

SPECIAL ARTICLE

## Representation of Transgenders in Post-colonial India: Studying the Contemporary 'Trans' Culture in the Queer Pride Parade in Delhi

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**Abstract:** *This research paper is a result of visiting various theatre festivals, meeting people, and participating in social movements. It led me to get out of the mechanical process of reading and writing, something which I am trained for as a researcher; into the real world where I got an opportunity to understand the enigma of the 'transgender'. The aim was not only to enlighten 'others' on transgender issues, but also an effort to educate the 'self' on what it really is. Over the years from my childhood to adulthood, I formed several biases about 'third' gender that was largely due to belonging to a society with a parochial outlook. If I dig into my memories, I get glimpses of how 'such people' were different from 'us'. I saw them either begging for money at traffic signals, or being invited by people to perform at the birth of a new-born baby. I never encountered them except these two occasions as if they had never existed. This research paper, thus is an endeavour towards finding that missing link in understanding this alternate gender identity and unravel the mystery of the 'transgender' in India. This will be done by studying and interpreting the documented materials of Delhi Queer Pride Parade held in January 2023.*

**Keywords:** Transgenders, Gender Bias, Delhi, Pride Parade

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transgender issues, but also an effort to educate the 'self' on what that really is. Over the years from my childhood to adulthood, I formed several biases about 'third' gender that was largely due to belonging to a society with a parochial outlook. If I dig into my memories, I get glimpses of how 'such people' were different from 'us'. I saw them either begging for money at traffic signals, or being invited by people to perform at the birth of a new-born baby. I never encountered them except these two occasions as if they had never existed. This research paper, thus is an endeavour towards finding that missing link in understanding this alternate gender identity and unravel the mystery of the 'transgender' in India. This will be done by studying and interpreting the documented materials of Delhi Queer Pride Parade held in January 2023.

For this paper, one would assume a cisgender's standpoint. As our worldview is largely shaped by experiential things, therefore lack of experience means one would be deficient in explaining them. Hence the transgender authors, researchers and activists are the real flagbearers of this quest- to narrate the trans experience as they have lived it. So, why is the cisgender outlook important? Regardless of being authentic, a completely trans inclusive viewpoint would make the transgender discourse very insulated. How do the non-trans people view and respond to the 'transgender question' is equally relevant in the larger debate. It would add new layers of perspectives to the study.

As the paper title suggests that it would deal with 'representation' of transgenders; but what does it mean in the first place? The British Marxist sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall discusses the salient features of 'representation' in his Representation Theory.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, according to Hall, the common notion about representation seems threefold. Either it means to "present or depict or image"<sup>2</sup> or it means to 're-present' the meaning which was already there. Even political entities 'represent' us in the sense that they stand in for us. Hall finds this meaning too traditional or literal which should be challenged. In simple words, representation deals with giving meaning to things that are depicted. These things can be either words or image. A lot of work in the media studies deals with finding this gap between what is really meant and how it is represented in different media. However, since there is no one fixed true meaning, can this gap be really measured? For instance, let us say that the government authorities decide to meet in Delhi to discuss political unrest, but to decipher what lies underneath is a formidable task. It is important to know the backstory, what does each participant want and what will be the possible consequences of the meeting. There will never be one interpretation. Therefore, Hall asserts that "representation does not really capture the process at all, as there was nothing absolutely fixed in the place to 'represent'".<sup>3</sup> The meaning does not exist until it has been represented. Representation will change as meaning moves through different people, groups, communities, and historical moments. Therefore, the updated definition of 'representation' would view it as constitutive of the event. It is not

outside, but within the event itself. Even for this paper, every time some material is scrutinized, new meaning would be generated. Therefore, covering a Parade, that focuses on trans folks would all add to the meaning of the 'transgender' means. The methodology employed has been that of Participant Observation 'which is a widely used method in tourism and festival studies'<sup>4</sup> and is a type of qualitative field research method. The study is exploratory and inductive in nature. It also falls under the broader Cultural Studies.

As the 'trans' cultural scene is to be discussed in the paper, it would be interesting to include Hall's views on culture. According to him, culture helps us to understand the world. However, this process does not happen in isolation. A social world is built only if people share their ideas with each other. There are shared 'conceptual maps'<sup>5</sup> which groups of members of a culture or society share together. This is acquired and not natural. We tend to absorb the shared maps of meaning with other people in our culture, and thus, we are cultural subjects and not only biological ones. Hall views these conceptual maps as a system of representation. Concepts help us to imagine things even after they have disappeared from the naked eye. This takes place with the help of language which externalizes the meanings we make. 'It is at this point that representation begins to take off and close the circle of representation'.<sup>6</sup>

It is to be noted that as meanings exist only in a particular discourse, so the 'transgender' holds value only in the gender discourse. Media is one of the most powerful and extensive systems for circulation of meaning. The authentic way for this circulation would be one to one interaction with people. It is common knowledge that the sense of personal touch in communication has been replaced with the advent of technology resulting in the extensive spreading of meaning though textual, visual, and oral media. Therefore, the question of dissemination of meaning involves the question of power, 'who acts out the power? In what channel to circulate the meanings? And to who?'<sup>7</sup> When representation is discussed, one cannot but address the questions of power.

This was very evident in the Delhi Queer Parade held on 8th January, 2023 from Barakhamba Road to Jantar Mantar. It is usually held in November in Delhi every year but in 2023, it was organized after a hiatus of 3 years due to the devastating Covid-19 pandemic. As I was not only a participant observer but a festival visitor too, it is important to describe what does participant observation means. 'Academic deliberations have argued that participant observation involves fieldwork, produces qualitative data, and has been recognised as the most appropriate method to investigate interactions and meanings of actions from the insiders' perspective'.<sup>8</sup>

According to Burgess<sup>9</sup> and Spradley<sup>10</sup> claim that participant observation is about observing participants in a setting and participating in the activity. So, it is not just 'looking', but also 'listening and talking to the people being studied'.<sup>11</sup> 'It has always been believed that during participant observations, researchers can adopt different immersive roles, from complete observer to complete

participant'.<sup>12</sup>

'The sensory experience allows festival visitors to meet people and discover places, just like researchers do in the field. For instance, Bennet and Woodward<sup>13</sup> claim that cultural festivals are sites for socio-cultural encounters via 'sensual and embodied experience based on engagement with different taste, sounds, forms of dress and behaviour, and cultural norms'' (Rossetti 1888).

### Decoding the Delhi Queer Pride Parade 2022-23



Figure 1. Delhi Queer Pride 2022-2023

The Delhi Queer Pride Parade was an aesthetic site to be explored as a researcher (see Figure 1.). It was an amalgamation of asexuals (see Figure 2.), the crossdressers (see Figure 3.), Dalit activists and disabled folks. Famous trans activist and performer Manobi Bandhopadhyay, the head of the Kinnar Akhada (representing the Hindu Hijras) primarily was also present. Thus, this Queer Parade brought together an interesting potpourri of individuals often viewed as marginalized in the post-colonial Indian society.



Figure 2. Asexuality is not a Choice



Figure 3. The Crossdressers

It was quite fascinating to see the raising of captivating slogans like 'Inquilaab Zindabaad' that translates to 'Long Live the Revolution' ('Inquilaab Zindabaad meaning').<sup>14</sup> This is a phrase that was widely used during the Indian Independence struggle when the country was still under the reins of colonialism. Then, freedom meant gaining independence from the long-standing colonial rule. But now, freedom in the post-colonial world means more about exercising an individual's freewill alongside being a social organism. As per the civil rights activist Kimberle Crenshaw's paper,<sup>15</sup> we are a product of intersectionalities, it holds true for post-colonial Indian subjects as well. We are striving to maintain a balance between our multi-dimensional identities like caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity etc. all at once. This is possible only by treading the road less travelled. Thus, this Queer Parade gave that pathway to such aspirants.

Deconstructing the meaning behind the thoughts of the participants was a challenging task. There was an elevated platform near Jantar Mantar where one protestor addressed the audience in Hindi, 'Koi bhi na chhupe. Hum sab shaant hain, hum sab ek saath hain, hum ek family hain, hum family ke sath ladenge'. He was mobilizing the crowd but at the same time stressed upon the idea of 'unity in diversity' as it was a pluralistic convention.

Another activist asked people, 'Kya chahte ho?', to which the audience replied, 'Azaadi'. He expects them to fill the missing words of the sentence while he utters, 'Mere jeene ki....tere jeene ki....sabke jeene ki' And the audience completes the sentence saying, 'Azaadi'.<sup>16</sup> They are associating queerness to the right to freedom as also aforementioned. It is also a clarion call for people to have a sense of belonging, so that they can come out of their closet and claim their rightful place in society.

Moving on, there were also present sign language translators for the audiences with hearing impairments. It meant that the Queer Parade was also addressing the disabled visitors who turned up to show their solidarity with the Queer. This assembly can also be analysed from a 'crip' lens which deals with the convergence of Queer and Disability Studies in academia and in the real world.

There was another campaigner who addressed the audiences in English saying,

*"We march against the systemic prosecution of the minorities, especially not limited to Muslims, Dalits, Bahujans, Adivasis and Christians. We march against the instigators of hatred and terror and denounce lynchings in the name of caste, religion, and region. We march to protest deforestation, climate injustice and the forced relocation of the indigenous people from their homelands. We march to protest corporate looting of our forests and reserves. We march to protest for our right to breathe. We march to protest for the people who we have lost in the Covid pandemic which has affected disproportionately to the queer and trans people. We march to demand healthcare and dignity for all against discrimination by medical institutions. We march for mental health,*



*against ablism for affirmative action or inclusion. We march to end sexual violence in support of survivors. We march against censorship in the media, universities, all egalitarian rights. We march against the unlawful harassment and attacks at activists across the country".<sup>17</sup>*

She in her speech has encompassed all the sections of the society who have been struggling despite their gender, class, caste, creed and disabilities. So, anyone who is away from the conventions of the mainstream culture, and does not resonate with Brahminical, elitist and heterosexual hegemony in the society is referred to as queer.

There was yet another participant who spoke, 'We march for our ancestors because of them we are here today'. While some other protestor shouted, 'Cheers to people who continue to speak the truth and to power...'. It was a reference to the predecessors in various kinds of social movements in the past, people who have fought for equality for all.

One placard read (see Figure 4.), 'Uske gharwaale maan gaye but government nahin maani' taking a jibe at the Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) whose roots can be traced back to the colonial times. The British Penal Code 1860 had criminalized, 'Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine'.<sup>18</sup> It was a colonial burden which continued post-independence. It was in 2018 when Section 377 was deemed unconstitutional after the Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India verdict. This shows how the members of the LGBTQIA+ community are legally aware and value the long battle the community had to fight for their voice to be heard. Having said this, the cultural and social inclusion is still very much a work under progress.



Figure 4. "Uske Gharwaale Maan Gaye... Par Government Nahin Maani!!!", Courtesy: Queersaathi



Figure 5. "I Eat Fucking Gender Norms for Breakfast"

Another slogan read 'I Eat Fucking Gender Norms for Breakfast' (see Figure 5 above), which was a defiance to the set gender roles in society. As the feminist theorist Butler also writes in her seminal book *Gender Trouble*,<sup>19</sup> how gender is a performance that is carried out in everyday life, and this is constantly repeated to fix meaning to it. Thus, this social construction needs to be overturned as adherence to stereotypes of society is a smothering experience for some people, especially who are genderqueer. Butler's assertion in this book gave way to Queer Studies, but it is also apt for Transgender Studies which goes a step ahead by 'queering' the queer and acknowledging the presence of gender variations in society that cannot fit into gay/lesbian binaries.

It would be interesting to quote an interaction I had with a transvestite professor in the parade whom few years ago, I had also met at a liberal arts university.<sup>20</sup> They used a masculine name and were extremely popular among their students. As a result, their class was very responsive. They wore sarees in vibrant hues and were praised for their fashion. But why did it raise so many eyebrows? This was because the expectations of onlookers were very visibly incongruent to the reality due to the following three reasons. Firstly, the professor was exhibiting a very genderfluid persona which was a clear act of resistance to the traditional gender norms. Secondly, since transgenders are expected to be marginalized entities, and therefore more vulnerable as compared to other genders; in this case, there was a contradiction. They were at the center of attention and were very much 'mainstream' society. Thirdly, finding one in an educational institution as an instructor was even a greater shock as general perception is that all transgenders are unlettered. But what is absent in their identity also gains meaning. Thus, reality and expectations both constitute 'representation.' Even the onlookers of the professor were helping to give meaning to this representation.

This professor was making an identity claim. This claim is made on a recognition which is invested in the practice of 'representation' of the self. Even in the media studies, 'no advertising could work without associating a claim on identity. The whole range of visual imagery comes with an identification tag. Advertising tries to construct a position of identification for the viewer in relation to what is depicted in the image'.<sup>21</sup> Even if it does not match one's real life, but one needs to imaginatively identify oneself with it for the meaning to make sense. Referring again to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall who in the same lecture as aforementioned says, "It works only if the viewer is implicated in the production of meaning. Images flood us and barrage us with meaning as if we can stand outside and be there, but the fact is because they constantly construct us through our fantasy relationship to the image as in the way it implicates us in the meaning and that is what bothers us. We are not bothered because we are barraged by something which does not mean anything to us, we are bothered because we are caught in the meaning which has been taken from it."<sup>22</sup> This is why, with respect to this aforesaid professor, we all were uncomfortable as we

were implicated into judging them, especially because they are behaving contrary to our perception of normalcy.

Accordingly, 'representation' is based on interpretation. Meaning thus, is the process of interpretation as "it always shifts from one historical setting to another. It is always contextual, one meaning can have stronger meaning than another only in a certain context, i.e., which is more plausible reading of an interpretation. But we cannot say that a reading is true while the other one is false".<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusive Thoughts: Critique of the Delhi Queer Parade**

It is ironic that meaning depends upon a certain fixing, but it cannot be finally fixed, it is not constant. Likewise, power also works in a similar way and tries to fix the meaning in a language. The attempt to fix it, is why power intervenes in 'representation' at all. Power through use of ideology tries to naturalize the meaning so that it is the only meaning it can possibly carry. This was also visible in the Queer Parade that was documented. Despite all the genuine intentions, it reeked of elitism. There was a narrative that was propagated only by the dominant class of participants. Since this mostly focuses on the transgenders, I would talk about the elitism with respect to transgenders only and not the other minority groups. It was noteworthy that there was not a single instance in the entire Parade that I could find transgender people from the lower rungs of the society. All of them looked well educated and were well-dressed clearly flaunting their 'class' on their sleeve. The underprivileged transgenders were completely and visibly absent. Since meaning of what is represented is also formulated by what is absent, it shows that this movement failed to incorporate them in their purview. I have vivid memories of my childhood where I have seen transgenders begging on the streets and in trains. But they were missing from this representative group in the Parade. Even though this Parade is a very good initiative but it is still not inclusive of all the sections of society. An initiative becomes a revolution if it is instrumental in bringing a social transformation. If such a large chunk of the transgender community is missing, the society still is miles away from being reformist.

Hall in his lecture also tries to provide a solution to this problem of 'representation'. It needs to be de-politicised by going inside the image itself. 'He believes that because stereotypes are complex to comprehend, it has somehow to occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and close representations'.<sup>24</sup> He suggests to develop strategies to use the stereotype to turn them against themselves. It has to open up the very practice of representation itself as a practice. Closure in representation naturalises the meaning of representations and you cannot see that anybody ever produced it. It slowly becomes a cliché and seems to misrepresent reality. The very act of opening up the practice of representation reposes questions: Where do images come from? Who produces images? How is meaning closed down in



representation? Who is silenced in the production of images? Interrogating stereotypes makes them inhabitable and destroys its naturalness and normality."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the thorough analysis of the Delhi Queer Pride Parade juxtaposing it with Halls's views on representation showed that the stereotypes normalized by society will be questioned and challenged only if they are represented in the first place. The class-divide among the transgenders in India is a harsh reality which needs to be addressed especially with respect to their representation in activism. Queer Parades should not be limited only to the rich and privileged trans people, but also the poor, middle class working population who are struggling to make their ends meet. This hierarchy needs to be broken to assimilate them in the larger social fabric of a gender inclusive society.

### Notes and References (Endnotes)

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  17. Walia, Saloni, 'Queer Parade Speech by Woman', *Filmed* 8th January 2023, 1:38  
[https://youtu.be/eqwlLaW\\_VoU](https://youtu.be/eqwlLaW_VoU)
  18. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1836974/>
  19. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)
  20. I would be using the pronouns "They/them" to refer to the professor. For purpose of anonymity, I would not be mentioning their name.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Ibid.
  23. Ibid.
  24. Ibid.
  25. Ibid.