BUILDING SOLIDARITY THROUGH DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of political belonging has been a contested problem in Assam due to the disharmony between pan-Indian frames and the local voices of a religiously and linguistically diverse, multi-ethnic state. Public spaces in Northeast India need to be understood with the geopolitical context of its regions, where access is gendered, socially exclusive, and more often than not marked by political uncertainty. There are states in the Northeast that have a history of communal tensions, and have legal and democratic arrangements co-deployed with counter-insurgency operations. Being perceived as 'disturbed' states due to armed resistance by indigenous communities for autonomy or self-governing territories, these regions continue to fight an unresolved battle for citizenship rights.

Access to public spaces in Assam for socially and ethnically marginalised identities is constrained by the ongoing political tensions

between different ethnic communities concerning the issue of 'illegal infiltration' by migrant communities, steered by ethno-nationalist groups of the state. The recent implementation of the National Register for Citizenship (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have complicated the social and political environment in the state, and have further increased vulnerabilities for communities that have traditionally been placed 'outside' the state's political imagination.

A public health crisis with the spread of Covid-19 has further limited access to public spaces by bringing changes to the cultural, economic, and political environment of the state, and led to increasing unemployment, poverty, and other structural inequalities. The state-imposed lockdown confined people to their household spaces and threatened livelihoods by altering people's social and public lives. Restrictions in mobilisation of large groups brought a drastic shift in the culture of protests and methods of activism for collectives and organisations in different states. In Assam, however, this shift can be traced to a few months before the pandemic. In fear of communal tensions, the state remained under curfew with the imposition of Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This prevented people from mobilising in public spaces. To restrict communication and information sharing among people, a state-sanctioned complete internet ban was imposed for several days across many districts. At the same time, Assam witnessed political unrest against CAA with an outpouring of participation by women, artists, scholars, and activists opposed to the implementation of the act, which they believed had failed to rightly represent the sentiments and expectations of the people of Assam.

On the other hand, NRC, which released its final draft of 'legitimate citizens' in 2019, has been popularly accepted by mainstream Assamese-speaking Hindu ethno-nationalists. It was and has always been a long-overdue demand put forward during the Assam Agitation, believed to be the only solution to 'infiltration' by Bengali-speaking Muslims in the state, which had led to a loss in tribal

commons (Sharma 2019). There, however, remain sections of society that oppose NRC for its exclusionary nature and the failure of the state to include and represent marginalised communities in Assam.

Sexually marginalised communities who have restricted access to public spaces to assert their rights for civil liberties and justice have opposed the implementation of NRC in the state because it fails to be adequately gender-inclusive. The All Assam Transgender Association (AATA) has claimed that 2,000 transgender persons were left out of the final NRC draft released in 2019. Women's organisations, queer and youth-led LGBTQ+ collectives from Assam and different parts of the country have come out in support to oppose the nature and manner of implementation of NRC in Assam.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a shift in the method of activism followed by organisations and collectives, with more reliance on digital technology to create alternate spaces and for continuing dialogue and dissent. Technological advancement among communities has enabled the representation of individual stories and collective modalities as they play a vital role in building intersectional solidarity across movements. However, the shift in forms of activism is not only a consequence of the pandemic, but also historical processes of gendered, social, and political exclusion of women and those belonging to sexually marginalised communities that have constantly negotiated with systemic structures to create alternate safer spaces for themselves.

Digital spaces have been popular and relevant among urban protest cultures in Assam because they enable easier and faster communication among diverse groups, and influence both online, and offline methods of dissent for civil liberties, democracy, and social justice. There is a renewed form of feminist politics that arises from the conjunction of digital platforms and activism today (Baer 2016).

This paper focuses on the use of online spaces by organisations and collectives in Assam to represent the politics of queer, LGBTQ+, and non-normative genders in the Northeast, especially in the context of the state's implementation of NRC and CAA. It conceptualises digital spaces through the internet's interactive features, as I believe that these

have enabled us to build intergenerational solidarity (Pruchniewska 2016) and connect with activists, movements, and social workers across borders. The paper acknowledges ethnic, caste, and class divisions that make online spaces exclusive, and understands this from the point of view of feminist politics of LGBTQ+ communities in Assam.

Citizenship rights in Assam reflect a peculiar colonial relationship that the state continues to share with the rest of the country. The issue of 'illegal' migration from neighbouring Bangladesh has been a long-contested problem in Assam, and is believed to be a direct threat to indigenous identities (Sharma 2019). NRC has always been perceived as a legal solution for issues that have influenced political mobilisation in Assam since the mid-20th century (Barbora 2019). NRC's implementation, a policy that had been under debate since the 1950s, was fast-tracked with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power in 2016, in alliance with the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP). The reason NRC faces resistance from certain communities is because of its exclusionary nature that ascertains citizenship rights for people through lineage, which is not only communal but also makes it an extremely gendered policy (Sharma 2019). Proof of lineage has to be provided through legacy documents of property, educational qualifications, and electoral identity cards or government-approved documents that can prove a family's residency in Assam on or before 24 March 1971. Not only does the requirement of such legacy documents have an aura of middle-class respectability (Barbora 2019), it also shows the government's efforts to only recognise and safeguard a heterosexual familial system that is Hindu and upper-caste. When citizenship rights get ascertained through lineage, the people who fall outside the heterosexual familial structure face the threat of political disenfranchisement. Sexually marginalised identities often move away from their biological families because they face domestic violence, lack of acceptance, and stigma. This leads many to live with their chosen families instead, and change their names from the ones assigned to them at birth. NRC is not a policy that is structured to consider the

challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities, as it has been almost impossible for many to access documents of legacy and get enlisted in the final draft with their actual names and not the ones that they have forsaken.

The politics of sexually marginalised identities needs to be understood with an awareness of nation-state policies that have presented themselves in favour of a sexual democracy (Richardson, 2017). The state's recognition of the rights of non-normative identities through the NALSA judgement of 2014 and the abolition of Section 377 indicated a possible future of social inclusion and equal representation for these sections. However, support for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 by the same state has been a setback for the movement and for the idea of democracy. There has been large-scale resistance to the act by the LGBTQ+ community and by activists who have compared this act to CAA, as they both ignore issues faced by a community while claiming to address them. Such policies highlight the conditions under which a state extends its citizenship rights to the LGBTQ+ communities by often leaving heteronormative assumptions unchallenged (Richardson 2017).

As I try to theorise the close links between sexual marginality and a nation-state's migration policies, it becomes imperative to think of the forms of conditionality that almost always come with the assignment of citizenship rights to non-normative identities. These forms of conditionality demand a particular modality of sexual citizenship, 'one that is privatised, de-politicised, de-eroticised and domesticated, and likely to lead to a decentring of sexual identity' (Richardson 2017). There remains very little scope for sexually marginalised identities to organise their activism outside the norms of a state while making demands for political and social justice. The language of resistance is shaped by the imagined boundaries of a modern nation-state that causes an 'advocate's dilemma' (White 2014). The dilemma of advancing migrant justice rights within the context of the nation-state, where the problematic common between migrant politics and queer

politics is that of activist tactics and the imaginaries of their long-term goals.

The unprecedented growth in media and communication has influenced the political economy where communication, representation, and publicity have increasingly defined public culture (Chaudhuri, 2019). The use of social media has had an impact on the culture of activism in collectives, organisations, and individuals, and has influenced feminist methods of mobilisation, dialogue, and networking in urban metropolitan spaces. Digital platforms have aided the weaving of local stories with global narratives and movements to highlight common structural inequalities across borders. For communities that have been under constant surveillance in physical spaces, such spaces have helped overcome spatial inequalities for those who have had the resources to access them. There have been instances where online platforms have aided transnational solidarity across different movements in other parts of the world. The #MilkTeaAlliance comprising of an online coalition of activists from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan against the increasing influence of China is an example of young protestors across borders collectively opposing authoritarianism to demand for democratic reforms with the help of digital platforms. In Southeast Asian political struggles, one of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movements, called the Umbrella Movement, that began in 2014, helped conceal the identities of the protestors who wanted to spread information, mobilise demonstrators, and avoid detainment by the state. Thinking of similar movements in India, I am drawn towards the recent situation in Assam during the CAA protests when the state imposed an internet shutdown to avoid mobilisation and the spread of 'hate speech.' With a long history of military presence in Assam, it has become essential to understand the reasons why a state considers digital media to be a threat to democracy and peace. It highlights the possible impact digital spaces might have on the people, as restrictions on congregating in physical spaces have not been enough to stop people from challenging the state.

While I could not trace any specific visible and organised digital movements among the people of Assam and beyond its borders in the context of citizenship rights, it is worth noting that the absence of accessible data on such alliances does give an insight into the nature of organisation and the process of collectivising in Assam, specifically for issues of social and political rights.

There are instances where global movements by queer communities have made use of digital media for their campaigns, like the 'Let Alvaro Stay' online campaign that started in Canada in 2011 and helped communities build collective pressure on the state to stop it from detaining an undocumented queer artist as an illegal migrant (White, 2014). Online spaces have also been fertile ground for individuals and collective movements to extend their solidarity to other social movements across borders. In Assam, an LGBTQ+ collective called Xomonnoy shared its experiences of extending support to global and India-based online movements like the #enviornmentmovementforfuture and the movement for gender-neutral toilets at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). It has collaborated with several other organisations and movements, one of which is Pink List India, an online archive with information about politicians who support LGBTQ+ rights in India. Pink List is a queer political archive that essentially aims to hold parliamentarians accountable for their statements about sexually marginalised identities to ultimately build a network of politicians across parties that make queer issues a political imperative.

As I point to some of the successful ways in which digital platforms have been used for organising activism, I am aware of how digital media can have both democratising and hierarchising tendencies that directly depend on the users and the context of usage (Dasgupta, 2018). The fundamental questions that need to be asked are who gets to be part of digital spaces and how representative are the discourses in such spaces?

For this paper, I spoke to LGBTQ+ collectives and organisations in Assam to understand their approach, politics, and use of digital spaces. I interviewed the founders of the collective Xomonnoy and organisations Xukia and Anajoree, all based in Guwahati. To gain insights into the patterns of activism for LGBTQ+ communities outside Guwahati, I spoke to the founder of Xobdo, a youth organisation in Tezpur.

METHODOLOGY

Xomonnoy was founded by a group of LGBTQ+ activists who gained confidence to build their own informal space after Section 377, where the court ruled in favour of decriminalising homosexuality; this helped their thoughts materialise into a collective on 1 November 2018. They are an unregistered collective who define themselves as an intersectional queer feminist group with a considerable presence on online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Xukia on the other hand is an informal youth-led organisation in Guwahati that pioneered the first pride walk in Assam. It is a queer support group that organises film screenings, workshops, and panel discussions to build awareness about LGBTQ+ issues in Assam. Anajoree is an extension and brain-child of one of Xukia's members. This is a non-profit platform that has been using the virtual media space to build a network among people working in different social movements in the Northeast and across other states in India. Xobdo is an organisation that is working to create a dialogue on issues of women and LGBTQ+ communities in Tezpur through initiatives like working with students to create awareness through education in its region.

Interviews with members of these collective and organisations focused on the relevance of digital spaces, experiences of violence and surveillance, the scope for intersectional representation, and the state's influence on the right to citizenship for the LGBTQ+ community in Assam.

Before the interviews, I built a rapport with the participants by discussing mutual topics of interest and giving them a broader understanding of my research objectives and intentions. I used snowball sampling to identify participants and conducted semi-structured interviews with interested members of organisations and collectives. As a result of the lockdown during the pandemic and the CAA protests in Assam, the interviews had to be conducted through recorded telephonic calls with the consent of the participants. The limitation of distant and non-face-to-face interviews was the inability to take participant observation notes. Therefore, to make up for this shortcoming and gather as much information, several follow-up interviews were conducted with the same research participants who were kind enough to interact with me in formal and informal capacities.

This paper is divided into three broad sections -- Intersectionality, Digital Activism, and Activism in the Northeast that are built and theorised through the participants' narratives.

INTERSECTIONALITY: LOCATING THE 'DIFFERENCE'

In an era where online spaces have been highly influenced by neo-liberal norms of self-reliance and self-promotion, it is imperative to ask if the collective spaces that have been created on such platforms, that (Baer 2016) terms 'micro-rebellions' of digital feminism are capable of bringing any structural changes in a system. I acknowledge that online spaces are only accessed by persons who have a considerable amount of privilege, and so this section tries to understand how LGBTQ+ collectives and organisations conceptualise intersectionality and address this gap in their own spaces by exploring some of their initiatives on building an inclusive environment. The questions that this section explores are: which voices get represented in online spaces, and how is the concept of 'difference' addressed through these initiatives?

In my conversation with Shivalal from the Xomonnoy collective, we discussed the concept of 'intersectionality' to understand why the collective defines itself as an intersectional feminist group. The idea

of intersectionality for the collective is recognising the different issues that affect the queer community directly or indirectly by moving away from homogenous assumptions about the LGBTQ+ community. Xomonnoy understands why it needs an intersectional approach in the context of urban spaces, and it has made a conscious effort to build a presence beyond Guwahati in other parts of Assam such as Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Chirang, and Lamping. Shivalal said:

> Even though we are an informal collective in an online space, before the pandemic we organised meet-up sessions where we ensured engagement with diverse groups within the community. We have reached out to queer persons from different tribes, ethnic communities, and marginalised groups for whom being queer has only added to the violence that they face.

Xomonnoy has been organising sessions and awareness activities in other parts of Assam by collaborating with local organisations and activists in these regions. This has helped them learn about the specific problems faced by the LGBTQ+ community in these areas and involve people from the community in awareness building programmes and activities. During the pandemic, they managed to keep in touch and coordinate such activities through online groups, telephonic conversations, and chat services. They also spoke about reaching out to people in offline spaces through personal contacts and providing support. Shivalal shared a specific instance of supporting known street vendors in a nearby locality by using their online presence to raise funds for families in financial distress who were gravely affected by the pandemic.

We also discussed intersectionality within sexually marginalised communities of Assam in the context of Xomonnoy's activism, and the differences between the LGBTQ+ community and the Hijra community and the reason Xomonnoy has not directly engaged with persons from the Hijra community in Assam. However, he explained how the pandemic brought about some changes in this relationship,

> We mostly work with LGBTQ+ persons who do not belong to the Hijra gharana. During the pandemic, the Hijra community in Guwahati reached out to us, as like everybody else they too were facing issues of food security and needed some help with their fundraising activities. Xomonnoy managed to raise Rs 60,000 in a week for the community, which went towards supporting rations for 15 persons for several days. We used our online platform to raise funds with the help of videos and by sharing information in our networks.

As the Hijra community in India is a systematically organised heterogeneous group which works on the system of discipleship lineage and is an institutionalised sub-culture of transgender persons, there is a distant sense of association between collectives of LGBTQ+ communities and the Hijra community in Assam. Reflecting on my conversation with Shivalal, there are class differences in Xomonnoy's modes of activism and its ability to successfully execute fund-raising initiatives on online platforms. While it does indicate middle-class visibilisation of queer differences within the LGBTQ+ culture in urban developing cities, it is essential to also be conscious of the growing literature in the west which suggests that LGBTQ+ recognition and visibility only caters to elite queers for nationality, citizenship, and socio-cultural respectability (Dutta 2012). There is a need to problematise this discourse as the activist institutions of LGBTQ+ groups in postcolonial India are heterogeneous, complicated, and internally contested (Dutta, 2012).

To understand Xomonnoy's activism in the context of Dalit issues and caste inequalities, and whether they occupy as much space in the collective's approach to other issues of the LGBTQ+ community, Shivalal's response gave an interesting insight into its understanding of communities in Assam:

> The reality of Assam and its most pressing issue is that of ethnic conflict. Though caste politics remains a pressing challenge in society, what lies at the heart of unrest in Assam is ethnicity. We connect with queer persons from different parts of the state

> with the help of digital platforms and discuss broader issues such as health, violence, and ethnic insecurity. Our collective doesn't aim to have an NGO-ised agenda when we are building networks around the state, instead we work to create more dialogue and awareness about queer communities and encourage every district to have its group or collective to discuss the problems that LGBTQ+ persons face in their areas. We don't believe that something should come up because we are pushing for it as this won't last. Things should come up because people in that region feel that there is a need for them and we want to be there to help with this.

For some LGBTQ+ persons, having an intersectional approach in online spaces has also meant reaching out in solidarity to other social movements that work towards addressing social inequalities, discrimination, and unequal access to resources. Intersectionality as a concept shows the linkages between discriminatory practices of caste, class, ethnicity, and sexuality that define everyday struggles for emancipation (Subramanian, 2015). In Milind, a trans man based in Guwahati and a member of Xukia, spoke about how the organisation worked with animal welfare groups and environment conservation movements to broaden its activism,

> The goal is to work for the Northeast and understand LGBTQ+ issues as connected to other aspects of society. The environment is as much connected to issues of gender and sexuality as it is to climate change. At Xukia, we aim to work together with LGBTQ+ organisations and extend our support to organisations that help rescue animals and stop animal cruelty.

Milind is also the founder of Anajoree, which organised a series of webinars to connect with organisations and activists from different social movements across India. One of the issues that was raised in the webinars was language and the reason most content was only available in English. For the LGBTQ+ organisation in Assam, language has been a barrier in bringing about awareness and in its outreach work. Milind said,

> We wanted to do some of our webinars in Assamese, but it has been a challenge to talk about gender and sexuality in this language because there are so many words that are missing in the Assamese language that are essential for talks on sexuality.

Despite being optimistic about the presence of intersectional voices on social media, it is an undeniable fact that many still fall outside these privileged zones. The penetration and influence of the internet in India has a long way to go still and access to such spaces is still a matter of class privilege. However, social media is also believed to have influenced issues that are represented in the mainstream media, which has a greater reach among people (Subramanian 2015). Thus, it is essential to understand the discourses, the nature of conversations, and the kinds of dialogue that these online spaces encourage.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM: WHY ONLINE PLATFORMS?

Online spaces are fast becoming an essential platform for organising protests and mobilising people for rallies, gatherings, and other events such as film screenings and discussions on specific issues and contemporary politics. These spaces have had an impact on feminist activism across different communities through social media campaigns that are devoted to raising feminist consciousness among their circles (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017). Platforms in digital spaces have enabled people to go beyond localised activism and build networks with movements from different regions across borders. In this section, I envisage digital spaces in correlation with activism in physical spaces, and emphasise how digital platforms have helped or aided activism by different groups across spaces. The Supreme Court ruling on 11 December 2013 that upheld Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code instigated activists from different cities to collectivise and call for a Global Day of Rage, which was coordinated with the help of a Facebook page to build a network with 31 cities across the world (Subramanian, 2015). LGBTQ+ activists in Assam had a public demonstration on 15 December 2013 in opposition to the state's

ruling and demanded equal rights for their community. This event is believed to have encouraged activists to organise the first pride walk in Assam the following year.

I aim to move away from limiting my understanding of the digital new wave as a break from earlier forms of activism, and look at it as a continuation of feminist politics into newer spaces that supplement activism in offline spaces (Pruchniewska 2016). The wave metaphor runs the danger of pitting feminists against feminists, as it gives the image of hierarchising generational differences (Pruchniewska 2016). Gilda Seddighi (2014) in her ethnographic study on the case of Iranian Mothers of Park Laleh highlights that there exists a strength that is drawn from the effective labour of women who meet in physical spaces. However, as groups shift to online spaces, a different kind of labour starts being valued, one where the social and cultural privilege that is present in offline activism gets blurred in such online spaces (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017). I further explore the relevance and use of online spaces by LGBTQ+ collectives in Assam with their other modes of activism. I also acknowledge the complex ways in which such spaces are structured and the power imbalances that make such spaces exclusive.

In my conversation with Milind about the importance of online spaces in Xukia and Anajoree's activism, he said,

> The pandemic has encouraged us to organise webinars with local activists and leaders of different movements across the country. We have used the online space to talk about issues that are generally not discussed so openly in Assam. I want to talk more about the different surgeries that are available for trans persons and I want people to know more about the challenges faced by the trans and LGBQA+ communities by listening to our experiences. We have had sessions where trans persons from Assam have engaged in conversations and shared some of their personal experiences, and the response that we have received for such events has been very encouraging. We have had many people reach out to us and tell us that they found the sessions to be relatable, because how often do you hear Assamese trans men

> talking about their transition and their everyday challenges in a public forum?

The process of sharing personal experiences on a public platform highlights a peculiar form of consciousness that feminists have often termed as the process of making the personal political. While understanding the practice of using the distance and option of anonymity provided by digital spaces in sharing one's personal experiences, I want to draw attention to the economic conditions that have enabled such methods of expression. In a neo-liberal age that speaks a resounding language of individual choice, empowerment, and self-reliance, personal experiences often get pushed into the private sphere, as they are seen as individual stories that cannot collectively challenge the structures of a system (Baer 2016). Even as digital spaces rest on a neo-liberal model, there are ways in which such spaces have been negotiated to further one's activism. The struggle for creating alternative spaces makes way for a 'renewed feminist politics' that rises out of the conjunction of digital platforms and activism today (Baer 2016). Milind's emphasis on the need to 'push boundaries' and make people 'uncomfortable' is an example of the ways in which digital spaces are used for personal as well as collective fulfilment.

Milind spoke about the impact of the pandemic on methods of activism for Xukia and Anajoree, as they started organising more events on digital platforms for dialogue and discussions. Xomonnoy, on the other hand, depended primarily on digital platforms for many of its initiatives even before the pandemic started in 2020. It has used online spaces to raise funds for flood relief programmes in Assam and to help the LGBTQ+ and Hijra communities affected by loss of jobs and livelihoods. One initiative by the collective was starting a helpline number for LGBTQ+ persons who are victims of violence and require support and assistance, especially due to the rise in cases during the lockdown. What Shivalal said in our conversation gave me some interesting insights into the use of digital spaces by Xomonnoy:

> The collective has used digital platforms to collaborate with organisations and other collectives and raise funds for the

> community. Very recently we collaborated with a group of artists in the Northeast to raise funds for the queer community in Assam. We used our Facebook and Instagram pages to promote their art and sell their work, and all the receipts from the sale were used for helping ten persons from the LGBTQ+ community with food, rent, medicines, and other services like hormone replacement therapy (HRT,) during the pandemic. We have collaborated with LGBTQ+ organisations around the Northeast like Ya All from Manipur and Spread Love and Peace (SLAP) and Xobdo in Tezpur. We have often been invited as speakers by organisations and collectives in different parts of the country to discuss pressing issues for the community together. This helps us speak about LGBTQ+ from the perspective of the Northeast, something we don't usually hear in general discussions and events. We also use online platforms to form peer support groups, and very recently we started a helpline service for people from the community to reach out to us for support and assistance on any personal, legal, and other challenging matters. We use our pages on these platforms to promote and build awareness about our initiatives in the hope that even those who don't have access to digital platforms can still use our helpline number to reach out to us.

Members of Xomonnoy, Xukia, and Xobdo all spoke about collaborating with other organisations and movements in the Northeast and in different parts of India. The process of building such networks gives rise to a sense of community and collectiveness that is central to building feminist solidarity. To think that digital technology has enabled people to build such connections gives us an optimistic view of online spaces. For Xomonnoy, which is an informal collective, digital platform have given more room to express dissent. A member of Xommonoy explained,

> We have often debated within the collective on the issue of being formally registered, but the forms of restrictions that come with being a formalised collective have made us rethink how we want our collective to be in the future. Being an unregistered informal collective has helped us escape censorship and surveillance by the state.

However, like any other public space, digital spaces are dynamic and come with their limitations that weaken the idea of a digital democracy. There have been instances of cyber-bullying, harassment, surveillance, and tone policing in such spaces that have affected activists in different ways. Shivalal said:

> In a recent event when Xomonnoy engaged with a community in Assam to raise funds to help with basic economic necessities as a consequence of the pandemic, the collective was subjected to harassment on digital platforms for taking up such initiatives, which escalated and led to some of us being specifically targeted and defamed in an online space. Instances like these have brought down the morale for a lot of us but we have tried to push it behind us and come out stronger.

Gendered violence in online spaces has often silenced feminist activists. Though digital spaces can be perceived as flexible because they don't seem to be legally administered by the state, these spaces do reproduce sexist and misogynistic values that are characteristic of a patriarchal society. The disrespect, shame, and disgrace that digital platforms bring with them can be distressing and can have a severe impact on one's mental and social well-being. Milind spoke of being harassed by a gay man on a digital platform for being a trans man, which led him to take action and block people from contacting him. Luku, the co-founder of Xobdo, an LGBTQ+ group in Tezpur, said that they were aware of harassment that other organisations were facing on online platforms and are very wary of it, as the violence that originates in digital spaces can well extend to their physical spaces.

As I point towards some of the shortcomings of online spaces, I unravel why such spaces continue to be central to the activism of many LGBTQ+ collectives and organisations in Assam. In an age where technology has penetrated most urban and semi-urban households, it becomes even more essential to explore and analyse the alternate spaces in which people share information and exchange ideas. To do so, I believe it is important to consider the geographical and political contexts in which such alternate spaces are created. In Assam, a state

that is currently under political turmoil due to contestations over citizenship rights for Bengali-speaking marginalised identities, the use of public spaces is even more complex and restricted for the socially and politically vulnerable population.

ACTIVISM IN THE NORTHEAST

Shivalal spoke about how in certain situations having a Northeastern identity was an added challenge for LGBTQ+ activists in terms of representation in larger discussions and groups organised by sexually marginalised identities from 'mainland' India. We discussed this in the context of Assam and the current political situation with its anti-migration policies that have severely impacted several marginalised groups in the state. One such community that has been relatively absent in discussions of such state policies has been the trans community, which has been selectively left out of the final NRC draft released in 2019. Shivalal spoke about the politics of exclusion for persons even within the trans community in matters of building awareness on the challenges faced by the community as a whole. The following section is an interview excerpt from my discussion with Xomonnoy and focuses on the perceptions of the collective on policies such as NRC and CAA, as they relate to the LGBTQ+ community.

> I believe that there is a need to understand NRC in the context of its violent history in Assam. As a collective, our stance has

> not been against NRC but against its gendered and exclusionary structure. It has been a very difficult policy to resist because of the fear of violence that comes with it. We acknowledge that the policy has been instrumental in dividing the people of the state and affecting marginalised sections of society, but it is a policy that has already been implemented in the state, unlike the rest of the country where there are on-going talks about the implementation of NPR, in which case protesting against it can stop it from coming into force. When we can't reject it, we demand that it should be inclusive. This is a discourse that the people outside Assam don't want to hear.

When asked about the impact of such state measures on the LGBTQ+ community, this is what they had to say,

> A large number of trans persons have been excluded from the final NRC draft and various organisations and collectives have come ahead to resist this exclusion, however, there is still very little conversation about the effect of NRC on the LGBTQ+ community. Even as there has been some awareness on the exclusion of the trans community, there has been almost no acknowledgement of trans men from the community since many remain undocumented and don't come from the Hijra community or a formalised group that is recognised by the state. Our collective aims to build a space to represent people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community and have had to leave their biological families because of their sexual identity without any access to legacy documents, a requirement to get enlisted in NRC. It is a difficult task to document cases of LGBTQ+ persons affected by such policies as there is no data available on the community. In December 2019, during the protests against CAA in Assam, members from our collective went forward to be a part of it, however, for some of us, it was impossible to directly engage in the protest. As a collective, we have been speaking more about NRC in our spaces, as there is already a lot of awareness and resistance against CAA in Assam.

In the context of the significance of being an online LGBTQ+ collective from the Northeast they said,

> When NRC was being implemented in Assam, there was no discussion about it among the members of the All India Transgender Association, since it wasn't a direct threat to the people from other parts of the country. Today, NRC in Assam is being used as an example to stop NPR from coming into being and it comes as no surprise to us as this has always been how issues in the Northeast are addressed. We understand this as a negative step-parental attitude towards the people from the Northeast, where experiences from the region are always secondary in the larger discourse in mainland India. We would like the perspectives of the people from the Northeast to be acknowledged without our discourses being twisted to serve other agendas. We have been trying as an online collective to reach out and document the experiences of trans men and non-normative genders in Assam and build more awareness through our collective's page, and the discussions we have with other activists, which are available online. We have also used our space to speak against the Transgender (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and have been trying to have more dialogue on the legal repercussions of the act for the community.

The dichotomous concept of 'mainland' India and the Northeast, gives the sense of a politics that is detached, misrepresented, and peripheral. The notion of being a peripheral region reflects in the relationship shared by the people of the state with other parts of India. The difference in the conception of NRC by an LGBTQ+ collective in Assam in comparison to LGBTQ+ and women's collectives from other parts of India is an example of an existing gap in the discourses in different regions. Such gaps are to be understood in the context of the state's politics and its influence on organisations' activism practices. Ethnic tensions and the fear of violence alter collectives' activist practices when it comes to dissent against the state. Xomonnoy points towards a feeling of alienation shared by the members of the collective that comes from the absence of LGBTQ+ perspectives

from the Northeast in popular mainstream discourses of queer and non-normative identities. The Chinky Homo Project, a digital queer anthology based in the Northeast, states that the regions of the Northeast are contested frontier zones that comprise conflicting structures, making it challenging for queer and trans persons, who remain largely undocumented, to navigate public spaces.

The concept of a 'gap' in the discourses in the Northeast versus the rest of India is also symbolic of the historical and complex political relationship between regions in the Northeast and the Indian nation-state. The state that aims at political integration of the Northeastern states consciously maintains a bureaucratic distance when peripheral voices of the borderlands raise critical questions challenging the limitations of Indian nationalism. The fundamental assumptions of Indian nationalism have deemed the people of the Northeast 'incomplete citizens' (Bora 2010) and have further complicated how citizenship rights are conceptualised by the people of Assam. The move to accept NRC without problematising the policy for being specifically exclusionary for Muslim minorities in Assam comes from an acknowledgement of the state's complicated past, and the fear of violence and political unrest by offending ethno-nationalist sentiments by disapproving a popularly accepted and celebrated policy.

As I acknowledge the complexity of spaces in the Northeast, I also try to understand the difference in spaces within the regions. In Assam, Guwahati is considered an urban centre for employment, education, and other prospects for people from other neighbouring states, which makes it essential for me to go beyond a space that is considered spatially privileged. To understand LGBTQ+ activism in other parts of Assam, I reached out to Luku. They said, about the culture of LGBTQ+ activism in Tezpur,

> Awareness among the LGBTQ+ community in Tezpur has been very low. I grew up in an all-girls convent school that had an unspoken tradition of girls being attracted to other fellow girls with the expectation that, when they grew up, they would be fine and their behaviour would change. Issues around sexuality

> were never taken seriously, and people hardly gave any thought to what happened to those girls when they grew up. This culture of silence is especially ironic in a place like Tezpur, which has a central university, the regional mental health institute, and also the Tezpur Medical College, and yet there has been no dialogue on the LGBTQ+ community. A lot of people here are ignorant by choice. As an organisation, we aim to break this silence and have more conversations about the community. We have collaborated with universities in Tezpur to organise an event called QueerTessential, which for us means talk is essential. Our organisation has so far not come under the radar or been opposed by people from society here, because our approach has not been perceived as a direct threat to the system. We don't resort to activism that can seem extreme; instead, we have a subtler approach for changing things from within. We create an enabling environment, and we do so by educating others about the LGBTQ+ community. Most of our initiatives focus on reaching out to students because our focus is on changing youth perceptions about our community. As we are in the middle of a pandemic, we organise webinars that have helped a lot of people know about Xobdo and reach out to us from Tezpur and other parts of Assam.

While conversations with Xomonnoy focused on comparing activism in the Northeast with the other parts of the country, Xobdo gave a sense of the differences in approach and perspectives of organisations within Assam. Luku emphasised adopting an approach that is not openly 'rebellious' in challenging society's structures. Perhaps differences in the cultures of places like Guwahati and Tezpur have an influence on the approaches followed by the organisations and collectives for activism. Less reliance on online platforms and more emphasis on meeting in physical spaces for film screenings and discussions could also be because of the presence of a small community in smaller space than a city like Guwahati, where the settled population come from various other Northeastern states, from different cultures and speaking different languages. It is important to note how factors

such as geographical contexts and diversity have a direct impact on the relevance and use of digital platforms for activism.

By perceiving spaces as contextually diverse, we understand how LGBTQ+ communities in Assam have developed methods of activism to navigate public spaces and create safer spaces for representation and visibility.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the influence of digital technology on activism by queer and non-normative identities in Assam. It understands how LGBTQ+ communities have used digital platforms and politicised such spaces with their initiatives. From the conversations with different organisations and collectives, I gathered that the degree of dependency and the use of online spaces differs between organisations and collectives and is subjective to various other contextual factors. For some, such platforms have proved to be safe spaces for sharing personal experiences and narratives and achieving visibility for their organisations to aid their outreach. The pandemic has also had an impact on the use of online spaces as all the participants in this research expressed an increased use of digital platforms for organising webinars and series for online discussions on different issues such as mental health, public health, different laws and policies, and education. This paper highlighted the different sides of online spaces by discussing forms of surveillance, violence, and harassment. More importantly, the narratives of the participants helped understand digital platforms as spaces that are constantly changing and being navigated by

communities who are trying to build safe spaces to speak and be heard. They are not isolated, self-contained, and homogenous spaces but are continuously influenced by other external factors such as the state, the economy, and other contemporary trends. It is important to theorise digital spaces while analysing aspects of gender and public spaces, as they have increasingly become an essential growing ground for feminist politics in recent times. By focusing on the personal narratives of LGBTQ+ activists in Assam, the paper highlighted the political economy of digital technology and the democratising potential of its spaces. What lies at the core of this paper is bringing forward the many forms of public spaces that are central to the activism and campaigns of LGBTQ+ communities in Assam, and conceptualising them in the new waves of change.

Xomonnoy's 24X7 helpline number for the LGBTQIA+ community is +91 9678717374.

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