

Editorial.....✍

The Struggle is not over! Beyond 'Situating the Invisibles'- Acceptance is the Key

As we immerse ourselves in materially rich and lofty aspirations in mid-2019, what I would attribute to a superfine summer in London and while we envision 2020, our engagements in Queer Lives have certainly got quite diverse. We are engaged with the 50th-year Celebration of Stonewall raids, and 50th-year Celebration of decriminalisation in the United Kingdom. In the past two months, we witnessed a range of activities and significant corporate interest and displayed commitment. It was indeed unprecedented, and certainly gives us a lot of hope in the dark times we continue to live, although our lives are floundered with the economic slowdown, policy paralysis, and a complete breakdown of a moral fabric which was known to have dominated our social lives over past 50 years! As we witness 50 years of PRIDE being published, publicised and glorified, it offers us opportunities to take a pause, look back, and see where did we start, and how far have we come with our effort at creating societies which value co-existence, amity and true cosmopolitan principles of equality in true sense of the term.

LGBT Marches have sure turned into Pride parades, and Homosexuals have certainly been dubbed as 'queers', but, lives of Gender-diverse and Sexual Minorities [GDSM] remain stuck in the same murky sphere of uncertainties. There are substantial observation and alarming evidence which suggests to the preposterous Criminalization of Behaviors, Character, Desires, Expressions and Identities, which riddles the realisation of lives in different contexts. And, wherever criminalisation does not exist in a formalised structure, a presence of shame, guilt and lack of social approbation makes it acutely clear that it's getting suffocatingly difficult for the queer lives to survive, and thrive in regimes which not only have denied, but have systematically deprived human rights in the name of budget-cuts alluding it to austerity, cost-effective analysis and winning public faith with rhetorics such as 'Nation first' and 'Nation great'.

I feel the problem of putting an abstract notion of the Nation First [mythical nationalism] has indeed obscured the focus of the Governments and have distracted them from finer nuances rendered to social policy based on individualities. Unfortunately, this often comes at the cost of compromising the social ideals of 'leaving no one behind', although euphemistically alluded to UN-SDG Agenda 2030. This effort at neglecting the inherent nature of various social sections are reflected in a pattern of invisibilization [deliberate or indeliberate], what we call a 'Compounded Invisibility'. Its a socio-structurally-induced form of invisibility consciously and unconsciously imposed/inflicted upon a group and section of the Society

due to their inherent nature and characteristics by the social institutions, and people in Power, which escalates their chances of being invisible, and compounds their marginalising experiences through this invisibilization.

Queer Sites and Geographies

As we imagine of 2020, a critical year in the history of Humankind especially with so many shifting geopolitical realities such as dark-spells of Post-Brexit and ascendance of larger fascist regimes around the world including in the USA, an examination of Queer Sites and geographies is pertinent. It's particularly interesting that historically relevant queer sites are dissolving into thin air, while they are being replaced by what we witness as gay-friendly spaces. This has indeed corroded away memories and significant memorabilia. This aspect of reality as depicted in Queer Urban geography seem to contrast with lived yet unregistered social memories in socially conservative societies which are slowly waking up to accept 'queer lives' as existent realities, only with a reluctance which they would happily compromise with.

Media and Queer Lives

In different parts of the World, Media has tried to portray queer lives in a different light, some quite pathetic, and some others in a somewhat positive tone, overshadowing the undercurrents. Some media houses in countries like India have been very strategic in getting TV shows dedicated to queer lives while trying to woo the public sympathies, and thereby gain substantial TRPs, and business while few others have been able to use queer lives as a sign of their social commitment. This media outcry and euphoria both were quite exorbitantly high following September 2018 in which Stills of Section-377 appeared on Sony Max - a mainstream TV Channel. Increasingly, new forms of Media based in cyberspace, e.g. Amazon Prime have tried to capture gay experiences surreptitiously while attempting to depict the hypocrisy in our social lives, and still, only make a compromised effort at portraying how despicable queer lives are.

Continued Atrocities on the Queers

Being 'gay' may be fallaciously interpreted as a happy state of affairs especially given the fact that so much information and effort at visualisation has got escalated over past few years, data and observations indicate that queer lives seem to be affected by atrocities at the hands of guileful mainstream society. It is represented in diverse forms of Discrimination [at the workplace and everyday life] and non-acceptance and in extreme cases religion/social sanctions, censorship, ridicule, bullying, and hate crimes including death punishments in many countries, e.g. Chechnya Purging situation in Russia to Capital punishments in the middle-east region. For example, as per the most recent HRW Report, gay men in Chechnya have been illegally detained, beaten and humiliated by police in a renewed anti-gay crackdown, according to a new report.

The recent listing of countries which award a death punishment merely based on one's sexual orientation and gender identity are Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, UAE and Yemen. Also, several others criminalize and punish as per their laws [often critiqued as colonial remain]. Also, countries like Russia have used its 2013 federal law prohibiting 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships' to split a male same-sex couple from their legally adopted 12- and 14-year-old sons. A similar trend to deprive Transgender people of their rights have been observed in the far east. In January 2019, the supreme court of Japan has upheld a law which forces transgender people to get sterilised before they can legally change their gender, reeking an elitist attitude to systemically deprive certain sections of their basic rights.

Also, recent observations have revealed a painful increase in hate crimes against the queer community and consequent suicidal attempts and ideation around the world. Mental Health and Well being of the Queer Community sadly remain a largely neglected affair, and not much advance has been made apart from bio-medically focused public health action plans which don't recognize concepts such as 'minority stress'. This may be sadly attributed to what 'straight' folks perceive as a problem of 'heightened visibility', making this analogy painstakingly challenging to understand what the mainstream wishes to do with queer lives. This narrative aligns well with 'blame the victim', and 'victim being the source of the criminality of perpetrator', and makes it clear on why social cognitive errors loudly premeditate and thereby predominate criminalising tendencies.

All these [and the persecutory fear] have resulted in a spiralling trend of inferiorizing of queer lives, their identities, their desires although a socially desirable effort at 'love is love' has been publicised in the recent discourses in some parts of the world. There are several charities that help LGBTQ people living in countries with discriminatory laws, including All Out, Amnesty International, Human Rights Campaign, Human Rights Watch, Rainbow Riots and Stonewall.

What merits our attention particularly is the fact that how duplicitous the efforts have been in terms of restoring dignity, and sanctity of the very values which stand to uphold the right of life, health and what I would dub 'right to love'. It's no secret that these rights have been violated in broad daylight on the streets of ours be it in London, New York, or in Chennai, let alone small towns or rural areas [which were believed not to have gays!]. It is surprising that although Governments around the world earn a significant degree of social desirability score by praising LGBT Rights in different speeches, their efforts at ensuring and protecting rights of queer communities have fallen short, and show very little actual commitment. This lack of a political will has got stronger under some intolerant conservative regimes, which very much remain apathetic to the realities of

lives, and certainly, do not lay enough emphasis on human rights and ideologies of social justice.

What will it take to be accepted?

There is no denial that acceptance is the key and it's no rocket science. But, why have we remained remotely closer to this objective in spite of several strides being made to achieve social equality? Why could not societies and its members accept queer lives fully yet?

"There is no secret to acceptance, tolerance, or happiness. You just have to find the right partner to take the step with. Let the truth of your love speak for itself. Love, Amit & Adi", say the recently married Hindu gay couple in the USA who have earned a lot of limelight. This has indeed made many eyes dreamy, and teary, while shattering and battering many lives and their aspirations as they continue to be exasperated by harder realities. In September 2018, Indian Supreme Court read down [to be interpreted not the same as decriminalised gay sex], i.e. made amendments in the law which now allows two consenting adults to pursue their passion, desire and pleasure in a private space. Although this has created a lot of glorified version of what we know as Queer liberation in the Indian context, the reality suggests that Indian society as many other parts of the world would suffer from problems of unacceptance of the queer lives by the family, friends and the community.

Recent efforts at solidifying values of social equality has been well reflected in a euphoric West which celebrates Queer Lives and their existence and puts on record their contributions to society, e.g. a flamboyant Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visits a gay bar, and Queen Elizabeth II welcomes Commonwealth Queer Activists to celebrate their lives and contributions to making the world a bit fairer, and just, if I may say. But, the same has been rejected by other societies which have chosen to act regressive, and they have been matched well by other conservative societies in various countries in Asia and Africa.

In this context, several questions pop up in our minds as to what are we proud of? Do we truly believe in social equality, and allowing [enabling] persons of all sections of the society to achieve their true best? And, what will take us to make a more socially accepting society?

Few of these questions are answered in this issue. Our Journal is indeed well-positioned to ignite and illuminate the space for a sensitive and evidence-informed discourse in SRHR, Identity and Emotions Research focused around Genders and Sexualities in the world in general and South Asia in particular. This thematic issue reflective of our Journal's strong commitment to gender equality, an ideal which we had humbly tried to shape with our very first issue on Homosexuality in 2017. The previous issue had focused on the health and Human Rights of the LGBT

Community, whereas in this issue we have made significant advances in both the nature of discourses as well as the degree of engagements we have created with policymakers, academics, and civil society alongside the community members and activists. This issue titled 'Alternative Sexual Identities, Expressions & Lives- A Global Dialogue started with a stated objective of curating an issue which acts as a strong and dominant voice on the concurrent Gender and Sexuality Discourses in the world. We aimed at collecting excellent pieces highlighting advances in scientific research, and updates and experiences and opinions on LGBTQIA Lives in India in particular, and from all over the world.

This issue truly comes as a beacon of voice to many lives, and collectively echoes sentiments, lived realities and experiences of gender-diverse communities around the world, and thereby promises to be a strong document posing significant policy implications.

In this issue, we have received excellent submissions from 4 different continents, experts, scholars and professionals ranging from Johns Hopkins to UNAIDS, UBC to UCL to Utkal, Queer Fictionist to Hollywood, Americas to Asia, Young Scholars aged 22 to Stalwarts up to age 80, Young Students with fresh UGs to people having multiple degrees and accolades. Each story and each piece is appealing in its own unique and highly original way. In addition, every effort is made to ensure the highest quality standard as can be expected in a truly global and multi and trans-disciplinary scientific Journal. We sincerely hope that this issue adds some meaning and value to the current literature on the Gender Diverse Sexual Minority Population and their Lives, and not only visibilizes their concerns, but also sensitises the mainstream society, and thereby creates a pressing need for policy and practice changes around the world.

We also expect that this issue will act as an excellent repository of knowledge for readers of any stage of their life interested in Queer Lives. We humbly believe that it has made concrete efforts at synthesising concurrent realities as expositied in few of the excellent opinion/experiential pieces and expert commentaries, cutting-edge science and advances in evidence and thereby promise that this knowledge is not only relevant but also informative for policy formulations at different levels.

Sincerely Yours
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