

The invisible queer disabled community

In a world still stuck in binaries of gender and ableism, there has been little conversation on the intersections within the LGBTQ+ community. But things are changing, slowly

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Nearly three months ago, the Gaysi Family—a safe digital space for members of the queer community—posted an artwork by Ritika Gupta. In the illustration, the artist, who posts on Instagram as @artistic_license, envisaged a world of the future in which theatres were disabled- and queer-friendly. Gupta, who is autistic and identifies as asexual, imagined a viewing space that would accommodate the varying sensory needs of queer people within the neurodivergent spectrum.

“Personalised screens cater to people who might get sensory (sic) by the movie and need to watch it at their own pace, pausing, rewinding, fast-forwarding in tune with their sensory requirement. Another screen is for people who might need more sensory stimulation to enjoy the art,” she wrote as the description. The idea was to create a safe space catering to individual needs, while also giving the feel of a community theatre experience.

This is a rare instance where the dreams and aspirations of a queer, disabled individual have found expression. In a world still stuck in the binaries of gender, sexuality and ableism, there is hardly any conversation about the intersections within the LGBTQ+ community—between disability, both visible and invisible, and queerness, for instance.

Things are changing, albeit slowly. Some platforms are now beginning to look at the intersections within the queer community related to caste, religion, disability, etc. The challenges and desires of people within these intersections are being recognised, with some safe communities—mostly online—giving space for expression through art, poetry and writing. Even in certain offline events, such as Pride marches, there has been a greater realisation of the different kinds of needs.

However, the conversation on inclusivity remains a complex one. In a 2021 article for the digital media platform Women’s Web, titled *The Agony Of Being Queer And Disabled In India*, Kanav N. Sahgal, a communications manager at Nyaaya, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, and an LGBTQ+ activist, wrote: “The queer community, while heterogeneous in composition, is oddly homogenous in representation. Very few queer people from Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Muslim and disabled backgrounds find themselves in positions of power, authority, and visibility in activist and non-activist queer spaces.”

The article lists the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities both visible and invisible—from lack of access to quality care to social stigma and little support for emotional health. Within this group, the community of queer disabled people has it even tougher. “Indeed, queer disabled people constitute a double minority, whose very existence is stigmatized, pathologized, and invisibilized even today. Recognizing their exclusion and making amends is critical,” he wrote.

It’s no wonder then that 26-year-old Gupta, who is from Gaya, Bihar, and is now based in Delhi, has always been searching for a community that truly understands her. In a recent interview to the digital magazine *Homegrown*, she noted that she didn’t fit in with either the disabled or the queer communities.

For there is discrimination within the queer community too. “A lot of LGBTQ+ people, looking for partners, end up rejecting or dismissing people with disabilities as they don’t sit within their idea of what an ideal companion would look like,” says Sahgal on a phone call.

Nu Misra, who runs Revival Disability India (RDI), a storytelling collective for and by disabled queer folks, has been writing extensively about this exclusion. “Disabled queer folks might have different ways of accessing queer circles, resources, structures of dating and platonicity—something that might be more readily available to non-disabled queer folk,” they wrote in an article.

Even offline events organised by queer collectives, such as Pride marches, can become inaccessible and overwhelming for people with visible and invisible disabilities. “At offline events, there are so many people, so much noise with music blaring on loudspeakers. There is something so ableist in the way physical spaces are designed. This is how things have been going on for a long time even within queer



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events and spaces,” says Gupta.

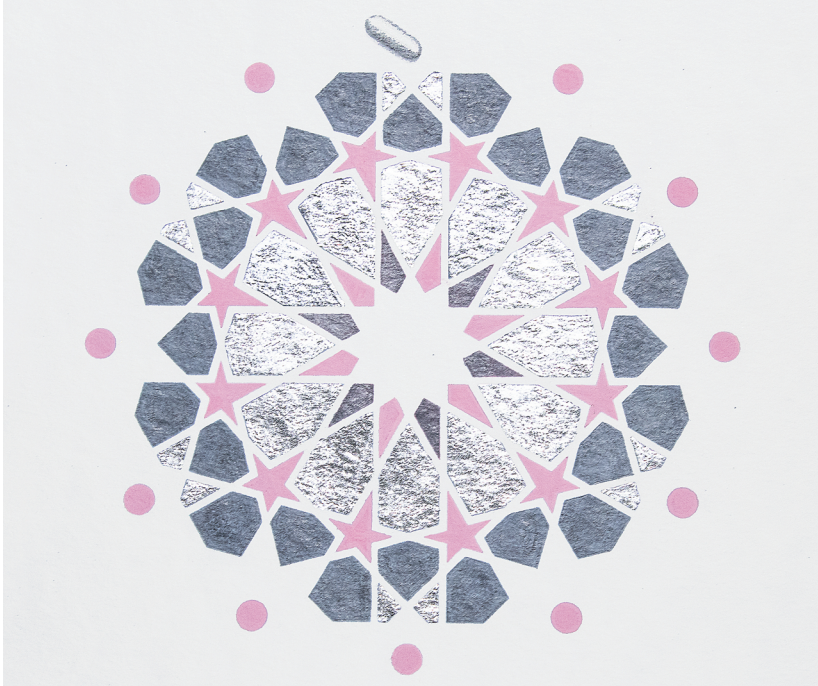
There have been stray efforts to be disabled-friendly but only when individuals within the queer community demand it. “There is no predisposition or a conscious effort to plan events, keeping different needs in mind,” she adds.

The divide is visible in the online space too. Take, for instance, the needs of queer individuals who are also hearing impaired. Say, you want to access a YouTube recording of a conversation on queer life but the video has no subtitles. This can cut you off from content that could have offered emotional support and succour.

“A lot of the queer collectives, which organise events, are bootstrapped and have limited resources. It’s not easy to ensure that all your videos are close-captioned. If you are creating a manual on inclusive LGBTQI+ terminology, the file has to be compatible with a screen reader for a person who is visually impaired. Awareness is slowly seeping in but there is a financial constraint,” says Sahgal. At least, notes Tejaswi Subramanian, digital editor at the Gaysi Family, the conversation has begun. “The term ‘neuro queer’ has come into being, an intersection between neurodivergent and queer. It is a very clear and obvious intersection to someone like me,” says the 31-year-old, who is neurodivergent and queer.

Goa-based Subramanian calls themselves queer in multiple ways in their gender and sexuality. Though they knew all along about these various identities, there was never any space to inspect them. During childhood, they picked up on the fact that any discussion or assertion of these identities would make others uncomfortable. “I didn’t even have the vocabulary for it, as this is not something taught in schools. And the fact that I am bisexual, among other things, is not widely understood even within the LGBTQ+ community. Gender fluidity and non-binary genders are not understood,” they say.

They discovered the right vocabulary in the 20s, after gaining financial independence.



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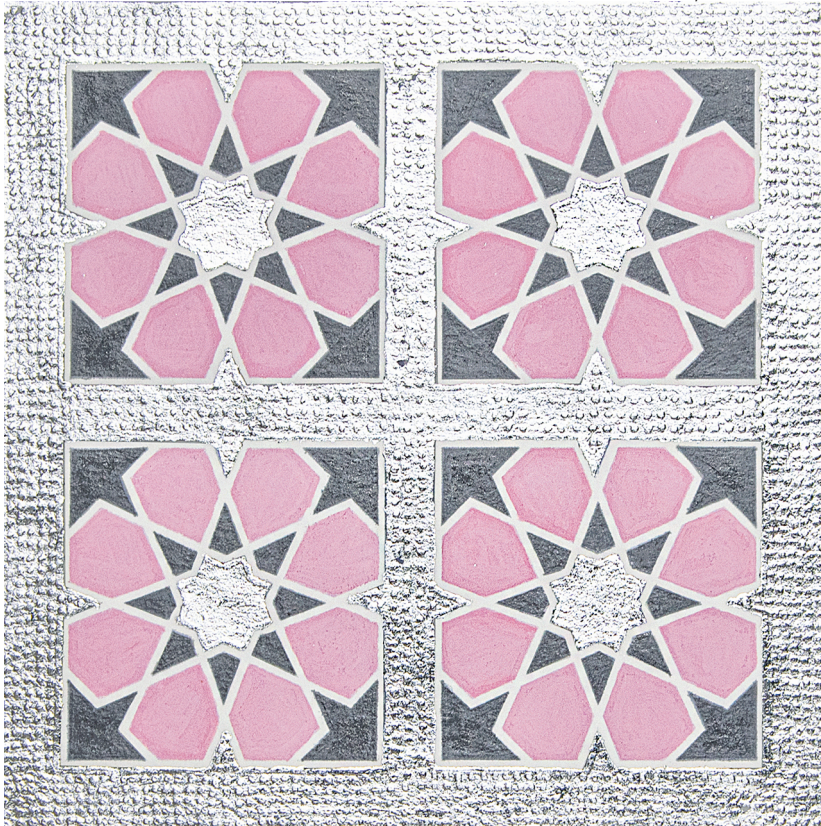
ence. “The need to talk about my mental health led me to communities that addressed this intersection. I was slightly older than the people within such mental health communities—not just in age but also in my journey as a queer person—that I ended up being looked upon as a queer elder,” says Subramanian.

To strengthen them as a support figure, they enrolled for the peer support provider training offered by Safe Access, which works on healthcare access for the LGBTQ+ community, and supported by the Mariwala Health Initiative. It’s an effort to create a pool of support providers, guided by their own lived experiences, within a space where healthcare providers themselves are often not trained in LGBTQ+ affirming modalities. Today, they coach people who are queer and within the neurodivergent spectrum, on ways to navigate work and home structures. “A lot of employers tend to brand themselves as inclusive but might not necessarily be so. It takes a lot of negotiation and many queer neurodivergent people find themselves ill-equipped to handle that. So, I provide support. That has been helpful for me too,” they say.

In a heartening sign, Subramanian has now come across queer-affirming therapists and people, who are themselves queer and neurodivergent, or living with chronic disability, offering support. “Sev-

(clockwise, from top) Ritika Gupta has been illustrating stories for Revival Disability India, and, in the process, her art has become more nuanced; and through their works, on display at the Shrine Empire, Priyanka D’Souza and Shreyasi Pathak are starting a dialogue around queerness and disability within the art ecosystem.

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eral communities are creating safe spaces through support groups on WhatsApp and Telegram. However, a lot of social media platforms are still phobic, often shadow-banning these groups. The algorithm tries to shut them down or limit the kind of portrayals of anatomy or body image that the group wants to create a conversation about,” says Subramanian. “Also, anti-caste support is still very rare.”

One of the most vocal platforms has been RDI, started by Misra during the pandemic as a means to “unhide” disability. Today, among many things, the platform is working with Nazariya Foundation, a queer-feminist resource group, to create a resource for queer-trans disabled folks escaping violent natal families.

“What do we mean when we say Queer-Trans* Disabled? Sexuality changes, travels and transforms. Within the discourse of sexuality, the intersecting identities of queerness and queerness impact and inform each other. These two identities interact to produce a community that wearily lies between queer and disabled forms of being. Disability is just another form of being in the world and covers a myriad of lived and political realities. It cannot be limited by definitions or laws,” states the joint Instagram post by RDI and Nazariya.

Misra has also started a section called “Speaking My Truth”, in which members of the RDI community call out instances of ableism and homophobia faced by them in public spheres.

The Gaysi Family too has been trying to become more inclusive, reaching out to people who might not have ready access to its content. “If we say we are an inclusive platform, and with so much intersectionality at play today, we can’t just look at queer conversations restricted to gender and sexuality alone. We have to look at them from the lens of fully-abled disability, besides religion, caste and economic backgrounds. We are aspiring for a better, safer and inclusive space for a large number of people,” says Sakshi Juneja, co-founder, the Gaysi Family.

They too are learning. For instance, they recently hosted a two-day event in Mumbai and Delhi with queer pop-ups, music—a loud queer do. But the team realised the event was tough for those with social anxiety. “As a result of such conversations, we are now working on a guide, with tips, for those with social anxiety and are within the neurodivergent spectrum,” says Juneja. A lot of thought is being given to the way content is being presented—the kind of colours that would not be overwhelming for those within the neurodivergent spectrum, closed captions and working more with audio. “At Gaysi, we have several team members from the neurodivergent spectrum and hence we have some content already out. We are also working with corporations on acknowledging and addressing visible and invisible disabilities, chronic disability and neurodivergence,” she says.

The internet has emerged as a safe space for many. Gupta, for instance, finds the online realm a space where she can unmask herself, navigate social constructs and interact with queer community members who might or might not be disabled. “I can mould the space to my own needs

and am in better control,” she says.

Gupta has been an active member of RDI since 2021, when she was confined to her hometown during the pandemic. It was the first queer disabled community platform she had ever come across and its articles and posts really spoke to her. “I realised that there were people who actually understood. I reached out to Nu and joined RDI’s WhatsApp group. Gradually, I started illustrating for them. Earlier, I had only been talking about my queerness and neurodivergence in my art. After becoming a part of RDI, I started understanding different points of view. My art has become more nuanced,” she says.

Sahgal has come across some unique LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces in the MetaVerse. “First Connect is one of these. It was my first experience of entering the MetaVerse. The language is very inclusive and they follow a stringent authentication process,” he says. Offline

too, he has noticed a greater sensitivity among Gen Z members of the queer community. “This time, the Delhi Pride parade featured a sign language interpreter,” he says. There were volunteers around to help those with physical disabilities. “These ideas didn’t exist earlier as it was taboo to even attend a Pride march. Some organisations are also making workplaces more inclusive. At Vidhi, we have a mental health committee. I am openly queer at work,” he adds.

In a unique initiative, artist-duo Priyanka D’Souza and Shreyasi

Pathak—an artist duo travelling through crip+queer time that hosts the Instagram page Resting Museum—is trying to start a dialogue around queerness and disability within the art ecosystem through the show *Aubade With _____* at the Shrine Empire, Delhi. The exhibition, which opened earlier this week, will be on view till 19 August. The duo is “using rest, queerness and disability as methodology in their art practice and curatorial projects to intervene in art and design history discourse and archives. They look at experiences of isolation of disabled body-minds and the formation of certain ‘publics’ physically and virtually through practices of sitting, resting, and participating together,” states the artists’ bio.

Resting Museum, started by D’Souza in 2020, “was based on the lack of spaces of rest—mental and physical—for the queer disabled community. Even the large museums in London were not equipped with it. From the metro stations in London to the main museums, there was no lift,” says D’Souza, a 27-year-old artist, writer and art historian. Pathak joined the Resting Museum in 2021.

“There are some amazing disability fellowships in the US for artists, with some great work emerging from it. In India, sadly, it is still looked on as something to gain sympathy out of. There is no quality content in art history or design theory related to this subject,” notes D’Souza.

It is not just through art but also through writing that the duo is trying to engage people on the subject. “Art or poetry might not further the cause at an immediate level but have long-term impact. Art and poetry can start a dialogue,” concludes D’Souza.



(They are) using rest, queerness and disability as methodology in their art practice...

SHREYASI PATHAK & PRIYANKA D'SOUZA
RESTING MUSEUM