

This Constitution Day, Consider the Queer Dalit



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Alongside visibility of the more dominant and privileged segments of queer people at Pride, there has to be more consciousness-raising for a wider range of rainbow colours and a queerness of Dalit people.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

Undeterred by the Supreme Court of India's denial of marriage equality to queer people, at the start of wedding season in the national capital, queer folks have preparing for Delhi Pride today, November 26 – a day that is also the Constitution Day.

The Constituent Assembly had adopted the constitution of India on this day in 1949. In a famous [speech](#) on the eve of this historic day, on November 25, the chairperson of the Drafting Committee, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had talked about 'a life of contradictions.' That an emerging India of the time would have political equality (as in universal adult franchise, one person one vote) but there would be deep and pervasive social inequality (as in the lives of some people would be more valuable than others). This life of contradictions has endured from over seven decades of the constitution by now.

Something caught my attention last week.

Someone said they're in the closet and wanted to know if there are ways of securing their anonymity at pride. In reply to this, someone else said, yes, there are usually face masks at the venue and some people also cover their faces in other ways such as with a bandana, dupatta, goggles, etc. Indeed, seemingly contradictory to the idea of pride, covered faces have been a common sight at the Delhi Queer Pride from its inception, a decade and half ago, in 2008.

Four years before that, in 2004, a group of queer people had organised a pride walk at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai. I was at this WSF on the invitation of a prominent Dalit group in India who were considering me for a work position with them. Unconnected to my work prospects with this group, some of my queer friends were organising a pride walk at the WSF and they asked me to join them. I was unsure and apprehensive about this. I thought the Dalit group would disapprove of my association with queer people, and consequently, I might lose my work prospects with them. At this moment, I came to my first realisation of the mutually exclusive composition of queer and Dalit groups – I knew of no openly out queer people in Dalit groups, and no openly out Dalit people in queer groups.

My first experience of pride was in London in 2002. I was there with a small group of friends from the London School of Economics (LSE), where I was enrolled as a British Chevening scholar. The anonymity of foreign location was reassuring and liberating for me. The WSF pride of 2004 was different – it was in a location where I knew many more people and many more people knew me, and then, there were those work related consequences for me. It was so daunting that I could not even think about it coherently.

When I got to the WSF, the organisers were distributing small pride flags. I took one, and instead of waving it around gleefully, I placed it over my face. Quietly and timidly, like burying a head in the sand. While I didn't think the flag was an effective cover or any assurance of anonymity, the internal conflict and the apparent contradictions of pride and shame were clear to me.

I don't know if anyone from the Dalit group saw me at the pride. Also unknown to me at the time, there was a conversation among Dalit and queer groups at the WSF. Even this conversation, I felt, had pitched the two groups as exclusive of each other: one group talking to another, as if nobody could be part of both the groups.

As part of a newly emerging queer scene in Delhi, I was familiar with queer spaces. Most of these spaces were furtive once-a-week gay night clubs or virtual 'chat rooms' on the internet. There was visible affluence that set these spaces apart from Dalit spaces. There was, and still is, a commercialisation of gay spaces – that are based on the financial abilities to afford them. In contrast, there is no commercialisation of Dalit spaces. Dalit spaces are mostly constituted by family and blood relations, and of course, there are mass political rallies and social festivities where Dalit people come together. I did not think of it much then or attribute any meaning to

this contrast. My intuition about Dalit and queer groups was that they are mutually exclusive, and it was this mutual exclusivity that made me feel conflicted and apprehensive at the WSF pride.

Soon after my return to Delhi, in a plush living room space of a gay British expat man's residence, I told him and his gay Danish friend about the covering of my face at the WSF pride. Both these men were working in international development agencies in India, and I thought they would have an understanding of social inequalities and caste. The Danish man scoffed at me, saying something to the effect that it was a shameful display of pride on my part; and the significance of the conversation was lost on the British man, he didn't say anything. At that moment, I felt diminished and a little less than gay.

At another moment, another day, I had visited the impoverished and bare residence space of my grandmother somewhere in South Delhi. The same day was a house party at a posh residence of a queer friend in another part of South Delhi. Somehow, I could not get myself to transition from the physical contrast of two residential spaces. I decided not to go to that house party.

My friend called me over the phone, and somehow I couldn't get myself to say that I was feeling conflicted – about the apparent inequalities of the two residential spaces.

I lied and I said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot about your party." This friend snapped at me, "You forgot about my party?!" and disconnected the call. I felt bad, but not any worse than I was already feeling. At that moment, I could not relate with this queer friend and the queer fraternity more broadly. I felt like our lives were so far apart that we couldn't be part of the same community.

Shortly after the WSF, the Dalit group offered me a work position. Respectfully, I declined to accept that offer because I felt I didn't belong in the exclusive Dalit fraternity either. Work on social justice issues in the following years confirmed my impressions about the mutual exclusivity of queer and Dalit groups. It would have been less remarkable if I were not queer and Dalit myself. I knew that I could not be the only one and I knew that I was not imagining a subgroup of queer Dalits. The question was – where were they and why were they invisible? The queer and Dalit intersection was desolate space.

The life of contradictions in Dr. Ambedkar's speech of 1949 was not an empty lament or an epiphany of impending doom. It was a critical observation that was accompanied by some clear prescriptions to resolve the contradictions. Dr. Ambedkar had urged everyone to read seemingly disparate constitutional rights – equality, liberty and fraternity – in an integrated manner. This integrated reading was referred to as the union of trinity "in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity."

Coming out of the closet with covered faces may seem contradictory to simplistically liberal aspirations of pride. Ambedkarite sensibilities of social democracy would weave these liberal aspirations into egalitarian ideas and into fraternity – brotherhood, sisterhood, gender neutral sibling-hood, friends, and community.

The invisibility of queer Dalit persons is slowly dissipating, with some individuals visibilising themselves, while some preferring to cover their faces, and some who are at ease with their invisibility. Alongside visibility of the more dominant and privileged segments of queer people at pride, there has to be more consciousness-raising for a wider range of rainbow colors and a queerness of Dalit people. Coming out of the closet with covered faces, or staying in, or not having the privacy of proverbial closets at all, these are all wide ranging and welcome diversities of queer people. We must embrace and celebrate our diversities.

Happy pride, and happy Constitution Day!

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