

# SWABHIMAN

July 2022  
Special Issue



नका करु दुजेयणा  
सुतरा लिंगीना  
मुले मणु

Gay Rights  
are Human  
Rights!

## ASTITVA

Pride Month and Perspectives

I AM GAY!  
I AM QUEER!  
I AM TRAN!  
I AM LESBIAN!



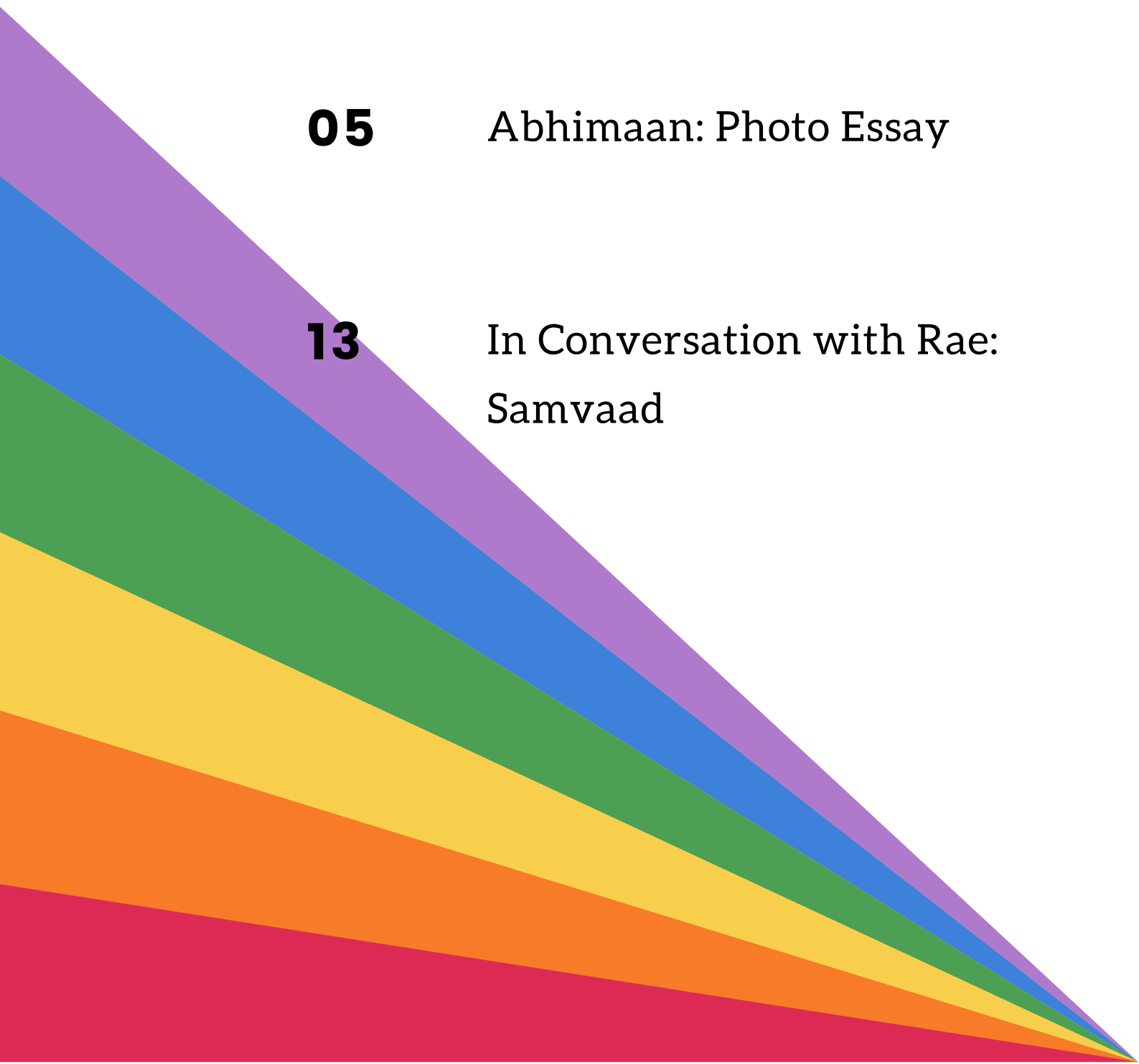


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Samvaad



# COMMENTARY

*Text by Ruhi Nadkarni and Isha Khurana*

The month of June marks a celebration of pride within the queer community worldwide. Even though the community is bound together by a sense of love and unity for the entirety of the year, pride month commemorates acceptance of the plethora of identities we perceive ourselves as and finding a sense of togetherness amid this relatively unaccepting society we live in.

The occasion of Pride Month has been established post a long-standing history of the events that unfolded in the United State's Stonewall Inn incident. The incident substantially impacted queer people in the late 1960s, directing them to fight for their rights. While the Stonewall riots rooted in the USA tied the queer community together, several other countries took heed of the fights taking place across the ocean. For instance, the Netherlands decriminalised homosexuality and legalised same-sex marriage and adoption in 2001. Multiple other countries chose to embark on this path themselves, adding to the list of nations that supported and welcomed the LGBTQIA+ community.

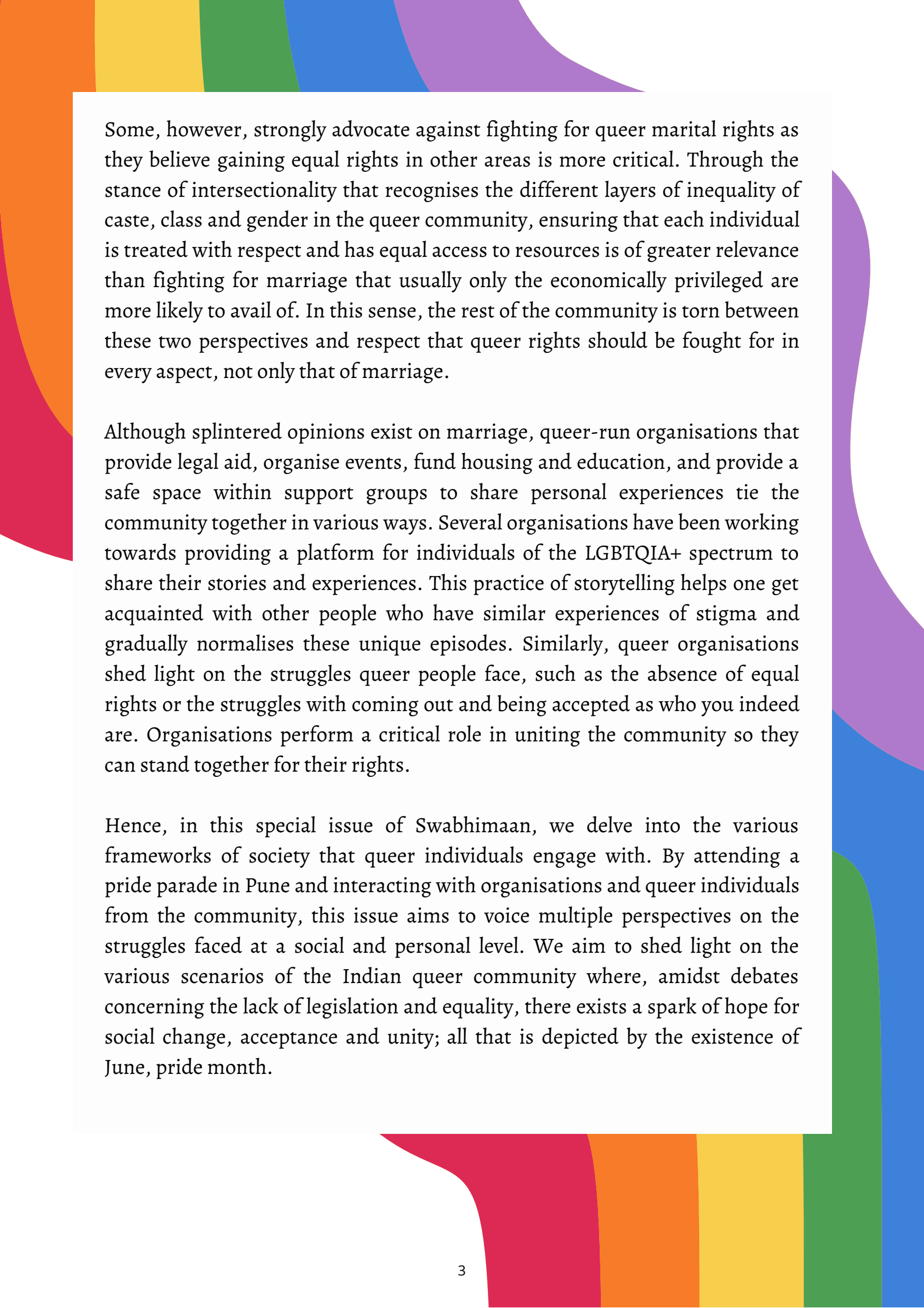
In India, the journey to queer rights has been tedious and difficult. Yet, action taken against the draconian Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised homosexual intercourse — considered an “act against the ordinary course of nature” — was struck down, leading to a widespread celebration amongst Indians. Even though the repeal of Section 377 should be applauded, the judgements or legislations following this are surrounded by an aura of silence and restraint in giving members of the queer community the same rights exercised by heterosexuals or cisgender persons.



While legislations have the potential to spark social change, societies around the world struggle to make amendments in personal and social spheres to be accepting of the queer community. The norm of being a heterosexual, cisgender individual is geared in social fabrics. Breaking through these structures by discovering your own identity can be an isolating experience: coming out as queer and deviating from heteronormative codes is faced by hostility in many cultures and religions in India. The fear of being ostracised from close social circles impacts self-perceptions. In the quest to be accepted by society, we often tend to reject parts of ourselves that we deeply want to come to terms with. It is for this very reason that pride month is essential to show that within this world that can often seem as a scary place to navigate on your own, there exists a community that will welcome your identity and queerness with shared experience and love.

There is, however, no denying that legal change is essential. It is a critical placeholder in the worldwide fight for equal rights for communities. Being recognised as valid, respectable and equal by law holds hope for social change in other spheres of life. In this quest, the queer community in India continues to file petitions and fight for the right to marry whoever one wishes to, irrespective of one's gender and sexuality. The current Special Marriage Act in India allows for unions between individuals from varied religious, caste, class, and social backgrounds. However, these personal laws are specific to a "bride" and a "groom", implying that only a heterosexual marriage would be valid under the law. The absence of the right to wed leads to a further obstacle to other rights such as adoption and surrogacy.

Queer marriage rights are a controversial and much-debated ground to engage with. As a patriarchal institution that marks economic ownership of the other, marriage rights are not viewed as an aspiration for the entirety of the queer community. Even though marriage can also be considered as a union of love, its roots lie in the murky depths of inequality as it indicates the existence of dynamics of superiority (undertaken by the male figure) and that of subordination imposed upon the woman. Queer marriage, many state, has the potential to dismantle these relationships and birth a new equation of diversity within this ancient institution of marriage.



Some, however, strongly advocate against fighting for queer marital rights as they believe gaining equal rights in other areas is more critical. Through the stance of intersectionality that recognises the different layers of inequality of caste, class and gender in the queer community, ensuring that each individual is treated with respect and has equal access to resources is of greater relevance than fighting for marriage that usually only the economically privileged are more likely to avail of. In this sense, the rest of the community is torn between these two perspectives and respect that queer rights should be fought for in every aspect, not only that of marriage.

Although splintered opinions exist on marriage, queer-run organisations that provide legal aid, organise events, fund housing and education, and provide a safe space within support groups to share personal experiences tie the community together in various ways. Several organisations have been working towards providing a platform for individuals of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to share their stories and experiences. This practice of storytelling helps one get acquainted with other people who have similar experiences of stigma and gradually normalises these unique episodes. Similarly, queer organisations shed light on the struggles queer people face, such as the absence of equal rights or the struggles with coming out and being accepted as who you indeed are. Organisations perform a critical role in uniting the community so they can stand together for their rights.

Hence, in this special issue of Swabhimaan, we delve into the various frameworks of society that queer individuals engage with. By attending a pride parade in Pune and interacting with organisations and queer individuals from the community, this issue aims to voice multiple perspectives on the struggles faced at a social and personal level. We aim to shed light on the various scenarios of the Indian queer community where, amidst debates concerning the lack of legislation and equality, there exists a spark of hope for social change, acceptance and unity; all that is depicted by the existence of June, pride month.

# ABHIMAAN

*Text by Isha Khurana and Shreeya Bhayana  
Pictures by Jignesh Mistry*

Since the Stonewall Riots, ignited by Marsha P. Johnson throwing a brick at the police, in New York's Greenwich Village in 1969, June has been branded as Pride Month. It is a month that commemorates the resistance against inaccessibility to civil rights by the LGBTQIA+ community globally. In India, the first Pride march was held on 2nd July 1999 in Kolkata. In recent years, it has started to become a trend in most of India's metropolitan cities.



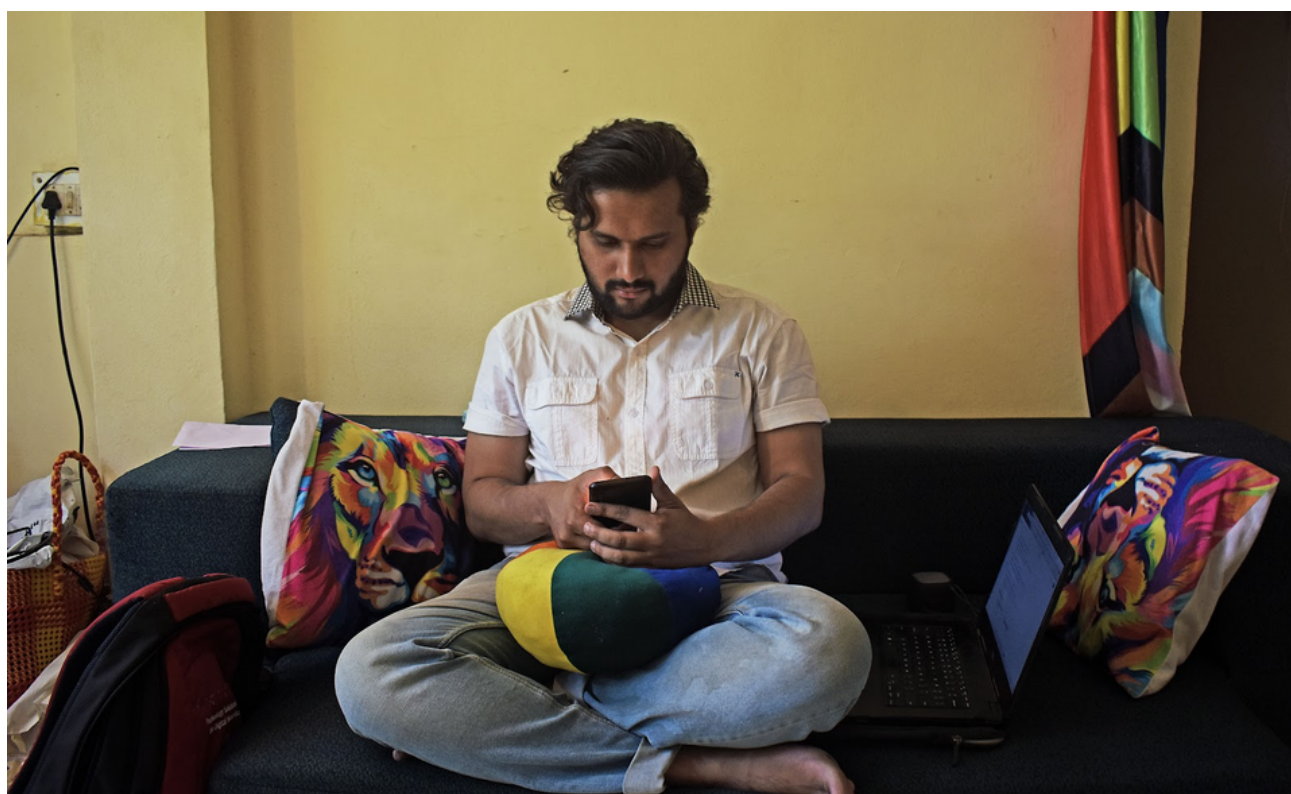




The celebrations of diverse gender and sexual identities have increased even more so since the abolishment of Section 377 from the Indian Penal Code in 2018 and the subsequent de-criminalization of same-sex relations within the country. While the striking of this law was a major step in the right direction, queer people in India seem to be in consensus that this is just the beginning. There is a long path ahead for this country to provide its queer citizens with basic civil liberties.



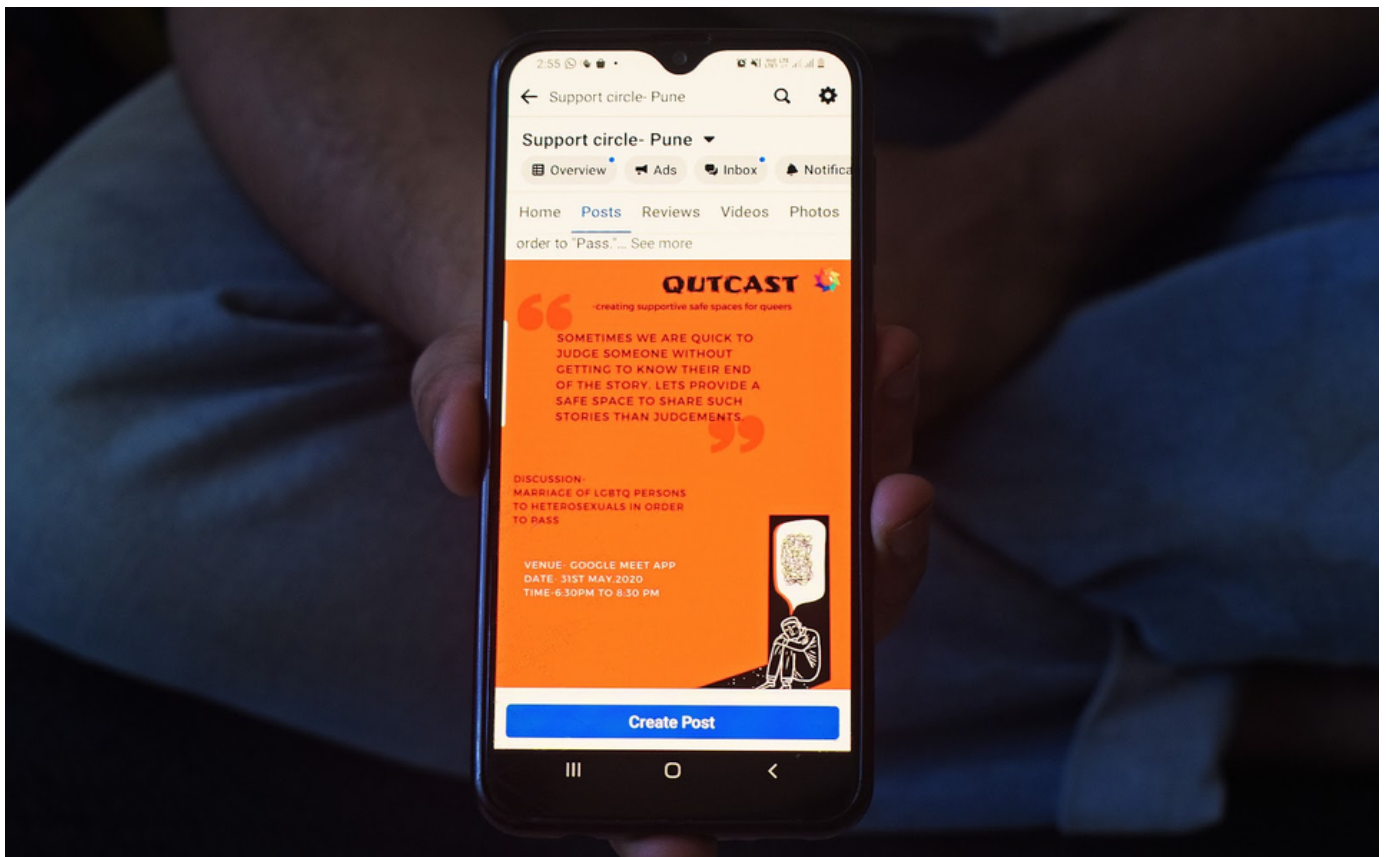
Numerous organizations across the country are working towards making India LGBTQ+ friendly. One of our respondents noted how there are numerous types of organizations working on queer liberation from a variety of directions. Some organisations such as Nazariya, focus on dismantling the stigma that plagues the well-being of the community, some cater to socio-medical concerns such as conversion therapy and others provide various relief measures. Their main aim, however, still remains the same; to cultivate solidarity and create a shared safe space for the celebration of queer identities. All queer-minded establishments are integral to the LGBTQIA+ community's struggle in India in their own ways.



Pride, in many ways, allows organisations to hold a plethora of events for queer folks. This gives them an opportunity to meet others like them and the subsequent visibility helps them find comfort and unapologetically accept their identities. The presence of social media provides them with a platform to connect with others in the community and share experiences, stories and ideas for uplifting queer individuals. Moreover, the reach of social media allows them to connect with individuals all across the world.



Numerous queer people report finding friends and relationships within these spaces. At times, people, with unhealthy familial relationships at home, form bonds on these platforms that are just like family. Organisations also create queer-only physical spaces for individuals to find solace and network within cities. One such example is Qutcast, Pune; they aim to represent acceptance of the queer community in a society that attempts to ostracize the “other”. The organization helps individuals in reclaiming heteronormative space by facilitating mobilization and talk circles in a physical environment. It is a necessary component for sociability within the queer community as often many people are not completely comfortable sharing their experiences virtually.



In addition to fostering a sense of community and creating spaces of solidarity, various other organisations are focussing on fighting for legal rights for the queer community. Many of our respondents emphasized the urgent need for the state to provide and ensure equal access to basic commodities, despite one’s gender and sexual orientation





Queer youth can be vulnerable to losing their homes when they “come out” or are at risk of losing employment if they work in queerphobic environments. Moreover, India has not outlawed conversion therapy; a practice that has proven to leave a traumatic mental and physical impact. This type of ‘therapy’ has been rejected by mainstream health organization because there is no proof that an individual’s sexual or gender orientation can be changed via these practices. Individuals who are subjected to reparation or conversion therapy are often made to do so by their families and caregivers because they do not approve of their identities. According to a study by San Francisco State University, LGBTQ youth who were rejected by their families based on their sexual orientation were 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide, 6 times as likely to be highly depressed, 3 times as likely to abuse substances and 3 times as likely to be affected by HIV/AIDS.



Another common topic of discussion within the queer community is marriage rights and equality. The community is fairly split in the debate; some members believe that it is important for India to legalise same-sex marriage as it allows for certain state-sanctioned protection for long-term couples. They contend that marriage allows for a certain recognition and acceptance within the wider society. The other side argues that the focus attributed to marriage rights within the diaspora of queer politics is not as necessary as comparative legal protections against discrimination.

***“We need to focus on roti, kapda, makaan” - Kritvi***

Additionally, some queer people also put forward their concerns regarding the singular focus on marriage within the community will force aspects of the toxic heteronormativity onto the queer community at large.





***"The concept of marriage itself is oppressive. The rituals in marriage and the gender oppression that is perpetuated in marriage is there and needs to be dealt with as a society at large. And while it does promote love; in the long run, it is important to evaluate the concept of marriage." - Anuj Ghanekar***



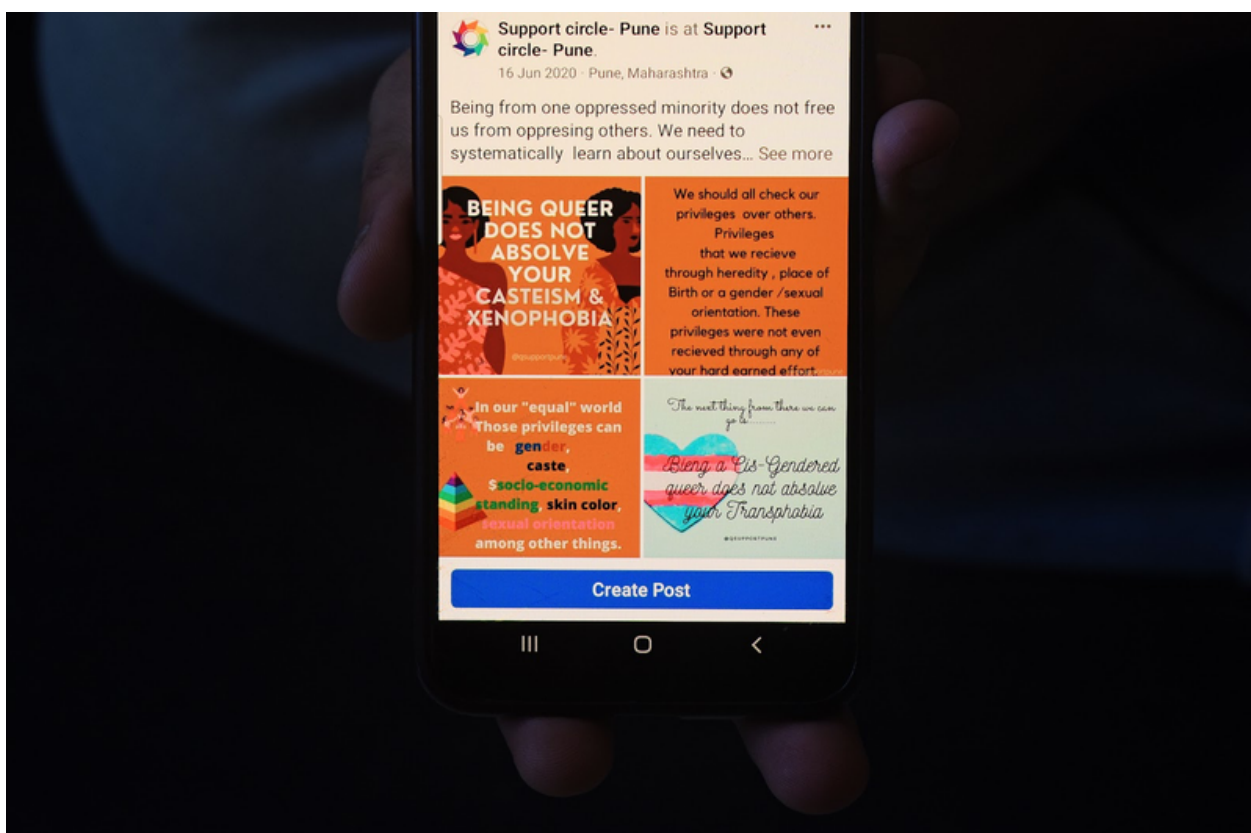


Moreover, queerness constantly interacts and intersects with other identities of religion, caste and class. Even within the LGBTQIA+community, different identities are treated differently.

*“When I look at queer organisations in India, I find it hard to find activities for lesbians. There are more activities for gay men.” - Savita*



One of our respondents, Savita, noted how there were more activities for gay men than gay women. Additionally, even though people belonging to Trans Gender and Non-Conforming (TNGC) groups arguably face more discrimination, given the explicit visibility of their identities, they still find themselves navigating through a rocky road to find space and acceptance within the larger LGBT groups.



***“Intersectionality plays a big role because we already do not have alot of spaces for queerness. Added on to the spaces that we do have, if there is a hierarchy that is enacted then it becomes harder for minority queer individuals to occupy their space.” - Omkar Shinde***



Additionally, while the work done by organizations is important, their reach and resources are limited. When it comes to working toward civil liberties, the Indian State has a major role to play in ensuring appropriate legislation. To motivate the state, it is imperative for us citizens to be vocal about queer rights around the year and not concentrate efforts during the month of June only.



*“When it comes to me, I try to work for queer rights all around the year and not just in June.”*

# Astitva

*In conversation with Rae, a student at O.P Jindal Global University*



***"We are not a part of a form. We are all different in our own ways"***

In this interview, our research assistant Shreya Bhayana converses with Rae (They/Them), a student of OP Jindal University. The interview attempts to understand the experiences of queerness witnessed by Rae in their life and how organisations have played a role in their journey. We also speak to them about Recover, an organisation that they are part of, that constitutes mostly of Neuro-divergent and queer members and how they help the queer community, both at working on a sense of community and solidarity but also in the work on the grassroots level .



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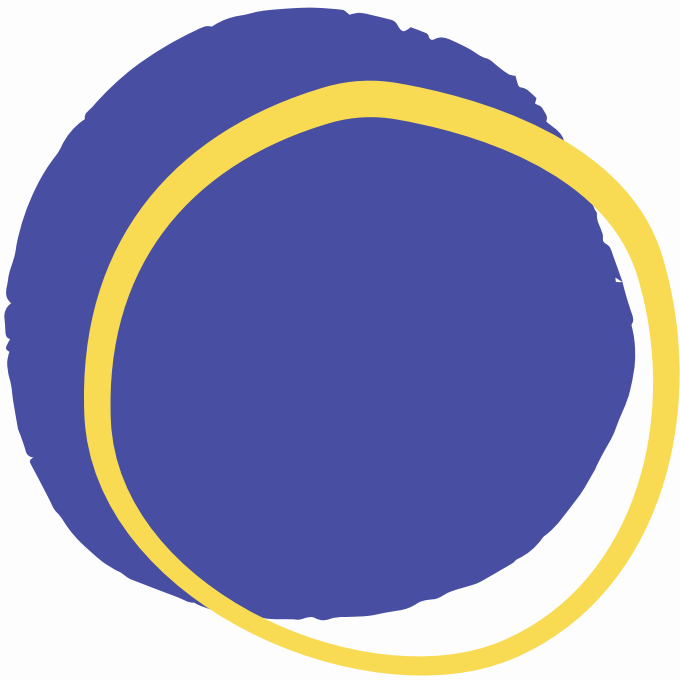


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Swabhimaan is an initiative undertaken by the Centre for New Economics Studies. It aims to bring out stories of success and positive evolution from gendered hurdles in the entrepreneurial spirit of creation and self-respect. The Team would like to thank all the interviewees who made this Issue of Swahimaan successful.



Swabhimaan  
Hope. Believe. Create.



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