LGBTQ\textsuperscript{1} Activist Organizations as ‘Respectably Queer’ in India: Contesting a Western View

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This study contests the distinction of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) organizations suggested by earlier scholars as ‘respectable’ — i.e. normalizing, professionalizing and conforming to the dominant cultural and institutional patterns — and ‘queer’, meaning challenging the cultural and institutional forces that ‘normalize and commodify differences’. Using Bernstein’s model of identity deployment, it is found problematic to distinguish LGBTQ organizations this way because when the actions of LGBTQ organizations are more complex to describe, it is not warranted to conflate identity goals with identity strategies — whether normalizing (respectable) or differentiating (queer). To examine these concerns, a qualitative inquiry was used to study five LGBTQ organizations in India where the intersections of post-colonial ethnicity, gender, social class and sexuality offer an intriguing context through which to study queer activism. Based on the findings, it is argued from a post-colonial perspective that when the socio-cultural and historical existence of non-homonormative queer communities and practices is strong, LGBTQ organizations challenge the heteronormative and/or other forms of domination to become ‘queer’. But they may simultaneously become ‘respectable’ by conforming to the diversity politics of non-profit business, donors, and social movement organizations they seek support from, and turn out as ‘respectably queer’.

Keywords: LGBTQ organizations, queer, post-colonial, India, identity politics, intersectionality

Introduction

A central contribution of queer theory is to foreground the gulf between academic constructs of sexual identities and the lived experiences of sexual minorities. Queer theorists contest the binary nature of dominant taxonomies of sex, gender, sexuality and gender presentation that excludes more myriad articulations of complex desires unexplained by the sex of object choice (Valocchi, 2005). They argue that these binary categorizations offer selective access of social and organizational privileges to sexual minority individuals that conform to the norms and values of the dominant culture. Homonormativity — meaning that heterosexual ideals and constructs could be assimilated into lesbian and gay identities (Duggan, 2003) — was intended to replace the old heteronormativity that considers heterosexuality as natural, normal and superior to all other forms of sexual orientation (Williams and Giuffre, 2011) and subject men and women to a ‘heterosexual matrix’, creating hierarchical genders and viewing ‘desire’ as a heterosexual male prerogative (Tyler and Cohen, 2008). However, it became more instrumental in extending ‘heteronormative privileges to certain normative gays and lesbians’:

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[It marked] the reentrance of white, gender normative gays and lesbians into the rights and privileges of US citizenship, allowing them to access racial and class privileges by conforming to gender and social norms. Homonormative gays and lesbians mimic (white) heteronormative gender, sexual, and family structures, strengthening both heteronormativity and white supremacy. (Vitulli, 2010, pp. 156–7)

While the scholarly works on sexualities continued to associate the terms, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘bisexual’ with normalcy and viewed them as ‘homonormative’ assimilated with the heterosexual and other dominant cultural patterns, activists who ‘embraced gender fluidity and aligned themselves with a broad array of sexual transgressions’ (Ward, 2008, p. 3), such as sadomasochism, non-monogamy, intersexuality, kink, leatherplay, transsexuality, BDSM, etc., increasingly distinguished themselves as ‘non-homonormative’ sexualities and often identified themselves as ‘queer’ (Valocchi, 2005). This term was not only indicative of non-normative sexual practices and identities, but it was also a political metaphor ‘without a fixed referent’ that encompassed ‘various modes of challenge to the institutional and state forces that normalized and commodified differences’ (Ward, 2008, p. 3). Thus, queer activism is decentring the cultural milieu by creating spaces such as ‘heterotopia’, as used by Foucault, or ‘queerscapes’ (Ingram, 1997), where marginalized communities subjugated by the dominant cultural forms and patterns challenge and subvert all forms of domination, including heteronormativity, patriarchy and neocolonialism (Ingram, 1997; Steyaert, 2010).

LGBTQ organizations as ‘respectably queer’?

The discourse on ‘normativity’ has moved beyond individuals to organizations. In her book Respectably Queer, Ward (2008) examines the co-optation of diversity discourses in her ethnographic study of three Los Angeles-based LGBTQ organizations. ‘Respectable’ LGBTQ organizations professionalize diversity by normatively performing their diversity politics, speaking well-versed corporate diversity speak, public respectability and connections. They instrumentalize diversity by drawing upon corporate-modelled diversity programmes to ensure that their diversity work is profitable and documenting these programmes statistically for the funders and LGBTQ community. Finally, they commodify diversity by rendering a gay male body ‘fundable’ for HIV/AIDS funding and for programme development, thus excluding lesbian issues and spaces. Ward argues that these organizations become ‘respectable’ through the homonormativity of its professional, educated gay and lesbian employees, which enables them to stay competitive in the economy of non-profit funding. But they simultaneously marginalize the non-homonormative queers and their social justice issues. In her conclusion, Ward (2008) writes:

What, if anything, is still ‘queer’ about queer approach to difference? With regard to the management of LGBT organizations, the unfortunate answer is ‘very little’. An inside look into three organizations in Los Angeles has revealed a narrowing gap between LGBT approaches to difference and those emerging from inside corporations and other mainstream institutions. Activists in queer [LGBT] organizations, like Americans in a variety of organizational settings, are fast at work leveraging diversity in the service of personal and institutional gain. Yet there are also queer activists resisting this trend from inside the LGBT movement … In an era in which normativity and mainstreaming function as primary means of disabling identity movements generally, queer defiance offers … a weapon against the cooptation of diversity. (p. 150)

Williams and Giuffre (2011) argue that ‘respectability’ and ‘queer’ appear distant for LGBTQ organizations: ‘A respectably queer organization is an unrealized goal, at least in the United States, the location of most of the studies we have reviewed’ (p. 560). They cite the example of ACT-UP that was committed to the ‘queer’ causes, but was not ‘respectable’ in the true sense. They argue that organizations that challenge heteronormativity and serve interests of diverse queers are limited mainly to entertainment and sex industries that allow for more ‘play’ with the gendered and sexual presentations of self.
Contesting ‘respectable’ versus ‘queer’

In this paper, I want to contest the findings of Ward (2008) and Williams and Giuffre (2011) because it is important not to conflate identity goals with the form of strategy, whether normalizing (respectable) or differentiating (queer). Drawing from Bernstein’s (1997) ‘identity for education’ and ‘identity for critique’ (p. 537), the notions of normalizing tactics (Clair et al., 2005) and normalizing strategy (Ghosh, 2012) refer to garnering legitimacy from the mainstream culture by emphasizing sameness with its patterns, values and expressions. One the other hand, differentiating tactics (Clair et al., 2005) and differentiating strategy (Ghosh, 2012) entail celebrating differences and keeping the patterns, values and expressions of the minority culture distinct from those of the mainstream culture. Bernstein (1997) argues that the identity goals that challenge the mainstream culture and its dominant values and beliefs are achievable through educational (normalizing) or critical (differentiating) strategies, or through a combination of both, termed as a mixed model of identity deployment. For example, in Colorado and Oregon, the homophile movement of exclusive organizations, i.e. organizations that discourage popular participation in political campaigns, combined the strategy of routine opposition (utilizing the access of insiders in the polity to raise non-controversial issues) and organized opposition (raising contentious issues by groups that are mobilized outside the polity). In addition, although the identity goal(s) may remain the same, the identity strategy of the same organization may vary from normalizing to differentiating across geographical locations depending on the changing nature of socio-political environments (Ghosh, 2012; also see Bernstein and Olsen, 2009; Cortese, 2004). In this light, I argue that viewing LGBTQ organizations mutually exclusive as ‘respectable’ or ‘queer’ could be problematic when the actions of LGBTQ organizations need to be described in more complex terms.

In order to examine these concerns, I wanted to shift my empirical focus to non-western contexts to see how the intersection of post-colonial ethnicity and sexuality inform the distinction between ‘respectable’ and ‘queer’. These contexts intrigued me because the subjugation of intellectual inquiry by western models in the understanding of the culture, politics and economics of subaltern communities in the post-colonial countries of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific offers rich ground from which to study the struggles to construct social and cultural identities by these communities (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Khan et al., 2010; Trovão, 2012). Hence, I used India as a cultural context wherein the LGBTQ movement has searched for paradigms different from the Eurocentric understanding of sexuality and its binary taxonomies (Joseph, 1996).

Queer identities and practices in India

India offers an intriguing context for queer studies as queer sexualities are rooted both in Indian history and also in contemporary times, and the Eurocentric binary taxonomies of gender and sexuality have often been questioned for their suitability in explaining a number of sexual expressions in Indian scriptures, arts and life histories (Joseph, 1996; Thadani, 1996). Traditional queer practices among men entail the circulation of ‘sexualness’ without distinguishing them as ‘homosexuals’. Launda naach (boy’s dance) is an erotic dance performance by effeminate adolescents at marriage celebrations in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Murat (idol of a deity) is a ‘flamboyant queer embodiment’ in Gujarat that is performative in nature. Masti, meaning fun or intoxication, is sexual play between boys or men without implications for self, thus distancing the person from the act or performance. And finally, maitri karar (friendship agreement) is a ritual agreement performed in northern India similar to marriage where two individuals of the same sex commit to each other for a ‘friendship’ and exchange garlands ceremonially in the presence of the local community in a temple (Khanna, 2013, p. 140).

Several queer identities indigenous to India are also accounted for that are beyond the ‘homonormative’ purview of sexuality. The Indian queer men who belong to the rural or socio-economically marginalized sections classify into several categories, the most popular ones being kothi — the effeminate male that is penetrated; dupli — the effeminate man who penetrates as well as is
penetrated; and the pareekh — the ‘masculine’ man whom kothis pair with as lovers. The effeminate man, or ‘meyeli chele’ as it is popularly called in West Bengal, is a gender fluid identity which may or may not translate into kothi or even homosexual behaviours (Khanna, 2009, pp. 48–9). Hijras are the community of transgenders that may include transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and intersexed, and they are structured around guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) hierarchies. The judgment of Supreme Court on 15 April 2014 that recognized transgenders as a ‘third sex’ (hereinafter NALSA judgment, as the petition was filed by the National Legal Services Authority [NALSA]) acknowledged a diverse and plural transgender population that includes several community groups spread across India, besides hijra, such as Aravanis and Tirunangis, Kothis, Jogtas and Jogappas, Shiv Shaktis, and Kinnars (Kavi, 2014).

Historical and religious accounts reveal that queer identities and practices have had religious, social and political significance in Indian society. In certain Hindu religious orders, gender non-normative worship practices are common. For example, in the Ramanandi monastic order, the rasiks or sakhis (female companions) are male devotees that show effeminate behaviours, wear female attire and even observe the precautions of the menstruation period when they are worshipping their deities, Ram and Sita. For centuries, hijra performances have been considered auspicious during male child birth and wedding ceremonies. In lieu of performances and alms collection, they discharged their socially sanctioned duty (which many consider as their spiritual power according to mythical narratives) of blessing a new born or a newly wedded couple on behalf of a deity. Therefore, despite having marginal status, their dances, songs and non-normative gender expressions were welcoming to a majority in the rural and urban sections. The courts of Islamic rulers accorded eunuchs the roles of political advisers, courtiers, administrators and harem guardians. Khwajasarais — the eunuch slaves — as a community had similarities with hijras in terms of ‘teacher-disciple’ hierarchies and non-biological kinship relationships. They had a diverse range of domestic and political duties in the governments of the Mughal Empire and other Islamic princely kingdoms. They were employed in the harems, and many of them could rise to prominent political positions, for example as courtiers and administrators. They were highly visible in intelligence, diplomatic and military roles (Hinchy, 2014).

However, despite their social and political significance, the British rulers viewed these transgender communities, whom they called collectively as ‘eunuchs’, as sodomites and gender deviants. Under the view of what Sinha (1995) describes as ‘colonial masculinity’, that is, the colonial officers’ ‘relational construction of British and Indian masculinity’, the British looked upon hijras as effeminate, sexually deviant and impotent — thus manifesting their ‘failed masculinity’. According to the British, hijras’ gender non-conformance was linked with their ‘sexual perversity’ that rendered their performances obscene. They viewed hijras’ alms collection as begging and vagrancy and their gender non-conforming behaviours, overtly sexual performances, ‘wandering habits’ and the exposure of their emasculated bodies when alms were refused as obscene and morally outrageous. Supporting them was a class of elite Indians who felt hijra practices were ‘abhorrent’ and ‘unspeakable’ due to their non-normative nature. The British applied their view of ‘failed masculinity’ to Khwajasarais as well, whom they viewed as corrupt and unsuitable administrators. They deprived Khwajasarais of their political status in the kingdoms that they started to annex from the mid-nineteenth century. In 1871, the British government enacted the Criminal Tribes Act that prescribed registration and control of ‘eunuchs’, a collective term they used for the transgender communities (Hinchy, 2014). Before that, in 1860, much to the disadvantage of both queer communities and non-queer homosexuals, the British had criminalized ‘unnatural intercourse’ or sodomy under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) (Narrain, 2008). The continuance of these laws hardly gave the Indian queer forms any opportunities to claim moral and social recognition during and after colonial rule (Hinchy, 2014).

LGBTQ organizations in India: literature review

Besides their legal disadvantage, the Indian LGBTQ individuals that comprised both the educated English speaking class and the socio-educationally marginalized sections faced cultural
marginalization due to the penetration into Indian society of Judeo-Christian values on sexuality during the British rule and the perpetuation of same after the British left. Those who were successful in migrating to western countries felt racial marginalization in the white gay communities in the US and Europe. This racial and cultural marginalization led the LGBTQ community to search for new identity forms, self-descriptions and acceptable paradigms (Joseph, 1996). LGBTQ activism thus gave rise to several South Asian LGBTQ organizations since the 1980s, both in western countries, such as Canada, the US and UK, and India (for names, see Joseph, 1996, p. 2229). From a review of the extant literature, I identify three distinct characteristics or goals of this activism that aid an understanding of the respectable/queer debate in the LGBTQ space in India.

Creation of lesbian space in the LGBTQ movement

The intersections of social class, gender and sexuality offer an intriguing context to study how the lesbian movement shaped up in the LGBTQ landscape of India. Indian lesbians had to carve out their niche by negotiating with both the feminist space and the LGBTQ space. In her ethnographic study, Dave (2011) points out that in the late 1980s, lesbianism was in a state of refusal and at a point of contention within the feminist space because feminist activists did not want their whole advocacy against patriarchy to get maligned by ‘Oh, of course you’re critiquing [marriage], you’re a lesbian’ (p. 654). There were several voices in the feminist movement that rejected the idea that India had lesbians under the pretext of ‘cultural authenticity’, ‘political expediency’ and the exclusion of non-English-speaking women living in the slums. Thus, they tried different terminologies to identify women who loved women. Contesting this heteronormative or ‘respectable’ stand, Giti Thadani formed India’s first explicit lesbian collective, Sakhi (meaning female friend). She saw lesbian identity capable of unifying women from various social classes, educational backgrounds and marital statuses to offer hope, solace and freedom. At the same time, it was also an opportunity to create a space for lesbian issues and challenges that had subordinate importance in the male-dominated LGBTQ organizations (Dave, 2010). While Sakhi did not close the respectable/queer debate for non-heterosexual women, it served as an example for several non-heterosexual women activist groups to start their organizations, such as Sangini (meaning female companion) and PRISM in New Delhi, Stree Sangam (meaning confluence of women) in Mumbai and Sappho for Equality in Kolkata.

Predominance of HIV/AIDS programme goals in LGBTQ organizations

The ‘respectable’ approach towards funding that Ward finds in her study of Los Angeles-based LGBTQ organizations holds good in the Indian scenario as well. A report on sexual rights and social movements observes that organizations that fund sexuality projects are usually ‘linked in a dependency relationship with the politics of donor countries, and often [do] not have the agency to fund certain politics even if they wanted to do so’ (CREA, 2006). As result of the politics, projects that have certain kinds of focus (e.g., ‘sexual health’ and not ‘sexuality’) and have a certain kind of language (e.g., ‘human rights’ and not ‘gay rights’) are more likely to get funded. These are largely service delivery programmes that focus on health and HIV/AIDS, but they have the most basic understanding of sexuality and are funded at the cost of advocacy-centred projects. The concerns about the predominance of statistics in the performance metrics, similar to those raised by Ward (2008), come from the women and LGBTQ advocacy-based organizations:

There is a lot of money if you are able to produce the relevant figures of condoms distributed and women sterilized, but women you have spent months talking to in order to get them to see their sexuality in a different way don’t make very good statistics. (CREA, 2006, p. 20)

As a result, a homonormative ‘HIV/AIDS industry’ proliferated in the space of LGBTQ activism by forming networks of governments, corporations, development agencies, non-governmental organizations, support groups and community-based organizations that defined new ‘respectable’
identities for their HIV/AIDS targeted intervention programmes, such as MSMs (men who have sex with men), CSW (commercial sex worker), IDU (injecting drug user), and PLWHA (people living with HIV/AIDS) (Khanna, 2013, p. 128). This was for individuals, many of whom had already identified themselves by their queer cultural identities.

**Activism towards reading down section 377 of the Indian Penal code (IPC)**

From the early 1990s, the LGBTQ movement has been demanding equality through legal rights by (a) repealing discriminatory legislation such as section 377 of IPC and the relevant sections of the Army, Navy and Air Force Act, (b) enacting civil rights legislation, (c) amending the constitution to include equality before law on the basis of sex and sexual orientation, and (d) amending the Special Marriage Act to allow same-sex marriages (Joseph, 1996, p. 2231). But the advocacy against section 377 has been the major focus in recent years that has not only achieved some amount of success, but has also raised public debates on the legality of homosexuality in the mass media. This advocacy has unified LGBTQ people as a community because the section criminalizes non-procreative penetrative sex (termed ‘unnatural’ in the section). As informed by the Supreme Court order of 2013 and the Delhi High Court order of 2009 on a section 377 case, in its 150-year history this section has hardly been used for prosecution but is rampantly being used by policemen to harass and extort money from LGBTQ people in public spaces and to intimidate outreach workers of non-profit organizations that are involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and promoting safer sexual practices.

In response to a petition filed by a New Delhi-based LGBTQ organization, Naz Foundation, the 2009 judgment of the Delhi High Court pared down section 377 to exclude private consensual sex between adults from its scope. However, the distinction between ‘private’ (and therefore, legitimately sexual) and ‘public’ (and therefore, normatively asexual) was problematic for several LGBTQ organizations as they argued that the police harassment and violence towards working-class queer males is largely for having sex in public spaces which was excluded from the judgment’s purview.

The petition broadened the scope of concern from ‘homosexuality’ to ‘sexuality’ itself. What was at stake, thus, was not simply the rights of the Queer (non) citizen, but the ascription of a sexuality to the normative citizen-subject itself. (Khanna, 2013, p. 129)

At the same time, several feminist organizations criticized this judgment as yet another exclusion by state intervention regarding the ‘private space’ that is marked by sexual and domestic violence against women. Taking both these arguments together, an intersectional view of this judgment shows there was no consultation by the principal petitioner that made a ‘representational claim’ from ‘respectable’ points of view and privileged ‘privacy’ as the luxury of the upper-class male — an opposition articulated in terms of class and gender (Khanna, 2013, p. 129).

However, disappointing all LGBTQ organizations and people, the Supreme Court of India reversed the 2009 Delhi High Court order on 11 December 2013 in response to a petition filed by certain religious groups and individuals. A curative petition challenging this order was thereafter filed in the Supreme Court of India, which was accepted for hearing on 22 April 2014, but was yet to be heard as of 23 September 2014 (Kavi, 2014; Rao, 2014).

**Methods**

In order to understand the ‘respectable’ or ‘queer’ nature of Indian LGBTQ organizations, I decided to use an interpretative methodology to generate a thematic analysis of qualitative data that I obtained from my participant LGBTQ organizations.

**Participant organizations**

The three characteristics or goals of Indian LGBTQ activism in my literature review, centring around the debate of ‘respectable’ versus ‘queer’, were the guiding criteria for recruiting LGBTQ
organizations for my study. I identified five LGBTQ organizations in India for study. To represent the goals of sexual health programmes in my data, I recruited one organization in New Delhi and another in Mumbai that have a major focus on HIV/AIDS programmes. To represent lesbian struggles in India, I included an organization for lesbians and queer women in Kolkata. I also recruited participants from a gay network based in Mumbai. This network and the New Delhi-based organization have played major roles in advocacy against section 377. In addition, I also included an organization for men who identify as gay and/or queer. This organization is based in Bangalore. All these five organizations are well known in the LGBTQ activism space in India. Except the one in Bangalore, all have been active since the 1990s. Their locations in the northern, southern, eastern and western parts of India fairly represent the geographical diversity of the country.

**Primary data sources**

I obtained my primary data through in-depth semi-structured interviews of 12 (seven male and five female) participants that are the leaders or members of these organizations. I had one participant each from the New Delhi and Mumbai-based organizations, four participants from the Kolkata-based organization for lesbians and queer women, two participants from the Bangalore-based organization for gays and queer men, and four participants from the Mumbai-based network of gay men. Their ages ranged from 22 to 59 years, and their median age was 42 at the time of the interview. Of these 12 participants, eight identified themselves as gay or lesbian, three identified themselves as queer, and one identified herself as heterosexual.

The participants were recruited through snowball sampling starting from my initial contacts. Each participant provided informed consent for the interviews. The scope of the interviews was larger than that of this paper. Except for two of my participants, whose interview questions centred only on the various activities, goals and strategies of their organization, the rest of the participants also answered questions on how they constructed their sexual identity in their social and workplace life, which is the subject of a separate study. My interview questions for this study were open and semi-structured. The preliminary questions centred on what the goals and objectives of their organization are, what kind of activities they carry out to meet them, who organizes them, how my interview participants and others contribute to them, and what defines their success or failure. Whenever required, I probed for specific details. For example, one of my participants played a major role in getting permission from the police for a gay pride march. I asked specific questions on how s/he approached the administration, where s/he got the resources from, and how s/he persuaded the authorities to grant permission. My interview also included personal questions such as whether being in a particular profession helped them in promoting LGBTQ advocacy and what motivated them to carry out their advocacy.

In the interests of my participants, I decided to keep their names and the names of their organizations confidential and included this in my informed consent sheet. All the interviews were carried out by telephone and recorded with the permission of my participants. The interviews lasted, on average, for 113 minutes per participant.

**Secondary data sources**

I obtained secondary data from several sources. I found these sources through various leads given by my participants during the interviews so that I could have secondary information about my participant organizations. These sources are available in the public domain and include the following:

1. *reports and documents*, such as the INFOSEM report (network of LGBTQ organizations in India that is led by my participant organization based in Mumbai), a report prepared by individuals from my Mumbai-based participant organization, a business consulting organization, and the World Bank (hereafter World Bank report);
2. *webpages and weblogs* of my participant organizations;
3. **legal documents** such as the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on section 377 IPC, special leave petition in the Supreme Court that challenged this verdict, the 11 December 2013 verdict of the Supreme Court on this petition, and the NALSA judgment;

4. **media reports** on my participant organizations;

5. **videos**, such as two media interviews of my participant from the New Delhi-based organization, and a documentary made by my participant from the gay network in Mumbai;

6. **interview** with the leader of an LGBTQ organization that is not a participant for this paper but informed about my New Delhi-based participant organization; and

7. the **editorials of a biannual magazine** published by my Kolkata-based participant organization.

**Coding strategies for thematic analysis**

I coded all my primary and secondary data using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software program developed by QSR International (Melbourne, Australia). I developed a general coding scheme to identify the goals and strategies adopted by my participant organizations. Initially, I used first cycle codes such as line codes, process codes and *in-vivo* codes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2006) to identify all possible goals and strategies. I re-coded them with ‘focused codes’ that were more frequent and distinct than the first cycle codes to categorize the data more incisively (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Then I identified relevant codes that suggested the ‘respectable’ or ‘queer’ nature of my participant organizations. For each code, I identified other codes that were either similar or talked about common themes, such as funding. In addition, I also identified codes obtained in previous cycles that had information related to the data in my relevant codes. Sometimes I had to deconstruct such codes and weave the relevant information as new codes and merge them with the existing codes to fit together the pieces of puzzle. I formed axial codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60) by interlinking these codes to form higher level nodes or themes that I would discuss in my findings.

**Findings**

I used my coding scheme to identify several fronts that addressed the question of my participant organizations getting ‘respectable’ or ‘queer’. I find that they became ‘respectably queer’ in at least six ways:

1. **Pursuing both ‘respectable’ and ‘queer’ goals within their programme or activities**

The leader of the New Delhi-based organization talked about the funding sources in India for HIV/AIDS targeted intervention (TI) programmes that I find similar to those that Ward (2008) describes as ‘respectable’ in her study. On the one hand my participant ‘ridiculed’ the government budgets that cannot run such programmes with integrity, and on the other, she cited the chaos created by an international donor from the US that came with lots of money, but only for carrying out HIV/AIDS TI programmes inconsistent with the socio-economic and legal realities of India. This pushed away a number of donors that were willing to sponsor ‘cutting edge’ projects. As she put it,

> The state aid societies are funding only targeted interventions with the most ridiculous kinds of budgets, which are impossible to work with unless you are fudging accounts. For example, they want to pay the peer educator Rupees 1500 (~GBP 15) [per month], and they expect the whole program to rest on their shoulders, or they want the counsellor for a salary of Rupees 8000 (~GBP 78) [per month], who is MSW, MA Psychology — is ridiculous. So we made a conscious decision not to take that money because we cannot run a program with those, we cannot run a program honestly with that kind of funding.

Because [XYZ — a US-based donor] came in with the kind of money they came in with, it screwed up things in this country. Because donors who were funding HIV works stopped funding and it
was really difficult for us to convince them because [XYZ] was working only in five states but they were behaving like they were funding everything in the country. So what happens is that a lot of funding which a lot of donors who were doing cutting edge work, stopped doing it saying that, ‘Oh now India has so much money, so much money has come in’. So for us [XYZ] was very problematic in what they did … I do not have a problem with targeted interventions but the thing is that if those targeted interventions are not set in an environment that will make it for us, it is problematic … So today [XYZ] is nowhere on the scene and there is total chaos.

Due to such incompatibilities, her organization has distanced itself from the donor politics both from the foreign counties and from the Indian government. Currently, it runs: (1) a TI programme for MSMs and hijra communities wherein they employ individuals from these groups to conduct regular outreach at cruising sites, massage parlours and in the hijra localities to distribute information and make safer sexual practices accessible to them; (2) a care programme for families that have HIV-infected individuals and for mainstreaming and rehabilitating children living with HIV/AIDS; (3) an education programme to train individuals affiliated with colleges and universities to conduct workshops on sexuality, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, and sexual health at organizations, educational institutions and rural communities; (4) a care programme for HIV-infected orphans; (5) programmes to enhance the capacity of trainers in the areas of sex and sexuality, counselling and testing, care and ethics, MSMs, and sexual health and human rights; and (6) advocacy against section 377 IPC. My participant from this organization related that these programmes can attract private donors if planned carefully and are more directed towards the socio-economic and legal realities of India. She shared that, although their workshops on sexual health issues for private donors and community organizations focus on the statistics of HIV/AIDS that make a business case for sponsorship, they also include a session on queer sexualities that aims to change attitudes and mindsets towards the LGBTQ communities. Hence, by retaining the goal of sexual health, the organization makes the diversity funding profitable for the donors and becomes ‘respectable’, but at the same time, it realizes the ‘queer’ goals of challenging the stigma and discrimination of transgenders and MSMs through educational and training programmes and advocacy against section 377 IPC.

The New Delhi- and Mumbai-based organizations not only had to build linkages with the government hospitals and doctors to provide access to the HIV/AIDS-infected people under their targeted intervention programmes as their ‘respectable’ goal, but they also had to advocate against section 377 IPC as their ‘queer’ goal to stop the police persons from harassing their outreach workers who made safer sexual practices available to MSMs and transgenders in the cruising areas under their HIV/AIDS prevention programme.

The Kolkata-based organization held the secretary position of a major consortium of women’s movement organizations in Kolkata for some period of time. Because of their role as a representative of the women’s movement, they were able to position themselves at that time as a guide to the police, helping them understand the nuances of gender non-normativity and sexual orientation in a high profile case of a queer athlete who was accused of sexual harassment by her female partner. Thus, while they already had the ‘respectable’ heteronormative goals of the women’s movement to pursue, they also pursued their ‘queer’ goal of advocacy against the marginalization of queer women within that role. Following a similar approach, the Mumbai-based organization pursues its ‘respectable’ goal of sensitizing the media and judiciary on HIV/AIDS as part of their targeted intervention programme, but within these workshops, they also pursue their ‘queer’ goal by sensitizing them on issues related to MSMs and queer communities.

2. Pursuing ‘queer’ goals through ‘respectable’ strategies

Projects focused exclusively on ‘queer’ agendas, such as LGBTQ rights and equality, may try for ‘respectable’ funding strategies that are broadly accepted within the heteronormative cultural patterns. The gay network at Mumbai raises money as a major sponsor of QAM (Queer Azadi [freedom] March), a pride march for all sexual minorities including the transgender and queer communities in Mumbai, and for an LGBTQ film festival. They raise money for both through fundraising at parties on
New Year’s Eve and other occasions that invite mainly affluent, English-speaking, and urban lesbians, gays, bisexuals and allies. My participant from this network informed me that several other queer groups conduct similar fundraising parties, and they also seek contributions from individuals and groups both in India and abroad. For example, a lesbian group in Mumbai raises money for QAM through dirty talk stand-up comedies and bar nights. While such funds are raised ‘respectably’ from affluent and ‘homonormative’ individuals and groups, the purpose of these funds remains to strengthen queer activism.

3. Interweaving sexual health as a ‘respectable’ goal with sexual rights as a ‘queer’ goal

The LGBTQ activists have tried to blur the respectable/queer gap between sexual health and sexual rights over the years by relating the cause of sexual health with LGBTQ equality. To fight against the discrimination against LGBTQ individuals by section 377 IPC in the Delhi High Court, the petitioner Naz Foundation, an LGBTQ organization, drew largely from the public health resources and the difficulties in running HIV/AIDS prevention programmes due to this law.

By criminalizing private, consensual same-sex conduct, Section 377 IPC serves as the weapon for police abuse; detaining and questioning, extortion, harassment, forced sex, payment of hush money; and perpetuates negative and discriminatory beliefs towards same-sex relations and sexuality minorities; which consequently drive the activities of gay men and MSM, as well as sexuality minorities underground thereby crippling HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. Section 377 IPC thus creates a class of vulnerable people that is continually victimized and directly affected by the provision. (The 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on section 377, p. 7)

The Mumbai-based organization tries to bring their ‘queer’ agenda to the table by educating officials at the government funding agencies on the importance of working on LGBTQ human rights issues and how those are linked with sexual health. My participant from this organization explained:

The starting point for [us] was using the health programs to get into the whole subject because that is where funding was available and that is where money was available and that is where the government was ready to engage with us because there was a scare of HIV ... We believe that health rights and human rights are not separate issues, they are interlinked ... If the human rights and your sensitivity towards populations are low they immediately affect the service obtained for people entering hospitals and taking services. The philosophy is that as an organization we will work within the government space. We try and engage with the authorities ... We work within the public health sector and we try to bring in inclusion of marginalized population into the mainstream.

The 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on section 377 and the annual pride marches (such as QAM) have brought visibility to LGBTQ issues. As a result, the funding for HIV/AIDS has given some leeway to the LGBTQ advocacy work in some cases. The Bangalore-based organization finds the allocation of some portion of HIV/AIDS funding from the AIDS Prevention Society of their state towards their advocacy work, such as conducting educational events and safe space programmes for gays and queer men, as a signal of acknowledgement by the agency that addressing sexual health issues requires reducing the stigma and discrimination of queer communities.

4. Carrying out ‘queer’ advocacy while conforming ‘respectably’ to the dominant institutional patterns by addressing their target’s interests

The Kolkata-based organization pursues its goal of addressing the issues of queer women by networking with the cultural institutions and getting ‘respectable’ by making their target programme broad and inclusive to align with their interests. Hence, they offer a comprehensive four-day workshop called ‘sexuality academy’ that seeks participation from frontline social workers in developmental organizations working for various cohorts of women, such as sex workers, victims of acid attacks, Muslims, economically marginalized women, etc. They draw connections between sexuality and the issues on which they work.
My participants from the New Delhi- and Kolkata-based organizations explained at length how they trained police officers. While the New Delhi-based organization offers training mainly on the scope and application of section 377 IPC that the police officers want to learn, the organization also pursues its ‘queer’ goal by sensitizing them in this training about gender identity, sexuality and the struggles that gays, MSM and queer men face due to this law and how this law is marginalizing these communities. My participant from this organization was confident that every police officer in the South Delhi region must have attended her training at least once. She observed that because of their linkage, their outreach workers were no longer harassed while carrying out the HIV/AIDS prevention programme in the cruising sites of MSMs and transgenders.

While the New Delhi-based organization leads with their ‘respectable’ goal and addresses their ‘queer’ goal within, the Kolkata-based organization does just the reverse. They take their gender and sexuality sensitizing programme as a ‘queer’ agenda to the head of women’s grievance cell at Lalbazar police headquarters to train the police officers, from constables to assistant commissioners. Though their programme is mainly about challenging sexual violence on lesbians and queer women, they also take a ‘respectable’ stand by aligning with the police officers’ interests, such as by training them, in addition, on dealing with the hijra communities that are usually seen by the police as creating a nuisance.

5. Supporting ‘queer’ LGBTQ organizations and networks in addition to pursuing ‘respectable’ goals

The New Delhi-based organization that works largely on HIV/AIDS programmes supports and mentors an organization that provides emergency support services and shelter homes for lesbians and queer women. The interview with the leader of this organization vividly narrated how they had once been the subject of a police inquiry and detained because of the perceived ‘immorality’ of the services they were offering to these women. The case was filed by the father of a woman that took shelter with her partner in their premises. As narrated by her, the case against them was strong as the man who filed that case was influential. So my participant from the New Delhi-based organization, a high profile activist, had to come to their rescue. The leader of the organization that is supported by the New Delhi-based organization narrated the incident to me:

Interviewee: We had one very bad case that got right out of proportion with two girls from Mumbai. The father was from the Mafia basically. He got the Mumbai police. I don’t know how he traced them, but they reached Delhi and the Mumbai police was in Delhi, which is like cross-state border police. Generally, you know, it takes months to get people to go across borders. They were here immediately. Then later on, he filed a case against us in the National Commission for Women. We had to produce the girl. Then he filed a robbery case against his daughter and her girlfriend, and again reached to us with Mumbai police. At that time, by mistake our gate was not closed, so I was detained and another person was detained, and big drama; it was like really, really bad. They came with hammers to hammer down the house. But it was illegal action, they just wanted to take out the women at any cost. When something like this happens, we generally call upon other NGOs. So, we called out [XXX — the New Delhi-based organization] has been our strongest support. [My organization] started under the umbrella of the [XXX]. I don’t know if you know about [XXX].

Apoorva: Yes, I know about [XXX].

Interviewee: Basically, generally when something like this happens we call up [YYY — my participant from the New Delhi-based organization] and say, ‘[YYY], we are in trouble’. She comes. So, that night actually once the media and the journalists arrived — because it takes at least an hour or two hours for the lawyers also to arrive; they are not always at our house; it takes time for them to arrive sometimes in the middle of the night; this time it was just like 7 or something — they arrived, then [YYY] arrived, then other people from NGOs arrived, and they called the media. The moment the media came, the entire mob basically just disappeared.

Similarly, although the Mumbai-based organization works mainly for HIV/AIDS-targeted intervention programmes, it provides the secretariat to INFOSEM, which is a network of around 180
LGBTQ organizations across India, many of which do not have a sexual health programme. When it was part of the team that drafted the World Bank report on sexual minorities, INFOSEM helped it to reach out to the LGBTQ individuals, groups and organizations for collecting data. The Mumbai-based organization also mentors an LBT (lesbian, bisexual and transgender) group and, in addition, provides them with administrative support and a drop-in centre to carry out their activities. They have also sponsored two hijra organizations. My participant informed me that their ultimate goal is to let these organizations build their capacity so that they can become self-governing and independent.

6. Accessing ‘respectable’ platforms to achieve ‘queer’ goals

The Mumbai-based organization partnered with the World Bank and a business consulting organization, but they used this ‘respectable’ platform for writing a report (World Bank report) on LGBTQ individuals in India, which suggested interventions at multiple levels, such as community, law, policy-making and media. According to my participant from this organization, this report has helped in getting the go ahead from national and state Human Rights Commissions to register human rights violation complaints and incidents related to gender identity and sexuality. Further, this organization has reached out to multinational corporations with a play as their ‘queer’ advocacy tool to help them understand the issues of gender identity and sexuality in the workplace. One of my participants from the gay network based in Mumbai conducts an LGBTQ sensitizing workshop at a premier university in New Delhi. The Mumbai-based organization also conducts similar programmes on sexual orientation and gender identity in educational institutions.

The Kolkata-based organization uses the Kolkata Book Fair, a large-scale annual event that, according to my participant, gets around 100,000 visitors, to fundraise by selling its publications on queer women. They also partner with a premier university in Kolkata to organize an annual queer conference that attracts academic papers on LGBTQ from scholars across the country.

Discussion

I observed that, in the process of becoming ‘respectable’, my participant LGBTQ organizations wanted to conform to the social and political parameters defined collectively by the external powers that the LGBTQ movement seeks benefits from. At the same time, they also became ‘queer’ by being inclusive to the wider context within the LGBTQ movement. Currier (2010) theorizes this as a ‘normalization’ strategy of social movement organizations. For the LGBTQ movement, this is a two-pronged strategy that on the one hand mainstreams the movement with the rubric of dominant culture, and on the other, keeps the gender and sexual politics inclusive. The Kolkata-based organization became a member of one prominent consortium of women rights groups to work on feminist interests, but as part of this work, its advocacy linked the struggles of lesbians and queer women with those of heterosexual women. The high profile case of a queer woman athlete mentioned in the findings above came up during its secretary stint, and thus it was able to attract more attention from the feminist movement than it otherwise could have. Like the LGBT organizations that Ward studied, my participant organizations that worked with the HIV/AIDS programmes also had to deal with donor politics, but after getting established over the years, they diversified their goals to become inclusive of the ‘queer’ goals. This diversification was moderate in the case of the Mumbai-based organization, which still has retained its targeted intervention HIV/AIDS programme funded by such donors, but has expanded its capacity over the years to include the queer agenda of supporting and mentoring ‘queer’ organizations, providing leadership to INFOSEM, and targeting cultural, state, and non-state institutions with their ‘queer’ advocacy. On the other hand, this diversification was more severe in case of the Delhi-based organization, which has completely moved away from the donor politics of foreign agencies and the Indian government and runs projects that incorporate both the ‘respectable’ goals of preventing HIV/AIDS infection and working for HIV/AIDS-affected individuals and the ‘queer’ goals of raising awareness on sexuality and advocacy against section 377.
Hence, I disagree with Williams and Giuffre (2011) that ‘respectable’ and ‘queer’ are too distant to come together for LGBTQ organizations, and I find the term ‘respectably queer’ more meaningful in the context of at least a few LGBTQ organizations in India. I want to draw from the post-colonial perspective on identity formation to argue why my participant organizations became ‘respectably queer’. Islam (2012) argues that the processes of identity negotiation and identity crafting in third world countries involve interpreting and reacting to the western interventions to position modern identities with respect to both the western influences and indigenous roots (Islam, 2012). I think that my participant LGBTQ organizations crafted a ‘respectably queer’ identity for themselves because of the co-existence of (1) homonormative ways of looking at sexual minorities as a result of the influences from the dominant cultural patterns within India, the LGBTQ goals and funding strategies informed by western practices, and (2) a strong tradition of having several queer identities in India whose existence has historical and cultural roots — some of which, like hijras, have high visibility even today. While the Mumbai-based organization has its primary focus on the HIV/AIDS programmes for MSMs, it is inclusive of the hijra community and sponsors two hijra organizations unlike a similar organization in Ward’s study that became exclusive for Latino gay men over time. As a testimony to this inclusiveness, the Mumbai-based organization displayed its oneness with the transgender queer communities in the mass media when the NALSA judgment came out. It backed its support, highlighting that transgenders were recognized as ‘tritiya panthi’ (the third set) in ancient India and have historical and cultural significance in Indian society (Kavi, 2014). Similarly, the inclusion of lesbian and queer women’s cause in the women’s movement was spearheaded by Giti Thadani, who foregrounded the cultural presence of same-sex desires and non-normative genders among female deities in ancient Indian texts and scriptures (Thadani, 1996). In their biannual magazine, the Kolkata-based organization has pitched its queer advocacy on this cultural context several times. Hence, although it deployed the ‘respectable’ strategies of aligning with the causes of the women’s movement in Kolkata and adjoining regions, acquired its secretary position, got into donor politics to seek funding from western agencies, and fundraised at Kolkata Book Fair, it did not lose its focus on lesbians and marginalized queer women. Rather, it brought the case of a prominent queer woman athlete to the forefront unlike one of the organizations in Ward’s study that had started with the lesbian cause (amongst many others) but marginalized it over time to make its diversity business profitable.

To summarize my view from post-colonial perspectives, I argue, drawing from my findings, that when the socio-cultural and historical existence of non-homonormative queer practices and identities is strong, LGBTQ organizations, under the influences of dominant cultural patterns in their country and practices from the West, may become ‘respectably queer’ in several ways. These include pursuing both ‘respectable’ and ‘queer’ goals within their programme or activities, pursuing ‘queer’ goals through ‘respectable’ strategies, interweaving sexual health as a ‘respectable’ goal with sexual rights as a ‘queer’ goal, carrying out ‘queer’ advocacy while conforming ‘respectably’ to the dominant institutional patterns by addressing their target’s interests, supporting ‘queer’ LGBTQ organizations and networks in addition to pursuing ‘respectable’ goals, and accessing ‘respectable’ platforms to achieve ‘queer’ goals.

**Directions for future research**

I want to encourage future work on LGBTQ organizations from the multi-institutional politics (MIP) approach to social movements (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008). I find that the LGBTQ organizations in India, as social movement actors, follow multi-institutional politics, which means that they consider non-state institutions (media, civil rights groups, cultural institutions, international agencies) equally as important as state institutions (police, judiciary, executive) in terms of being advocacy targets when they seek material and symbolic benefits for the LGBTQ communities. Material changes, for example, could relate to the laws and policies, such as paring down section 377 of the IPC to decriminalize homosexuality, and the symbolic cultural changes could mean more inclusiveness in the media, judiciary, state institutions and medical institutions for the LGBTQ communities. The
activists may want to target more than one institution in their advocacy to exploit the institutional contradictions in power and domination between them. For example, when the Mumbai Police (traffic) refused to permit the first Queer Azadi March on grounds of perversity, the gay network in Mumbai used its influence on a member of parliament from South Mumbai and a senior journalist to put pressure on the police establishment and finally succeeded in getting the permission. When donor agencies put restrictions on the kind of projects they would fund, LGBTQ organizations target the community for fundraising and sponsoring their advocacy. I note that with respect to the Delhi High Court order in the section 377 case, the advocacy against this law drew a major impetus from the inherent contradiction between the affidavit of the Ministry of Home Affairs that justified the retention of section 377 and that of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which insisted that continuance of section 377 has hampered HIV/AIDS prevention.

An important question that social movement scholars try to answer is that ‘under what conditions do challenges originate, survive and succeed?’ (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008, p. 76). I find support for Armstrong and Bernstein’s (2008) proposition that identifying and understanding the relevant institutional logic and linking advocacy goals to it is the key to successful identity strategies. Institutional logics refer to the ‘sets of beliefs and values resulting from an institution’s focus on a subset of the environmental pressures that are exerted on its decision making’ (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013, p. 1377). Understanding the relevant institutional logic helps in developing long-term programmes that can keep the challenger and the advocacy target united. These logics could be multiple, and the activists try to understand them in the light of their goals. The New Delhi- and Mumbai-based organizations had similar strategies in targeting the police and judiciary. They used section 377 as a major focus in their workshops and training, which is of common interest to both the parties. On the other hand, the Kolkata-based organization for lesbians and queer women targeted the women’s grievance cell of Kolkata police to focus largely on sexual violence in their advocacy. The police also wanted to learn about tackling issues related to hijras and how to tackle cases that involved gender and sexuality, such as that of the queer athlete. On both fronts, the Kolkata-based organization helped them. Both strategies worked well, though they understood different institutional logics based on their goals. It is worth noting that while all the three organizations from New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata attempted to target hospitals and the medical fraternity, only those from New Delhi- and Mumbai-based organizations had been able to do so successfully. These two organizations could relate their HIV/AIDS programmes with the public health agenda of these hospitals. But the Kolkata-based organization is yet to identify a relevant institutional logic that it can use to successfully target the hospitals. Future work on LGBTQ organizations can study the dialectics between the targets and the challengers in order to find out why some activist organizations can link their advocacy goals with the institutional logics of their targets, while others cannot.

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Notes

1. The understanding of alternate sexualities in India is framed by the western constructs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (Narain, 2007; Shah, 1993) as well as by the queer identities and practices indigenous to India (Khanna, 2009, 2013). Given this confluence, I draw from Freud's three essays on sexuality to arrive at an acronym for sexual minorities in this paper. Freud defined sexuality by differentiating into 'sex of object choice', meaning defining sexuality based on who one is attracted to, and 'sexual energy by aim', meaning sexuality defined by one's practices (Valocchi, 2005). In order to be inclusive, I use the term LGBTQ because 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'bisexual' identities are defined based on who one is attracted to, and hence 'sex of object choice', whereas, 'transgender' and 'queer' encompass Indian sexualities that embrace fluidity in gender and sexual orientation and transgress sexual normativity through queer practices (described in the paper) to represent 'sexual energy by aim'.

2. The term 'respectably queer' was coined in the title of Ward's study (2008). I draw from Williams and Giuffre (2011) to understand that 'respectably queer' is an organization that is both 'respectable' or 'professional' that is conforming to the diversity politics of non-profit business and donors and at the same time challenging heteronormative and/or other dominant cultural and institutional forces.

3. In other words, it means that queer practices, even if carrying eroticism or sensuality, may not always result in such individuals identifying with queer or non-heterosexual identities (Khanna, 2013). In the example of queer religious practices in the Ramanandi monastic order discussed later, the male devotees who become gender non-normative while worshipping may not identify themselves as transgender.

4. I have confined this section to the historical and socio-cultural existence of queer communities and their practices to explain their significance in Indian society. The examples are illustrative and not exhaustive. I have not dealt with the mythical existence of queer sexualities among the gods described in the Hindu ancient texts as discussed elsewhere (e.g., Thadani, 1996). That also forms a base for support of queer identities and practices in India.

References

Biographical note

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