



Research in Marginalized Sexualities: Obstacles and Concerns in Kerala

TINTU THOMAS
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT, KERALA, INDIA

Abstract: The study about sexual minorities (LGBTQI+) is an emerging academic interdisciplinary zone that requires systematic analysis and research. The main problem of conducting research in this area is that the LGBTQI+ people remain largely invisible and socially marginalised. They refuse to attend school and colleges for fear of being discriminated. This invisibility would be an obstacle in obtaining sufficient population sample for study. As a result it would be difficult to arrive at a generalization. Though every states and organization speaks of inclusivity, there is no inclusivity for the LGBTQI+ people in most circumstances. This community distrusts people in general and research and researchers in particular which will make it challenging to collect personal experiences even of the people who have made their ‘coming out’. Since this is a new area of study, it would be difficult to find sufficient research and study materials. For more than a century scientists and scholars are making attempts to find out the reason behind alternate sexual orientations.

In this paper I would like to analyse the common obstacles in conducting research about the sexual minorities in India in general and the state of Kerala in particular and the absence of these people in educational institutions. The state of Kerala, though renowned for its high social development, is quite conservative in matters concerning sexuality. Kerala is also homophobic except for a few open minded people. A majority of the LGBTQ people live here in fear and self contempt. Doing a research in such a situation would be a tight ropewalking.

Key words: marginalized, LGBTQ, homosexuality, homophobia, heterosexuality, Kerala.

History owes an apology to the members of the LGBTQ community and their families for the delay in providing redressal for the ignominy and ostracism that they have suffered through the centuries. The members of this community were compelled to live a life full of fear of persecution. This was on account of the ignorance of the majority to recognize that homosexuality is completely a natural condition, part of range of human sexuality.

Justice Indu Malhotra

The history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is as old as the history of mankind itself. But it was the new wave of cultural freedom that emerged in the modern era that helped it to secure a place in the historical records. Today Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) history is an accredited research topic in the West and to some extent in the East. This interdisciplinary field of study is now included in the curriculum of colleges and universities. The word 'Queer' which once used to be a derogatory word denoting a person with homosexual orientation, is now a blanket term that is used to designate people with sexual orientations other than the dominant heterosexual one. A new theory called Queer theory emerged to denote the combined area of gay and lesbian studies together with the theoretical and critical writings about all modes of deviance such as cross dressing, bisexuality and transsexuality from society's normative model of sexual identity, orientation and activities.

Lesbian and gay literary theory became prominent only in the 1990's though it began earlier in 1960's and 1970's as part of sexual political movements such as Women's liberation and Gay liberation movements. The essence of lesbian or gay criticism lies in the fact that it makes sexual orientation an integral category of analysis and understanding. It is formed as a resistance to homophobia and heterosexism. Gay/lesbian studies do for sex and sexuality what women studies do for gender. While lesbian/gay studies focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory spreads its arena of exploration to confront the allegedly secure relation between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. The two main tasks of queer theorists are:

1. To deconstruct the binary unstable opposites heterosexual /homosexual where the first is given privilege and the second is marginalized.
2. Challenge the essentialist assumption that heterosexual and homosexual are universal and independent of cultural difference by proposing they are social constructs subject to change.

India, with its innumerable forms of gender identities throughout its history spanning thousands of years, has not yet broached the subject. India has never been unfamiliar of the existence of sexual minorities in its midst because it has a history of the varied love interests of Mughal emperors and Sufi saints, the unabashed depiction of homosexuality in the *Kama Sutra*, the classical Indian text on sex which has an entire chapter dedicated to Auparishtaka (homosexual intercourse), the homoerotic temples of *Khajuraho* and the *Vedic* texts which mention of saints, demigods, unions by god and goddesses and the Supreme Lord, Shiva manifesting multiple combinations of sex and gender. But in polite conversation in India any kind of sexual topic is avoided and any conversation related to homosexuality is a taboo. The concern and prejudice against homosexuality persists even as previously taboo topics such as contraception and sexually transmitted diseases are freely discussed. Though much has been said and written about the 'condition' of homosexuality, each work ends with the assumption that homosexuality is a mental illness that can be cured by taking appropriate treatments.

Kerala is a state which is widely celebrated for its high levels of social development in the area of education, sex ratio, mortality rates, sanitation, health etc. however it is very much conservative in matters concerning sexuality except for a few open minded people, majority of

them belonging to the category of young educated group. Since queer and marginalized sexualities are a new area of study the society has no idea still of these kind of orientations as a result of which the Kerala society is very much homophobic. Religious beliefs such as those of the Christians and muslims which despise homosexuality is also an element that adds fuel to the homophobia of the society. Even the highly educated people find it difficult to accept these hitherto obscure people who have found the courage to 'come out' in the wake of decriminalization of section 377. This section was inserted in the Indian Penal Code by Lord Macaulay in 1860. It reads:

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. (Vanita15)

On 2 July 2009, Delhi High Court struck down the *Section 377* on the basis that the legal prohibition against same- sex act would be a violation of the fundamental rights provided by the *Indian Constitution*. On 16th January 2012, the Supreme Court hearing a bunch of appeals filed against decriminalization of gay sex observed that homosexuality should be seen in the context of changing times and that it should not be seen in terms of sexual intercourse. In 2013 the supreme court of India recriminalized homosexuality. Later in 2018, the Supreme Court read down the section to the extent that it decriminalized consensual sex among adults of the same age.

The study about sexual minorities (LGBTQI+) is an emerging academic interdisciplinary zone that requires systematic analysis and research. The main problem of conducting research in this area is that they remain largely invisible and socially marginalised. Though section 377 has been scraped, the antagonism against the LGBTQ community still continues. They are still in a vulnerable position. The mainstream patriarchal hetero normative society is very much concerned with asserting the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality and of the two genders- male and female. Not only the sexual minorities like lesbians and gays but also the transgender and intersex people are not given room in the Indian society. As a result they are forced to live in fear of ostracization. Violence against this community has increased exponentially. On august 29, 2022 transwoman shikha and her husband Benitio who also happens to be a transman was beaten by the locals in the kannur district, kerala in which she sustained neck, chest and head injuries (<http://www.thehindu.com>). The major hurdle faced by the community is that they are not able to find a space for themselves in the society. Non acceptance by the society prevents them from living a comfortable life of their choice. They are constantly struggling to establish their identity in an adamant mainstream society. Since this quest for identity ad security are not always fruitful many of them prefer to remain invisible and pretend to be a part of the mainstream life and culture. Many people who wish to 'come out' are skeptical in doing so as they wish to safeguard the honour of their family.

The exclusion and oppression faced by the sexual minorities compel them to live in self contempt, fear and hatred. This would act as a barrier in obtaining sufficient population for the research and with only a small sample size generalizing the study would not be possible. Among the few people available for research majority refuse to be treated as an 'object' of study. Many of them would be reluctant to participate in the research in the apprehension that their identity which is disclosed only to people in their social circle will be known to outsiders. Moreover the people who like to narrate their experience with a researcher in the hope that being studied would

bring a change in their situation may sometimes become weary of recounting their lives every time a researcher approaches them. The narration of their dull and dissatisfied life becomes monotonous eventually. Many of them avoid encounters with researchers as they are in a state of mind where everything irritates them and they perceive the researchers as an active participant of the heteronormative society that is responsible for their miserable life. This community generally distrusts research and researchers. Even if gay people are available for research it would be difficult to find out lesbians for research. Being women, they are doubly marginalized. So they prefer to live in anonymity.

The government both at the centre and the state advocates the policy of inclusiveness. According to the Cambridge dictionary, the word inclusiveness refers to the quality of including many different types of people and treating them all fairly and equally. But when analyzing the situation of sexual and gender minorities we come to know that there is no inclusivity for the LGBTQI+ people in the society. Article 14 and 15 of the constitution of India states that the state shall not deny any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India and shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. It is at this time India should follow the example of South Africa, the first to adopt a constitution that protect its people from discrimination based on race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture language and birth (Gibson 132). If the sexual minority people is to be fully accepted by the society it is the government who should initiate as they are also a part of the society with voting rights and ours is a government which is by the people, of the people and for the people. The sexual minorities in India are devoid of the rights, privileges and opportunities enjoyed by heterosexuals and cisgender people. First and foremost their families try to get rid of them. Among the LGBTQI+ community, the transgender people are the most neglected. Recently Arjun Geetha, a transman in Kerala had to approach Kerala Administrative Tribunal to consider his application for the post of sub inspector in the Armed police Battalion (<https://english.mathruboomi.com>). Transgender people are easily recognized from their appearances and people refuse to hire them for work. They become school dropouts as they leave their home before matriculation or just after schooling which makes it difficult for them to secure a decent job. These people get compelled to run away from school and home on account of the bullying, harassments and teasing they face for their appearance and behavior. Many of them resort to sex work to make a living. Most often they live far below the poverty line. The absence of marriage, adoption and property rights are a great cause of concern for the lesbians and gays. Same sex marriages are not recognized in India.

The only way to empower these people and bring them to the forefront of the society is to provide them with quality education so that they acquire the courage to face the public and stand up for themselves. One thing we should keep in mind is that a person with education, job and good financial position can secure good status and value in the society. Article 29 of the constitution states that the state shall not deny admission into educational institutes maintained by it or those that receive aid from it to any person based only on race, religion, caste, language or any of them. But provisions in paper are not sufficient. If we consider the number of transgender students studying in colleges and universities especially in Kerala we get to know that the number would be less than ten. In the words of Neysara Rai, a human rights activist and the founder of TransgenderIndia.com “a normal life is a very over ambitious goal because they are isolated and tormented- especially in schools and colleges where children are not sensitized

and maturity levels are low. With such prejudices, it is impossible to take your mind off the body and focus on other aspects of life” Sometimes parents may express concern over sexual minorities studying with their wards as a result of which many institutions become reluctant to accept them for fear of being devoid of admission. Also those people who enroll for study are the ones who have established their place in the society in the first place either as models, bloggers or makeup artists or the people with a good financial background. However the need of the hour is to bring the people who are living a life confined to themselves cursing their destiny to the educational institutions may be with reservation and scholarship and a discrimination free atmosphere. Educational institutions should be made sexual minority friendly. But we should not expect every college to be LGBTQI+ friendly. For instance, I being a research scholar was invited for a talk on sexual minorities to a reputed college run by Muslim management in Kerala. However to my wonder the talk was cancelled in the last minute as the management expressed concern over a talk on this subject.

When considering the methodology of the study of sexual and gender minorities, both quantitative and qualitative methods are applicable. Qualitative methods such as one-on one interview, case study, record keeping, observation, focus groups, ethnographic research and quantitative methods like survey and questionnaire can be used to collect information about them. But the success of these methods lies in the participation of the respondents who, as we mentioned earlier, is most of the times unwilling to take part in the research process. The lack of standard measures, including measures of sexual orientation which itself has three dimensions like sexual attraction, sexual behavior and sexual identity and gender identity is a hindrance to genuine research. Since this is a new area of study, the scarcity of sufficient study materials is also a matter of concern.

For the minorities, the absence of a language of their own community, a distinctive style of speech and writing that serves as an authentic expression of group identity is also a hindrance to the smooth flow of research. Words help in the creation of sexual identities. Sexual minorities use linguistic expressions such as ‘out and proud’, ‘coming out’, ‘gay pride’ to openly affirm the joys of gay and lesbian sex and to celebrate their identities. Even with a language research can be conducted only with people who are open about their sexual preferences. Moreover a researcher’s writings about the sexual minorities may be from his own point of view most of the times. The way a scholar perceives his sample population could be influenced by his tradition and culture. Also there would be a difference in the way in which a hetero normative person writes about a counter normative person. When it is published as a research paper it becomes a narration in the language of the so called ‘dominant community’. When the case studies or interviews taken in the regional languages are subject to translation it loses its essence. It is a challenge for the researcher to document their actual feelings or the emotions with which they speak or narrate their experience.

When looking at the theory part, though many studies have been conducted, scientists or scholars or psychologists were not able to find the actual cause of sexual deviance. However they theorize that it is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician and sex researcher of the 20th century studied sexual orientation from a biological perspective and proposed that brain development was different in fetuses destined to become gay and straight. There is no substantive evidence which suggests that parenting, early childhood experiences or sexual abuse or troubled relationships play a role with regard to it. According to Foucault, homosexuality is the result of a modern era

as while there were same sex acts and friendships from ancient period itself, there was no distinct category of identification. He writes:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault 43)

Sigmund Freud, in 1935, in a famous letter to the mother of a young homosexual asserted that *homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development* (<https://advocatetanmoy.com>). Engaging in research without a proper theory back up would be problematic.

Yet another problem with queer research is the availability of supervisors who are willing to guide the research scholars interested to initiate research in this field. Since both Christianity and Islam consider all the other sexualities other than heterosexuality as a sin, a staunch religious person may show unwillingness to supervise such a scholar. A research scholar who is studying the sexual minorities as part of the research is likely to face criticism from the family and society. A person who is interested in learning about sexual minorities may hesitate to take up this subject for the fear of being deliberated as a member of that community by the society.

Literature, music and cinema play a good role in influencing the cultural growth of a society. But when it comes to sensitive matters filmmakers or writers are more concerned with satisfying the notions of the larger public. In most cases, Malayalam mainstream films representing sexual minorities focus on the libidinous aspect, gay people are most often shown as being satisfied with a single touch such as those in *Two Countries* and *Rockstar*. Stories are written in such a way that it reinforces the myth that society has conceived of the sexual minorities. When they are represented in such a manner society draw up a wrong notion about them and tend to be more homophobic. When compared to media, the extent to which a research thesis can contribute to bring about a change to a homophobic society is minute.

Generally speaking Kerala society is homophobic and conventional in matters regarding sex and sexuality. But the situation is changing now and kerala is in a transition of being an environment that is conducive for the sexual minorities. When making a comparison with the past we see that they get more acceptances. Kerala in 2015 became the first state to establish a policy for transgenders. But in 2021, an amicus curie appointed by the Kerala High court found out that the state failed in implementing the policy. Hospitals are not well equipped for sex reassignment surgery. For the society , sexuality is the most important thing about the sexual and gender minorities. They can remain visible only if the people become mature enough to accept them .Doing queer research in a hetero normative society would bring about a lot of criticism. As long as people think heterosexuality is natural and normal , LGBTQI+ people especially transgenders and intersex people would hesitate to turn up to schools and colleges. The Kerala government, in 2018 , directed universities to reserve two seats for transgender students in undergraduate and post graduate courses subject to fulfillment of qualification. But no transgender person has sought admissions in any departments of University of Calicut since 2018. In this way it would be difficult to find LGBTQI+ people for a research. Conducting a research or study about sexual minorities will help enhance the effectiveness of public policy for them. The more the studies are conducted the more the acceptance they receive.

Reference

1. Abrams, M.H.A *Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage learning, 2009. Print.
2. Agarwal, supriya Arora, Neha et al. *Understanding Marginality Cultural and Literary perspective*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2022. print.
3. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New York: Manchester, 1995. Print.
4. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
5. Gibson, A Michael, Alexander Jonathan et al. *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies*. California: Sage, 2014. Print.
6. Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Melbourne, 1996. Print.
7. Vanitha, Ruth. ed. *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
8. "A letter from Freud to a mother of a homosexual-1935". *advocatetanmoy.com* 15 june 2021. 28 march 2023 <https://adocatetanmoy.com>.
9. "Kerala High Court dismisses plea over job application of transgender person for SI post". *Mathrubhumi*, 26 March 2023, <https://English.mathrubhumi.com/amp/news/kerala/1.8425133>. Accessed 28 march 2023.
10. "Transgender couple assaulted at peravoor". *The Hindu*, 30 August 2022, www.thehindu.com/news/transgender-couple-assaulted-at-peravoor/article65831080.ece. Accessed 28 march 2023.

