

From Margins to Headlines: A Critical Inquiry of LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity in Indian Newsrooms and News Items

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Abstract

While several works of literature now feature instances of characters who do not conform to normative gender binaries, more often than not, there is a conspicuous relegation of their voices to single column news articles when it comes to mainstream media. Although there are instances of a few national dailies reporting responsibly about the community, a close analysis of published news articles makes it evident that instances of positive representation of these individuals are rare. While the guidelines on LGBTQIA+ news coverage recently issued by the Press Council of India offer a ray of hope, their efficacy in mitigating entrenched gender biases remains untested. Such a situation mandates a critical analysis of the present status of media portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community. Textual analysis will be used in order to examine selected news items wherein problematic representation of the community in mainstream Indian media is apparent. The aim of the study is to acknowledge the impact of Indian media on cultural perspectives of its readers with regard to the LGBTQIA+ community, and also to highlight its role in boosting social acceptance of alternative sexualities.

Keywords: culture, ethics, gender, media, representation

Introduction

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community often turn to works of literature for validation and comfort. From James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* to Casey McQuiston's *Red, White & Royal Blue*, the fictional realm promises them a world which does not stifle their voices. Their hopes of forging a gender-inclusive world, however, get dashed when the dichotomy between instances of their frequent misrepresentation in a world which thrives on facts (for example, newspapers) and their positive diverse representation in the fictional world which literature permits becomes evident. While several works of literature are now replete with characters who do not conform to normative gender binaries, more often than not, there is a conspicuous relegation of their voices to single column news articles when it comes to mainstream media.¹

The recent set of guidelines on LGBTQIA+ news coverage issued by the Press Council of India on 21 September 2023 necessitates a critical analysis of frequent instances of

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¹ Pratikshya Mishra, "It's 2021 and Queer Reportage Is Still Dangerously Superficial," *The Quint*, 18 June (2021).
At: <https://www.thequint.com/neon/queer-reportage-indian-media-superficial-2021-deadnaming-misgendering-lgbtqia-issues>.

misrepresentation and underrepresentation of people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community in mainstream media. The document which highlights the importance of language in forging a culture which is more inclusive, states that its objective is to “propose a solution through improved language usage so that the press is more conscious of how they refer to the LGBTQIA+ community.”² In sharp contrast to its predecessor (Press Council of India Guidelines, 2022) which went silent when it came to listing out guidelines for Indian journalists reporting on LGBTQIA+ issues, the newly-released document contains directives for media persons to ensure a fair representation to members of alternative sexualities. Although the recent release of guidelines on LGBTQIA+ news coverage in India is a positive sign, much more needs to be done to actually give impetus to the collective voice of the community. Numerous discrepancies in media's portrayal of LGBTQIA+ reiterate the veracity of a poignant observation made by Gust A. Yep, Sage E. Russo, and Jace Allen, “Language constructs, affirms, and invalidates identities.”³ Language used for transgenders and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community in news reports, therefore, goes a long way in hastening their legitimization in the minds of the masses which in turn paves the way for their social acceptance.

The dream of living in a gender-inclusive society is not merely a utopian vision anymore, but a recurrent demand which can be appeased by the print media by reporting responsibly. One of the ways of achieving this is by granting adequate representation to members of the LGBTQIA+ community in newsrooms as well as news items. Taking a cue from the recent guidelines issued by the Press Council of India, this article will critically analyse cases of misrepresentation, underrepresentation and positive representation of the community by revisiting selected news clippings from popular national and regional dailies. Since media can be a catalytic agent for change in public perception, this study focuses on selected instances of news coverage of LGBTQIA+ issues, analysing them via the lens of gender studies, media studies and linguistics.

While India is all set to host the first “Rainbow Awards for Literature and Journalism” in December this year in a bid to encourage and celebrate queer writings, a thorough examination of news articles reveals that Indian mainstream media often fails to be sensitive to sexually diverse people and thus might inadvertently become instrumental in fostering greater animosity for the community. Rosalind Gill considered the role of media in the construction of gender in her *Gender and the Media*. For Gill, analysis of the contemporary representations of gender in the media in western societies reveals that “constructions of gender have changed in the recent years in response to feminist critiques and wider social transformations,” but there is a pressing need to question cultural politics in order to decide what “interventions are needed today to engage with and challenge representations of gender in the media in order to produce gender relations that are more equal, open, generous and hopeful.”⁴

² ‘Media Guidelines for Covering News on the LGBTQ+ Community’, *Press Council of India* (2023), p. 3.

³ Gust A. Yep, Sage E. Russo, and Jace Allen, *Pushing Boundaries: Toward the Development of a Model for Transing Communication in (Inter)cultural Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 642.

⁴ Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 1-7.

Larry Gross and Richard Dyer pioneered work on gay, lesbian and queer representation in media. Dyer in *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* delved into the intricacies of gay and lesbian cultural production. A notable scholar in media and sexual minorities, Gross, in *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society and Politics* highlighted the importance of excerpts taken from news publications in making one understand the “historical trajectory of gay and lesbian representations.”⁵ Given the fact that Indian print media has immense potential for creating a lasting impression on the minds of the populace, it is essential to not only read newspaper articles critically, and also to decipher the slew of negative jibes being directed at members of the LGBTQIA+ community in news coverage. Visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community in the mainstream media is an important factor which governs not only public perception but also plays a role in building the self-perception of members of the community.⁶

Undoing Symbolic Annihilation: Analysing Press Council of India and NUJ Guidelines on LGBTQIA+ News Coverage

Another issue which merits attention is the fact that while the LGBTQIA+ community is a marginalised community, hierarchies have formed even within the community as of all the acronyms, it is only the L and G which have started contesting for media inclusiveness. Transgender people and bisexuals have, therefore, been further pushed to the margins. News media's refusal to extensively cover issues related to transgender people is akin to what noted media scholar George Gerbner called “symbolic annihilation.”⁷ According to Gerbner, lack of news coverage leads to symbolic annihilation of the transgender community. The findings of a study conducted by Jamie C. Capuzza suggest that four highly problematic patterns emerge the news reports featuring LGBTQIA+ issues:⁸ the bodies of transgender people are sexualised in news articles and journalists tend to misname, misgender and misrepresent transgender people in their news articles.⁹ The voices of queer, bisexual, asexual and intersex persons, too, seldom make it to the pages of the newspapers, another glaring issue in LGBTQIA+ media coverage.

It is interesting to note that while the code of ethics which was issued by the Press Council of India in 2022 went silent when it came to spelling out the norms of journalistic conduct to be followed by journalists while reporting on LGBTQIA+ issues, the recently issued guidelines offer a ray of hope. A dedicated analysis of the erstwhile Code (Norms of Journalist Conduct released

⁵ David Gudelunas, “Gays and Lesbians in the Media,” *Oxford Bibliographies* (2012). At: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0068.xml>.

⁶ Sarah Gomillion, “The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 58, no. 3 (2011), pp. 330-354.

⁷ George Gerbner, *Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions* (Annenberg: University of Pennsylvania, 1970), p. 44.

⁸ Jamie C. Capuzza, “What’s in a name? Transgender identity, metareporting, and the misgendering of Chelsea Manning,” in *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, eds. Jamie C. Capuzza and Leland G. Spencer (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 173–186.

⁹ Thomas J. Billard, “Writing in the Margins: Mainstream News Media Representations of Transgenderism,” *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 10 (2016), p. 2.

by the Press Council of India in 2022) revealed that the document which prescribes the permissible limits for news reportage merely contained one line with respect to gender-based reporting: “Press should play a vital role in removing the age-old gender biases and even unilateral description as the news item could contribute to continuation of such bias to retard social balances and development.”¹⁰ The crux of the statement was positive, albeit dismissive of non-binary gender identities, in that it did not precisely state how journalists could ensure a more sensitive portrayal of LGBTQIA+ individuals in their writings. In contrast to the previous Code, the new guidelines contain detailed directives to the media persons when they cover news related to the LGBTQIA+ community. The document endeavours to cater to the needs of the community by stating at the outset that media houses should “use the words and terms that the community accepts for itself.”¹¹ The document thus highlights the significance of linguistic choices in news articles and how they contribute to the representation or the misrepresentation of the LGBTQIA+ community in media.

I have also considered the guidelines being followed as directives for LGBTQIA+ reporting by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).¹² Although both documents endeavour to advise Indian media to tread cautiously with regard to crucial aspects of LGBTQIA+ individuals especially their right to privacy, neither of them emerges as a comprehensive authority on the matter. Both documents leave room for an in-depth dedicated analysis of news clippings as well as a thorough review of the transcripts of news telecasts in order to identify problematic points when journalists inadvertently crossed the line by being derogatory to the individuals who identify themselves as homosexuals, bisexual and so on. For instance, both texts are silent on several issues, such as how broadcast media, as well as digital and print media can unite to mitigate hierarchies in sexual orientations and gender identities. While the manuals direct journalists to exercise caution when reporting on issues related to the LGBTQIA+ community, by asking reporters to steer clear of their tendency to mention the sexual orientation of the concerned person by way of terms such as gay, lesbian, bisexual unless it is relevant to the issue at hand. Neither suggests ways in which this underrepresented section of society can be accorded recognition, for instance, by writing extensively about their achievements instead of victimising them.

There are, however, some very significant points that the documents make. For instance, both the documents sensitise journalists to use the word “homosexual” very sparingly since it connotes an underlying psychological disorder in the person it is used for. It is also refreshing to see that the guidelines listed out in both the documents, encourage journalists to ask the person concerned about his/her preferred way of being addressed and goes on to add that “if someone’s gender identity is not clarified, it’s best to stick to neutral terms like ‘them/they’ instead of ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘it’.”¹³ Another commendable feature of both texts is that they discourage the use of terms such as “gay,” “lesbian” and “transgender” as nouns because media people often end up using them in a pejorative sense. Despite the endeavours of NUJ and Press Council of India in this

¹⁰ “Norms of Journalist Conduct 2022,” *Press Council of India*.

¹¹ “Media Guidelines for Covering News on the LGBTQ+ Community.”

¹² “NUJ Guidelines on LGBT+ Reporting,” *National Union of Journalists*. At: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-guidelines-on-lgbt-reporting.html>.

¹³ “Media Guidelines for Covering News on the LGBTQ+ Community.”

direction, the dictum of fair and accurate reporting mostly is ineffective when it comes to news items featuring LGBTQIA+ individuals. What concerns LGBTQIA+ organisations the most is the fact that their life stories are seldom written with a sense of inclusiveness unlike those of other people. The problematic representation of transgender people manifests itself in a multitude of ways in mainstream media.¹⁴ Transgender people are often sexualised by way of reducing their gender identity to their sexual organs. Journalists tend to assume the gender of a person that they write about based on how that person appears, instead of asking the concerned person what is their affirmed gender identity? Thus, transgender people must be asked which gender identity they identify as, instead of ascribing them a normative gender identity based on their appearance.

Due caution must also be exercised when using some of the terms without taking cognizance of their latent meaning. Thus, while many media organisations use the terms “sexual preference” and “sexual orientation” interchangeably, there is a difference between the two terms which needs to be kept in mind for the media industry to become truly inclusive. According to the guidelines issued by the NUJ, media organisations must replace the term “sexual preference” with “sexual orientation” when using it for LGBTQIA+ people. This is so because the former gives the impression that being gay and lesbian is a preferred way of leading one's life and this preference can change. However, if journalists use the term sexual orientation that implies a sense of permanence of the individual's way of being. Journalists must also take seriously the NUJ directive which refrains them from using the words “admitted gay” or “avowed lesbian” as these are offensive. NUJ encourages the usage of phrases such as “coming out of the closet,” “openly gay,” or simply “out” so as to reduce any stigma associated with the chosen gender identity.

Representation of LGBTQIA+ Community in Indian newspapers

Popular Marathi daily *Lokmat* attracted attention when articles it published suggested that homosexuality is a “social malice” and that around “4000 men have fallen prey to this gay culture.”¹⁵ Ganesh Deshmukh, the author of the article, faced the ire of the Community Based Organisation (CBO) which argued the report's strong tendency to marginalise and criminalise homosexuals by labelling all gays as “addicts of this kind of sex” was offensive. While the media organisation defended its correspondent's writings by locating it under as part a series of “sting operations” undertaken for the greater good of society, it later released a statement claiming that the reporter had been subsequently “sensitized by the CBO.” It is crucial, not only for newspaper staff to exercise greater caution in writing about such contentious issues, but the readers should also be made aware of the need to adopt a more positive attitude to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Another regional news channel which boasts of the highest TRP ratings amongst all Telugu news channels is TV9 Telugu. The channel was recently brought to book for spreading

¹⁴ Rory Magrath, “‘Progress...Slowly, but Surely’: The Sports Media Workplace, Gay Sports Journalists, and LGBT Media Representation in Sport”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2019), pp.1–17.

¹⁵ Raahul Chiranjit Sen, “Marathi Daily *Lokmat* Amravati ‘Witch Hunting’ Gays,” *Gaylaxy*, 14 August (2013). At: www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/marathi-daily-lokmat-amravati-witch-hunting-gays/.

homophobia. A special coverage aired by the channel on 25 December, 2017 saw a news reporter immaculately dressed in a white lab coat (perhaps to give the impression of a medical expert) as he made baseless claims such as “homosexuality is a result of people living in same-sex hostels.”¹⁶ It also claimed that gay people are responsible for the breaking down of the institution of marriage, the spread of HIV/Aids and that homosexuality corrupts the young. The “breaking news” series which focused on how to stop the “rise of the gay culture in Telugu state,” was also uploaded on YouTube but was subsequently taken down. Employees of the news channel also accessed the contact lists of men who categorised themselves as homosexuals from dating sites and revealed their identities in their news telecast much to their chagrin. Most of these individuals were yet to come out in front of their families, and yet their names were put on display before the whole world without their prior consent in clear infringement of privacy. This incident was one among the host of discriminatory and baseless allegations tossed at members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Back in 2011, TV9 Telugu had also conducted a sting operation by disguising themselves as homosexuals on a networking site catering to LGBTQIA+ individuals. It received a lot of flak for broadcasting the private conversations of gay people for everyone to see.

Another facet of print media which often receives criticism from gay rights activists is the way in which news articles more often than not indulge in a victim narrative portrayal of LGBTQIA+ issues. Most stories carried by publication houses and media agencies, alike focus only on the rampant victimisation of these individuals and how they are always at the receiving end of discriminatory practices meted out to them in a highly unfair society. While it is a good idea to highlight the trials and tribulations of these people by shedding light on their issues, it is also important to bring the achievements of the community to the forefront so that their status gets lifted from the victimised category to the achievers’ category.

No Room for Alternative Sexuality in Newsrooms?

While indulging in a critical analysis of journalism and the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ community in Indian media, one often tends to overlook the representation of journalists. A study conducted under the aegis of Birmingham City University suggests that even a country as developed as the United Kingdom is not doing much to protect its LGBTQIA+ journalists from harassment and abuse.¹⁷ It comes as no surprise then that several newspapers of immense repute in the UK such as *The Sun* and *The Mail*, too, have indulged in insensitive headlines replete with demeaning words such as “lezzies,” “benders,” “poofers” and “abortion hope for ‘gay genes’.”

The recent debate on same-sex marriages and the legality thereof for the honourable Supreme Court of India has once again brought to light the lack of coverage of LGBTQIA+ issues in Indian media. Adequate representation is an offshoot of inclusiveness. Since the media coverage

¹⁶ Harish Iyer, “Compliments of the Homophobic Season-Thanks to TV9 Telugu,” *The Quint*, 26 December (2017). At: www.thequint.com/gender/lgbt/tv9-telugu-airs-homophobic-programme-gay-culture-christmas#read-more.

¹⁷ Finbarr Toesland, “Are media organisations adequately protecting LGBTQ journalists from harassment and abuse?” *Birmingham City University*. At: <https://bcuassets.blob.core.windows.net/docs/lhc-reports-4523-133277545674237816.pdf>.

of LGBTQIA+ issues is seldom extensive, it is expected that research will note dismal findings when it comes to seeing the number of journalists belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. There is not only a conspicuous dearth of Indian journalists who positively write on LGBTQIA+ issues but there are only four well-known Indian journalists who openly identify as individuals with alternative sexualities. Heidi Saadiya created headlines in 2019 for being Kerala's first transperson broadcast journalist. Firdaus Kanga, Ashok Row Kavi and Parvez Sharma are other renowned Indian journalists who have contributed to the rights of people with different sexual orientations. Parvez Sharma's critically-acclaimed film *A Jihad for Love* endeavoured to reduce the deep-rooted hostility towards homosexuality by removing the falsely held belief that Muslim individuals cannot identify with non-binary sexual orientations. Sharma also wrote a book *A Sinner in Mecca: A Gay Muslim's Hajj of Defiance* (2017) which forms part of his Islam Trilogy. This is often hailed as the first book which openly talked about Islam and homosexuality in India.

Firdaus Kanga who wrote his semi-autobiographical book *Trying to Grow*, wherein he pondered how homosexuality was considered to be taboo and was thus never spoken about except in sublime stories that he read in books. Ashok Row Kavi who is also known as India's first and oldest LGBTQIA+ activist serves as the founder-chairperson of the Humsafar Trust which supports legal recognition for the community. Most notably, Kavi founded "Bombay Dost" in 1990, which is hailed as India's first magazine catering to LGBTQIA+ readers. One of the primary aims of the magazine is to mobilise gay and transgender people to action. It is imperative to shed the stigma associated with non-binary gender identities and get more journalists on board so that the LGBTQIA+ community gets a voice of its own in news organisations.

The limited LGBTQIA+ visibility in the entertainment media is another issue which has prompted the said study. According to Jan M. Ochman, children need to be exposed to positive depictions of same-sex characters in story books and media portrayals so that they become open to accepting the sexual orientations of every individual.¹⁸ While winds of change have started to blow both in Hollywood and Bollywood by film producers exploring this issue in films, members of the LGBTQIA+ community hold the view that the actors who play their roles on the screen should be part of the community. A notable example in this direction is Sushmita Sen, star of the web series *Taali*, which draws inspiration from transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant. While it is commendable that such programmes are made, many transgender activists thought either a transgender actor or Shreegauri Sawant herself should have played the role in the critically-acclaimed series. The film *Pine Cone* won hearts at the fourteenth Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival because it is the first Hindi mainstream movie with a queer actor playing the role of a gay protagonist. What is interesting to note is, although the coming in of an officially "out" actor as the leading actor of the movie directed by filmmaker Onir, who is an "openly gay

¹⁸ Jan M. Ochman, "The Effects of Nongender-Role Stereotyped, Same-Sex Role Models in Storybooks on the Self-Esteem of Children in Grade Three," *Sex Roles*, vol. 35, no. 11 (1996), pp. 711-735.

director”¹⁹ calls for a celebration, yet the fact that it is happening for the first time now also highlights the lack of media visibility accorded to the community at large.

Discrimination Owing to Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities

Quite recently, UNESCO released its “The Chilling” report and its results suggest that the percentage of lesbian and bisexual women journalists facing online attacks is much higher when compared to heterosexual women. “While 72% of heterosexual women journalists said they had been targeted by online attacks, 88% of lesbian and 85% of bisexual women journalists had faced online attacks.”²⁰ The findings from research by the National Union of Journalists, suggest that “close to a third (29%) of LGBT journalists have reported experiencing bullying, harassment, ill-treatment or discrimination at work, as a result of their sexuality or gender identity.”²¹

Another recent survey on LGBTQIA+ representation in the media conducted in 2021 “saw 73% of respondents who identified as members of the LGBT+ community say they have witnessed discrimination due to negative and unrealistic media portrayals.”²² According to renowned journalist Finbarr Toesland, “If left unchecked, hate speech and abuse against LGBTQ journalists have the potential to create a chilling effect where journalists are either uncomfortable or afraid to report on vital issues of importance to LGBTQ people.”²³ It thus is imperative to plug the visible loopholes in media representation of the community, apart from ensuring the implementation of redressal mechanisms, to stop any harassment of journalists from the community.

While the results of the 2011 census boasted 488,000 (estimated) people who identified themselves as transgender, the 2021 census too suggests that 4.8 million Indians now identify as transgender.²⁴ While there has been change in recent times, most official data sources still rely on collecting data in gender binary format, thereby excluding transgender people from several social benefit schemes. While the *NALSA* judgment of the Honourable Supreme Court of India accorded legal recognition to transgenders as the third gender, to date these individuals struggle to get valid

¹⁹ Deepali Singh, “Onir’s *Pine Cone* is One of the First Mainstream Hindi Films to have a Queer Actor Play a Gay Role”, *Money Control*, 3 June (2023). At: <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/entertainment/filmmaker-onir-pine-cone-interview-10724991.html>.

²⁰ Julie Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir, “The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists,” *International Center for Journalists*, 2 November (2022). At: www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/ICFJ_UNESCO_The%20Chilling_2022_1.pdf.

²¹ “One in three LGBT+ members have been bullied or discriminated at work,” *NUJ*, 25 February (2021). At: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/one-in-three-lgbt-members-have-been-bullied-or-discriminated-at-work.html>.

²² “LGBT+ Representation in the Media,” *Involve*, November (2021). At: <https://www.involvepeople.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/LGBT-In-The-Media-Report.pdf>

²³ Kevin Rawlinson, “UK is a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ journalists, study suggests,” *The Guardian*, 9 May (2023). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/may/09/uk-hostile-environment-for-lgbtq-journalists-study-online-abuse-harassment>.

²⁴ Anuj Behal, “Non-binary genders need more visibility in India’s Census 2021,” *Down To Earth*, 6 September (2021). At: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/non-binary-genders-need-more-visibility-in-india-s-census-2021-78844>.

identity cards with their preferred name and gender.²⁵ Adequate media coverage on the issue can help avert similar discrimination in the future.

Instances of Positive Media Representation

There are some notable instances where Indian media has also played a positive role when it comes to boosting the acceptance of those belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, when 22-year-old Divyaroop Ananda was sexually and physically assaulted for “dressing and talking like a gay person”²⁶ by a group of people in Mumbai, media organisations especially *Midday* played a positive role in reporting the incident. The article not only made a mention of the trauma that Ananda was made to go through merely because he was an LGBTQIA+ activist but also talked about how his family and friends dissuaded him from lodging a complaint fearing the social stigma against the LGBTQIA+ community and those supporting it. The news clipping lauded Ananda's efforts in approaching the police and in doing so it urged members of the LGBTQIA+ people to come out and seek police assistance whenever they find themselves at the receiving end of such harassment. The positive role played by the media in this case, therefore, shed light on many other cases of homophobia and attacks on members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Popular shows such as *Ellen* and RuPaul's *Drag Race* contributed immensely in painting a more positive picture of gay people, unlike their stereotypical stock character depictions which used to show them as flashy and promiscuous. Another commendable development in the sphere of media is the coming forward of online magazines which talk about the stigma attached with gays. Some of the popular magazines are *Gaylaxy*, *Gaysi* and other social media platforms which encourage members of the community to lift the veil of shame which keeps them from freely expressing their sexuality. Of late, the efforts of LGBTQIA+ rights campaigners have been bearing fruit owing to the support of the media with regard to issuing gender-neutral IDs for people who subscribe to non-binary sexual orientations. Thanks to the news coverage of LGBTQIA+ in the media, the governments of countries such as the United States of America, India, Australia, New Zealand and Iceland have now started offering gender-neutral passports for non-binary people by allowing their citizens to select third gender on their passports.

Empty-ing the Closet: A Comparative Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Media Portrayal in United States of America and India

While winds of change have begun to blow in India, it is interesting to note that countries such as the United States of America have achieved a formidable social order based on LGBTQIA+

²⁵ Shreya Raman, “Denied Visibility In Official Data, Transgender Indians Can't Access Benefits, Services,” *India Spend*, 11 June (2021). At: <https://www.indiaspend.com/gendercheck/denied-visibility-in-official-data-millions-of-transgender-indians-cant-access-benefits-services-754436>.

²⁶ Shreya Bhandary, “4 arrested for attacking Andheri-based youth ‘for being gay’,” *Midday*, 31 October (2015). At: <https://www.mid-day.com/mumbai/mumbai-news/article/4-arrested-for-attacking-andheri-based-youth--for-being-gay--16644155>.

inclusivity. As alternative sexualities struggle to make their voices heard in Indian newspapers, America already sees dailies soaked in colours of the rainbow on a regular basis. Not only do American media-houses report responsibly on LGBTQIA+ issues, what is commendable is the fact that America is host to many news organisations which are either run by members of the alternative sexualities or are dedicated to writing about their issues. It is heartwarming to witness the names of a multitude of magazines/ periodicals and newspapers popping up which are dedicated to pull the LGBTQIA+ people out of the closet and into the limelight by writing about them. Some news organisations which merit attention at this juncture include, *The Empty Closet*, *Gay Community News*, *Curve Archive*, *The Furies: Lesbian Feminist Monthly*, *Bay Area Reporter*, *Gay Peoples Union Collective*, *Out/Look Magazine Archive*, *BI Women Quarterly*, *Anything That Moves*, *Outweek Magazine Archive* and *The Gay Blade*.

Both *Empty Closet* and *Curve Archive* (formerly known as *Deneuve: A Lesbian Magazine*) endeavour to harness “collective LGBTQ+ histories”²⁷ by giving free online access to all their content, which grants greater media visibility to members belonging to alternative sexualities. It is rather interesting to note that the latter also promotes greater coverage of lesbians by showcasing the work of the recipients of its annual “Curve Award for Excellence in Lesbian Coverage” on its website. While *Out/Look* the lesbian and gay quarterly existed in print version for about a decade, magazines like *OutWeek* changed the sensibilities of people in the US about gay and lesbian journalism within the span of two years, from 1989 to 1991. However, while white LGBTQIA+ people have made their voices heard in the US media, LGBTQIA+ persons of colour have not been as fortunate. The veracity of Alfred Martin’s contention cannot be contested at this point, “Popular television shows including *Will & Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *Modern Family* routinely depict gay men. Yet the common characteristic among most televisual representations of gay men is that they are usually white.”²⁸

Scrutiny of the positive role played by US periodicals, newspapers and magazines highlights a probable solution which can promote greater LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in Indian media; that is “self-produced media” by members of the community. Linda Steiner, Fred Fejes and Kevin Petrich observe in *Invisibility, Homophobia and Heterosexism: Lesbians, Gays and the Media* that, “Self-produced media can give authentic voice and affirmation to the entire membership of a particular community.”²⁹ Adrienne Rich fiercely conveyed the idea that heterosexuality is often imposed on women. One of her oft-quoted lines is “Women endure sexual harassment to keep their jobs and learn to behave in a complaisant and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner... the woman who too decisively resists sexual overtures in the workplace is accused of being ‘dried-up and sexless’, or lesbian.” Thus homophobia is socially constructed and heteronormativity is ingrained

²⁷ “The Archive,” *Curve Archive*. At: <https://archive.curvemag.com/s/curve-archive/page/the-archive>.

²⁸ Alfred L. Martin Jr, “TV in Black and Gay: Examining Constructions of Gay Blackness and Gay Crossracial Dating on GREEK”, *Race, Sexuality, and Television Spectator*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2011), p. 63.

²⁹ Linda Steiner et al, “Invisibility, Homophobia and Heterosexism: Lesbians, Gays and the Media”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1993), pp. 395-422.

in the minds of people.³⁰ Another pertinent point emerges when one closely scrutinises the current social milieu in India. Although the Honourable Supreme Court of India decriminalised homosexuality in 2017 when it observed that “homosexuality is no longer an offence under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code”, the “rainbow of hope” that the ruling promised to the LGBTQIA+ community did not see the light of the day owing to the stark absence of laws to “protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.”³¹ While the landmark *Bostock v. Clayton County* judgment³² of 15 June 2020 paved the way for the passage of mandates on prohibition of employment discrimination based on a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity in the United States of America under Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; despite numerous attempts of the honourable Supreme Court to bring the Indian LGBTQIA+ community on an equal footing with those belonging to heteronormative gender identities, there is an absence of laws in this direction. The increasing visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community in Indian media is one of the most efficacious ways to make the demands of LGBTQIA+ rights activists heard by legislators, so as to promptly address the issue.

Conclusion

This study is a clarion call to journalists to start writing extensively about various issues that members of the LGBTQIA+ community face so that they can be mainstreamed. Most importantly, it opens new avenues for further research on the intersection between media studies, linguistics and gender studies by encouraging other researchers to analyse the impact of media on strengthening the perception of masses towards those who identify themselves as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. There are instances of a few national dailies reporting responsibly about the community, yet a close analysis of the published news articles makes it evident that instances of positive representation of these individuals are rare. While works of literature now feature characters who do not conform to normative gender binaries as protagonists, more often than not, there is a conspicuous relegation of their voices to single column news articles when it comes to mainstream media. Journalism plays a key role in boosting the social inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community and hence it is important to give greater representation to their issues and accord more protection to journalists who support them or belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Language metamorphoses itself into a scaffolding agent which disseminates, supports and constructs culture, hence it plays a crucial role in shaping how we engage with the world around us.³³ Since journalism plays a key role in subverting or reinforcing social roles, such a situation

³⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2003), pp. 11-48.

³¹ Krishnadas Rajagopal, “2018 Supreme Court Ruling Decriminalising Homosexuality Was a ‘Rainbow of Hope’,” *The Hindu*, 20 April (2023). At: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sc-implicitly-contemplated-stable-marriage-like-relationships-between-same-sex-persons-while-decriminalising-homosexuality/article66759000.ece>.

³² “*Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*,” *The Supreme Court of the United States*, 15 June (2020), pp. 1-172. At: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/17-1618_hfci.pdf.

³³ Byron Reeves and Clifford Ivar Nass, *The Media Equation: How people Treat Computers, Television, and New Media like Real People and Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

calls for immediate attempts to ensure that Indian journalists are sensitised towards the community so as to avoid any sort of misrepresentation. The efficacy of the recent guidelines issued by the NUJ and the Press Council of India with regard to news coverage of LGBTQIA+ issues and increasing the media visibility of members belonging to alternative sexualities remains to be seen. Compiled by Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group with support from the Rainbow Lit Fest – Queer & Inclusive (RLF), the “Media Guidelines for Covering News on the LGBTQ+ Community” recently released by the Press Council of India offer a ray of hope for ensuring LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in news items, albeit leaving room for further additions and recommendations.