



SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF INDIAN QUEER DIASPORA IN USA

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to study and analyse social and cultural differences of India and US and how these differences have created problems and also provided opportunities to Indian diaspora and Indian queer diaspora. It illustrates the affects of social and cultural behaviours of Indian and American society on Indian queer diaspora. It talks about sexual discrimination and homophobia in Indian society and also elaborates the racial discrimination in US and how it has impacted on Indian queer individuals and community. It focuses on the mental health problems of queer individuals and its causes. It also discusses the impact of abolition of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code on Indian queer community.

Keywords: *Indian Queer Diaspora, Indo-American Queer Diaspora, Migration, Racism, Homophobia, Indian and American Culture and Society, Section 377 of IPC.*

Introduction

Differences in social and cultural structures of India and US make its impact on individuals who migrate. Culture of foreign countries do not only have its impact on migrants but often native individuals, families, groups and communities also get highly influenced by the culture and tradition of other countries, for instance, Indians are influenced with American cuisine, apparel, music and other forms of art. Likewise, Americans are also influenced and have shown great interest in Indian cuisine, apparel, festivals and Indian art forms especially classical music and dance. They have also shown interest in learning Sanskrit language and practicing yoga to maintain physical and mental health. From years India and US have been exchanging their cultures to build strong social, political and economic relations. In the era of globalisation not only these two countries but every country believes in learning and exchanging cultures to build social, political and economic relations. These exchanges are important because it helps to

develop economic facet of countries.

In the age of exchanging social and cultural aspects, diasporic individuals try to preserve their homeland's culture and tradition in the host land. Due to geographical distance between homeland and host land they go through loneliness, nostalgia, alienation in the host land, in this situation their homeland's culture and tradition helps them to stay connected with their homeland. This is the main reason that they seek for the community in the host land that share common social and cultural norms. Indian diasporic individuals, families, groups and communities also follow their social and cultural norms in the host land.

Queer individuals live liberally in countries where homosexuality and homosexual marriages are legalised such as US, Canada, Australia, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, etc. India which has also legalised homosexuality in the year 2018 has given hope to queer individuals to live without hiding their

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sexuality. The efforts made by individuals and communities who have formed social movements have helped in the legalisation of homosexuality (Amaya and Gonzalez, 2019).

Indian queer individuals due to Section 377 of Indian Penal Code have migrated to countries that have legalised homosexuality to get freedom to express their sexuality. Indian queer individuals have highly migrated to US especially New York, California, Texas and Los Angeles. They follow their Indian culture while assimilating US culture, to escape racism they join Indian and other South-Asian queer community in US to form their social and cultural identity.

The paper tries to present the differences of social and cultural aspects of India and US. It tries to examine that how these differences have made its impact on migration. It also tries to explore the impact of social and cultural differences of India and US on Indian diaspora and Indian queer diaspora.

Homosexuality, Social and Cultural Behaviours

According to Parasar (2010), Indian society has always been aware of homosexuality but has ignored from years. The main reason of the ignorance must include their lack of communication of alternative sexualities. Indian society has limited itself to the knowledge and concept of heterosexuality from years after the implementation of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code by British Raj. Engaging from long in the dominance of heterosexist society, Indians were used to live in the ignorance of other existing sexualities. Ignorance of other existing sexualities in the society has made Indians to reject the alternative sexualities as soon as they are made aware of alternative sexualities by social movements, queer movements, etc.

Queer individuals face various problems such as discrimination, bullies and rejection in the society where heterosexuality has been seen and taken as the only existing sexuality and homosexuality has been denied and rejected (Chatterjee, 2014; Hart-Brinson, 2016). In the society where queer individuals face discrimination based on their sexual identity, they also face various other social problems such as lack of advances in

health care system, legal rights, education and job system, marriage institutions, etc. Sometimes social discrimination also create homophobic environment in queer individuals' family that parents and other members of the family exclude and banish them from the family or force them to form heterosexual identity by engaging in a heterosexual marriage (Chatterjee, 2014).

Meyer (2003) argues that social disturbances affect queer individuals' mental health. If queer individuals are treated negatively in the social sphere due to their sexual identity then their self-esteem decreases and they go through various mental health issues. Most of the parents who already know their children's homosexuality and fear social and cultural norms of the society try to change their children's homosexuality by forcing them to be in the contact of heterosexual individuals and group and often ask them to cut off their relationships with their homosexual friends (Chatterjee, 2014).

Changes in the society comes with the change of time, in the present era of globalisation, socio-cultural exchanges have brought changes in the thoughts and attitudes of individuals, families, groups and communities. People have become more broad-minded and started accepting new, hidden, and suppressed concepts. Acceptance of homosexuality in societies also depends on the societies' social and cultural changes, various social movements in the support of queer individuals and communities have spread awareness and knowledge about homosexuality in the society. The more people become aware with the notion of homosexuality the more they accept queer people and will stop spreading hate speeches. Social movements, organisations and media have brought awareness and made people to realise the bitter truth of the society where queer individuals have been humiliated, harassed, tortured, abandoned and murdered. Progressively, after many efforts and battle of queer individuals for their rights and justice, many countries have legalised homosexuality and homosexual marriages (Fetner, 2016).

Kumar (2018) says that queer movement has worked for the rights of queer individuals. In India,

queer movements have played a vital role in the abolition of Section 377 of IPC, queer movements in the form of queer film festivals, queer literature, pride marches, elaborating their issues and conditions in social networks have worked and stood equally to other social movements that have taken place in India to bring equality and justice to the suppressed communities. Various NGOs have also supported queer movements in the crucial period of queer movements to provide them human rights and justice in the Indian society.

Social and Cultural Aspects of Indo-American Queer Diaspora

On the questions of preserving Indian culture and tradition, many Indian immigrants said that they have lost interest in the culture and tradition of India, whereas, many claimed to follow their culture and religious values. Kruzykowski (2007) says that the immigrants those have stopped preserving their homeland's cultural and traditional values cannot pass their homeland's cultural and traditional values to their children in the foreign land. Thus, second and third generation Indian immigrants whose parents have not taught their root cultural and traditional values will adopt host land's culture.

Studies have focused on the reasons behind queer migration and came with the various reasons which not only include exploring sexuality and coming out but also social and economic factors. They migrate to different places and countries in search for better education and employment (Felicianantonio and Gadelha, 2016).

India has always been known for its unity in diversity. It has always welcomed individuals, groups and communities who have shared different culture, tradition, religion, etc. It has also welcomed and respected individuals irrespective of their gender and sexual identity. The land which has always given importance to the intelligence and capabilities of individuals has changed gradually after the British Colonial rule. Studies say that queer individuals have always existed in ancient India and there was no such punishment that was implemented on them. In

the modern era, Section 377 of Indian Penal Code was implemented by the British Raj against homosexuality. Section 377 of IPC has raised various problems and issues in the lives of queer people, they were not only punished legally but also hate crimes against them had increased such as they were beaten, threaten, abused, given shock therapy, rusticated from schools, colleges and jobs. Along with these incidents they also lacked support from their family due to parents' homophobia of losing respect in the society. After witnessing and facing abhorrence, queer individuals have started to remain in the closet and also it lead to queer suicides (Parasar, 2010).

Rejection from family and society has made queer individuals to migrate from India to other countries which has legalised homosexuality. Countries such as US and Canada have become desired destination for Indian queer individuals. Many Indian queer individuals have migrated to these countries to start new life away from their family, relatives and Indian society. Most of them have even faced problems in the foreign countries too. And the common problem is racial discrimination which almost every Indian queer individual has faced in US, Canada and other western countries. Even after suffering from discrimination and marginalisation in host land, most of them have settled there with their partners and never thought to come back to India due to its rigidity in accepting their homosexuality (Fetner, 2016).

Changes in the culture of US have changed the mindset of Americans in understanding the notion of homosexuality (Hart-Brinson, 2016). Studies show that most of the Indo-American queer individuals have revealed their homosexuality to their parents and some of them are accepted by their family and some of them have no open conversation with the family about their sexual orientation. With the formation of their own queer community, Indo-Americans feel less loneliness in the foreign land in the case of facing rejection from family (Jacobs and Brown, 1997).

Sandil et al. (2015) elaborate social and cultural stressors of Indian queer diaspora in US in two different categories: internal and external stressors (p. 77). They explain hiding sexual orientation, emotional breakdown comes under internal stressors, whereas, racist and heterosexist discrimination (p. 77) comes under external stressors. They also argue that both internal and external stressors have direct connection with the mental health of queer individuals.

Social and cultural differences in the upbringing of Indian queer and American queer individuals affect their relationships as American queer individuals easily reveal their sexual orientation to their family and friends because of the liberty and freedom of expressing homosexuality in US, thus, American parents easily accept their children's homosexuality. Indian queer individuals cannot reveal their sexual orientation to their family, friends and Indian community as they reject the concept of homosexuality and believe it as unnatural and a part of western culture (Sandil et al., 2015).

Indian queer individuals face racism in US which is another important factor that affects their homosexual life in US. They face racism in the American community as well as American queer community. Hence in US, Indian queer individuals are discriminated and rejected in many ways, in one way if they are accepted homosexual individuals then in other way they are rejected in the American society due to their ethnic identity. Racial discrimination limits their connection and emotional bond with American queer individuals, groups and communities, thus, they connect with Indian and other South-Asian queer individuals with whom he can share his social, cultural and homosexual identities (Sandil et al., 2015).

Researchers have claimed that by adopting American culture and less involving in Indian culture have benefitted Indian queer individuals to establish connection with American queer individuals. Adopting American culture, which accepts homosexuality, has raised confidence in Indian queer individuals. After adopting American

culture Indian queer individuals not only form their sexual identity but also strengthen their confidence in revealing their homosexuality to their parents, family, friends and Indian community. Adoption of American culture by Indian queer individuals has also diminished the percentage of depression and suicidal cases (Sandil et al., 2015).

Abolition of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code and its Positive Affect on Indian Queer Community

With the abolition of Section 377 of IPC, India has raised hope in Indian queer individuals. It has made justice to queer individuals that they can live in India freely with their sexual orientation. Though it has not changed the Indian societal thoughts wholly but gradually Indian society will understand and accept homosexuals. Studies claim that due to the implementation of Section 377 of IPC, many queer individuals have faced social, cultural, political and economic problems as they were not able to reveal their sexuality due to homophobia. They were also rejected internally in all areas including academic and job sectors. They can only find a place in better schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions if they hide their sexuality. And in the revelation of their sexual identity they are rusticated from their academic institutions as well as jobs. Even they were not able to reveal their sexual orientation to their parents, family, friends, etc. This has affected their psychological health and forced many to commit suicide (D'Silva 2018).

Abolition of Section 377 of IPC has provided rights to queer community in India. On 6th September 2018 soon after the declaration of the abolition of Section 377 of IPC, queer community have expressed their happiness by celebrating the victory. Many queer individuals said that it has strengthened them to reveal their sexuality to their parents, and some said that they feel reborn. But some queer individuals and members of NGOs have said that still there are lot of things left which should be put into action to change the mindset of the society (How life has changed, 2020).

Conclusion

Some researchers have claimed that immigrants preserve the culture of their homeland and some have claimed that they gradually lose their interest in their homeland's culture and tradition. As a result, immigrants are more likely to be influenced by foreign land's culture and tradition. Queer immigrants try to preserve their root culture to form their identity but by preserving their root land's culture and tradition they cannot fully accept foreign land's culture and tradition which has given freedom to explore sexuality. Researchers have claimed that adopting foreign land's culture bring benefits to queer immigrants. Indian queer immigrants in US who have adopted American culture have become more confident about their sexuality and forming their sexual identity in the society, it has also given them courage to reveal their sexual identity to their parents. Acculturation has cured depression of many Indian queer immigrants in US. Some researchers have also claimed that bicultural aspect is also increasing hugely as immigrants feel comfortable in preserving their root land's culture while adopting host land's culture. Indian queer individuals in US have faced many social and cultural problems in US such as racism and heterosexual discrimination. Majority of Indian queer individuals do not want to go back to their homeland due to its social and cultural aspects on homosexuality. Though, abolition of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code has given rights and justice to queer individuals. Thus, in future it can be hoped that Indian queer individuals will not migrate to other countries in search of freedom but they will migrate to form their academic life, to improve their economical conditions, etc. Mediums such as social movements, queer movements, social networking, media, literature, films, etc have been used to bring awareness about queer people in the society. Concerning the welfare of homosexuals it is necessary to implement certain laws and policies in India to protect queer human rights and to bring positive changes in the Indian society.

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