Project Design

A study of pandemic experiences of transgender people in India through social media data

Problem Statement

Norms are constantly being constructed, disrupted and reconstructed. There are mainstream understandings of gender and sexualities which exclude a section of our society therefore it becomes important to diverge from the traditional norms and not conform to them. There is an urgent need to shift from the traditional ideas to a more inclusive definition of gender and sexuality (Shah et al., 2015, p. 13).

All basic rights have been easily accessible to only two genders namely, 'men' and 'women'. Other genders and sexual identities have been denied basic citizenship rights such as the right to freedom of expression, health, education and many more (Shah et al., 2015).

The only socio-cultural community who are gender-divergent and are visible due to the support networks formed by them are Hijras. Thus 'transgender' is often times considered to be the same as Hijras (Shah et al., 2015, p. 12). Attempts need to be made to include the voices of all marginalized communities, like, transgenders , FTM, MTF, hijras, etc. Along with the inclusion of voices, our very thinking about gender and sexuality needs to change and evolve with newer understanding of gender and sexuality identities coming to light.

Hence, this project works towards addressing these changes and the problems that emerge from these changes.

For this project, I will be reviewing two books on the experiences of transgender communities along with around 10 articles on the pandemic experiences of the transgender communities in India. The purpose of this review is to understand the key questions that have been posed and addressed in the scholarship on transgender people in the context of the pandemic. I will then proceed to conduct computational

analysis of social media data about transgender pandemic experiences. I will then relate and interpret my findings from the computational analysis.

This project will aim to do the following :

- To understand what are the most widely shared pandemic experiences of transgender people in India on social media

- To assess and analyse what the realities of transgender people have been during the pandemic, and what that reveals about their place in the Indian polity

- To gauge how effective the use of computational tools is in the study of gender, particularly in the context of marginalized communities

Methodology

The source data for this project will be the data obtained from social media platforms like Twitter and Reddit during the time period of the pandemic, that is, from 2020 - 2022 and the same will be used to accomplish the goals of this project. The tweets made, the discussions that stemmed from these tweets, the comments on the tweet and the interaction the tweet recieved will act as the main source of information.

Computational analysis like text analysis, regression analysis and sentiment analysis are some ways for us to analyze and review the massive amount of data obtained from these tweets.

Considering the time constraints for this project, regression analysis will be performed on the obtained data. This type of analysis helps us discover the relationships between the different factors that were in play during this pandemic.

For regression analysis, the independent variable that could be considered is the three waves of the pandemic, that is, time period of each wave. In other words, time (in months) will be taken as the independent variable and as the project progresses, the dependent variables along with the independent variables will be reviewed and updated.

Through this computational analysis, careful observations can be made regarding the relationships between each factor and could help in reaching meaningful conclusions.

Rationale

The transgender community only truly got the freedom of expression after the Supreme Court verdict in April 2014. This gave recognition to the marginalized communities and acknowledged individuals who self-identified as neither a 'man' or a 'woman'. (Shah et al., 2015)

The April 2014 Supreme Court judgement states that "Transgender will be included as a third gender under the various scholarship/fellowships schemes of UGC". The verdict was vague in itself and had a number of unanswered questions, questions like, who exactly is transgender? what this verdict holds for people marginalized on the basis of their gender expression (Shah et al., 2015, p. 12).

Even though the April 2014 verdict gave a means to protect the basic rights of the marginalized communities, but did the general public ever accept those who did not place themselves in the gender binary? Has society stopped equating the gender binary to what's natural?

During the pandemic, millions lost their jobs and homes and were affected in numerous ways but the LGBTQ+ community or any other marginalized community who face discrimination even in a "normal" setting, how had the pandemic affected them?

With the pandemic, a number of cities in India had lockdowns imposed, curfews put in place after the wave died, minimal contact was ensured and travel restrictions imposed thus people who were away from their home did not have a chance to move closer to their family or friends.

Virtual was the new reality, people stopped stepping out of their homes, finding enough grocery for the entire family was an issue, seeking proper medical support was a task but while all of this was happening, it seems our already discriminated sections of the society were being discriminated against even more.

Social media platforms are a great medium through which people stay in touch with their loved ones, form new connections by meeting new people, share their life stories, find people with common interests, in short, these spaces bring the world a little closer and makes it easier for people to express themselves and share their stories with everyone else.

Just like everyone else, communities marginalized on the basis of their gender identity or expression also took their issues online and more so during the pandemic. Social

media platforms like Twitter, Reddit, Instagram and Facebook have been the major platforms where experiences of everyone during the pandemic can be found. It becomes necessary for us to understand how they survived the pandemic, whether the implementation of the 2014 verdict was successful or not and what changes can help overcome future discomfort to the community.

This is why a project like this is essential where we understand the lived realities of the marginalized communities during the pandemic through social media data.