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"Instagram is like a *karela*": transnational digital queer politics and online censorship and surveillance in India

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Abstract

This article explores transnational queer political flows and negotiations in Indian queer/trans communities on Instagram, situating this in its limits and restrictions as a public sphere that is corporate- and state-governed and subject to conditions of profitability, censorship, regulation, and algorithmic disciplining. Using insights from 23 in-depth interviews with queer/trans women and non-binary Instagram users and community organizers across India, I argue that binaries of Western/Indigenous, global/local, authentic/inauthentic are insufficient to understand Indian queer digital politics. I instead explore the political utility of agentic reclamations and negotiations of queer/trans identity by marginal queer/trans users. At the same time, drawing on participant experiences of content moderation, censorship, and corporate and state surveillance, I examine how the potentials of Instagram as a site to mediate articulations of a radical politics of queer liberation are restricted, thwarted, and reconfigured by platform design and policing.

Keywords: Instagram, queer and trans women, transnational politics, content moderation, state surveillance

Introduction

This article makes two arguments: firstly, that Instagram opens up a space for transnational queer and trans political imaginations, articulations, and negotiations in India, and secondly, that Instagram's political economy renders marginal queer/trans users particularly vulnerable to censorship and surveillance. I draw on insights from 23 in-depth interviews with queer/trans women and non-binary Instagram users and community organizers across India, conducted from February to April 2023 during my doctoral fieldwork, to explore the contours of these formations.

Digital space offers up new avenues and modalities for queer users to assert, contest, reformulate, and negotiate ideas of queerness, as well as build relationships and intimacies (Dasgupta & DasGupta, 2018; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). Transnational and translocal communication flows provoke new forms of political mobilization and community-building beyond narrow nationalistic frames. Much of the research on queer digital cultures has focused on (cisgender) gay men, whether in the West (McGlotten, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2010), or specifically in India (Dasgupta, 2017; Shahani, 2008). Social media can thus be thought of as comprising new forms of networked publics that potentially extend participation to non-elites through the relative accessibility and ubiquity of digital technologies. At the same time, socioeconomic stratification means that digital technologies have spread deep rather than wide in India; there is still an inequity in whose voices were/are being platformed online (Gopinath, 2009).

Less attention has been paid to how the political economy of social media structures, limits, and reconfigures its use for queer/trans users in India, particularly women. Contemporary platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) function on an attention economy where virality equals profit (for the platforms and advertisers on them), where users are subject to algorithmic structures that privilege certain content

over others (Paasonen, 2020), and where state-corporate nexuses of surveillance and control regulate their use (Dasgupta & DasGupta, 2018).

The transnational participatory possibilities of social media as networked publics, then, exist side-by-side with its limits and restrictions as a public sphere that is corporate- and state-governed and subject to conditions of profitability, censorship, regulation, and algorithmic disciplining. Using insights from participant interviews, I examine how the tension between transnational possibilities and platform policing structures users' experiences of Instagram. I argue that binaries of Western/Indigenous, global/local, authentic/inauthentic are insufficient, and moreover inaccurate, in understanding Indian queer digital cultures. Instead, I offer an analysis built on a framework of hybridity and agentic reclamations. In other words, I explore users' translations, re/appropriations, and applications of language, concepts, and identities in their own contexts. At the same time, drawing on participant experiences of content moderation, censorship, and state surveillance, I examine how the transnational potentialities of Instagram as a site to mediate articulations of a radical politics of queer liberation are restricted, thwarted, and reconfigured by platform design and policing. As one participant puts it, Instagram functions as a "*karela*", or a bitter gourd, presenting both opportunities and limitations.

Instagram emerged as the primary social media platform on which my participants engaged with queer/trans content and community; this reflects contemporary work that has explored the affordances of Instagram as a platform for activism in India (Tuli & Danish, 2021). Several of my participants put this down to, firstly, the platform's privileging of audio-visual content, which enables Indian users to interact across a variety of regional languages and literacy levels, and secondly, to how Instagram Reels were quickly able to fill the void left behind by India's banning of TikTok in 2020.

I start by framing my article's theoretical intervention through a critique of Hindu nationalist and neoliberal co-optations of queer liberation, and giving an overview of my methodological approach. I then examine the contours of transnational possibilities Instagram opens up for queer/trans political imaginations, ambitions, and articulations in India. Finally, I situate these possibilities within the limits of online surveillance, content moderation, and censorship, examining my participants' negotiations with these structures.

Arriving at a queer/trans politics of liberation

A radical, progressive, and feminist queer politics in India must contend with and indeed explicitly disavow the twin forces of Hindu nationalist co-optations and the singular emphasis on a neoliberal human rights framework as a pathway for queer liberation. In this section, I employ a critique of these forces to frame my article's theoretical orientation.

Mainstream Indian queer activism's preoccupation over the last two decades with Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has cemented the criminalization of male homosexuality as the primary, if not only, visible site of struggle around queer rights. This preoccupation was itself born out of the developmental health politics of HIV/AIDS outreach in the 1980s and 1990s in India, which argued that the existence of Section 377 inhibited such work (Dave, 2012; Khanna, 2016).

The Hindu right-wing pushed back against the Indian Supreme Court's decriminalization of homosexual sex by denouncing homosexuality as "foreign" or "Western," and as a corrupting import from the Global North that had no roots in Indian culture and thus should not be legitimated (Dave, 2012; Menon, 2007; Rao, 2020; Sircar, 2017). Queerphobia has often been identified as one of the pillars of Hindu nationalism, while queerness is a vice attributed to all "others" that must remain outside of the Hindu national project (Bacchetta, 1999). Conversely, the colonial origins of Section 377 and of laws around modesty, obscenity, and "unnatural" sex have been well-documented. Homosexuality was, after all, characterized by the British as "the oriental vice" (Bacchetta, 1999, p. 143); the postcolonial Indian nation's criminalization and demonization of homosexuality has much to do with colonial legacies.

It is strategically understandable, then, that mainstream Indian queer activism has taken an archival turn, with the aim of recapturing queer histories that were squashed by British colonial prudishness and Indian sovereign respectability in turn (Menon, 2007). However, this implicit locating of queer legitimacy in the archive vests in it the power of becoming the sole evidentiary trove for queerness. Such archival turns confer illegitimacy upon forms of desire that "cannot be shown to have existed within the boundaries of the nation" (Rao, 2020, p. 19). In other words, it renders real and authentic only such forms of desire, sexuality, and gender identity for which evidence can be found within historical accounts of so-called India. It also presents the precolonial past as "uncontaminated by contact with the West or indeed any external influence" (Rao, 2020, p. 19), thus laying the locations of homophobia (Rao, 2014) squarely at the feet of British colonizers.

The Hindu nationalist stance on queerness has undergone a change in recent years, particularly around the time of the 2018 reading down of Section 377. Sircar (2017) notes the presence of "emerging intimacies" (p. 1) between queer

politics, the Hindu right, and neoliberalism, born out of the points of overlap between the creation of the Indian subject-citizen as a liberal bearer of rights, and the neoliberal developmental aims of the current Hindu nationalist government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The contemporary rise of the Hindu right-wing has been accompanied by a rise of the "neoliberal and Hindu queer subject, who performs, 'homonationalist' and 'homocapitalist' practices with aplomb in their ostensibly chic queer lifestyles" (Sircar, 2017, p. 21). Such a subject can be a subscriber to the project of Hindu nationalism through their discursive creation of precolonial (Hindu) India as accepting of non-normative sexualities and genders, thus placing the onus of queerphobia onto India's Mughal (Muslim) rulers. This is not purely theoretical—mainstream Indian queer activism features a predominance of such subjects (Singh & Rampal, 2018; The News Minute, 2018). By presenting the 2018 ruling as a decolonial act, the Hindu right is thus able to deploy queerness to homo-Hindu-nationalist ends (Upadhyay, 2020).

Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women's groups have criticized the foregrounding of Section 377, focusing instead on heteropatriarchial issues, such as forced marriages (Dave, 2011). For instance, groups such as Sangini critiqued the focus on privacy in the first reading down of Section 377 by highlighting how the private space is still a domain ruled by men (Dave, 2011, pp. 31–32). Drawing from radical feminist demands more generally, queer women's groups have emphasized how interrogating the power of the nation state should be central for Indian queer politics (Dave, 2011; Dave, 2012; Menon, 2007).

Anti-caste feminist scholars have long pointed out the inherent limits of a *savarna* Indian feminism (John, 2015; Rege, 1998). Arya (2020) argues that "only a dalit feminist thought can help us resolve patriarchal slavery of women in India" (p. 223), and a singular engagement with either gender or caste will always be limited and incomplete because of its ignorance of the "crosshatched embedding of caste with patriarchy" (p. 224). Thinking alongside such approaches, Dalit feminist and queer writers assert that we must reckon with how Brahminical cis-heteropatriarchy structures queer politics in India (Banu, 2016; Jyoti, 2017). This is of particular urgency given the explosion of Hindu nationalist violence and rhetoric in the contemporary moment. In Upadhyay's (2020) article on "homohindunationalism," they argue that "caste-based violence is integral to Hinduism" (p. 464). Any intimacies between Hinduism and queer/trans-friendliness, then, is a complicity in and normalization of caste violence.

More recently, Dalit trans women's groups have pointed out how mainstream Indian queer politics' singular focus on decriminalization, and now marriage equality, only benefits those who already occupy positions of privilege outside of queerness. Grace Banu and her organization Trans Rights Now have stringently critiqued the lack of horizontal reservations for caste-oppressed trans people, and have been met with violent policing and silencing (The News Minute, 2023). These demands are centered on an understanding and application of intersectional justice in the Indian context, particularly as it pertains to Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi (DBA) or caste-oppressed trans people. They highlight how nexuses of class, caste, religion, gender, and transmisogyny structure the realities of queer/trans life in the country.

A feminist, decolonial critique of sexuality in the contemporary moment must reject co-optations of "decolonization"

by the Indian right-wing to justify the Hindu nationalist project. Such a critique must question how assemblages of caste, class, religion, gender, family, law, Hindu-nationalism, and the nation state interact with queer/trans politics (Upadhyay & Bakshi, 2020). This critique must necessarily be transfeminist, anti-caste, anti-Islamophobic, anti-Hindu nationalist, and anti-fascist. I argue that we must look to the demands, politics, activism, and organizing that stems from communities of marginal queers—queer women, trans and non-binary people, Muslim and DBA people—as the space from which to mold such a critique, and the space through which to imagine and locate queer and trans liberation. This research centers these voices and experiences in its examination of transnational queer politics, corporate-state surveillance, and censorship online.

Methods: on trust, positionality, and orientation

The insights I use for this article are drawn from 23 in-depth interviews with queer/trans women and non-binary people from February to April 2023, conducted as part of my doctoral research. Participants were queer/trans community organizers/activists who contributed to running organizations' social media accounts, and/or were individual social media users. Interviews were either conducted one-on-one, or in small groups of two to three people from the same organization.

I identified participants through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, drawing from the networks I have built from my community work with queer/ trans organizations across India, particularly in Mumbai, which is where I was born and grew up. Participants were located in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, and Kolkata. I centered queer/trans women and non-binary people, with a particular focus on including DBA, Muslim, and disabled voices. However, my sample was predominantly urban, and as a result this research speaks to that socioeconomic location.

My orientation towards interviews is one of discussion, rather than extraction. In Haritaworn's (2008) reflections on a queer/trans of color methodology, they discuss how marginalized subjects often afford their marginalized interviews greater trust when disclosing their experiences and opinions (p. 6). I conceptualized and approached my interviews as a two-way conversation, where I had to give in order to receive. I was candid about my objectives and political orientations, shared my own experiences, and engaged in the conversation as a fellow Bahujan queer/trans Instagram user alongside being a researcher. I talked through my research design, objectives, and motivations with my participants, valuing them as partners in the knowledge production process.

I also think with Smith (2021) on how the "native" intellectual in the Western academy might often be denoted as a "saviour" of our people, without due attention paid to our privileges, class interests, values, and ways of thinking (pp. 79–81). At the same time, she points out how such scholars also run the risk of not being taken seriously. My methodological approach holds these issues in consideration. Haritaworn (2008) makes clear that research participants "are not merely raw, pre-theoretical sources of 'experience', but active producers of their own interpretations, which compete with those of the researcher" (p. 3). However, these interpretations don't compete on a "level playing field," as the researcher still has the "last word at the stage of the analysis" (Haritaworn, 2008, p. 3). My participants' insights have value beyond and outside of the work of analysis and interpretation that I subject them to in the process of writing this article. While the arguments I make in this article are my own, I have aimed to present fuller contexts to interview excerpts, in an attempt to make space for my participants' own processes of theorizing.

Queer hybridities and transnational linkages

Queerness in the Global South is often theorized as either stemming from Indigenous, precolonial practices of same-sex desire and gender nonconformity, or as being an inauthentic result of Western cultural imperialism of modern gay identities (for example, Altman, 1996; Massad, 2002; Tellis, 2015). Integral to all these approaches is the conceptualization of sexual identity as stemming from modernity, thereby signaling any adoption of terms such as "queer" by those in the non-West as a form of Western neocolonialism. Such approaches also presume and thus reify an inherent and impassable difference between the practices and expressions of non-normative genders and sexualities in the Global South and the Global North. The West is marked out as a site for political articulations of queer identity, while the Global South remains a space only of negotiation of "queer desire with local moralities" (Dave, 2012, p. 15). If similarity is indeed found between queer cultures in the Global South and the Global North, it is often explained away as a simplistic West–East, top-down flow of cultural imperialism.

There are a number of problems with such an approach. First, it positions queer subjects in the non-West as being primarily preoccupied with negotiating their desire within the boundaries of their nation, religion, and culture in exceptionalist frames. Second, it furthers the idea that no "authentic" queer subject in the Global South would want to identify with such "Western" terms like queer, gay or lesbian, and that if they do, they are simply products of Western cultural imperialism and not indicative of "real" identities and practices of queerness of their region, which erases their agency. Third, it ignores transnational linkages and flows of culture, thought, and identity within the Global South, or indeed even from the Global South to the Global North. Finally, there is an inherent valorization of the precolonial past in such arguments, and a nativist attempt to "recover" the culturally pure queer subject who existed outside of any "contaminating" forces. In the context of India, as explained previously, this becomes a dangerous narrative tool for the Hindu nationalist project.

What opportunities, then, do interrogating and disrupting such assumptions present? My research participants asserted that language, agendas, and priorities for Indian queer politics are set both locally and transnationally—not just in terms of what is being done in different parts of the world, but also in terms of what that reveals is needed in the Indian context. Instagram presents opportunities and possibilities for the articulation and negotiation of a transnational queer/trans politics that is locally contextualized and activated. For instance, Dazz (34, Muslim, queer, non-binary)[1] maintains that Instagram opens up a space to imagine queer politics in India through global developments: "We begin understanding that these are possibilities that we also want to be working on (…) it gives us the language, gives us a goal."

Thinking along similar lines, Sujatha (38, lesbian, cis woman) believes that such spaces enable transnational imaginations, and provide a variety of language choices to talk about queer lives and issues. She points out how digital discourse on marriage equality in Taiwan provides a framework for imagining the same in other Asian contexts, including India. When Section 377 was read down in India, she was exposed to queer Sri Lankan Instagram users' ambitions for their own country. "People in Sri Lanka were quite hopeful that this would make it easy for them [to also decriminalize homosexuality]. And wasn't it (…) literally last week when they did that? So it definitely does have an impact," she said, referring to the Sri Lankan government's February 2023 statement of support for decriminalizing homosexual sex. Such interactions, then, expand queer/trans imaginations and ambitions beyond the nation state, even when communities are forced to function politically or economically within its limits.

Koyel (30, Bahujan, trans woman) argues that Indigenous queer activism in North America provides a framework for imagining DBA queer/trans liberation in India:

> [As a] Bahujan person sitting in India, [I'm] getting to know that there is something called Two Spirit [through digital spaces], which I was never aware of. And I can see that indigenous people in America have (…) include[d] that in the acronym, some people are using 2S (…) So that gives me the inspiration that going forward, maybe indigenous, DBA people in our country will also have their own vocabulary, or they already have [it], [and] they will bring it to the forefront in the queer politics. So that is inspiring. And that way I think it's making things a little easier for us (…) Globalization [has] taught us certain things which we can extract, and reclaim. Everything doesn't have to be great. There are a lot of things we can reject. There are a lot of things we can accept, and there are a lot of things we can modify. So I feel [that] we have more resources because of globalization and digitalization.

Koyel, then, is engaged in an agentic negotiation of global trans identity and politics vis-à-vis her context as a Bahujan trans woman living in India. Her arguments reveal that there is an active component of "acceptance" and "rejection" as well as "reclamation" and "modification" that accompanies digital participation. Looking at digital "globalization," as she puts it, as an opening up of a wealth of resources, rather than as a creation of a one-way imposition, allows us to situate the overlaps, similarities, negotiations, and reclamations of queer identity in the contexts in which they actually exist. Connecting Indigenous queer assertions in North America with DBA queer assertions in India is a process of thinking with, imagining, and building transnational queer solidarities and possibilities in a way that engenders deeper theoretical engagement than a simplistic binary of neocolonial or "authentic" queer expressions. A more useful way of studying queerness in the non-West is by examining how queer concepts and categories are translated, redefined, and appropriated by subjects, and how they are made "intelligible and useful in their local contexts" (Moussawi, 2015, p. 594). Koyel evidently sees her use of Instagram as an opportunity to engage in such a process of translation, redefinition, and appropriation, and as a landscape through which to make such queer concepts intelligible in her own local context.

Expanding on reclamations and reappropriations of language, Niloufer (32, queer, non-binary) points out the paradox in the claim that "queer" as label and concept cannot and does not travel:

> [Because of social media, many of us now have] access to a discourse that we hadn't really arrived at yet. It took time (…) to make it our own, and have it feed our context. But it did give us something to work with, especially for the English-speaking folks. [For instance] with the word queer. The scores of queer, trans (…) people who've been doing that work to make that language mean something. We learn from that, and we feed off of that, and then we create our own, as it should be. I think it's also very interesting how territorial people get about "but that's not ours, it's the West" (…) there's something that people get very uncomfortable with within that. Instead [we can say], "yes, it doesn't speak to all of our realities, but it gives us something to work with, so that we can create something for our reality." What do you allow influence to be? And is it a passive process? Or is it an active one? (…) One thing social media does is that you're inundated with data and information (…) so you do have to actually be an active participant. And I think often that's the lacking link. And also, aren't we deeply oversimplifying how these words are used? Because even within a Western context, they're not used as the same thing. It's not like everybody means the same thing [when they say queer]. So why should that be how we think of it when we use it?

Niloufer's thoughts chart a way for us to disrupt recurrent binaries of global/local, which position the two as oppositional forces that exist separate of each other. The systems that create what is understood as "local" and "global" must be interrogated, especially in the context of queerness (Hawley, 2001). I argue that there is little political utility in questioning the supposed authenticity of forms of queer and trans identification in the Global South: the fact of their existence is justification enough. It is more useful, instead, to think of "culture as an inherently translocal process," and to approach "globalization as an incitement to both sameness and difference" (Dave, 2012, p. 15). Niloufer's ideas highlight the political possibilities that open up if we progress from the assumption that cultural purity is a myth and instead view culture through the lens of reappropriation, hybridity, and confluence, especially in digital spaces that are at once bordered and borderless.

This is where it becomes important to disrupt approaches that reify the binary between precolonial practices of queerness and "Western" ideas of queerness, whether by turning to the archive to legitimize contemporary queerness, or by simplistically insisting that terms like queer cannot and do not travel. As Niloufer notes, it is evident that such language and concepts have already traveled, mediated as they are by the space of Instagram and other social media platforms, and that this process is not inherently passive. Their reflections on "influence" as an active process illuminate the conscious and constant intellectual work being done in marginal queer and trans digital communities to map out what queerness is and does in the Indian context. As Dave's (2012) work has extensively explored, queer has come to be used as a "radical political frame" in Indian activist communities for several years

now, to signify the "intersectional critique of all forms of limitation" beyond just sexuality (p. 20).

The marking out of "modern" queer identities as inherent to Western culture entrenches the idea that modernity and queerness are inseparable, and that gender/sexual others in the non-West who identify with queer political subject positions are "at best products of capitalism = cultural imperialism and, at worst, its perpetrators" (Savci, 2021, p. 145). This reifies the denial of agency and the dismissal of the work of political translation by queer subjects in India that Niloufer also refers to. Instead, a more productive approach is one that centers hybridities: that looks to the use, employment, and deployment of queer identities in the Global South towards different ends.

For some participants, Instagram also opens up a space for transnational political solidarity beyond single-issue queer/trans politics. Mae (25, Bahujan, trans non-binary) emphasizes that digital exposure to movements like Black Lives Matter informs their queer, trans, disabled, anti-caste politics; for them, global movements have an impact in India and social media "helps contextualize it." They acknowledge that Instagram has a Western bias in terms of the content it serves them, but that once they connected with queer/trans users in other parts of Asia—in their case, Malaysia—their Instagram began to surface even more content to them from queer/trans activists in countries such as Indonesia and Singapore.

Instagram, then, offers a space for queer/trans political agendas and identities to be contested and reconstituted, asserted, and negotiated. It opens up a space for marginal Indian queer/trans users to challenge normative ideas of queerness, and to imagine and articulate a radical politics of queer liberation from a transnational lens, offering new entry points into theorizing and unpacking what queerness is and means in the Indian context.

Online surveillance and censorship

However, as Mae's allusion to Instagram's algorithm illustrates, queer/trans users are still enmeshed in the political economy and governance logics of the online spaces they engage with. Digital platform design and governance is rooted in a Silicon Valley imagination, which impacts user agency and vulnerability. User choice and agency on social media does not exist in a vacuum but is influenced by several factors, including negotiations with platform algorithms, content moderation practices, and audience engagement (Paasonen, 2020). For instance, a desire to maximize audience engagement and minimize moderation could lead to users making strategic choices about when to post something, how long a caption or video should be, and whether to substitute certain terms or phrases that are more likely to flag up automated moderation processes. Digital technologies are not inherently positive or negative—and are therefore also not necessarily drivers of transformative, progressive change—but are molded by their political economic structures and the uses they can be put to (see, for instance, Akhavan, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

Consider Natasha's (29, Bahujan, queer, non-binary) experiences with Instagram suspending the account of the queer anti-caste collective that they co-founded:

> When someone [famous] with a lot of followers has shared one of our posts, we've got major [right-wing] trolls (…)

that come in and start commenting, and then you have to (…) delete those comments and report the person, but nothing happens because obviously Meta doesn't care about right-wing trolls (…) They [the trolls] have done nothing wrong in their eyes. [Instead, one day] we found that (…) our entire profile (…) was not on the internet, [was] no longer on Instagram.

Their experience is not unique. Research from Equality Labs (Soundararajan et al., 2019) shows how a great deal of casteist hate speech remains on Facebook despite being reported—in certain cases, accounts of DBA users themselves are removed or banned. This is put down to the contextual ignorance of Facebook's content moderation practices. DBA activists face disproportionate amounts of "hate speech, trolling, gaslighting, and questioning," and even though Meta now includes caste as a protected category vis-à-vis hate speech on Facebook, it still "routinely fails to implement these safeguards" (Baishya et al., 2023, p. 103).

These structures are replicated across digital platforms. Prior to the 2020 ban, casteist hate speech went unchecked on Indian TikTok, with only one in every 10 such videos reported to the platform being taken down, and a mere 1% of such reported accounts being banned (Christopher, 2019). The probability of harassment, discrimination, and censorship heightens for social media users at the intersections of caste, gender, sexuality, and class marginality (Banaji & Bhat, 2022, p. 84).

For DBA queer and trans users, then, Instagram presents a space of possibility, but also a site of violence, censorship, policing, and near-constant negotiations. Natasha continues:

> Our content doesn't reach a large enough audience (…) I do think that there is a certain level of, not shadowbanning, but (…) a certain type of content get[s] more visibility on Instagram, just by virtue of [what type of content] Instagram pushes. And that's maybe not our content.

The monopoly of huge Global North corporations over social media results in a privileging of Western epistemological approaches to platform design and governance, resulting in a form of digital epistemic injustice (Causevic & Sengupta, 2020). Certain knowledges and narratives are privileged over others in virtual worlds, through practices of content moderation, decision-makers behind digital infrastructures, the predominance of English as the default language of the Internet, and so on. In effect, social media users can reach innumerable others and post whatever they want, but as "only as long as the corporate owners permit it and the algorithms that structure the platform surface it to a broad audience" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 137), and only as long as such content is not summarily taken down when it upsets the status quo.

My interviewees were keenly aware of this tension; it was an awareness that had been built through trying to make sense of their experiences of being moderated and censored. Anandita (27, lesbian), Sarika (25, bisexual, genderqueer), and Vansh (23, transfeminine, queer) work for a digital media collective that encourages conversations around sexuality and desire. Their organization's Instagram is subject to constant censorship and moderation, and the platform's appeals process often yields no results. Sarika points out the deliberate opaqueness of Instagram's algorithm and moderation practices: "Meta does not make itself understandable to

you—it has this air of, 'I am a mystery and you will never understand me, but you're supposed to use me anyway.'" At the same time, they describe it as a "necessary evil," admitting that their Instagram audience reach would not be reproducible offline: "*Tum* on-ground *roz bhi* event *karoge toh tumhe itna* visibility *nahi milega jitna tumko* social media *pe milega* (translation from Hindi: even if you do an on-ground event every day, you won't get the kind of visibility you get from social media)."

In a similar vein, Mae asserts, "[Instagram] is not designed for marginalized people, let's be very honest about it." They continue:

> People feel like if you post anything against the ruling party, or anything which, quote unquote, is deemed anti-Indian, there would be problems with you getting a visa, getting passports, or even getting a government job. So that's a fear I see in a lot of people, people who used to post about all these things have now stopped themselves from doing it, because it would affect them (…) affect their means of livelihood, if they want to leave the country, if they want to go into public services.

Iman (32, Muslim, transfeminine non-binary, pansexual) connects the dots between Hindu nationalism, corporate censorship, and digital policing, through her repeated experiences of being "shadowbanned" (see Savolainen, 2022) on Instagram. She describes having her reach limited and being unable to post something for up to three days, whenever she posts content critical of the government:

> Instagram can very heavily control where your content is served (…) Basically, their solution to is to limit our reach (…) [instead of] taking away the people who are bullying (…) You're going to experience transphobia and racism when you step outside the house, but do you experience it online as well? It makes a difference. [State surveillance] is always at the front of my mind, twenty four by seven, always (…) There's nothing I can do about certain parts of my identity. I can change my name, but I'll still be Muslim, and wherever I go, people will find it out no matter what I do (…) And then the trans thing (…) you can't really hide, so it's going to be there at the forefront all the time. I'm very aware constantly about surveillance because I know that I have and most likely am being surveilled. And that's just the reality I live with (…) We do live in a world where at some point, the reality of UAPA[2] happening for me and me being called a terrorist is very real.

State control and governance heavily structures digital space. Dasgupta and DasGupta (2018) argue that neoliberalism, nationalism, digital technologies, and queerness are entangled in contemporary India. A platform like Instagram, then, may offer radical new opportunities for gender and sexual minorities in India, but it also presents a space for the disciplining and governance of bodies deemed undesirable for the state. With the digital sphere becoming the Indian government's new frontier for "development" and "progress," through neoliberal projects such as *Digital India*, the landscape of queer politics online is changing dramatically. The collusion of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg in *Digital India* (Dasgupta & DasGupta, 2018, p. 9) also gestures to an entanglement of Indian nation state governance and corporate governance in ways that threaten the assumed participatory and free nature of social media.

The BJP government's use of social media to further their campaign goals and fuel Islamophobia has been well-documented (see Sinha, 2017). These activities have either been actively enabled by companies like Meta (Sambhav et al., 2022), or ignored in the interest of the profitability of the Indian market (Purnell & Horwitz, 2021). Following the 2020–2021 farmers' protests against proposed pro-corporate, anti-farmer government bills, Twitter became a key site for political dissent and mobilization by farmers' groups and their allies. To solidify their power over the digital space, the BJP enacted a new law that compels social media platforms to comply with content take-down notices from the government or risk being held legally liable (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Participants are thus increasingly hyper-vigilant in their use of Instagram to express dissent or critique government actions and policy, due to this deliberate consolidation of corporate-governmental power over online space. As evidenced by my interviewees' experiences, Muslim and DBA trans users are particularly vulnerable to excessive surveillance and censorship, which impacts their agency in using such spaces to express dissent and enact a queer politics that is necessarily anti-caste, anti-Hindu-nationalist, and anti-fascist.

Conclusion

There exists a tension between the affordances of Instagram and the policing that undergirds its structure. Instagram's ability to enable dialogue amongst queer/trans users in India and elsewhere opens up interesting transnational and decolonial political possibilities. At the same time, it is simplistic to assert that Instagram, as a form of networked publics, is therefore always dialogic and participative. Instagram may enable mediations of a radical politics of queer liberation, but this potential is also restricted, thwarted, and reconfigured by the design, logics, and political economy of the platform. As Sarika puts it, for queer/trans users, Instagram functions as a "*karela*" (bitter gourd): "*Zeher khaana pad raha hai, par amrut bhi mil raha hai* (translation from Hindi: we're having to eat poison, but we also get some nectar)."

This article offers a theoretical intervention into studies of queer/trans digital cultures in India by analyzing queer and trans political discourse and activism from a transnational and decolonial lens. It emphasizes how studies of queer digital cultures need to be located in analyses of the political economy of digital platforms and its impact on user agency, paying attention to which users are particularly vulnerable to corporate-state nexuses of surveillance and censorship. It is important to locate Indian queer digital cultures in this context, and to build such a critique on the foundation of the queer transfeminist politics, activism, organizing, and experiences of marginal queer and trans people.

Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of the individuals that participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Notes

1. All participant names are pseudonyms, and identity labels are presented as self-described.
2. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, is often described as a law that exists to criminalize dissent in India. The 2019 amendment to the Act allows the Indian government to label and arrest any person as a "terrorist" without the requirement of evidence. It continues to be used as a tool to primarily police and silence Muslim, anti-caste, and left-wing activists and dissenters.

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