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'GAY GAZE' AND THE REFASHIONING OF QUEER IMAGINARIES IN DIGITAL INDIA

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Abstract. The proliferation of internet access and digital technologies in contemporary India has reshaped the social role of the internet. Existing ethnographic accounts have demonstrated that digital platforms function as a key player in organising the often marginalised and stigmatised queer communities in the country. Building on this digital queer scholarship, this commentary analyses visual and textual archives that the internet makes available to gay men in India, helping them construct social imaginaries inaccessible to them in their immediate milieu. By offering a study of selected blogs and websites produced by and targeted towards gay men in India, we argue that a cultural studies perspective has valuable inputs to offer to the field of digital queer studies in India. We further theorise on the emergence and operation of a digital 'gay gaze' that turns the 'male gaze' upon the male body, mooring the political agency of same-sex desires through a cultural appropriation of online spaces.

Keywords. *Gay gaze, internet studies, cultural studies, visual media, blogs, sexuality, queer*

JM&C

Volume 3 Issue 2
© Central University of Tamil Nadu
Thiruvavur - India

Introduction

A Delhi-based website published an interview on April 19, 2008 with the description that it was a “[conversation] with a man who runs a blog on the city’s gay life” named Yugyag (Soofi, 2008). The said blogger, who refused to be named, explained about his blogging in the following words:

Yugyag symbolises my status as a closet gay guy who somehow doesn’t have guts enough to come out. Through this blog, I’m trying to come out ... When I started my blog, many of my buddies were shocked. I’m such a closet guy after all. They never imagined that I could publish my thoughts and events from my own life so openly. And yet there is a picture of mine. Just that my eyes are closed and you can’t see the rest of my face. (Soofi, 2008)

Scholars looking into the “social shaping and the social consequences of the internet” (Livingstone, 2009, p. 4) have pointed to the role online platforms play in destabilising the public/private divide and in forging new frontiers for social interactions. These technological enablements have been seized upon by queer subjects in India—such as the unnamed blogger in the above excerpt—as opportunities for reinforcing their sexual identity as well as for forging same-sex digital intimacy and a sense of community. The host of blogs, dating sites, and smartphone applications that have spread across India over the last decade have reshaped Indian queer imaginaries. For instance, in her ethnographic study on young people’s use of media in India, Shakuntala Banaji (2017) quotes a boy named Dilip (pseudonym used by Banaji) who came out as gay after being interviewed. Dilip told her this: “Internet gives me life, it gives me hope, I find others who think like me” (p. 140). To appreciate the narratives of digital self-disclosure and explorations captured in the excerpts from the Yugyag blogger and Dilip, we must interrogate the visual and textual archives that the internet makes available to gay men in India and analyse the implications of the social imaginaries they construct – imaginaries which are inaccessible to gay men in India who continue to be marginalised within mainstream discourses.

The significance of cyber ‘queer spaces’ needs to be better understood, as Brown & Knopp (2003) argue, by considering the concrete uses to which they are put including as online dating sites and sex chat rooms. Such projects gain greater urgency since sexual minorities, whose intimate geographies are largely delegitimised and stigmatised in ‘mainstream’ homophobic public places, are able to interact and forge social capital online and thus reject the heteronormative gaze and simultaneously mould “new realities” by investing in virtual sexual and intimate environments (Ashford, 2009, p. 303). It must, however, be pointed out that virtual spaces do not constitute a fixed unity but a heterogeneous assemblage or in the words of Dasgupta (2018), “a locus around which modes of social interaction, commercial interests, and other discursive and imaginative practices coalesce” (p. 190). However, digital platforms are not a quick-fix solution to the structural social injustices that queer people face. Indeed, just as virtual queer spaces create possibilities for community building, intimacies, and solidarity, they also pose ‘risks’ evident in instances where such platforms have been used in India to target queer people

and meet them under false pretences to rob and sexually assault them (Parussini, 2015; Ansar, 2018; TNN, 2019; Dhankhar, 2020).

In the Indian context, Dasgupta has provided the first in-depth study of queer digital cultures. Dasgupta's ethnographic research highlights how important it is to "acknowledge the connectedness between online and offline spaces" (2017, p. 3) towards understanding same-sex cultures in contemporary India. It is through a complex, heterogeneous, and even contradictory engagement with digital media that queer men in India "understand, access and perform their sexual identities within the context of the nation and their local space" (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 10). Dasgupta (2017) further demonstrates that these 'cyberqueer spaces' that emerged in India with the proliferation of digital technologies have provided for new ways of articulating, initiating, manipulating, and sustaining same-sex intimacies, relations, friendship, desires, romance, connections, and kinship. Furthermore, looking into the 'idioms of same-sex desires' in contemporary India, Katyal (2016) argues that in the context of online gay chat and dating sites, queer identities get articulated through and are articulative of complex processes of interactions within a "gay scene" - a subcultural phenomenon which both continues and refashions the prevalent ideals of romantic love (p. 118). However, these scholarly interventions have focused primarily on urban and technologically literate gay men, with studies looking into the use of 'cyberqueer' spaces by other demographic sections rather thin on the ground.

Aims and Methods: Towards a Cultural Studies Approach to Queer Digital Cultures

This commentary draws upon the above cited studies on digital queer cultures in India to analyse user-driven content on queer blogs. Embedded within 'LGBTQ internet studies' (Szulc, 2014), in this commentary we adopt a cultural studies perspective as opposed to the ethnographic methods used by previous researchers.

Our aim in this paper is to interrogate the practices emerging from Indian gay men's engagement with the internet through a critical analysis of textual and visual materials made by and targeted towards gay men. This is particularly important in light of Pullen's (2010) observation that "LGBT identity is evolving as a community form, at the same time that is increasingly distanced from the need for a physical social space" (p. xi). In charting these heterogeneous practices of digital queer production, circulation, representation and consumption, we pay close attention to the ways in which the visual materials are enframed within these contexts and what those frames can tell us about the micropolitics of queer desire amongst men in India where homosexual acts were until recently outlawed and even today continue to be stigmatised and pathologised. Our methodology builds on the notions of 'electronic textuality' (Hayles, 2003) and 'interactivity of authorship' (Gillespie, 2003) that acknowledge the 'textuality' of the internet as well as its textual politics. The materials presented here were collected in early 2015 at a time when same-sex acts were outlawed in India under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Our analysis therefore offers a window into queer subjectivities in India prior to the writing down of IPC 377.

Understanding Queer Imaginaries: A Theoretical Framework

In this commentary, we will interrogate the queer digital archives and visual texts referred to above through the prism of queer theory. Built on the recognition of a wider continuum of sexual possibilities, queer theory challenges the control over sexual expressions imposed by the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality (Cohen, 1997). It, therefore, not only draws attention to the ways in which sexual subjects are constructed through cultural discourses and regulatory regimes, but also helps us understand how non-normative sexualities are lived out and represented. Although there are several epistemological positions within queer theories, our approach in this paper is informed by the works of Doty (1993) and Halperin (2012) which deal with queer imaginaries, subjectivities, and textual politics.

Doty (1993) points out the 'queerness' of cultural expressions has four different dimensions: their conditions of production, their reception, their reading and usage by non-normative sexual subjects, and the queerness of the text itself. This model offers a springboard for entering into those texts made by and for gay men in India – that through an assemblage of written materials, images and affects create novel imaginaries outside the mainstream heterosexist assumptions of mass culture.

Their liminality within the wider cultural industries offers us a fresh insight into what Halperin (2012) describes as "gay male desire" (p. 69) which is not co-terminus with either sexual desire or a stable gay identity. Halperin (2012) argues that gay male cultural practices and subjectivities offer a window into the distinctive relationship of gay men to the culture of the larger society as well as to the shared sensibilities and outlooks amongst gay men. Taken together, in this commentary, we will approach the production, reception, and usage of queer visual texts (Doty, 1993) and tease out their political implications for gendered gay subjectivities as outlined by Halperin (2012).

Queer Blogging in India

In a website called www.orinam.net, an anonymous user writes about their 'gender dysphoria' which has resulted in their inability to accept their own sexuality, leading them to live a 'double life.' Narratives like this bring to light the subjective experiences of queerness in India and demonstrate the ways in which sexual politics gets entangled with cyber discourse. Through personal anecdotes, another user talks about a lifelong anxiety in reconciling why the possession of certain body parts should determine the choice of clothes, toys, and other material resources of life in these words:

I have been much happier during the last few years primarily because I got involved in the LGBTQI movement. I now interact with people who have similar interests. However, not everyone working for the welfare of gender and sexual minorities understands or accepts fluidity. Sometimes I happen to meet people who want to put me into a category like gay or trans. There is a clear binary into which the world wants to fit people like me...I am just a person. Why do others need to categorize me as either "he" or "she"? (Orinam)

This statement is important in more ways than one. It reveals how the ‘LGBTQ community,’ as it so often labelled, fails to accommodate voices like these. Opinions which are not contained into larger narratives of mainstream activism emerge from these platforms with their own politics of contingency, often strategically sustained through a double-writing of sexuality and re-presentation.

Creed (2003), drawing from Julian Dibbell, has termed the ‘sexual body’ represented online as a “psychic double” (p. 120). There seems to exist a complex mind-body conflict in the steps leading to the (non)formation of specific ‘online identities.’ These identities emerge in relation to one’s subjective estimation of the self. The act of writing, here, is “about the art of writing one’s self into existence for others to read and comment upon” (Rak, 2005, p. 176). Furthermore, Rak (2005) argues that “‘blog identity’ involves a recouping of strategies of the real, which includes the use of offline experiences as a guarantor of identity, to reconstitute liberal subjectivity in a public space” (p. 176). These strategies can be seen in the ‘gay blog identity’ formed through a dialogue between the offline and the online vis-à-vis the narratives of representation. Rak (2005), in a similar understanding, talks of ‘queer blogging’ as not featuring the kind of subjectivity described in Queer Theory. It instead speaks to the “unpredictable, unsystematic ensemble” of gay male desire as described by Halperin (2012, p. 70) and as witnessable on queer virtual platforms in India.

An attempt to locate and analyse these micro-politics of online same-sex desire and negotiations in India has been initiated by the likes of Katyal (2016) and Dasgupta (2017). Katyal (2016), in the context of Indian online dating sites, claims that there is a ‘doubleness of sexuality’ as portrayed on such virtual platforms. Considering the India-specific idioms of desire such as masti, yaari, dosti, MSM, etc., Katyal (2016) discusses narratives from the gay dating website PlanetRomeo that project and sustain the continuously shifting online ‘gay scene’ as “a series of expectations” (p. 127) where sexual desiring and consumption constitute and are constitutive of the gay subculture. Similarly, in his extensive discussions based on ethnographic exploration of the queer cybercultures in contemporary India (including websites like PlanetRomeo and smartphone gay dating apps like Grindr), Dasgupta (2017) uncovers the ambivalent politics of virtual queer intimacies negotiated through what he calls “phatic forms of communication that are ephemeral in nature but have deeply embedded forms of meaning” (p. 154). Both Katyal (2016) and Dasgupta (2017) direct attention to the need to further interrogate and problematise the narrative politics of such virtual domains and platforms in order to analyse the varied rhetoric and politics of re-presentation. What we focus on here is one such key element of the online same-sex cultures of accessing and consuming desire—digital ‘gay gaze.’

Theorising Digital ‘Gay Gaze’

What emerges when identity narratives on online queer platforms in India are read in the context of accompanying visual tropes and suggestions is the idea of what we term the digital ‘gay gaze.’ On studying the various textual and pictorial representations on blogs such as www.desi-gay-desires.blogspot.in and www.chennaiidost.com, one can find the idea of the masculine self as a valorised, recurrent trope. The male body, often clad in

minimal clothing, is on display. It is presented as a seductive invitation and, therefore, asserting an unequivocal desire for the masculine body. The heteronormative meanings of 'hunk' and 'macho' are subverted and transformed when these apparently masculine images are projected for the consumption of male audiences—predicated upon the politics of the male gaze turned into the gay gaze. Drawing upon what Freud terms 'scopophilia' (pleasure derived from actively looking at another), Creed (2003) talks about a "voyeuristic gaze" at work in online interactions which creates a space for pleasure having strong erotic component (p. 125). A mainstay of these forms of visual representation is the way in which it produces and manipulates visual pleasure.

Laura Mulvey's (1975) ideas regarding cinematic representation can be critically used to engage with the idea of the 'gay gaze.' Theorising upon the politics of the 'male gaze' in sustaining scopophilia and sexual desire in films, she goes on to point out that, "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" and that "[t]he determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (1975, p. 4).

In the case of the pictorial representations on the aforementioned blogs, the male gaze is turned towards the male body. The men here are not only the bearer of the gaze but are also the object of desire being gazed upon—a process that problematises Mulvey's understanding that "[a]ccording to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (1975, p. 5). Nevertheless, drawing upon Mulvey's (1975) ideas, it can be noticed that in case of non-interactive visual representations on these blogs, an illusion of voyeuristic separation is generated wherein one is allowed to peep into someone's private world or exposed bodies from a position of separation or distance afforded by the digital screen. This, in turn, helps project modes of desires onto the person(s) one is looking at on the screen.

One such example of the digital 'gay gaze' at work can be found in a particular nude photo collections archived on the Desi Gay Desires blog (DesiXposed blog since 2017) where the sexually projected art-like full-body pictures of Indian men provide a readily accessible domain of gay male desire. In the sections titled "Nude Male Art," the homoerotic photographs of men with genitalia hidden behind objects such as pieces of cloth depict what Barthes (2000) theorises as the "non-unary" erotic photograph that is different from the pornographic image (p. 41-42). In not making the sexual organ the central object, the photographic 'punctuation' of the erotic male image—the "punctum"—becomes "a kind of a subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see [...]" (Barthes, 2000, p. 59, emphasis in original). The 'user comments' on the collection are further indicative of the intrigues of gay male desire reaching out beyond the apparent by means of the digital 'gay gaze.' In the context of the more explicitly homoerotic and pornographic images that constitute other forms of this online 'nude male art,' the digital 'gay gaze' is articulated in a more assertive manner. Out of the numerous 'comments' that a collection of nude male images of a particular "Muscle Hunk" has been able to garner, one such anonymous 'gay gazer' points out in a matter-of-fact way:

The quality of this website on archiving eyecandy hunks is unprecedented. Wow. Just wow. Hats off to the admin. The set of pictures in recent times have achieved very highest [sic] form of 'Porn and Voyeuristic' quality. It's a shame that this country does not have a platform and legalities on 'legal sexual entertainment.' (Desi Gay Desires)

The accessing of the cyberspace as a means of looking at, consuming, and expressing queerness is agential in its ability to connect to audiences who can engage with the contents at any point, thus adding to the politics that it seeks to embody. The intersection of the virtual activities on such platforms and the micro-politics of the gay gaze embedded within it offers a re-assessment of queer digital media as it is being theorised here. The implicit utility of gay gaze not only sustains queer subjectivities (through reading and re-reading of such visual body-texts) but also complicates Butlerian sexual 'performativity' in the sense that the virtual domain allows multiple and varied opportunities for the queer subject to partake in, consume, and refashion non-heteronormative sexualities.

This interrelation has important implications and indispensable relevance for any research on contemporary and future virtual queer spaces, subjects, and texts. Such spaces now contain a varied array of media which takes it well beyond the confines of the restrictive models of interpersonal communication. For example, the Blued gay chatting and dating app enables Indian users to host video sessions that can be watched and commented upon in real-time by users who in turn become the subjects of their audio-visual narratives—always already constructed through and continuously refashioned by the virtual gay gaze.

Conclusion

In light of the discussions and textual evidences presented in this commentary, it must be pointed out that the operation of the digital 'gay gaze' on web-based platforms in India needs to be understood in the context of India's contemporary history where mutually consenting sexual acts between people of the same sex were criminalised when the above blogs were written. The sweep of homophobia in India, materialised and nurtured by a colonial-era anti-sodomy law, has ensured that non-normative sexual expressions and identities continue to be stereotyped, pathologised, and criminalised within popular culture. Spaces for alternative imaginings too are routinely policed and sanitised. In a youth survey of 15-34 year-olds in India conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in 2016, it was found that 61% of Indian youth consider same-sex relationships to be 'wrong' (CSDS-KAS).

The finding further illustrates the degree and extent of homophobia prevalent even amongst the youth in India, and one can seriously wonder if the realities have changed in the post-Section 377 period. It is in this context that we have to approach the cyber queer texts discussed above. The digital 'gay gaze' functioning in Indian gay blogs and websites is indicative, and indeed constitutive, of the micro-politics of queer desire and the forms of resistance that such acts of desiring or gazing engenders in an otherwise homophobic social milieu. Far from being a mere gendered substitution of the object of desire in the widely critiqued 'male gaze' of the heteropatriarchal order, we recognise the possibilities that a

cultural appropriation/transformation of the cyberspace and its concomitant 'gay gaze' offer, insofar as the sexual agency and emancipation of a marginalised sexual minority are concerned, through narratives of queer subjectivities and imaginaries that incessantly intersect and are themselves in flux.

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