

Mapping Queer Collective Organisations In Assam: Identity, Advocacy And Social Transformation

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Abstract

The LGBTQIA+ population has historically been marginalised because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The Gender/ LGBTQ/ Queer Movement is going on across the world that struggles for the social and legal acknowledgement of their rights. Queer collective organisations have been instrumental in advancing this movement all around the world. In order to provide a “safe space” for the queer community, and “gender sensitise” society against homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, these queer collective organisations are often founded and joined by people who identify as LGBTQ+ or as their “allies”. In Assam, among the few organisations that operate solely for the LGBTQIA+ community are queer collectives like Xukia, Xomonnoy, Xobdo, and Drishti. These collectives have effectively amplified the voices of the LGBTQIA+ community; providing individuals with the courage to step out of the closet and express themselves freely. However, the queer movement as well as the working of these organisations in Assam, is not without challenges. The initiatives done to raise awareness and transform society frequently lack funding, community participation, and outward support. People who identify as queer still have to face violence or threat of violence, on a daily basis.

This study makes an effort to offer a thorough examination of these organisations, including their history, goals, activities as well as the difficulties they encounter in

advancing the LGBTQ cause. It has employed a qualitative, analytical and descriptive methodology.

Keywords: Identities, culture, gender justice, gender movement, LGBTQIA+.

Introduction

Identity is a significant factor in a culture that creates differences between individuals and groups. There is no universally accepted definition of who we are as human beings. Some identities occupy a central position in society, whereas others are marginalised because no identity is universally acknowledged and some identities dominate. From the very beginning of human society, this trait has been present. Because of their sexual and/or gender identity, the LGBTQ+ community faces discrimination from the state as well as society. As a result, a movement has been going on across the world for legal as well as social acceptance of the community. The essence of the LGBTQ movement lies in its resistance to conformity and its appreciation of diversity within the self and the diversity of human lives. LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. 'Q' also stands for 'questioning', as a way to acknowledge those who are exploring their gender or sexual identity. The sexual orientation or gender identity of an individual is described using these phrases. Nowadays the word LGBTQIA+ is used to embrace a wider swath of the community. Here 'I' stands for 'intersex', 'A' stands for 'asexual' and the plus sign is used to refer to a wide variety of gender identifications and sexual identities.

The ongoing queer movement globally has played an important role in challenging societal expectations about bodies and identities and emphasising the importance of rethinking about sex/gender categories (Ghosh 2020). Queer collective organisations play a crucial role in advocating for the rights, visibility, and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. These groups are often formed by individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ or as allies, with the goal of creating a safe and supportive environment for people who have historically been marginalised due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. All over the world, the queer collective organisations have been playing a leading role in taking forward the LGBTQ movement. The history of the movement in the global scenario as well as in India itself is

proof of that. These LGBTQ-supportive organisations provide a safe space for the community and amplify their voices in the form of regular initiatives that seek to promote their well-being in all spheres of life. In India, there are various such organisations which are working for the welfare of the community by spreading awareness and sensitising people against homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. Among them Humsafar Trust, Indian Aces, Sappho for Equality, and Nazariya are worth mentioning. In Assam, queer collectives like Xomonnoy, Xukia, the Xobdo Foundation, Drishti: A Queer Collective serve as advocates for queer activism. They organise pride parades, discussions on queer topics, film screenings of queer movies and documentaries; provide mental health support to the community and take many other praiseworthy initiatives for the upliftment of the LGBTQ+ community of Assam.

This study aims at analysing the queer collective organisations in the region of Assam, with a specific focus on understanding their role in shaping identities, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, and contributing to broader social transformation. It attempts to provide an in-depth exploration of these organisations, their origins, missions, activities and the challenges they face while taking forward the LGBTQ movement. This study has adopted a qualitative, analytical and descriptive approach. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted in order to develop this paper. Interviews are conducted with the queer collective organisations, the queer activists of Assam, as well as with the LGBTQIA+ community members. On the other hand, secondary sources, such as books, journals, articles and websites are used. The terms 'LGBTQ movement' and 'Queer Movement' are used interchangeably in this paper.

- **Xukia**

Xukia (meaning 'unique' in Assamese) is a pioneering Assam-based queer group that strives to raise awareness about LGBTQ concerns in Northeast India. After the Supreme Court's decision on December 11, 2013 to reinstate Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and thereby criminalise homosexual behaviour, protests took place worldwide. On December 15, 2013, a 'Global Day of Rage' was observed in a number of places throughout the world at the same time. In line with the 'Global Day of Rage' a group primarily comprising young women organised the first LGBTQ protest in Guwahati, marking the city's inaugural LGBTQ rally. On February 9, 2014,

the same group of people organised Queer Pride Guwahati, the first LGBTQ Pride Parade in the entire Northeast region. Following the success of the Pride Parade, Xukia was formed as a collective to continue the advocacy for queer people in the region (Shriya, 2017).

Xukia has been working for the LGBTQ+ community and creating awareness through innovative approaches like flash mobs, film screenings, workshops, panel discussions, etc. Their activities include organising film and video screenings to raise awareness against homophobia and engaging with the community through social media and event promotions. Xukia's vision is to foster a queer-friendly environment in Assam. They hosted the first LGBTQ film and video festival in the region, called 'Dialogues: Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Film' in 2014, which was a travelling version of the yearly film festival held in Kolkata (Davidson, 2014). Xukia has also hosted movie screenings at the city's schools and institutions and participated in Global LGBTQ leadership programmes. The organisation aims to establish a queer discourse in Assam and the Northeast by combining activism with academia through reading clubs, interactive sessions, and research. They launched 'The Forbidden: ek Xukia distranto', Assam's first multilingual LGBTQ+ publication (Gaylaxy, 4 July 2015). The aim behind this is to create a platform where community members and allies can express themselves.

The founders of Xukia have also established a non-profit organisation 'Anaajoree' in 2018 to support and promote various initiatives that strive for social change, leadership development, entrepreneurship, and other such work. They made Xukia the LGBTQ wing and have been taking collaborative initiatives related to gender and sexuality. They pioneered the first virtual skill orientation fellowship, 'Poriso', for transgender and gender-fluid individuals in Northeast India in 2021. In the interview, Milin Dutta, one of the co-founders of Xukia, stated that the upcoming project of the organisation is screening queer themed film 'Jonaki Poruwa' in educational institutions and raising funds for future queer themed projects. Currently, Xukia is mainly working for transgender people's rights (M. Dutta, personal communication, July 20, 2022).

- **Xomonnoy:**

Xomonnoy (in Assamese which means 'bridge') is an LGBTQ+ group in Guwahati, Assam, formed on November 1, 2018, with seven members that provides support to the community through interventions, referrals and community building. It

emerged after the decriminalisation of Section 377 in September 2018. Their focus is mobilising and connecting the queer community in Assam via initiatives like meetups, workshops, etc. They also work on identifying and nurturing queer leaders, especially at the grassroots level, for comprehensive statewide reach. Their focus extends to raising awareness. In the last years, Xomonnoy has organised multiple community meetups, brought out leaders in different parts of Assam, hosted various events such as film screenings, cultural programmes like 'Sargam', dance, poetry, art exhibitions, fashion shows, hug campaigns as well as queer sports too. In addition, they organise and participate in various panel discussions; and conduct workshops, seminars and lectures in various spaces across the state.

Xomonnoy offers legal, mental and sexual health support to the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition to ensuring the community's safety, they also give members access to crisis intervention and counselling services. Their goal is to build bridges and assist members of the LGBTQIA+ community in reaching out to others who are in need. They established Assam's first queer community space/drop-in centre in Chandmari, Guwahati in February 2021, which provides a safe space for the community people, which the community people can call their home. This place is not only open to queer people but also to their family, friends and allies. Xomonnoy has done a lot of crisis intervention until now. The founders of the organisation Shivalal Gautam and Prakash Das have visited various districts their own and engaged in extensive community mobilisation. They also operate a 24/7 helpline where they provide free peer counselling to the community people in need. Xomonnoy also offers legal services to financially constrained community members at a discounted or free cost. Nuzhat Nasreen Islam, one of the co-founders of the organisation, is herself a lawyer and has been providing free legal assistance to the needy ones in her capacity. Apart from that they provide guidance on safer sexual practices, Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) support. They have been playing an incredible role in providing health care services to the community. They also seek to assist LGBTQ people who experience harassment and extortion, particularly those who are HIV positive. The services provided by the co-founders and the core members of the organisation within their area of expertise are absolutely free of charge.

Even during the lockdown time, Xomonnoy helped the people of the community, as this time was much harder for them, especially for the transgender community. They provided assistance to the people through education and livelihood support. They crowdfunded 1.5 lakh rupees during the pandemic and helped people pay for rent and medicines (Deka, 2021). They also assisted other organisations in Assam as well as those from states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Odisha in crowdfunding for COVID assistance. They extended help to the HIV positive queer persons for their medical treatment and expenses. They arranged virtual meet-ups and many virtual events like art events, story-writing competitions, including online mental health sessions. They have started a virtual space through their WhatsApp support group, which was created during the COVID crisis and now has about 200+ participants from across the country. They facilitate discussions on health and personal issues through these groups and offer peer counselling. Xomonnoy's impact extends beyond Assam. For instance, they raised 15,000 rupees for Jammu Pride (held on June 26, 2022), which was in desperate need of funds. They also connected the pride organisers with nearby organisations that could assist them during the event. During the lockdown, they distributed rations and other relief items in other states of the Northeastern region too. Apart from all of this, they have been engaged in research and documentation work, assisting many students and researchers working in the LGBTQ field. Furthermore, they have been linking and aiding community members in finding potential employment and job prospects (Xomonnoy, personal communication, July 23, 2022).

- **Xobdo Foundation**

The Xobdo Foundation is another organisation in Assam that has been generating awareness about gender and sexuality. Xobdo is the first queer movement in Tezpur, Assam, that is working towards upholding the dignity of all individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ through the creation of dialogue and movement. Xobdo organises queer meet-ups, discussions on queer mental health and wellbeing. It's worth mentioning that Arpana Choudhury, the co-founder of Xobdo, is also the first Assamese person to be featured on Forbes India's '30 under 30 list' as one of the 30 most prominent young Indian personalities. After the decriminalisation of Section 377 in September 2018, this organisation was founded in the same month and has been working for the queer community since

then. Xobdo- Dialogue Dignity Movement Foundation, or in short, Xobdo got registered in September 2021 under Section 8 of the Companies Act and is the first registered organisation in Assam working exclusively on gender, sex and sexuality. Xobdo, which means both 'words' and 'sound' in the Assamese language, aims to foster dialogue among young people in order to uphold the dignity of queer people, thus creating a movement towards an equal society. Xobdo believes in equal opportunities for all people, regardless of their gender and sexual identities. Through discussions, film screenings, consultations, and panel discussions, Xobdo aims to challenge the societal taboos surrounding the LGBTQ+ community and establish a secure environment for its members. The primary goal of Xobdo is to foster conversations among various stakeholders, destigmatising misconceptions about individuals with marginalised gender and sexual identities. Additionally, Xobdo strives to initiate a local queer activism movement while actively participating in broader state, regional, and national initiatives promoting LGBTQ+ rights.

'QueerTessential' was a youth-engaging initiative launched by the Xobdo Foundation, garnering significant youth interest. Its primary aim was to communicate insights about gender and sexuality through dialogues, discussions, and film screenings. Furthermore, the project aimed to shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and the challenges faced by the community (Tezpurbuzz, Sept. 30, 2021). Xobdo collaborates with educational institutions in and around Tezpur to establish a culture where being LGBTQ+ is no more considered as a social taboo. In their sessions with students, they conduct in depth discussions on gender, sex, and sexuality.

- **Drishti: A Queer Collective**

Jorhat district based queer collective organisation Drishti is dedicated to working towards queer rights in Assam focusing on rural areas with an approach of love, compassion and feminist ideology. Founded in 2021, Drishti provides mental health support, training, workshops on gender and sexuality, and work for the visibility of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. They have been working towards creating a safe space for the community and towards gender equality and the mental health of the community. The co-founder of the organisation, Rituparna Neog, is also leading a library initiative named 'Project Kitape Katha Koi' in Assam.

Drishti organised the first pride walk of the entire Upper Assam in Jorhat on their own and the second one in Dibrugarh in collaboration with the Dibrugarh Pride Walk Committee. They conducted poster activities involving colleges, social media campaigns, and street plays to increase awareness among the public regarding gender and sexuality. This queer collective also conducts various programs like queer poetry recitation, dance, musical performances among the community members.

Findings

Compared to cities like Delhi and Mumbai, in Assam, and in fact in the entire Northeastern region, there are very few organisations exclusively working for the LGBTQ+ community. In Assam, there are only four such organisations – Xukia, Xomonnoy, Xobdo, and Drishti. Two of them are located in Guwahati only. Thus, they also face geographical constraints while expanding the movement to other parts of the state. In addition, in the entire Barak Valley, there are no such LGBTQ rights advocacy groups. Very recently, four/five members of the community in the region started a queer organisation named ‘Satrang Barak’ with the aim of making a safe and healthy environment for the community, but it is quite new in its origin and for now is limited to a very few people. It is located in the Karimganj district, and so far, they have done a small flood relief campaign during the recent flood in the Barak Valley (Satrang Barak, telephonic interview, July 26, 2022).

The endeavours of the queer supportive organisations have effectively amplified the voices of the LGBTQIA+ community, providing individuals with the courage to step out of the closet and express themselves freely, a courage that has grown stronger over time. However, these organisations encounter a range of challenges while taking forward the queer movement in the region.

Firstly, the community has not received full acceptance from society yet. They experience intolerance, discrimination, harassment, and the threat of violence on a daily basis due to their sexual orientation. For queer collectives, combating the social stigmas associated with being homosexual is by no means a simple endeavour. In fact, they also go through mental stress and emotional imbalances while dealing with such vulnerable issues in the community. Xomonnoy stated that they receive hundreds of calls every day relating to minor to extreme issues. At times, the cumulative impact of these

factors takes a toll on their mental well-being, leading to emotional distress.

Secondly, a lack of participation by community members is another challenge these queer collectives face. Queer activist Milin Dutta claimed that the people of the community, especially the Hijra community, often show reluctance to engage in the programmes organised for their benefit. Xukia has been doing programmes for the transgender community for years now, but they have observed that community members' enthusiasm and engagement are very low, despite the fact that these programmes are offered free of charge.

Thirdly, and most importantly, these queer collectives are non-funding organisations. Xukia and Xomonnoy have affirmed that they have not received a single penny from the government to date. They face numerous challenges due to lack of funding, compelling them to rely primarily on crowdfunding or independent funding from third parties. Furthermore, a noticeable lack of collaboration between government entities and queer collective organisations is apparent. There exists an evident need for cohesive engagement between the government and these supportive organisations, fostering mutual cooperation for the betterment of the LGBTQ+ community.

Fourthly, these queer collective organisations consist of only a few members. The co-founders as well as the members also have a life outside of this. Most of the time, they feel the need for more helping hands. They need more volunteers and individuals who can actively contribute with them to further their movement towards the emancipation of the LGBTQ+ community.

Apart from these non-profit organisations, some people are also taking individual initiatives for the LGBTQ+ community in the region. Catholic nun Sister Prema Chowallur's name is worth mentioning in this regard. She founded a shelter home named 'Rainbow Home of the Seven Sisters' (RhoSS) for transgender people at Christian Basti, Guwahati, in the year 2021. In an interview with the authors, she stated that it was very difficult for her to find a place to open the shelter home. She expected people to be happy and supportive about this, but it was quite the opposite. This shelter home aims to prevent transgender population from begging and engaging in sex work. Sister Prema has supported many community members in finding livelihoods, constructing homes; and has offered various forms of assistance. The city's

transgenders refer to her as 'Maa' because of her selfless love and care for them. Sister Prema has also been working relentlessly to combat another major social evil – human trafficking.

Conclusion

With the efforts of the queer collectives, LGBTQ activism in Assam has been successful to some extent, with notable changes occurring for the community. Especially after the repeal of Section 377, queer activism in the state is increasingly growing. As stated by these queer advocacy groups, participation in queer meetups and other queer-related programmes has witnessed a sudden surge in numbers. At present, a substantial number of queer influencers are from Assam. Indeed, both outsiders and insiders regard the Northeastern region as more tolerant and liberal towards the LGBTQ+ community than any other “mainland” places in India. However, despite all this, queer people in the region continue to face violence and discrimination. Queer collectives and safe spaces for queers are also rising steadily but not enough yet. Clearly, there has been a significant increase in support for LGBTQ+ people, but this support seems to be limited. For example, Guwahati Pride has grown in size; but the fanfare, spirit, and outward support seem to be confined to that one day of celebration, glam, and fun associated with Pride Walks. Deep down, there appears to be a lack of wider support; a visible lack of sensitisation on the ground; and a general lack of funds for LGBTQ+ empowerment, and for solving their specific problems.

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