

LGBT Activism in India: The Need to Address Gender and Caste System

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Abstract

Discourses of gender and sexuality have ceased to be mere counter narratives against the established thought praxis, but fluid arguments constantly questioning the known and unknown. Rather than creating theoretical frameworks they have moved into the realms of Law, Public Policy, Activism and Social change. This encouraging trend has moved into the discourses by, for, of the LGBT community. Over the years, the questions posed by the community has moved from demanding basic rights granted under the constitution treating everybody as one and the same to the more complex questions of structure and hegemony behind the isolation under which the community is shackled. One such revealing factor that has only now come to the public forum is how caste is used as an isolation strategy in this community.

Exploring castes also can serve the purpose if understanding how the government tries to impart its narrow interpretation through retrograde laws. Does caste plays a role in defining what is natural or unnatural sexual orientation? Does the practice of controlling a woman's body and through that her economic and social freedom is trying to subtly establish in the relationships under this community? Does the law encourage this attitude as the existing social more? This paper attempts to explore these themes and bring out perspectives to extend the discourses and counter discourses in LGBT community and thus making a progressive step in their struggle for acceptance.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Caste, LGBT, Activism

We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, Republic and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all; fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. Every Indian knows these words are the preamble of our Constitution, but whether the tenets of Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity is followed not only in letter but in spirit as well requires deeper introspection. These principles were designed not keeping the majority in mind but the oppressed minorities and the subaltern in mind. When seen in this context these words sounds more like an oxymoron in this current milieu. Multiple marginalized positions destroys the ability of a community to question the systems which has

imposed these shackles on it. The LGBTQ community is in one such delicate point of time where it has to counter stereotypes from multiple spheres by carving out its own space and narratives from the debris.

However the entrenched patriarchal hegemony in the society goes to great lengths in ensuring the questions posed by this community does not cross the proverbial Lakshman Rekha. To be honest, the word homo itself is an irony in the patriarchal system where the normalization and purity of sexual relations is essential to maintain its hold over the society. But any system needs to evolve to keep itself relevant according to the conditions, and this system too is no exception. The system evolved itself adequately to accommodate these anomalies but still retained its controls (transformed according to the new age). A relevant example can be found in the Honorable SC's ruling on gay sex. Besides the glaring ambiguities in the way the judgement played with words it questioned the liberal stance which the SC adopts in interpreting the fundamental rights. The question whether rational thought process was applied or patriarchal hegemony dominated the minds when this judgement was given needs to be asked. Why does an institution which is often considered as the vanguard of the quotidian needs to protect a retrograde Victorian law? Such questions cannot be answered without deconstructing the caste system and the narratives of the dominant community.

There is no better definition about caste than B.R Ambedkar's from his seminal work 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development':

“This sub-division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close them of their own accord? I submit that there is a double line of answer: Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them. The one is a psychological interpretation and the other is mechanistic, but they are complementary and both are necessary to explain the phenomena of caste-formation in its entirety”.

The Dominant caste(s) that closes the door always closes on its own accord to maintain its purity and difference from the rest while the other castes under them are compelled to imitate them cascading this process to the very bottom to maintain the graded inequality in the society. All the customs and traditions are derived from the Dominant caste and modified according to each caste's own nature.

Normalization of heterosexuality is very vital to maintain this caste hierarchy or the process of patriarchal hegemony of top to bottom relationship. Patriarchy needs compulsory heterosexuality to survive. Purity of identities through caste, community, social formations, controlling the sexual relationships of (Upper caste) women and men (to maintain their lineage) are essential to maintain this system. Examples of fathers forcing men to further their family's lineage to further their dominance can be brought under the purity of the construct. While there are also cases nowadays where the dominant caste mother is accepting her son's homosexuality by boldly advertising a groom for her son but still needs a groom from the same caste. This is something different although she very well knows they cannot further her caste through a progeny why does she insist she needs someone from same caste? Will she insist them to adopt a baby from the

same caste? If at all they are adopting a child. This once again signifies the need to maintain the purity of her caste but in a more subtle form than the first example.

The above quoted examples will be exercised in any functional caste system by all castes according to their differential powers in the caste ladder. Sexuality and gender are not external to the socio political economic relations defined by castes in India. Institutions which are grown in this landscape are every bit as patriarchal and hegemonic as the men and women who man and woman these institutions. When castes play a dominant role in determining every aspect of this society it is unwise to fight for superficial sexual and gender rights. Because all these rights are inside the caste and caste is the one overarching component in all these issues. As it was told “There is no such thing as single issue struggle here”.

Another way in which patriarchal fundamentalism exercise its control over the society is by controlling women’s sexuality preferences and how the system views with a myopic eye on the sexual needs of a man and a woman. Controlling the sexuality of a woman is essential in a patriarchal system to establish its control over the resources of a society. Woman (Upper caste) itself is viewed by the Dominant caste as a resource to further their progeny and lineage and some women (of lower caste) to fulfill their sexual pleasures and desires. While the fidelity of a woman is worshipped the infidelity of a man is celebrated as the right of a man. If this is very visible in a heterosexual relation it is very visible in a homosexual relationship proving male chauvinism is immune to sexual orientation. The social space available to a Gay man and a Lesbian woman are two different universes. A Gay man can get away making sexist statements against Lesbians, while the same cannot be said vice versa. Bi sexual men can fulfill the sexual needs of both their partners, while a woman with an alternate sexual orientation is forced to marry, let alone allowed to fulfill her natural sexual needs.

Many straight woman suffer because of their marriage to a gay man while a straight man can still have a child in spite of marrying a woman with an alternate sexual preference. Women of all sexual orientations are specified to fulfil their reproduction role by the system with or without their consent. Most support groups do not take a definite stand in the rights of Straight women marrying Gay men let alone lesbian women rights. These attitudes are less in only those groups which takes a conscious effort to reduce them, but this itself signifies they are the natural response of any man. This mentality of viewing the rights of Lesbians and Gays through different scales is proof to the subtle patriarchal hegemony prevalent in the society. This selective amnesia about the difference between these two groups are prevalent in all spheres of the society and when caste is also added this becomes more virulent. When two lesbian Adivasi women committed suicide law enforcement authorities and the media reported them as suicide rather than doing objective reporting and solid police work. However if the same incident had happened in a metro city and if the deceased were two men of upper caste it might have been different, but even here suppose if the two were women their relationship would have been definitely obscenely exploited.. It is essential for all the support groups to do a self-reflection of how they myopically view their fellow community members.

There is no difference between the inhumanities committed against the homosexual and heterosexual women. It is essential to at least try to understand the problems faced by each other. Finding a common ground between these two groups will empower them to make the Straight, Gay men unlearn the patriarchal attitudes which they had learnt over the centuries. This is just

one example to understand the benefits reaped if we find a common ground among the diverse priorities.

If the LGBTQ communities can find a common ground with the priorities of the various subaltern oppressed groups and can integrate it in their wide agenda they can go beyond the short term victories. Annihilation of the caste is the only common thread which can bring these diverse groups to a common platform and that is the only solution for long term empowerment and moving towards a more equitable and just society as envisioned and enshrined in the preamble of our constitution .

As Karl Marx said:

“If you love without evoking love in return – if through the vital expression of yourself as a loving person you fail to become a loved person, then your love is impotent, it is a misfortune”

Caste has entrenched these predetermined mentalities and moralities and in a community that does not understand even a heterosexual love understanding homosexual love is nothing but a far cry. Annihilation of caste can only bring true social justice to all those oppressed in this country and protecting their dignity without harassing them in the name of protecting our sovereignty is real fraternity and ensuring equality and liberty in all spheres of social economic political life will be the least we can do to make them feel they belong to this country. It has been often alleged that LGBT groups and spaces are led by upper caste people voicing issues concerning to certain sections of LGBT people. Intersection of these identities will further strengthen the movement. We have to remember that if the world is hegemonically heterosexual it is also hegemonically upper caste. Coming out is not about sexuality alone but also caste. This engagement of intersection cannot be easy and it'll reveal some uncomfortable truths about Minorities of different kinds, Dalit and queer. Muslim and queer, Tribal and queer, Disabled and queer their attitude to each other and their attitude to themselves. When each of these marginalised identities to come together we would learn the importance of self reflexivity, change the need to listen to other kinds of oppression and learn from them and work with them. LGBT activism should not only challenge hetero norms but caste shackles also.

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