicting same-sex intimacy were censored or destroyed, and Hijra communities, once revered in many contexts, were classified as a "criminal tribe" under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (Hinchy, 2019).



Contemporary Queer Reclamation of Sacred Narratives

In recent decades, queer activists, artists, and scholars have reclaimed these sacred narratives to challenge both Brahminical cis-heteronormativity and homophobia within religious orthodoxy. Scholars such as Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, and Devdutt Pattanaik have documented queer genealogies in Indian religious traditions, providing counter-histories that establish the presence of LGBTQ+ persons in Indian sacred life (Pattanaik, 2014; Vanita; Kidwai, 2000). These intellectual reclamations are paralleled by embodied and performative practices: drag performances as Mohini, trans-led reenactments of Ras Leela, and queer retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Elamatha; Rajamanikkam, 2025; Prakash et al., 2023).

Yet this reclamation is neither simple nor tension-free. The intensification of Hindutva politics has narrowed the flexibility of Hindu tradition, weaponizing it to exclude queer and non-cisgender lives. At the same time, right-wing discourses occasionally invoke figures like Ardhanarishvara or Shikhandi as evidence of Hindu inclusivity, a gesture that remains tokenistic when it neglects the lived marginalization of trans, queer, and non-heterosexual people within temples, rituals, and everyday faith communities (Bacchetta, 2019; Dhar; Kandali, 2024; Upadhyay, 2020).

This tension is powerfully illustrated by the experience of Simran, a thirty-year-old lower-caste Dalit trans-feminine classical dancer from Uttar Pradesh, whom I met in Agra, during a queer NGO event:

“Look, they lecture about Ardhanarishvara when they want to say Hinduism welcomes everyone, but I cannot even enter the inner temple’s sanctum. The priest sees my body as impure. I dressed as Sakhi for a community theatre, someone gave me slang. But what I feel when I become Sakhi is devotion, not just performance. For people like me, reclaiming the stories is survival. They’ll show us in a poster, a pride-walk, the media, or mythology, but won’t give us a place in the sacred. What they call ‘inclusion’ is just decoration.”

Simran’s account illustrates a structural contradiction embedded in the queer reclamation of sacred narratives: mythological figures may be invoked symbolically in Pride aesthetics or nationalist discourse, while the bodily exclusion of Dalit-queer persons from sacred spaces continues undisturbed. For many rural and lower-caste queer people,

reclaiming these stories is not an academic exercise but a form of spiritual self-making and survival—even as they navigate institutions that remain materially hostile to their presence (Dhar & Kandali, 2024).

The Journey of Queer Movement in India: From Criminalization to Constitutional Morality

The queer movement in India has a layered history of erasure, resistance, and reclaiming. Colonial laws, postcolonial silences, and contemporary struggles for dignity, visibility, and freedom have all shaped it. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced by British colonial rule in 1861, criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." This legal clause was modelled on the English Buggery Act of 1533 and imported Victorian ideals of moral purity and procreative sexuality into Indian legal life (Ghosh, 2022; Narrain, 2004). The colonial state viewed indigenous sexual practices, such as hijra traditions, homoerotic poetry, temple art, as morally deviant and imposed Judeo-Christian norms of sexual behavior (Gupta, 2006; Hunter, 2019; Rajasekaran, 2023).

Before colonialism, Indian societies maintained a wide range of perspectives on gender and sexuality that were more plural and contextually variable. Temple art, oral traditions, religious texts, Sufi poems, and Bhakti poetry reflect multiple gender roles, same-sex desires, and erotic devotion that were at times revered, tolerated, or normalized (Dasgupta, 2011; Pattanaik, 2014; Vanita; Kidwai, 2000). Colonial modernity not only obliterated these plural expressions but systematically rewrote queerness as depraved, criminal, and sinful, aligning vernacular bodies with the colonial imagination of deviance.

After independence in 1947, the postcolonial state largely retained colonial legal frameworks, including Section 377 (Sinha, 1995). For decades, queer existence was silenced in the public domain. The post-independence silence was not only legal but deeply social: queer people faced domestic, institutional, state, and police violence and were compelled to remain closeted. Dalit queers, trans sex workers, working-class queer people from rural areas faced compounded marginalization and excluded from both urban queer culture and legal protection (Bhaskaran, 2004).



The 1980s and 1990s brought modest yet significant transformations. The HIV/AIDS epidemic brought sexual health and sexual minorities into public health discourse, and NGOs such as the Naz Foundation, Humsafar Trust, and SAATHII created safe spaces and pushed for decriminalization (Misra, 2009). These interventions enabled queer rights to gain coherence within the framework of human rights and public policy.

The Emergence of Queer Politics and Legal Challenges

The term "queer" started to take a political role within Indian social movements during the late 1980s, was influenced by activists' engagement with global postmodernist discourse alongside Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship. Even though early anthologies played a key role in making a visible queer politics by codifying a variety of lived experiences and political stances but failed to explicitly take a decolonial approach.

The subsequent application of decolonial frameworks to analyze Indian queer activism draws on scholars who interrogate how colonial and postcolonial power structures continue to shape sexuality and resistance. For instance, the formation of "queer" politics in India has been critically examined through the transnational flows and local articulations that constitute it (Dutta; Roy, 2014), while other scholarship situates these movements within the broader context of decolonization and diasporic identity (Upadhyay, 2020). Further building on this, the intersections of law, violence, and postcoloniality in queer lives have been critically explored (Sircar, 2017). Additionally, ethnographic accounts of queer activism in India implicitly challenge Western-centric notions of queer community and politics, demonstrating how desire and activism are negotiated within specific cultural and moral landscapes (Dave, 2012).

The first major legal action intensified with the Naz Foundation Public Interest Litigation in 2001, challenging Section 377 on constitutional grounds. The Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality in 2009, but the Supreme Court reversed this in 2013 (*Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation*), dismissing gender-sexual minorities as a "minuscule minority"—a ruling that provoked nationwide protests and renewed legal organizing (Dam, 2013).

The 2018 Verdict and the Triumph of Constitutional Morality

On 6 September 2018, the Supreme Court of India read down Section 377 in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, making consensual same-sex relationships between adults legal after decades of struggle. The verdict emphasized that constitutional morality must prevail over social morality and reaffirmed the dignity and freedom of queer persons (Johar v. UOI, 2018). Justice Indu Malhotra's words, that "history owes an apology to the LGBTQ+ community", were celebrated worldwide. Yet the judgement's scope was limited: it did not address marriage equality, adoption rights, property inheritance, or anti-discrimination protections, leaving queer persons in a grey zone of partial legal recognition (Jain, 2022; Sudha, 2024).

This historical judgement was situated within broader jurisprudential developments, notably *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. UOI* (2017), which recognized privacy as a fundamental right (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. UOI, 2017). Nevertheless, in 2023, the Supreme Court in *Supriyo Chakraborty v. Union of India* (2023) declined to legalize same-sex marriage, passing the matter to Parliament. The Indian government had submitted an affidavit stating that marriage is "only between a biological male and a biological female," a position publicly endorsed by the ruling party, which declared that marriage is a sacred Hindu sacrament, not a civil contract. This framing exposes the Hindutva ideological investment in maintaining cis-heteronormative family structures, using religion and culture as instruments of exclusion (Hindustan Times, 2018; Gaysi, 2023).

Moreover, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, provides some formal recognition but has been widely criticized by trans communities for inadequate protections against violence and for requiring medical certification of gender identity (Khobarekar; Pandey, 2023). Minakshi, a working-class trans-queer hijra person from Delhi, with whom I met in a queer event on the street in New Delhi, articulates the lived gap between law and reality:

"Being a hijra, we still live in the margin. Mainstream society make laws, but where is the implementation? We can't access school and healthcare, because there are no infrastructure and sensitization in the massive governmental and private sectors. We are being forced



to do our traditional occupation, Challa, Badhai, Khajra or begging, and sex work.”

Minakshi's statement illuminates the structural distance between juridical recognition and material inclusion; a theme that runs throughout the ethnographic sections that follow. Some NGOs in West Bengal and other states have begun offering vocational training to Hijra, kothi, and other trans communities in tailoring, beauty-work, and paramedical skills, and a few companies have begun hiring transgender persons. However, as the following accounts demonstrate, these initiatives frequently fail to address the basic infrastructural and social conditions necessary for trans persons to remain employed.

Nilay, a 26 years old, trans-man activist from Kolkata, who was my fellow comrade during organizing Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk 2022, described a investigation on why trans-masculine employees at a franchise outlet consistently left after one month: the outlet had no gender-neutral toilet, compelling trans-men workers to hold their urine for entire eight-hour shifts with serious health consequences. Furthermore, another comrade of mine, Ulka, a 25 years old, trans-woman from Kolkata hired by a company, described facing both caste and gender-based harassment from colleagues:

“They called me ‘moga’, ‘chakka’. Questioned on my private part. Further called me ‘charal’. This was not just gender discrimination, but casteism as well.”

He was eventually forced to leave. Both accounts illustrate that formal inclusion without structural change and protection laws produces conditional, unstable, and ultimately untenable conditions for marginalized queer persons. These structural failures in law, in workplaces, and in social infrastructure form the material backdrop against which the Pride movement emerged and continues to operate. To understand both the possibilities and the limits of queer visibility in India, it is necessary to trace the movement's origins and its evolving relationship with state power, public space, and its own internal hierarchies.

Negotiation and Obstacles in the Pride Movement: Visibility, Violence, and Accessibility

The Kolkata Friendship Walk of 2 July 1999 was organized by approximately fifteen activists from Kolkata, Bangalore, and Mumbai. The walk was deliberately named non-confrontationally: "Friendship Walk", to emphasize dialogue, awareness, and connection with civil society rather than direct confrontation with the state. Participants in bright yellow T-shirts with slogans like "LGBT-India" carried pamphlets on safe sex, HIV/AIDS awareness, and human rights. Starting at Park Circus Maidan, a known cruising and gathering site. The group split into two, one visiting NGOs and the other visiting the West Bengal Human Rights Commission, to initiate conversations about LGBTQ+ rights. The walk attracted surprising media attention; reporters requested a "mock walk" for photographs, which subsequently appeared in national newspapers (Karia, 2024).

Rupanker, a fifty-year-old queer person long associated with Kolkata's Rainbow Pride Walks, reflects on the walk's significance:

"Although I was not a part of this first walk, it has shaped our lives. It gave us hope to step out of the closet. Become comrades. Fight for our fundamental rights and justice."

Pride movements grew rapidly across urban India following this beginning. Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore organized their own walks from 2008. The first Queer Azaadi Mumbai parade on 16 August 2008, the day after Independence Day, explicitly framed itself as a demand for freedom from Section 377 (DNA, 2015). In 2014, Guwahati hosted the first Pride in North-east India, organized by four trans-queer individuals: Minakshi Bujarbaruah, Ankita Gupta, Bitopi Dutta, and Milin Dutta. This feminist-led initiative foregrounded the necessity of regional queer politics beyond the metropolitan mainstream. By 2023, the Guwahati Pride had grown from approximately 150 to over 4,000 participants, catalyzing the formation of XUKIA, a queer advocacy group in Assam (One Future Collective, 2019).

Organizing Pride events in India involves intensive negotiation with state bureaucracy. Organizers must obtain separate police permissions for each locality along the parade route—permissions that often arrive only days before the event. Being an organizer of the 2022 Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk; I still recall that:



“We had to select two different routes or two different dates of parades, and sometimes. This happened due to the police's permission. Once we got the actual permission letter two days before the walk. So, we have had some nail-biting moments.”

This precarity produces strategic forms of self-censorship within the parades themselves. At the 2022 Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk, as the procession passed the Park Street Police Station, a gay-identified organizer announced on the microphone:

“Now we are in front of the police station. Please keep the volume low. Don't make any provocative slogans.”

The instruction is striking. What counts as "provocative" in a queer Pride walk, whose historical function across the world has been precisely to provoke, to resist, and to challenge the normative public order. This strategic silencing reflects the precarious relationship between queer communities and law enforcement, which characterized by scrutiny, surveillance, and periodic institutional violence.

The question of police presence at Pride events remains deeply contested. While police provide logistical support and crowd management at some parades, many activists question the ethics of collaborating with an institution historically implicated in violence against queer persons. Shanti, a trans-queer-hijra activist from Kolkata whom I met through sustained engagement with hijra community networks in North Kolkata during 2019 and 2022, articulates the fundamental contradiction:

“Trans-women, kothis, hijras, and other trans-feminine identified individuals are in some ways the most visible and vulnerable in society, and they are the ones who suffer the most violence from the police and guards. Our entire point is that one day of pride, but 365 days of violence doesn't make sense. Today we are having conditional protection, even that can be questionable, but what about the other days?”

A trans woman from Delhi, one of my interlocutors whom I met through a trans community support group during my 2023 fieldwork in the city and whose name I withhold entirely for safety reasons, described going to the police station after being gang-raped by six people, only to

encounter a second register of violence. Officers laughing at her, using derogatory slurs, refusing to file an FIR for two hours. Then assigned a male doctor and male officer to examine her wounds despite her repeated assertion of her identity, and demanding money and sexual labor.

“The space of the police station, which was supposed to provide me safety, made me most vulnerable or unsafe,” she said.

Her account connects to global debates about pinkwashing, the institutional appropriation of Pride by actors that do not protect queer lives for the remaining 364 days of the year (Blackmer, 2019).

Internal Critiques: Caste, Class, and the Elitism of Pride

The Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk faced significant internal critique in its early years for being dominated by urban, upper-caste, cisgender gay men organized through NGO structures, with insufficient representation from grassroots lesbian, bisexual, trans-masculine, and working-class queer identities. Following 2011, the power dynamics shifted: Niluphar, trans-queer activist, one of the pride walk organizers, noted that more queer women joined the organizing committees and NGO resources were directed toward subsidizing travel and accommodation for queer persons from district-level communities. This shift reflects a broader tension between centralized resource management and genuine grassroots participation, a tension that characterizes many social movements globally (Bhaskaran, 2004).

The Delhi Queer Pride Walk (DQPW) has attempted a more systematic model of inclusion, visibilizing the rights of Dalit-Adivasi-Bahujan queers, disabled queer people, trans-queer sex workers. The organizing committee has implemented practical measures: e-rickshaws for disabled and elderly participants, sign-language interpreters, and trained volunteers. Shivangi Agarwal, a disabled queer organizer, observed that disabled queer individuals always had a voice, they just weren't given a space and weren't heard" (Bakhsh, 2023).

Yet this inclusive ethos proved fragile. In 2022, when the organizers organized a Pride fundraising party at the Hyatt Centric, a five-star hotel in Delhi. Nidhi, one of my interlocutors, whom I met in a queer event in 2022, a queer woman activist from a lower-caste



working-class background coming from the state of Uttar Pradesh, told me:

“These luxurious places are not for us. We don't feel welcome at those gatherings. Those spaces are very elite, because of their money, English-speaking ability, and upper-class-caste background.”

Nidhi's words underscore those formal gestures of inclusion; accessible parade logistics do not translate automatically into the cultural and economic conditions. Tokenistic inclusion, as Simran identified in the context of religious spaces, appears here again in the domain of queer activism itself: the symbolic presence of diverse bodies without the structural transformation of the conditions under which those bodies can participate.

The Linguistic Politics of Pride: Inclusivity, Diversity and Multilingualism

India's profound linguistic plurality, encompassing hundreds of languages and dialects, means that language is not merely a medium of communication for social movements but a political terrain in which inclusion and exclusion are enacted (Debbarma, 2025). In most major Pride walks across Indian metropolitan cities, English and Hindi function as the primary languages of sloganeering, stage speeches, posters and official materials. This produces the structural exclusion of non-English and non-Hindi-speaking communities, reinforcing a pattern of urban elitism and colonial linguistic hierarchy in which regional languages are pushed to the margins of public discourse. Kollolini Das, a queer-lesbian rights activist whom I interviewed on multiple occasions in both Delhi (2019, 2022, 2023) and Kolkata (2019, 2022, 2023), and who has been involved in Pride organizing in both cities, articulates this directly:

“Pride should cross linguistic barriers and reach the grassroots. Unfortunately, both in Delhi and Kolkata Pride Walk, the organizers are using English more than regional languages. However, there was a radical shift visible during the 2022 Kolkata Pride Walk, where a few people started giving slogans in Bengali. This linguistic political shift was able to reach larger audiences.”

Organizers in cities such as Pune, Chennai, and Guwahati have made meaningful efforts in recent years to incorporate regional and vernacular languages. The Pune Pride organizers' inclusion of Marathi in posters and slogans enabled broader grassroots mobilization. In Chennai, the Self-Respect Pride March employs Tamil as its primary language of protest and resistance, situating queer politics within a longer Tamil progressive tradition.

I was among the activists who participated in the most significant linguistic intervention of the 2022 Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk. Together with Ani, Chitrangada, and a group of kothi-hijra-trans-queer activists, we consciously reclaimed slang words that had been historically weaponized against queer and sex-working communities, words such as *Khanki*, *Beshya*, *Magi*, *Chakka*, *Homo*. We transformed them into declarations of identity and pride. We also composed slogans in Ulti, the vernacular queer language used by working-class kothi, hijra, and transgender communities across West Bengal and Bangladesh. These slogans made visible the identities, which were most specifically criminalized, and the communities of sex workers, kothis, hijras, whose voices had been most consistently absent from Pride platforms:

“Ami Kothi, Ami Dhurai / Dhuria Dhuria Bhat Khai. Ami Chakka, Ami Dhurai / Dhuria Dhuria Bhat Khai. Ami Hijra, Ami Dhurai / Dhuria Dhuria Bhat Khai. Ami Khanki, Ami Dhurai / Dhuria Dhuria Bhat Khai.”

[In translation: “I am Kothi, I do sex / From sex work, I earn my money. I am Chakka, I do sex / From sex work, I earn my money. I am Hijra, I do sex / From sex work, I earn my money. I am a Prostitute, I do sex / From sex work, I earn my money.”]

Another slogan:

“Chele Chelete Prem Koreche / Besh Koreche, Besh Koreche.... Meye Meyete Prem Koreche / Besh Koreche, Besh Koreche... Hijra Kothite Prem koreche / Besh Koreche, Besh Koreche.”

[In translation: “The boy fell in love with another boy / That's fine, that's fine.... The girl fell in love with another girl / That's fine, that's fine. The Hijra fell in love with a Kothi / That's fine, that's fine.”]



These slogans were the product of deliberate collective creation, and as one of their co-authors, I situate my account here at the intersection of ethnographic analysis and activist reflection. They were radical in multiple registers: they employed Ulti: a language largely invisible in public Pride discourse; and they used direct, "low-status" Bengali words (*Pod Marano* for anal sex; *Dhurano* for sex work) rather than the sanitized, NGO-normalized equivalents. As I reflected at the time, and as other activists confirmed, this was a deliberate assertion that queer liberation must be legible to—and shaped by—those communities most marginalized within it.

The response was sharply divided. Konnya (name changed), an upper-class, upper-caste, urban trans activist based in Kolkata whose views I encountered through social media posts and a subsequent informal conversation at a community event in early 2023, declared that the KRPW 2022 had become “a space of shame” through its use of slang and called for a boycott. In contrast, Rina, a hijra trans activist from Nadia district whom I had known through field visits to that district since 2020 and who attended the 2022 KRPW, responded with enthusiasm:

“This was the first time in the Pride where we have seen our visibility in slogans. They gave slogans in Ulti. We felt that we were connected.”

The divergence in these responses’ maps directly onto the class, caste, and urban-rural divisions that structure queer communities in India. For elite urban activists, the vernacular slogans represented a breach of decorum; for working-class and rural hijra and kothi communities, they represented, for the first time, recognition.

Chitrangada, a 24 years old transgender kothi activist and also one of the co-creators, reflected:

“These slogans were not just random slogans; we consciously created them to reclaim our own vernacular identities, which were historically not visible in the Pride platforms. But these identities are visible across rural areas of our country. This is not just a random reclamation, but a radical queer reclamation, which even shackled the elite-class urban queer community.”

These interventions confirm that language is not merely an instrument of communication but a site of identity, belonging, and resistance (Debbarma, 2025). The linguistic politics of the 2022 KRPW represent a microcosm of the larger struggle over who gets to define queer liberation in India—and in whose voice.

Conclusion: Queer Politics, Praxis, and in Search for an Anthropological Horizon

Analyzing the foregoing material, we can perceive that the journey of queer liberation in India is neither linear nor complete. Socio-political and cultural nuances, such as legal battles, victories, cultural fears, ideological contestations, and the persistence of caste and class hierarchies within queer organizing have all shaped its present contours and will determine its future. The 2018 *Navej Singh Johar* verdict was a turning point, but the fight for marriage equality, anti-discrimination protections, and cultural inclusion continues (Verma, 2024; Khobarekar; Pandey, 2023).

The ethnographic material gathered over six years foregrounds three structural tensions that this conclusion draws together. First, the gap between symbolic inclusion or the invocation of Ardhanarishvara or Shikhandi in Pride aesthetics and nationalist rhetoric—and the material exclusion experienced by Dalit-queer persons like Simran, who remain barred from sacred spaces even as their mythological counterparts are displayed on Pride banners. Second, the complicity of queer institutions with state actors; most visibly in the managed relationship between Pride organizers and the police—whose everyday practices of violence against trans and hijra persons are momentarily suspended during the festival but continue structurally throughout the year. Third, the reproduction of caste, class, and linguistic hierarchies within queer organizing spaces, even when those spaces formally commit to inclusion: the Hyatt fundraiser, the English-language slogans, the working-class trans women and hijras who feel unwelcome in spaces nominally organized on their behalf.

From an anthropological perspective, this article contributes to an understanding of queer activism as a site of multiple and competing socialities, not a unified movement but a contested field in which caste, class, religion, language, and region produce divergent, sometimes antagonistic, visions of liberation. The methodological approach I have



taken—combining multi-sited fieldwork, sustained relationship with interlocutors, and explicit acknowledgment of my own activist positionality—has enabled the kind of access and accountability that this analysis requires. Ethnography conducted from within the field, by a researcher who is simultaneously a political subject of the movement being studied, generates distinctive insights and distinctive responsibilities: to be transparent, to avoid romanticizing, and to resist the temptation to smooth over tensions that implicate the researcher.

Supporters of Hindutva often deny or erase the fact that Section 377 was a British imposition, calling queerness a Western import while denying their own ancient and medieval histories of gender and sexual plurality (HRW, 2008; Wilhelm, 2004). The decolonial approach I advocate—grounded in South Asian scholarship rather than exported uncritically from Western academic contexts. This seeks to recuperate these pre-colonial genealogies not as evidence of an idealized past but as resources for imagining more expansive futures.

The Indian queer identity is not homogeneous; it is inherently intersectional and intersecting with class, caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and region. This intersectional character plays a central role in organizing both macro-movements and micro-resistances, often led by Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, and disabled queer individuals, constructing a radical reimagining of queer politics that contradicts elite, urban, upper-caste narratives. From the Kolkata Friendship Walk of 1999 to the *NALSA v. Union of India* judgement (2014) to *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), these milestones reflect both institutional victories and grassroots mobilizations. Every act of queer defiance; whether a Pride parade, a slogan in Ulti, a whispered coming-out, or a hijra performing traditional occupation in public is part of a larger movement for liberation.

This movement seeks not only the reform of laws but the transformation of the social and cultural conditions within which those laws operate. It requires intersectional activism that connects grassroots organizing to legal reform, and both to the deep cultural transformation necessary to make queer lives liveable across all of India's many worlds. Not only in English-speaking, upper-caste, urban Pride parades, but in temples and villages, in factories and police stations, in the vernacular languages and embodied identities of those who have always been most targeted, and most resilient.

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Movimento de Libertação Queer na Índia: Compreensão através da mitologia, religião, história e cenário sócio-jurídico contemporâneo

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga uma questão central: como as minorias de gênero e sexualidade na Índia negociam reconhecimento legal, legitimidade cultural e solidariedade de base, especialmente quando os marcos dominantes—tanto do Estado quanto do próprio movimento Pride—reproduzem desigualdades de casta, classe e linguagem? Baseando-se em seis anos de trabalho de campo etnográfico multi-situado em Kolkata e Delhi, com entrevistas não estruturadas e observação participante em eventos do Orgulho, e a partir de uma perspectiva feminista interseccional informada pela academia decolonial sul-asiática, o artigo examina o movimento de libertação queer na Índia em suas dimensões mitológica, jurídica e ativista contemporânea. As tradições pré-coloniais indianas—hindu, islâmica, budista e jainista—codificavam significativa pluralidade de gênero e sexualidade, sistematicamente criminalizada sob o domínio colonial britânico por meio da Seção 377 do Código Penal Indiano (1861) e da Lei das Tribos Criminosas (1871). O estudo rastreia a política queer desde a Caminhada da Amizade de 1999 até o ativismo contemporâneo do Pride, centrando as experiências vividas de interlocutores cujas identidades se interseccionam com casta, classe, religião, língua e região. O artigo



argumenta que a libertação queer genuína requer estruturas anti-casta, anticapitalistas e interseccionais profundamente enraizadas nas realidades vernáculas das bases.

Palavras-chave: Queer decolonial. Heteropatriarcado bramânico. Homonacionalismo. Práxis interseccional. Etnografia do orgulho.

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