

Transnational and Networked Empathy: Queer Activism in Indian Digital Diasporas | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcription for the recorded event “Transnational and Networked Empathy: Queer Activism in Indian Digital Diasporas” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on May 11, 2023, and was moderated by Dilshan Fernando. The guest speaker was Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy.

Transcript:

Dilshan Fernando:

So, welcome you all for the webinar, “Transnational and Networked Empathy: Queer Activism in Indian Digital Diasporas,” organized by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement ---- CIRCLE for short at the University of Guelph.

I would like to start with a land acknowledgement, the University of Guelph resides on the treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We recognize this gathering place where we work and learn is home to many past, present, and future First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.

Our acknowledgement of the land is our declaration of collective responsibility to this place and its people's histories, rights and presence. We support and add a collective voice to the calls to action from The Truth and Reconciliation Committee on the Indian residential school to never forget, to hold governments and colonial forces to account, to seek redress and healing.

My name is Dilshan Fernando. I'm a PhD student in Sociology and International Development here at the University of Guelph. I've been a part of CIRCLE for the past two years in many capacities and I will be your moderator for this webinar.

CIRCLE was established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph --- the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement. CIRCLE aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting edge research on India, South Asia and their diasporas to showcase, advocate, catalyze and foster equitable, respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian Scholars on complex and emerging and unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

I'll put the website link on the chat after some time, you could explore a wealth of resources on what we have on our website. I also want to remind an upcoming event which CIRCLE is proud of, that is the CIRCLE graduate South Asia conference.

This conference is for PhD students who are engaged in research related to India, South Asia and Indian and all South Asian diasporas. This is for the second-- this conference is held for the second time. We had a very successful conference last year. This is a three-day virtual conference, and we expect proposals and abstracts from all disciplines --- it's a multidisciplinary conference --- and the deadline for abstract submission is on July 10th.

Okay, so coming to today's event... the title of our webinar today is “Transnational and Networked Empathy: Queer Activism in Indian Digital Diasporas.”

Let me introduce Dr Nanditha Narayanamoorthy. Dr. Narayanamoorthy is a post-doctoral researcher at the centre for information, technology, and public life at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Siegel Family Endowment fellow.

Her work draws from a humanities-based framework to understand the relationship between technology and democracy and rethink digital infrastructure and platform design in the global south. As an interdisciplinary scholar at the intersection of critical digital studies, gender studies and social justice, her work investigates the role digital infrastructures play in centering feminist and queer subaltern counter publics online.

She's published in feminist media studies and digital studies. If you want to look at Dr. Narayanamoorthy's work, I'm going to put in the chat one of my favorites. If you want to know about what happened in me to India, which is an exciting piece, I'll just put it on the chat. Feel free to look at Dr. Narayanamoorthy's published work.

So, thank you so much Dr. Narayanamoorthy, welcome to this webinar. Before I give you the floor, I just want to remind our participants of the time allocation. So, Dr. Narayanamoorthy will speak for about 30 to 40 minutes and after that we will have a Q&A for 20 to 30 minutes.

You can put your questions on the chat or raise your hand after Dr. Narayanamoorthy is done with the talk. So, thank you so much, thanks for joining and over to you Dr. Narayanamoorthy.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Thank you so much Dilshan for the warm introduction and thank you for the invitation extended to me by the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement at the University of Guelph. I'm really grateful to be here and thanks for everyone for showing up. So, I'm going to share my screen and let me know if you can—

Dilshan Fernando:

Perfect.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Okay. Perfect.

So, as Dilshan said I'm Nanditha, I'm a post-doctoral researcher at the centre for Information, Technology, and Public Life at the University of North Carolina and today my talk is going to be titled “Transnational and Networked Empathy: Queer Activism in the Context of Indian Digital Diasporas.” This research that I will be talking about today is based on my first book project that is titled “Queer Digital Activism in India: Networked Empathy, Kinship and Solidarity.”

This is currently under contract with Palgrave MacMillan and under this series specifically on mediating kinship, representation, and difference. This book is, of course, not only about digital diasporas --- it is thinking through queer activism based on the Indian queer movement #Section377 and the discourse that's happening around the movement on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, but the scope of today's talk is going to be about digital diasporas.... and how they talk about #Section377.

So, as an international student living in Canada in 2018, I both witnessed and also participated in this rising digital celebration of newfound queer rights in India and I'm going to be talking a little bit more about what #Section377 is, but this online movement paved the way essentially for Paradigm rights for queer identity, sex, and desire in the country.

So, as a comparatist and interdisciplinary scholar, I was really interested in thinking through some of the ways that activist discourse happens on social media technologies and this fascination in turn, shaped my research as well.

So, very broadly, I look at how communities engage with social media platforms for social organizing and also how they create activist discourse in the context of the global south, but particularly here in the Indian context.

My scope for this research, as I had already said, is to focus on digital diasporas and so the question that I'm interested in asking is "How does the Indo-Canadian diaspora participate in the discourse around #Section377?" on specifically Twitter and Instagram. And how is it that they are able to create these imagined communities of solidarity, support, allyship, friendship and empathy for their queer Indian counterparts.

So, before I actually take you on the talking about the research that I do, I wanted to highlight some of the key contributions that my work actually makes in this study, and I'll return to them in the findings section.

So, the first contribution that I make with my research is, of course, in thinking about networked empathy. So, I talk about this concept in a way that defines how queer communities come together and coalesce around the discourse on #Section377 and how they create this collective identity and sort of a networked identity around discussions of queerness.

Second, I talk about this idea of transnational solidarity because, of course, the Indian digital diasporas are instrumental when thinking about the role that they play in creating awareness about queer identities and LGBTQ activism and of course we have to consider the aspect of solidarity when we talk about this particular work.

And finally, I talk about queer subaltern counter publics, so this is an idea that I borrow from Rohit Das Gupta who's been very, very important to the work that I do on queer activism in India. So, the final queer subaltern counter publics point is essentially my borrowing from Rohit Das Gupta to talk about this collective queer identity that digital diasporas are able to participate in.

A little bit of background on what is #Section377; So, in order to study social how social media's role is in centering queer voices in India, I examine the queer movement around #Section377. So, this is essentially an Indian law of the Indian Penal Code which is a very archaic and colonial law and until a recent momentous verdict by the Supreme Court of India in August 2008, criminalized homosexuality.

And so it read "whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life." Although it's not clearly stated, carnal intercourse against the order of nature in the Indian penal code alludes to sexual acts that are not necessarily always homosexual --- they can mean it is part of heterosexuality as well.

However, when it comes to criminalizing homosexual acts, #Section377 burdens LGBT communities and subjects in the country and also those who are practicing homosexuality and brings them out and forces them to essentially keep their lives a secret from their families, communities and authorities.

A little bit of a timeline as to how #Section377 came to be and how it was decriminalized in the Indian context; The law was first introduced by the British Raj in 1861 and it was a colonial experiment that was shaped by homophobic attitudes and imported to other colonial societies as well, so India was not the only society where #Section377 was implemented.

Its colonial hegemony primarily serving Imperialist and Victorian interest was adopted by the Indian constitution in 1947 when India won its independence, and this became an instrument to police the masses using sexual, moral and religious policing and it became a vestigial reminder of colonial oppression.

The non-governmental organization Naz was the first to actually create awareness surrounding the spread of AIDS and then it launched its own fight for legalization against #Section377 and for the decriminalization of homosexuality. And so, it was Naz Foundation that really started this decade long fight I should say, until in August 2018 the Supreme Court finally read down the law.

Diasporas have always occupied a liminal third space, enabling the reimagination of what constitutes a nation or the concept of a nation. So, particularly in the context of Indian diasporas in the global north, identities have constantly oscillated between the discontinuity and fluidity.

It could be either thinking about digital diasporas and their role in fortifying the nation state in terms of a heteropatriarchal, very masculine society or spearheading a very transnational queer supportive movement. Social media platforms actually enable both kinds of diasporic participation.

And Indian diasporas in the early '80s and '90s were actually reinscribing notions of what it means to.... take a stance against the sort of foreign incursion of what queer sexuality meant at the time and the intransigent of the rejection of non-traditional and peripheral sexualities within this diaspora also kind of contributed to an anti-Indianness or an otherness that came with identifying as being gay.

However, as time passed, as LGBTQ activism is also something that India imported from the West it also became true that digital diasporas increasingly participated in this

transnational solidarity of the Desi queerness or the South Asian queerness and in terms of thinking about challenging some of these notions of what it means to be a citizen of India.

Secondly, diasporic identity has always also been built on the foundation of religion. Historically so, and it is a part of a nation-building character. So, whether it's thinking about Hinduism or Sikhism or Christianity or Muslim-Indian communities, the Indian diasporic project in the west has largely been focused on religion and, contemporarily, I don't think we can dismiss the aspect of the Hindu nationalist society that has also promoted superiority of Hindu civilization and codes of sexuality in the west.

Whether it is thinking about North American diasporas of India or thinking about the UK and Caribbean or African countries, the Hindu diaspora has increasingly become a part of this conversation.

And as Gopinath, who is an important scholar when it comes to discussing diasporas, Indian diasporas in the West, argues minoritized communities, including women, lower caste groups, and LGBTQI groups and those who are deemed politically undesirable to serve the homeland's elite nationalist claims of heterosexual patriarchal logic are, in fact, parts of this Hindu normative idea of sexuality.

And so, this transnational solidarity that digital diasporas espouse and support, is in fact challenging these very notions of what it means to be this particular idea of a Hindu citizen. Despite being an extension of national identities, diasporic communities also help create what Appadurai calls "diasporic public spheres" and they enable this diffusion of Western norms of human rights into regulations and constitutions of the nation state.

And, even though they function through the production of nationalistic interests, at times they are also imbricated in, and they are produced through forces of transnational capitalism that they borrow from. So, western identity politics becomes an important manifestation of modern transnational LGBTQ movements.

It has always been this global narrative of what it means to be queer and these different terms of like gay, lesbian or even queer are in fact imported from the west, India does not have this terminology and so the very idea of activism related to LGBTQ communities comes from the west.

In this particular research, I also talk about LGBTQ organizations in the United States and Canada and look at how they have been involved in this discourse. Some of these organizations are Khush, or Gaysi, or Sher Vancouver that are within Canada. I (inaudible)

theoretical frameworks to think about and this particular research I bring together a multitude of disciplines.

In my study of queer movements in India and particularly I build on the scholarship at the intersection of social media activism, digital subaltern counter publics and diaspora studies. In the case of #Section377, members of the Indian diaspora engage in this transnationalist, modern narrative and openly express support and solidarity with the decriminalization of homosexuality.

So, the Habermasian public sphere is the platform where all public opinions are formed and conversations for private individuals can also be held. And so, for me, the public sphere argument by Nancy Fraser is something that I really borrow from and talk about this exclusion of certain LGBTQ groups and how they come together on social media platforms to create this digital subaltern counter public space. And so, in the context of this particular research on diasporas, I talk about how diasporic discourse enables this sort of free space for the solidarity and support with the Indian queer movement.

And with respect to social media activism, I go to Tufekci's Twitter and tear gas and Moya Bailey, Sarah Jackson, and Brooke Foucault-Welles' #activism and these two works have been instrumental in shaping the work that I do in the context of #activism in the global south.

And I also draw very importantly from Rohit Das Gupta and Radhika Gajjala who contextualize queer activism in the context of Indian subaltern counter publics. And with respect to diaspora studies, although I look at many prominent diaspora studies scholars, the most important ones to me are Appadurai and Gopinath.

So, in this study I combined multiple theoretical Frameworks. So, in this particular one, I look at Queer Theory and Decolonial Theory as well to kind of evoke this digital queer subject and to think about what it means to really belong.

What does citizenship mean? What does belonging mean? --- especially for queer communities that are on the fringe and how it is that digital diasporas are using or engaging these platforms to challenge heteronormative masculine homophobic power structure. So, at the very centre of all of my work is thinking about power. And so, these series help question power institutions and hierarchies of power for these marginalized communities.

With respect to methodologies, I bring together a number of qualitative frameworks to understand how the discourse actually takes place. And I, of course, bring together

discourse analysis as well as visual analysis and I considered this sort of like a mixed-methods research that I'm doing --- bringing together the work that I do on social media.

In the entire data set that I collected, I only had about 500 tweets that I was able to collect using the #Section377. And of course I have to reemphasize that my research does not completely only entail digital diasporas --- I also did research on India and collecting data from India.

And so, unfortunately because of the limited number of people who use the location API for Canada on Twitter, I was only able to collect a limited data set from within this region. And so, in addition to looking at #Section377, I also examined certain LGBTQI organizations that were a part of the Indo-Canadian context and the languages that I used to collect this data set were both in English and Hindi.

The timeline was between 2017, which was one year before the decriminalization happened, until 2019. Okay, so it's like a 2-year period before and after the Supreme Court actually read down the law. And similarly to Twitter, I also engaged in data collection with Instagram.

I also used the same hashtag to manually look for conversations that are happening in the diasporic space --- which was a little bit more difficult than doing so on Twitter because Instagram does not have an API, and so I focused here on looking at Indo-Canadian LGBTQI organizations and the kinds of posts that they are making um to engage with this discourse.

And I used the selenium browser automation method to sort of scroll through all of these posts and manually screenshotted every post that I thought was important. And so, I ended up collecting a little bit fewer than 200 posts on Instagram, so you can see that this is a limited data set that I work with for this particular research question. And I conduct a discourse as well as a visual analysis of both of these posts that I collect.

In other research that I do, I also follow what I call the “deductive coding” methodology where I'm looking at the number of --- the statistical number of the tweets that actually follow a particular question. Whether it's, you know, if you read my other papers on the exclusion with “Me to India” or about “Homophobia in the Queer Movement in India,” I showcase how many posts actually respond to that particular question.

Whereas, in this particular context of digital diasporas, I focused on manual content analysis and data collection. And so, I use discourse and visual analysis to examine how these conversations are happening.

And as you can see, my data set has been limited, and so the conclusions that I draw from this are in fact necessary and important but of course come with certain caveats. In addition to that, there's also a lack of ethnographic components. I'm really interested in actually talking to some of these organizations and the people that are a part of it, but that research would happen later. This particular research is only focused on looking at digital discourse and so that's what I'm focused on.

So, I wanted to go back to some of these key theoretical contributions that I talked about and focus on some of these findings at the moment. So I argue that social media platforms and hashtag activism provide the community with affordances for the construction of networks of empathy within the queer Indian movement.

And so, the first point that that I'm interested in making is about networked empathy and transnational diasporic solidarity. So, the most important finding was that 54% of the Twitter dataset that I found and a slightly lesser percentage, with respect to Instagram, actually indicated solidarity support and allyship with the Indian queer movement.

And so, most of these tweets were in English because it's coming from the west. There's relatively fewer Tweets in Hindi, which I expected, and the diasporic discourse is all about celebration, jubilation, and pride about the emancipation of the community and about the reading down of #Section377.

So, all of the names here on these tweets have been anonymized or changed to ensure anonymity. But, these are some examples that talk about how some of these users who come from the Indian diaspora are talking about #Section377 and that they are actually in solidarity with everybody from India who's actually now able to live freely.

And so, this one person talks about how queerness has always been a western concept and so now homosexuality, which has always been a part of our culture, can be something that Indians can finally accept because this is a way to connect with an India of the past.

And so, in essence, some of these comments are attempting to decolonize and to think about in India where sexuality was fluid and free and so... and really challenging these notions of colonial interpretations of what sex and sexuality constituted.

And on Instagram, about 14% of the images that I coded were depicting transnational solidarity in a different way. So, images with pride colors were posted by individuals, they were posted by LGBTQ non-profit organizations, some of these advocacy groups in support of the reading down of #Section377.

These Pride images were employed in various different ways. Whether it was thinking about flags, or their clothes that people were wearing, or the food that they were eating. So, this was all a rainbow of colors and immediately following the decriminalization rule that came out in August. So the use of rainbows here in Instagram demonstrates solidarity, it demonstrates collective and connective action with the queer subaltern, and it facilitates the production of imagined collectives that reaffirm and legitimize non-normative love and queerness on digital spaces.

And so, this is another post from Twitter that I took from the LGBTQ organization “Gaysi Family” that engages with #Section377 and it's been a very important aspect of storytelling within this entire conversation, where a lot of Indians have also whether they are Desi and living in western countries, or they are part of India, have been actually using this as a platform to talk about their own stories of growing up queer or completely using these platforms to come out in in that way.

So, I found this particular tweet that also performs the function of transnational solidarity through both images and text. And then there's the picture of a clock or an alarm that the Indian Supreme Court has finally broken.

And the next concept that I talk about is networked empathy and “how do I define empathy?” and “why is it important?” So, this is taken --- I've actually like defined and classified empathy in two very important ways in terms of how I see the discourse emerging.

And so, this is the way for me to classify some of these conversations and the first is empathy emerges around #Section377 in the digital diasporas through the expression of positive affirmation --- whether it's through sentiments, feelings, and expression of emotions like joy, hope, and pride or it's through the expression of positive acknowledgment of queer rights.

So, one of the important reasons that I talk about networked empathy in this context is because the queer movement, even though it was very active on the streets and offline spaces, it has been the digital discourse coming from a very transnational perspective and a transnational pull from the diasporas that has really played a very important role and pushed the movements towards a legal emancipation from the Supreme Court for queer rights.

And so, this idea of digital citizenship has been very important for the entire queer community. And so, this is a space where not just queer communities are able to

participate, but everyone who is a part of the Indian diaspora who's able to engage in these conversations and help support and empathize with everyone from India who's actually a member of the LGBTQ community.

So, this is a graph basically that shows that this is the kind of discussion out of the 54% of tweets that were very supportive of the entire movement. It is these adjectives or like emotions that were used. And so, as you can see, happiness, and hope, and pride or some of like the bigger emotions that are felt by some of these users.

And this is... a lot of these conversations were happening both prior, as well as post the decriminalization of homosexuality. Here are some more examples that showcase how the diaspora expresses empathy for the Indian transgender.

So it's not just solidarity, but also essentially looking at how the LGBTQ community or the transgender community have been facing ostracization and putting themselves in their shoes to think about the kind of discrimination they have faced in society.

And this is another organization called "KhushDC," which is a South Asian LGBTQ community that's based in Canada that evokes this conversation about how Humsafar Trust in India was the very first organization to actually start talking about queer rights in the country and they really use this conversation to empathize with how much there needs to be done and the kinds of issues that these communities actually go through.

This brings me to the final point on queer digital subaltern counterpublics within digital diasporas. So, diasporas in Canada employ social media platforms to create these imagined collectives that support queer rights in the country.

So, Rohit Das Gupta as I mentioned earlier, is the one who really talks about this idea of queer subaltern counterpublics as spaces where a sexual revolution of sorts happens ---- and there is this reawakening of sexual revolutions in this case, to talk about to construct the subaltern culture to create this safe space for conversation.

And so, I draw from his work to frame this queer subaltern space that digital diasporas are a part of... to not only think about how there is a queer politics of resistance that's being shaped here through this support, through the solidarity, allyship, friendship --- it is also creating a notion of the collective, a collective queer identity within these imagined collectives.

And so, this collective queer identity is what I term the queer subaltern counterpublic space. So, in my work digital diasporas also help construct this subaltern space while participating in the exercise for collective and performative postcolonial identity building.

So, these networked counterpublics that lead to the production of postcolonial identity, are made possible through hashtag activism. That, not only are changing debates about how queerness is viewed in the country, but actually helping re-center and accelerate this process of decolonization by forging the means to dismantle colonial and postcolonial knowledge on queer sexuality.

So, it is through these expressions of solidarity, and it is through expressions of empathy with the community in India that these spaces are created and this space actually takes on the burden of the queer cause in India.

So, the networked voice here is constructed to combat and to challenge some of these heterosexual, homophobic, authoritarian views of sex and sexuality that are inherently Victorian, colonial, and postcolonial... and also nationalist.

And so, I argue that even in the absence of the subaltern counterpublic communities, or the queer in India who cannot really talk for themselves or use these platforms in a way to completely live their authentic lives, the digital diasporas are in fact creating those spaces where they are able to not only create a collective queer identity, but also engaging in conversations that push some of these legal emancipatory spaces to come through.

So, finally I wanted to talk about this idea of the zones of empathy that I draw from this work of networked empathy in my own work. So, I argue that when it comes to zones of empathy, I'm not only talking about how queer communities engage with hashtags like #Section377, I'm also talking about how individuals in the diaspora community who are not, in fact, queer are also participating in these discourses --- they're also using these hashtags to empathize with the movement and empathize with the communities.

They are creating these spaces of connective and collective action. And, in addition to just individuals, it's also non-governmental organizations, or corporations or LGBTQ advocacy groups that are involved in conversations --- as you saw --- who also help push or carry this movement forward.

So, unfortunately the subaltern is not very actively present and this is a different kind of research that I'm talking about that I did... where I showcase that the queer subaltern, it does not participate enough on these platforms.

I do show that there is these zones of queer empathy that are created, in fact, by those that empathize, by those that express their solidarity, so the digital diaspora here creates that network of empathy and transnational solidarity that help really push the movement forward.

So, to conclude, these mediated networks of affective empathy among this subaltern culture create a foundation for digital mobilization emerging from digital diasporas. It culminates in queer emancipation in the country.

So, the Indo-Canadian diaspora is really performing the function of demonstrating care, compassion, affinity, rapport, and sympathy for these communities in India and recognizing the everyday social and personal struggles that these communities and individuals within these communities face.

So, the effect of solidarity and user support is built through hashtag connections and it emerges through this open act of acknowledging the vulnerabilities of the subaltern group and also promoting these feelings up --- affection, attachment, and belonging within these communities.

And so, these posts --- some of the posts that I showcase, speak to the importance of fostering some of these social connections and this feeling of belonging and togetherness -- both online and offline --- in order to create this awareness for the struggle that these minoritized communities are facing. And eventually, to enact not just a social change, but also a political and legal change in the country.

And finally, collective action according to this particular conversation that I have talked about --- evokes a sense of unity, and it evokes a sense of collective belonging and togetherness, and it fosters empathetic connections. And so, eventually, it leads to this construction of imagined collectives and queer subaltern spaces that completely redefines this idea of nationhood and what that constitutes --- what nationhood belonging in citizenship means for queer communities who have always been at the fringe of society.

And this collective action produces and performs solidarity through protest rituals --- whether it's through sharing a lot of pictures that look very similar dressing in certain colors, or holding flags, there is a certain affinity that's created with your counterparts --- LGBTQ counterparts --- in India.

And this creation of solidarity occurs through imagined collectives where participants are unaware of even the identities of who is participating. So, there's a lack of the physical and material embodiment on digital platforms that actually promotes these kinds of imagined

spaces or that become safe for the community to participate in and also erases differences and privileges this sort of collective identity... and the creation of empathy and empowerment that really takes or moves the movement forward.

Thank you so much.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you so much Dr Narayanamoorthy. That was a great talk, I enjoyed it thoroughly. Let's now open the dialogue for questions. I put it in the chat, if you want --- if you have any question, feel free to put it in the chat as well as click the raise your hand option that's available on Zoom... and then I will give you the floor. So, you can read out the question. Yeah. Let's... I see Rajinder Dudrah --- do you want to read out your question Rajinder?

Rajinder Dudrah:

Hello, thank you, sorry Nanditha. Sorry.

Thank you very much for that paper, it was really clearly articulated and I really enjoyed hearing the presentation. Thank you very much for that. Just a couple of questions --- one could you just talk a bit methodologically about your... kind of data collection --- particularly with selenium for those of us who might not be familiar with it.

So, the kind of strengths and weaknesses of doing that work. And then the second question is... I think you're absolutely right, it was a -- kind of a moment of celebration for the wider community with the doing way of this act and the way that you capture the celebration.

But even in that moment and shortly after, are you able to say or did you capture anything in the sense of, not necessarily dissenting voices, but the heterogeneity of voices which you start to talk about towards the end of your talk.

And I'm particularly thinking about the intersectionality of the haves and the have nots access to digital access. Did that come up in any way? Even though a lot of the people were online and you were looking online, but I'm also thinking of you know other minority communities women, the trans debate, the queer debate or is that a completely kind of separate project? And yours is one, just kind of marking the moment of arrival and celebration.

Thank you.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Thank you so much, Rajinder. They were very wonderful questions. Yeah, I'd like to address the first question about using selenium. Methodologically, it was a challenge working with Instagram, for example, and I used Twitter at the time when APIs were available and I was able to easily extract the data using #Section377.

But of course, I also put in the filter for, you know, language and location that limited the amount of data that I was able to have access to. With respect to Instagram, what selenium as a browser does is actually just --- I was able to download all of the data that I had at the same time and then I was able to manually go through it to screenshot the posts that were important to the specific research question that I was asking.

But, selenium essentially just sort of openly gives me all of the data under a single hashtag because it's difficult to get all of the data at the same time and I have to like scroll through, you know, because each hashtag that I'm looking at is about 30,000 or 50,000, you know.

There's a lot of data that I have to parse through, so it just gives me access to all of it and I'm able to screenshot it based on the timeline that I have and based on the specific research questions that I have.

And for the second question that you asked, I think it's a very important question and it's a great question --- so, my answer to that would be... so I was going into this particular research on digital diasporas thinking about these sorts of nationalist discussions that are being had and, you know, the exclusion of some of these communities --- whether it's feminist or queer voices and how that's actually happening on social media ever since the Hindu nationalist movement has been taking place since 2014 in the country.

And so, you're absolutely right, that's what I expected to go through but unfortunately the limited data set that I had only gave me, you know, this kind of discourse. So, I expected to find dissenting voices, expected to find a different type of discourse but unfortunately celebration, empathy, and solidarity is the singular kind of discourse that I found in this particular data set. But, yes, I do work on a lot of these different questions as a bigger research project that I do. Yeah.

Rajinder Dudrah:

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Dilshan Fernando:

There are two questions in the chat. I'll read the first question and then come to Abby. Zabin says as a question, "I'm curious to know if networked empathy expands to solidarity with non-Indian LGBTQ digital activism or other forms of Justice?"

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

I think that's a great question. So, I would say that I don't know the answer to that question because I have not specifically looked at it. So, the only locations that I have considered for this work are looking at the diasporic discourse in Canada and also looking at the discourse on or around #Section377 in all of India, but, I think it would be interesting to do more work on non-Indian LGBTQ activist organizations and what they have been saying. So, thank you for that, yes.

Dilshan Fernando:

Okay, Abby do you want to read out the question?

Abby Silversmith:

Can you hear me now? Yes, okay. Yeah I was a bit concerned, you know, on how solidarity is being defined here like, especially because there's expressions of like, you know, because like I feel like this looks at like --- one dimensionalizes the problem of what exactly counts as solidarity here.

I think, like, it is also important to look at like larger critiques of like, a lot of these platforms that are mentioned like critiques of [inaudible], critiques of [inaudible], which have which have come from queer and feminist activists and scholars. I just find it a little bit troubling that... [inaudible] I hope I was clear.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you, Abby.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Yeah, thank you so much. I think that that's a great question, and you're absolutely right that there, you know, it seems like it's one-dimensional. I think the reason that it seems that way is because of the kinds of discourse that are emerging.

So, what I did with my methodology, in fact, was that I looked specifically for the conversations that were happening and I took into account everything --- all of the conversations that I saw happening that were coming from diasporic communities and spaces and, unfortunately, it all seemed to point to a particular argument.

It was not an argument that I made in any way, but when it comes to questions of, you know, solidarity and support in the Indian context and you know the discourse that's happening around #Section377 in India and I have a lot of data on that; It's not limiting in any way and so, those conversations I found to be more interesting and, of course, pointing to a lot of different you know types of discourse --- which are not only about solidarity and networked empathy, but also about exclusion... about not really centering the voices of subaltern communities.

Whether it's feminist or queer communities, and so there's a lot to unpack there but with respect to this particular research question, I think this is where it led me so... but it's absolutely correct that I could consider thinking about some of the histories of these organizations and critiquing where necessary. But thank you so much.

Abby Silversmith:

I have a small follow-up. This is something that is concerning, that I'm just seeing in the scholarship... in the diasporic scholarship on how a lot of folks in the diaspora when doing studies, seem to be a lot less nuanced because like the feminist, [inaudible] caste analysis, the feminist analysis, all of these are fundamental. How do you even like look at queer solidarity in India without looking at the caste aspect?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Mhm.

No, I think that's a great question. I think that, unfortunately, some of these the discussions that people were having here were unidimensional, but these are not... like my work is actually not unidimensional when I talk about India.

So, in order to counteract this particular digital discourse --- because of course it seems like it's heading in a very specific direction and, you know, even with respect to APIs --- those who choose to make their location public for example.

And those are the only tweets and Instagram posts that I was able to collect. It seems that they are very much in favor of the decriminalization right, and so not a lot of these conversations are happening that are like critiquing or like thinking about caste and

feminism or other, you know, multitudes of identity factors or other, you know, ideas within this particular framework but in order to add to this research, I'm also conducting a very ethnographic work.

Whether it's like thinking about working with some of these organizations, or talking to the Indian diaspora where I live in the US, or in Canada and, you know, ask these questions of what they think about queer activism and, like I said, I went into this research thinking that there would be a lot more nationalistic discourse as well and there would be a lot more to parse from ---- but you're absolutely right that there could be more that comes out of this but thank you.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you. Kim has a question on the chat. Kim was wondering if you could touch on how the idea of queerness being wrong is colonial but the LGBTQ2+ movement is also considered western and criticized as a cultural colonialism.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that --- could you repeat that question?

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, Kim asked a question. Kim is wondering if you could touch on how the idea of queerness being wrong is colonial but the LGBTQ2+ movement is also considered Western and criticized as a cultural colonialism.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

I think that's a great question because there is this frequent tension that I saw within the Indian data set that I talked about where there are two strands of postcolonial as well as decolonial identity that were emerging.

So, the first strand was thinking about just decolonizing, wanting nothing to do with, you know, this idea of sex and sexuality that colonizers have interpreted in a very specific way and so this was a movement for them to essentially move away from a colonial interpretation and to really just go back to this India where sex and sexuality were both fluid.

And there's this other discourse that was also happening that really showcased how they were more interested in moving forward in time to a more modern, progressive India just

like the west, you know, because they were working with terminology that was western, there was no way to understand what “LGBTQ” even meant, or what the term “queer” meant, or “gay”, or “lesbian” these are terms that we borrowed from the west.

And so, since the movement itself was imported, this was a way for them to feel okay, we'll give the LGBTQ community all of the rights that they rightfully deserve. And so, this was a way for India to actually become a more transnational and modern state and this is where I think the diaspora really actually helped in in these conversations. Yeah.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you Nanditha. There's another question from Anshu Jan.

Okay, the question is “can you give some examples of care and empathy that is being networked, transacted, forged here?” Anshu Jan is particularly wondering that both care and empathy are not one-way actions, that builds on Abby's question... so how is care and empathy being understood?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

So yeah, that's a great question. I think I would go back to the way that I was defining empathy. So it's more a way of a lot of use of different sorts these positive objectives, sentiments, and emotions to talk about the movement and to talk about their counterparts in who were LGBTQ in India and also care and empathies expressed by thinking about... just positive affirmations and just making sure that they are putting themselves in the shoes of these communities and talking about what is needed, the kind of discrimination that they have been through, and kind of ostracization that they have been through. So, those are some of the examples that I showed, yeah.

Anshu Jan:

So, you're saying defining empathy and care, like you are defining it, it's not based...

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Yes. Yes. I'm the one defining it, yes. Yeah.

Anshu Jan:

And so, can you go back to the slide on your theoretical framework and the literature review or conceptual framing?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Just one second. I'm sorry about this. Yeah.

Anshu Jan:

And there was one more slide on decolonialism I think that you were using.

Okay, so where these authors come in... like how is your work drawing on decolonial theory? How is your work drawing on queer theory? Why you haven't used any sort of literature... there's a vast amount of literature on care theory, about care, labour...

[inaudible]

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Yeah, I think that's a fair suggestion. So, the kind of research I've done is not only on digital diasporas. The work that I have done is on, you know, feminist as well as queer movements but thinking through like how these communities are actually representing themselves, how the conversation about them is happening on these spaces, you know, which means that these are not the only individuals that are participating here.

So, I would say that in this particular research, I'm not only talking about LGBTQ communities but also talking about how others are perceiving them, right. And you're absolutely right that there is a lot of literature on queerness and diasporas that I may not have looked at but this is because this is more of like a research on digital discourses and digital activism and how these communities are actually participating in that conversation.

Yeah, and I'm actually using this queer theory and decolonial theory as sort of frameworks to look at power --- to like, examine power and I understand that this doesn't show up in this particular research but again, as we talked about earlier, if you actually go through some of my other work that's related to this project, you'll see how I use power, and feminist, and queer frameworks to actually think about digital activism, how it should be, how it should be designed on these spaces and what it means to actually have conversations about intersectionality, and feminism, and queerness. Yeah.

Dilshan Fernando:

So, while others are typing the questions, let me ask a question Nanditha.

In your research, digital spaces are central to practice solidarity for queer subaltern courses, and since power is an important consideration, could you clarify how the power

politics of digital spaces --- example the Twitter politics, you know, the ownership and capitalism of the digital spaces --- is related to the articulation between the politics of digital spaces and the queer politics of resistance. Could you comment on that?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Right. I think the connection is, I would say contemporary. So, this is like a contemporary fourth wave movement whether it's talking about me to India or #Section377. So, this is kind of like re-emerging like... it's a movement, it's always existed on, you know, in offline spaces and of course, there's been a lot of conversations about queerness and a lot of these safe spaces that have always existed on social media even whether it's blogs or like dating sites and so on.

So, I think that Twitter, and Instagram, and all of these public sites that have come into being very recently have enabled some of these conversations to happen in public and so I think that this fourth wave movement, this queer movement, which is parallel to other movements like the feminist movement in India, have actually pushed us in thinking about this in a very public way because a lot of our earlier conversations were happening in private spaces.

And so, it's a moment of reckoning in that way. Yeah.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you. Are there any more questions for Dr. Narayanamoorthy? Does anyone one want to read the question or?

So, I'll go ahead and uh ask another question which I personally am interested in. What are some of the limitations of this research? If you were to do this research again, are there any things that you would do differently?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Yes, absolutely. I think that, based on the thoughtful questions that everyone put through, I think it would be important to kind of juxtapose this research that's only happening on social media to kind of add to... and I would actually think about like doing more ethnographic research in addition to social media.

So, of course I talked about the power of social media and bringing these voices into the public platform, but of course there are a lot of conversations that are important to have --- whether it's about caste dynamics, or feminism ,or transgenderism and, you know, in

terms of even thinking about the perception of #Section377 and the decriminalization of homosexuality within the diaspora community.

So, I think that I would take the time to actually meet with more organizations or talk to people as a social scientist and an observer of like how social activism takes place. I would like to interact with some of these people and users and also, I was interested in also creating a digital archive of sorts based off how some of these communities actually talk about their own selves and using these platforms as a space to come out and also create these sort of invisible networks with their counterparts in India. Yeah.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you. I think participants are interested to see if you would share the slides... If there are a couple of questions on the chat and there is a...

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Okay, sure. Absolutely. Yes.

Dilshan Fernando:

There's a question from Lindsay Thompson, the question is "are there specific ethnographic pieces that you would like to be involved in?"

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

I wanted to clarify what what you mean by ethnographic pieces. I think mostly I would be interested in doing archival research, and also like making sure that I'm excavating some of these actual marginalized voices. The second way for me to do that would be to talk to some of these communities.

Dilshan Fernando:

Are there any more questions?

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Thank you so much.

Dilshan Fernando:

Okay. Yeah, if there aren't any more questions, I'd like to thank everyone who were here. Thank you so much, Dr Nanditha Narayanamoorthy for your excellent talk about queer

activism in the Indian digital diaspora. I'd like to remind everyone about the CIRCLE graduate South Asia conference. Please go to our website, the call for proposal is open. Again, thank you so much for your participation, we wish everyone a good summer from CIRCLE. Thanks so much.

Dr. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy:

Thank you so much.

[End of transcript]