

Beyond Privilege: Interrogating Exclusions and Hierarchies in Queer Politics in IndiaShashi Chauhan¹ & Dr. P. K. Gupta²¹Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Lucknow²Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Lucknow

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the elitist tendencies of the contemporary queer movement in India and asks whether queerness, as it is articulated in mainstream activist and academic spaces, remains a prerogative of the privileged. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse, power, and sexuality, it examines how structures of caste, class, gender, and religion intersect with sexuality in ways that dominant queer narratives have often ignored. The study situates the queer movement within both its historical and global contexts—tracing colonial criminalization of sexuality, postcolonial struggles around Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and the rise of NGO-led activism in urban India. It argues that while the queer movement has advanced legal reforms and visibility, it has simultaneously reproduced exclusionary practices by privileging upper-caste, urban, English-speaking, and economically secure queer subjects, while marginalizing Hijra communities, Dalit queer activists, working-class LGBTQ persons, and rural populations. By comparing the Western bourgeois discourse of sexuality with Indian Brahmanical hierarchies, the paper demonstrates how elitist discourses shape both repression and resistance. Ultimately, it advocates for an intersectional and inclusive queer politics that learns from Dalit, feminist, and anti-caste struggles to build solidarities across axes of oppression. Only by embedding itself within the lived realities of India's toiling masses can the queer movement transcend elitist limitations and achieve meaningful social transformation.

Keywords: *Gender, Queer, Homosexuals, Discrimination, Sexuality***Introduction**

The question of who speaks for the queer community in India—and who remains unheard—has increasingly come under scrutiny. While the legal and cultural gains of the last two decades, particularly the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018, mark significant milestones, they also expose the limitations of a movement largely shaped by urban, English-speaking, upper-caste elites. This paper seeks to tend to examine the extent to which queerness in India has become the dispensation of the privileged, and how this exclusivity undermines the liberating potential of queer politics.

At the heart of this critique lies Michel Foucault's insight that sexuality is not merely a natural or private domain, but one that is discursively produced through relations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1978). In the Indian context, sexuality has been doubly regulated—first by the Brahmanical order that instituted caste-based hierarchies of purity and pollution, and later by colonial criminalisation that redefined non-heteronormative practices as “unnatural offences.” These layered histories of control continue to shape queer subjectivities in the present. Yet, the mainstream queer movement in India has often failed to account for these multiple axes of oppression, focusing instead on narrow questions of legal recognition, identity, and rights.

The emergence of queer activism in India has been deeply entangled with the politics of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The Delhi High Court's 2009 Naz Foundation judgment, which decriminalised same-sex intimacy, was celebrated as a watershed moment. The subsequent reversal of this verdict by the Supreme Court in 2013, and its eventual reinstatement of decriminalisation in 2018 have kept Section 377 at

the centre of queer political discourse. However, this legalistic focus has been critiqued by scholars and activists alike for its exclusionary nature. The Hijra community, for example, has historically been subject not only to moral policing under Section 377, but also to criminalisation under laws relating to public nuisance, trafficking, and bodily harm—yet their struggles remain marginal to the dominant narrative of decriminalisation (Semmlar, 2014).

The elitism of the queer movement is evident in multiple registers. Pride marches across metropolitan cities often reflect the visibility of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians, while trans persons, Dalit queers, and working-class LGBTQ people remain underrepresented. The language of queer activism—predominantly English—further alienates rural and non-English-speaking populations. NGOisation of queer politics has compounded this problem, as urban, upper-class activists secure funding from international agencies, thereby shaping the discourse of sexuality within frameworks dictated by global governance rather than local struggles (Tellis, 2012). This process, as Josephine Ho (2006) observes in other Asian contexts, results in the creation of a professionalised class of queer activists whose agendas are divorced from the concerns of labourers, farmers, and sex workers.

The parallels between Western bourgeois discourses of sexuality and Indian Brahmanical orders of hierarchy cannot be ignored. Just as Foucault (1978) argued that bourgeois society suppressed non-reproductive sexuality to maintain social order, Brahmanical Hinduism has historically pathologised and marginalised non-normative sexualities to safeguard caste-based power relations. The stigmatization of Hijras, the erasure of queer presence from religious and cultural life, and the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality are all outcomes of this Brahmanical logic. The queer movement, by neglecting caste, risks perpetuating the very hierarchies it claims to resist. Dalit trans activist Living Smile Vidya has aptly described transphobia in India as a form of Brahmanism, wherein Hijras become the “untouchable” subjects of the queer community itself.

Moreover, the contemporary queer movement has been shaped by the forces of globalization and neoliberalism. As India entered the era of liberalisation, queerness too became commodified, producing entrepreneurial queer subjects who align themselves with the state-market nexus. Pride marches sponsored by corporations, the emergence of a “pink economy,” and the framing of queer rights in terms of consumption and lifestyle reinforce classist exclusions. Queerness, under such conditions, becomes less about solidarity with oppressed communities and more about securing recognition for those who can afford to participate in consumerist and cosmopolitan cultures.

This paper positions itself as a critique of these tendencies, highlighting how queerness in India has been monopolised by privileged groups and how this monopolisation reproduces structures of caste, class, and gender inequality. It traces the historical, theoretical, and political underpinnings of this exclusivity, drawing analogies between Western bourgeois discourse and Indian Brahmanism, and examining the intersections of the role of NGO, global governance, and homonationalism. Most importantly, it seeks to foreground the struggles and voices of those who have been sidelined within queer politics: Hijras, Dalit queers, working-class LGBTQ persons, and rural sexual minorities.

In doing so, this study does not dismiss the achievements of the queer movement—such as legal victories and increasing visibility—but calls for a reorientation of its politics towards inclusivity and intersectionality. Inspired by the struggles of Dalit feminists like Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh, and drawing on Black feminist thought, the paper argues for a queer politics that aligns itself with broader movements against caste, patriarchy, class oppression, and religious majoritarianism. Only such a politics, rooted in the lived realities

of India's oppressed masses, can dismantle the elitist character of queerness and transform it into a truly liberatory force.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, critical, and interpretive methodology, grounded in textual analysis and sociological critique. The primary aim is not to generate empirical generalisations but to interrogate how queer politics in India has been discursively produced, circulated, and institutionalised through law, activism, and globalisation.

First, the research adopts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, drawing on Foucault's theorisation of power/knowledge to examine how sexuality is articulated within legal, medical, and activist discourses. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, and NGO reports are treated as sites where sexuality is not merely described but actively regulated. The analysis focuses on how these discourses privilege certain queer subjectivities — upper-caste, English-speaking, urban gay men and lesbians — while marginalising others such as hijras, Dalit queers, and working-class trans individuals.

Second, the study engages in textual and theoretical reading of key scholarly contributions, including works by Ashley Tellis, Nivedita Menon, Ruth Vanita, Naisargi Dave, Srila Roy, and Josephine Ho. These writings are examined alongside activist interventions by Dalit and trans leaders such as Living Smile Vidya and Grace Banu, to foreground the tensions between elite-driven narratives and subaltern queer voices. The approach utilized here is interdisciplinary, merging sociology, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and critical caste studies to uncover the complex exclusions present in queer politics.

Third, the paper situates Indian queer politics within the broader context of globalisation and NGOisation. This involves analysing how transnational funding flows, corporate sponsorships, and the rise of rainbow capitalism shape the agenda of queer movements in India. Here, a political economy lens is employed to critique the depoliticisation of queer struggles through market logics and NGO frameworks.

Finally, the research is informed by an intersectional methodology. Following the insights of Black feminist thought and Dalit queer activism, the paper insists that sexuality cannot be analysed in isolation but must be understood in relation to caste, class, gender, religion, and labour. Intersectionality is not treated as an additive category but as a structural analytic that reveals how power operates across multiple axes simultaneously.

Through these methodological orientations, the paper develops a critical, situated account of queer politics in India — one that resists universalising claims of inclusivity and instead highlights the exclusions, contradictions, and possibilities for solidarities that emerge when queerness is located within broader structures of oppression.

Theoretical Framework and Historical Context

Foucault, Power, and the Discourse of Sexuality:

Any critical interrogation of sexuality and queer politics must begin with the work of Michel Foucault, particularly *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1978). Foucault challenges what he calls the “repressive hypothesis,” which assumes that sexuality was simply suppressed in modern society. Instead, he argues that sexuality was never silenced but rather became a central site through which power was exercised. Sexuality, according to Foucault, is not a natural essence but a discursive construct—shaped by institutions, knowledge systems, and mechanisms of surveillance.

Through this framework, it becomes possible to understand how heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality were not simply private choices but socio-political arrangements designed to maintain certain

relations of power. Foucault illustrates how bourgeois society, starting in the 18th and 19th centuries, categorized sexual behaviors into binaries of normal versus abnormal, natural versus unnatural, consequently pushing non-reproductive sexualities to the periphery. Sexuality, in this sense, is inseparable from power and knowledge—it is not merely about personal desire but about the governance of populations.

In the Indian context, this Foucauldian insight allows us to examine how both Brahmanism and colonial modernity shaped the discourse of sexuality. Similarly to how bourgeois society in the West stigmatized non-reproductive sex to uphold social order, Brahmanical Hinduism utilized ideas of purity, pollution, and caste hierarchy to control sexual conduct. Colonialism, in turn, reinforced these mechanisms by codifying “unnatural offences” through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Thus, queer politics in India must be understood not only as resistance to heteronormativity but also as a struggle against layered histories of Brahmanical patriarchy and colonial power.

Brahmanism, Caste, and the Regulation of Sexuality:

The regulation of sexuality in India cannot be analysed without accounting for caste and Brahmanism. Caste, as B. R. Ambedkar argued, is fundamentally sustained through endogamy. The regulation of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction has historically been central to maintaining caste purity and hierarchy. Inter-caste unions, particularly those involving Dalits and lower castes, have been violently suppressed through social ostracism and physical violence. In this sense, sexuality is not merely about individual choice but is deeply tied to the reproduction of caste-based social order.

Brahmanical patriarchy operates by controlling women’s sexuality and policing sexual practices considered “deviant.” The stigmatization of Hijras, for example, reflects this logic. Hijras were historically visible in cultural and religious life—occupying roles in royal courts, ritual ceremonies, and local traditions. However, with the consolidation of Brahmanical Hinduism and later colonial morality, Hijras came to be pathologised as deviant and excluded from mainstream society. They became the symbolic “untouchables” of sexuality, paralleling caste-based untouchability in broader society.

This intersection of caste and sexuality is crucial for critiquing the contemporary queer movement. While upper-caste, English-speaking activists foreground issues such as marriage equality, they often neglect the lived experiences of Dalit and working-class queer people, whose struggles revolve around basic rights to livelihood, safety, and dignity. As Living Smile Vidya (2014) has argued, transphobia in India is inseparable from Brahmanism—Hijras and trans persons are not only marginalised for their gender identity but are also subjected to caste-based exclusion within queer spaces themselves. Thus, any queer politics in India that ignores caste risks reproducing Brahmanical oppression under the banner of liberation.

Colonial Criminalisation and the Invention of “Unnatural Sex”:

While Brahmanism provided one set of mechanisms for regulating sexuality, colonialism introduced another by codifying sexual practices into legal categories of crime. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1861, criminalised “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” This law, modeled on Victorian morality, was not merely about regulating sexual behaviour but about enforcing a civilizational hierarchy wherein colonial rulers sought to “civilize” Indian subjects by imposing heteronormative Christian morality.

Scholars such as Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000) have shown that pre-colonial India contained rich traditions of homoerotic expression in literature, mythology, and art. From the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho and Konark to medieval Sufi poetry and bhakti traditions, non-heteronormative desires were embedded in

cultural narratives, albeit in complex ways. Colonial criminalisation erased these pluralities, creating a homogenised narrative of Indian sexuality as exclusively heterosexual and patriarchal.

This colonial legacy continues to shape Indian queer politics. The legal struggle against Section 377 has been pivotal for queer activism, yet it has also narrowed the discourse to questions of legality. The focus on Section 377, while important, has overshadowed other forms of structural violence faced by queer communities—police harassment under other penal provisions, economic marginalisation, lack of healthcare access, and caste-based discrimination. The reduction of queer politics to a legal battle, largely fought in English-speaking courts by elite NGOs, illustrates the privileged character of mainstream queer discourse.

Ancient Expressions of Sexual Diversity:

To counter the claim that queerness is a Western import, it is important to recall the presence of sexual diversity in ancient Indian traditions. The temples of Khajuraho and Konark contain sculptures depicting same-sex intimacy, group sex, and non-reproductive sexual practices. Hindu texts such as the Kama Sutra discuss a range of sexual behaviours, including those between men and between women. The Mahabharata narrates stories of gender fluidity, such as Shikhandi's transformation, while Islamic and Sufi traditions celebrate homoerotic devotion in poetry and mysticism.

These histories suggest that queerness has long been part of the Indian social fabric, albeit in ways that were often ritualised, sacred, or symbolic. What colonialism achieved was not the introduction of queerness but its erasure—by labeling such practices as “unnatural” and criminalising them under law. The irony, then, is that the queer movement today, in borrowing heavily from Western frameworks of identity and rights, sometimes reproduces the same elitism that colonialism institutionalised.

The Shift from Repression to Visibility:

The trajectory of queer politics in India since the late 20th century reflects a shift from repression to visibility, though this visibility remains uneven. The HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s brought questions of sexuality into public discourse, as NGOs engaged in health interventions with men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender communities. However, these interventions were often medicalised, framing queer bodies as sites of disease control rather than subjects of rights.

The 2009 Naz Foundation judgment marked a moment of optimism, as the Delhi High Court recognised the rights of sexual minorities under constitutional principles of equality and dignity. Yet the 2013 Supreme Court reversal, followed by the 2018 decriminalisation, revealed the precariousness of legal victories. More importantly, the centrality of Section 377 in queer activism highlighted the dominance of legalistic, urban, and elite frameworks that often failed to resonate with rural and working-class LGBTQ populations.

This historical context shows how queer politics in India has been shaped by intersecting forces of Brahmanism, colonialism, and neoliberalism. Each of these forces has produced discourses that regulate sexuality, while also generating sites of resistance. The challenge, however, is that mainstream queer activism has too often aligned itself with privileged discourses, thereby limiting its transformative potential.

Critique of Elitism in the Indian Queer Movement

The Politics of Representation: Whose Queerness Counts?

One of the most pressing critiques of the queer movement in India is the politics of representation. The images circulated in media coverage of Pride marches, NGO campaigns, and legal battles often reflect young, urban, English-speaking, upper-caste gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians. This homogenisation of queer identity

not only erases the diverse experiences of other sexual and gender minorities but also constructs a particular version of “acceptable” queerness aligned with privilege.

In metropolitan Pride events, rainbow flags, slogans in English, and globalised symbols of queer identity dominate the visual landscape. While these displays signal visibility, they also reproduce exclusions by alienating those without access to English education, disposable income, or urban spaces of celebration. The working-class transgender woman, the Dalit queer activist, or the rural lesbian couple is rendered invisible within this spectacle of cosmopolitan queerness. As Ashley Tellis (2012) provocatively argued, the Indian queer movement has often become a “gay boys’ club,” dominated by elite men whose concerns rarely extend to the structural oppressions faced by marginalised communities.

Hijra and Transgender Exclusion:

The most glaring instance of exclusion lies in the treatment of Hijra and transgender communities. Historically present in South Asian societies, Hijras have long been both revered and stigmatised—occupying ritual roles in marriage and childbirth ceremonies while simultaneously being subjected to ridicule, violence, and exclusion. Despite their centrality in the history of sexuality in India, Hijras remain peripheral to the contemporary queer movement.

The struggles of Hijras are materially different from those of elite queer activists. While middle-class gay men may demand marriage equality or workplace non-discrimination policies, Hijras often struggle for survival—access to housing, employment, healthcare, and protection from daily harassment. Many Hijras are criminalised not under Section 377 but under provisions such as Section 268 (public nuisance), Section 320 (grievous hurt, applied to voluntary sex reassignment), and the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. Yet the mainstream queer discourse, narrowly focused on Section 377, has failed to centre these issues (Semmlar, 2014).

Trans activists like Living Smile Vidya and Grace Banu have consistently pointed out that queer space themselves replicate caste and class hierarchies. Vidya describes transphobia as a form of Brahmanism, wherein Hijras become “untouchables” not only in wider society but also within queer politics. Grace Banu has highlighted how Dalit trans persons face double marginalisation—excluded by upper-caste queer activists and ostracised by caste society. This structural exclusion demonstrates that the queer movement, while claiming inclusivity, often reproduces the very oppressions it seeks to dismantle.

Caste and Class Blindness in Queer Politics:

Perhaps the most enduring critique of queer activism in India is its blindness to caste. The legalistic and rights-based framework adopted by many NGOs and activists often treats sexuality as an isolated category, detached from caste and class. Yet, as scholars like Aniruddha Dutta (2013) and Srila Roy (2015) argue, sexuality in India is inseparable from other axes of social inequality.

For Dalit queer persons, the struggle is not simply about the freedom to love or marry; it is also about surviving caste violence, economic exploitation, and gendered oppression. Dalit lesbians, for instance, face threats of “honour killings” for transgressing caste endogamy. Dalit trans persons face exclusion not only from caste society but also from upper-caste-dominated queer spaces. Yet, these realities are rarely reflected in Pride slogans or NGO reports.

The reliance on English as the lingua franca of queer activism further entrenches privilege. Legal petitions, academic writings, and Pride campaigns are overwhelmingly produced in English, alienating non-English-speaking queer people. While queer desire and identity are expressed in multiple Indian languages through

films, songs, poetry, and everyday practices, these vernacular forms rarely gain legitimacy in activist spaces dominated by English-educated elites. This linguistic elitism mirrors the colonial and Brahmanical histories of exclusion, thereby reproducing a discourse of queerness accessible only to the privileged.

NGOisation and the Marketisation of Queer Politics:

Another major critique is the NGOisation of queer politics. Since the 1990s, with the rise of HIV/AIDS interventions, queer activism in India has been institutionalised through NGOs funded by international donors. While NGOs have played a crucial role in providing services and advocacy, they have also professionalised and depoliticised queer struggles.

NGO-led activism often privileges quantifiable outcomes—number of people reached, workshops conducted, awareness campaigns organised—over structural transformation. Moreover, funding priorities dictated by international agencies shape the discourse of sexuality. As Josephine Ho (2006) notes in the East Asian context, NGOs often produce “civilised” queer subjects aligned with global governance, while marginalising those who do not fit the donor’s framework. In India, this has meant privileging urban, middle-class queer identities while ignoring the needs of rural, working-class, and caste-oppressed communities.

The “professional queer activist,” fluent in English, comfortable in international conferences, and adept at navigating donor expectations, emerges as the legitimate voice of queerness. This creates a class of entrepreneurial queers who align themselves with neoliberal state-market logics, reinforcing class privilege rather than challenging it. As Tellis (2012) observes, NGOisation has flattened the sociological landscape into paradigms of identity and rights that inhibit genuine processes of social change.

Homonationalism and the Alignment with Majoritarianism:

A further layer of critique emerges through the concept of homonationalism, developed by Jasbir Puar (2007). Homonationalism refers to the alignment of queer identities with nationalist projects, wherein certain queer subjects are included within the nation-state at the expense of others. In the Indian context, this is visible in the celebration of queer identities that align with Hindu majoritarianism, while excluding religious minorities.

Many queer activists, for instance, participate uncritically in caste-Hindu festivals and rituals, reproducing structures of caste and patriarchy. This alignment with dominant religious practices alienates queer Muslims, Christians, and Dalits, for whom these rituals signify exclusion and oppression. The queer movement’s silence on issues such as Islamophobia, lynching of Muslims, or caste atrocities reveals the limits of its solidarity. Queerness, in this form, becomes complicit in reinforcing majoritarian narratives rather than challenging them.

Furthermore, the global discourse of LGBTQ rights, heavily influenced by Western frameworks, often celebrates legal reforms like same-sex marriage as the pinnacle of progress. In India, this framework fails to resonate with large sections of queer communities whose immediate struggles revolve around food, shelter, healthcare, and protection from violence. By aligning with elite agendas and nationalist pride, queer politics risks becoming homonationalist—upholding the state’s legitimacy while neglecting its violence against marginalised citizens.

Pride Marches as Spaces of Privilege:

Pride marches, often celebrated as symbols of queer visibility, provide another site for examining elitism. Organised in metropolitan centres like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, Pride events are inaccessible to many due to geographical, economic, and cultural barriers. The cost of travel, the dominance of English slogans, and the framing of Pride as a festive spectacle exclude rural and working-class queer people.

Moreover, corporate sponsorship of Pride—rainbow-branded products, multinational company floats, and endorsements by elite celebrities—has turned these marches into sites of commodification. Pride becomes less about protest and more about consumption, catering to middle-class queer citizens who can afford to participate in consumer culture. This commodification echoes what Lisa Duggan (2002) terms “homonormativity”—a depoliticised queer politics that embraces neoliberal values of privacy, consumption, and domesticity while ignoring structural inequalities.

The Limits of Legalistic and Identity-Based Politics:

Finally, the dominance of legalistic and identity-based politics has constrained the radical potential of queer activism. The focus on rights—decriminalisation, anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality—while necessary, risks narrowing the horizon of queer politics to issues that primarily benefit privileged groups. For Hijras, Dalits, and working-class queers, the demand is not merely for legal recognition but for structural transformation: access to education, employment, housing, and dignity in everyday life.

By focusing narrowly on identity, the queer movement often fails to connect with broader struggles—labour rights, farmer movements, Dalit struggles, feminist mobilisations—that directly affect the lives of marginalised queers. The absence of such solidarities weakens queer politics, rendering it elitist and insular. As Semmalar (2014) argues, the challenge is not only to fight for inclusion within existing structures but to dismantle the oppressive systems of caste, patriarchy, and neoliberalism that shape those structures.

The elitism of the queer movement in India is thus evident across multiple dimensions: representation, exclusion of Hijras and Dalits, linguistic and cultural alienation, NGOisation, homonationalist alignments, and commodification of Pride. These exclusions reveal that queerness, as articulated in mainstream activism, remains the prerogative of the privileged. By failing to address caste, class, religion, and rural-urban divides, the movement reproduces the very hierarchies it claims to resist.

For queer politics in India to be transformative, it must move beyond elite frameworks of rights and recognition. It must listen to the voices of the most marginalised—Hijras, Dalit queers, rural sexual minorities—and align itself with broader struggles against caste, patriarchy, and capitalism. Only then can queerness cease to be a marker of privilege and become a truly radical force for social justice.

Globalisation, Marketisation, and Intersectional Alternatives:

The trajectory of queer politics in India cannot be understood in isolation from the global structures of neoliberal governance, marketisation, and the transnational flows of capital. With the rise of NGO-led activism and the increasing reliance on international funding, the queer movement has gradually shifted from being an oppositional politics of resistance to becoming a technocratic project of rights management. This transformation has produced what scholars such as Puar (2007) describe as homonationalism: a mode of queer politics that aligns with nationalist, capitalist, and upper-caste agendas while disavowing solidarities with labouring classes, religious minorities, and subaltern castes. The result is the emergence of a depoliticised queer subject — one who is framed as a consumer, a legal claimant, and a cosmopolitan citizen, but not necessarily as a worker, peasant, Dalit, or Muslim.

Globalisation has therefore created an uneven terrain of queer visibility. Pride marches in Indian metros, corporate-sponsored campaigns during Pride Month, and the rise of rainbow capitalism have enabled upper-class LGBTQ individuals to gain symbolic representation, yet this recognition remains restricted to those who can perform queerness in English, within urban spaces, and in consumerist frameworks. This is not accidental but reflects the larger dynamics of neoliberalism where rights are often commodified and distributed

selectively to those who can afford to be visible. The “global” queer subject, celebrated in international media and development reports, is disproportionately Savarna, English-speaking, and urban. By contrast, the hijra sex worker in a Tier-II city, or the Dalit trans person negotiating caste discrimination in rural India, remains absent from these discourses.

The NGOisation of queer politics in India exemplifies this dilemma. While NGOs have been instrumental in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, organising legal support, and advocating for decriminalisation, their structural dependence on foreign funding has narrowed the scope of activism. As Tellis (2012) argues, the NGO model flattens the political into a discourse of “rights” and “identities,” leaving little space to interrogate structural inequalities of caste, class, or religion. This is why trans communities continue to face everyday violence through laws such as the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act or Section 268 of the IPC, even while middle-class gay men celebrate the reading down of Section 377. In other words, the legal victories achieved through globalised queer politics often leave untouched the material conditions of the most marginalised.

To challenge these exclusions, it is necessary to build intersectional alternatives that foreground solidarities across oppressed groups. Dalit queer activists like Living Smile Vidya have powerfully demonstrated that transphobia cannot be understood outside brahmanism, and that queer struggles must necessarily ally with anti-caste struggles. Similarly, drawing from Black feminist traditions, Indian queer politics must learn to engage not merely with identity but with structures of labour, land, and livelihood. This means moving beyond the celebration of “visibility” towards addressing issues of access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare for queer individuals at the margins.

An intersectional queer politics must also resist the seductions of rainbow capitalism and reclaim spaces of collective resistance. The 2005 protests in Hong Kong, where queer activists joined labourers, farmers, and sex workers against WTO policies, illustrate what such solidarities could look like in practice (Ho, 2010). In India, similar alliances can be imagined between queer collectives, women’s movements, Dalit organisations, and workers’ unions. Such solidarities would resist both the brahmanical state and the neoliberal market by insisting that sexuality cannot be divorced from material life. The goal now is to reconstruct queer politics as a movement for the oppressed, one that rejects co-optation by the state-market connection and instead bases itself in community struggles for dignity, redistribution, and justice

Conclusion

The critique of queer politics in India reveals that queerness, as currently articulated, is often the prerogative of the privileged. The dominance of upper-caste, English-speaking, urban elites has produced a discourse that marginalises the hijra, the Dalit queer, and the rural sexual minority, even as it claims the mantle of inclusivity. Foucault’s insights on discourse and power remain instructive here: sexuality in India has been regulated historically not only by colonial law but also by brahmanical knowledge systems that dictated what counts as legitimate desire. The queer movement, instead of disrupting these structures, has at times reproduced them under the banner of rights.

The overemphasis on Section 377, the celebration of Pride parades as urban spectacles, and the corporatisation of queer visibility have all contributed to an exclusionary politics. Meanwhile, the everyday struggles of trans women harassed under nuisance laws, of Dalit queers navigating caste violence, and of rural sexual minorities living outside NGO networks remain largely invisible. This is the paradox of queer politics in India: while it claims to fight heteronormativity, it often fails to confront casteism, classism, and communalism within its own ranks.

The way forward requires a radical rethinking. Queer politics must shift from the narrow terrain of rights recognition to the broader struggles for redistribution, dignity, and solidarity. Drawing from the legacies of Savitribai Phule, Fatima Sheikh, and other anti-caste feminists, as well as from global movements of Black and indigenous queers, Indian queer politics must reimagine itself as a struggle of the oppressed. This means interrogating brahmanism, challenging the neoliberal market, and forging alliances with workers, peasants, Dalits, women, and religious minorities.

Only by embracing such intersectional solidarities can queerness in India move beyond the privileges of a few and speak to the realities of the many. To be truly transformative, the queer movement must refuse to be merely a site of identity politics or consumer visibility. Instead, it must reclaim its radical potential as a politics of disruption — one that dismantles hierarchies, redistributes power, and affirms the dignity of every marginalised life.

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