Invited Essay

Surviving and Thriving Beyond Young Adulthood in India as a Queer Person: Perspectives from Personal Life Review and the Value of Story Telling

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Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it,
you will live along some distant day into your answers
- Rainer Maria Rilke

In my mid to late teens, a spark was kindled in my heart when I came out to my parents about being queer. It lit my world to the horizon of a hopeful future. While it kept me warm and hygge in the years since there have also been many stormy phases in life where I struggled to keep that spark alive. With my queer identity still evolving as I navigate my mid-30s, I often ponder upon my queer existence. Many a time, the hopeful future feels like a distant dream seldom meeting in grounded reality, like the parallel train tracks I could stare at for eternity during long journeys on Indian Railways with my family between school years. Fantasy was an escape, and the duality of life almost seemed theatrical and a little more bearable as an observer in the audience. So, it was quite relatable when I learned that a few of my age peers in our friends and community circles who I danced with and dreamed together as queerlings went back into the closet by getting into heterosexual arranged marriages or shut the lens on their queer lives due to death by suicide. It wrung my heart and soul and out came blood, fire, and love.

Sharing, discussing, and spending time with my queer friends and community kept me grounded and going during the difficult times in my life. Given the effervescence of life, and as I pass through time and age, I increasingly tend to look back on life as my future older self rather than projecting into a hazy future from where I am right now. I often approach my younger self with deep compassion and probably yearn for the assurance of my older, wiser self as I navigate the seemingly uncertain next few decades of life. Also, as a gerontologist in training, reading about LGBTQ aging, life course, and social structures, I cannot help but engage my prospective and retrospective life review more analytically. So, with the tenderness of remembrance, reminiscence, and realization, I would like to depart to pragmatism and reflect on the probable reasons for what I am experiencing and observing in the community around me.

Lack of Social Infrastructure

Societal structures and regulations give certain form and flow to people's lives. For example, family is the functional unit of Indian society in which individuals operate and participate in the larger social world. The institution of marriage, sanctioned by religion and state, is the formative force behind the family unit. Growing up, individuals are conditioned and guided into a heteronormative life script with clear milestones, such as getting an education and finding a job to be able to marry, have kids, and acquire property before becoming grandparents and retiring. Following the norm is as if being on a conveyor belt of life. There is a sense of purpose, direction, progress, ease, safety, recognition, validation, support, reward, and fulfillment for following the familiar path. To be queer is straying away from the familiar narrative and challenging the social establishment.

In a resource-stretched, highly competitive, super-sized market society, the culture of arranged marriage, operating in the social hierarchy of the age-old Indian caste system, continues to act as a source of stability and security by enabling families to preserve and consolidate their social capital. Even today, about 95% of all marriages in India happen within the same caste, religion, and social class (Narzary & Ladusingh, 2019). Not marrying within one's caste is seen as bringing shame to the family, sometimes inciting violence; in this context, supporting same-sex partnership may be a farfetched idea. Due to patriarchal values and the dowry system, gay and bisexual men not marrying women can be seen as a loss, and lesbian and bisexual women not marrying men can be seen as a liability on the family. With advancing age, parental pressure may increase, and queer individuals may give in to heterosexual arranged marriages.

Unlike other minorities, queer children do not grow up among people like them who can teach about queer lives and help prepare for one. So, as I felt after coming out, young adulthood can feel optimistic, with opportunities to

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connect with other queer folk and access queer spaces. However, without social acceptance, family support, and the ability to get married or adopt children, it is difficult to lead a queer version of the normative, heterofamilial life. Moreover, the lack of visible role models or a map for later stages of life adds to uncertainty and anxiety about the future and aging, making it increasingly difficult to sustain and thrive as a queer person in India beyond young adulthood. Since old age is traditionally seen as a stage beyond sexual intimacy, of renunciation and spiritual pursuits (Saraswathi et al., 2011), the prospect of needing to assert one's sexuality to be visible in older age can feel burdensome.

The Intersection of Homophobia and Ageism

Adolescence and young adulthood may be a time of identity exploration. As heterosexual and cisgender kids explore and act on their identity, the family and society approve, affirm, and love them for who they are, so they consolidate their identity into their sense of self. Due to lack of visibility and the presence of stigma, queer individuals may internalize homophobia and delay their identity development to much later in life (D'Augelli, 1994). Queer children and young adults miss the love and affirmation their heterosexual and cisgender peers receive, leading to a sense of isolation and loneliness. In such a scenario, being wanted in an intimate relationship may assume heightened importance, though they may not be able to be public about their queer relationship owing to internalized and societal homophobia. Due to lack of familial and social support, such queer relationships may also be more difficult to sustain (Khaddouma et al., 2015). The grief of losing such relationships is often unacknowledged (disenfranchised grief; Doka, 2008), and repeated failed attempts at establishing long-term relationships may impact one's self-esteem and confidence.

As per Maslow (2019), love and belonging are basic human needs that queer individuals long for despite the aforementioned challenges. The heteronormative life course is tightly timed, and queer Indians may feel the off-timeliness of their lives due to delay in identity development and difficulty establishing intimate relationships. Since queer individuals operate outside the caste-based, patriarchal, heterofamilial society, their social capital may be devalued. They may also accrue less social capital with advancing age typically experienced in India and other Eastern societies that are culturally wired to value older adults (Gangopadhyay, 2021). With diminishing social capital, youth may become an especially prized possession for socialization, finding new partners, and feeling loved. Queer Indians beyond young adulthood may fear losing the prospects of finding a long-term partner due to fading youth, potentially manifesting as ageism in the queer community. Therefore, due to lack of affirmation and love, inability to sustain relationships, and feeling aged out of the youth-oriented queer community, they may give into parental pressure and get

into heterosexual arranged marriages. These factors may also contribute to stress, substance use, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Diversity, Social Media and Political Polarization

Unlike generations past, teenagers and young adults are more likely to have initial exposure and contact with the LGBTQ community online and on social media. It has been a game-changer regarding access to information, resources, community, and interpersonal connections. However, there are also downsides to online interactions. Inherent positivity bias, social comparison, and cyberbullying can contribute to a sense of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). While India is incredibly diverse, it is also quite a segregated society, and people's social networks tend to be comparatively homogenous. It may be challenging to realize and understand one's privilege in such insular circles. But in queer spaces, when young people from various languages, regions, religions, castes, classes, ideologies, political affiliations, sexualities, and genders come together, while enriching, it can be challenging to understand each other. Groups with more social power may set the precedence, albeit unintentionally, making queer spaces less accessible and welcoming for other groups. Social media algorithms can be echo chambers, potentially fueling differences and furthering the polarization of opinions. These factors can dampen the initial enthusiasm of finding one's queer community. The resultant sense of isolation can influence people to go back into the closet and try to assimilate into the hetero-normative world.

Turnover in Social Relationships

Human beings are social animals and interdependent on each other for emotional and instrumental needs. Typically, a convoy of social relationships, beginning from the birth family and then by marriage and procreation, accompanies an individual through life. We dream with our loved ones, and with their support and help look forward to growing together in the process of realizing those dreams. Queer people may experience interruptions in the continuity of key social relationships, probably leading to feelings of being unsupported, isolated, and lonely.

Queer individuals coming out to their parents, family, and friends are likely to experience outright rejection or ambivalence, which can cause a drift in the depth and quality of relationships. They may escape to the safety and anonymity of bigger cities, placating themselves from the familiar social networks of their hometowns. Anonymity may be a strategy to shield against societal homophobia, but it also becomes a hindrance in networking and forming new relationships. Queer spaces in larger towns and cities may have their own culture and cliques, making it difficult to break in initially. Once they connect with these new networks, the acceptance and camaraderie within such

queer communities may bring relief, hope, and excitement about the future ahead. However, these relationships may not be as strong and enduring because queer communities in bigger cities are a constant flux of people moving in and out for education, work, and other opportunities.

As discussed in the above sections, difficulty sustaining intimate relationships due to lack of legal recognition and family support and losing community ties due to feeling aged out of the youth-oriented queer community may also contribute to the instability of social relationships. As their heterosexual family and friends get married, have kids, and move on in life, the difference in life trajectories may make queer individuals feel distant, leading to further isolation and loneliness. All these uncertainties can wear one down, enticing queer Indians into the deceptive stability of a heterosexual relationship or, at the extreme, push towards suicide.

The Value of Story Telling and Support Groups

While my academic training may have helped me connect the various dots discussed above, many of these points were a result of sharing and discussing them with my queer friends and allies over the years. Each observation on its own, and as they fit into the larger puzzle, brought in some healing perspectives. The act of sharing our stories can be liberating and empowering. As my identity exploration shifted from my sexuality to gender, the challenges that I faced changed as well. While I started to seek connections in the trans community, it was insightful and comforting to share those challenges with my gay friends that I grew up with, some on similar journeys, and with my straight friends and family. I am sharing this essay in the hopes that it may resonate with my fellow queer Indians. If not lessons, it may at least offer an alternate point of view for the larger Indian audience as they are also likely to contend with challenging the rigid social structures that were set up to benefit a narrow segment of the society.

One of the easiest and less expensive things to promote sharing and storytelling is periodic peer-led drop-in support groups. Support groups would give an opportunity for people to voice their concerns in a safe space and normalize their struggle. Sharing our stories and reminiscing about past experiences may reveal a different rhythm to queer lives. The overlap between our shared life experiences can inspire us to imagine alternate, flexible life scripts and goals. For example, we can celebrate milestones such as coming to terms with one's queer identity or make space to bereave the loss of intimate relationships that are often invisible and unacknowledged in heteronormative spaces. By being of help to others while simultaneously receiving support and providing an opportunity to build personal relationships, support groups may help combat social isolation and loneliness. They may also foster a sense of security in the community—that there is a place to go in crises and alleviate some anxiety about

future uncertainties. As queer individuals, their parents and siblings may also not know other families in their networks with similar experiences. So, having support groups for family members may help them better support their queer children. In addition, mental health professionals may consider life review and reminiscence as therapeutic tools in formal individual or group therapies and assist in the formation and running of informal support groups.

Conclusion

Despite generations of fighting for justice, women, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other marginalized groups still experience disparities (Subramanian et al., 2008). Comparatively, the LGBT rights movement is quite nascent and queer Indians are much smaller in number and may not experience social cohesion until much later when they can meet other queer people. So, despite welcome steps such as statutes decriminalizing homosexuality and protecting transgender rights, the fight for justice and the longing for love and belonging will probably be a long one. However, I am optimistic that the resiliency of the LGBTQ community can inspire us to imagine and create a social infrastructure that works for us. Sharing and storytelling through support groups may be one way to tend to our queer spark collectively.

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