

The Suno India Show
Pride & Prejudice: Pride, a political protest or a community celebration?

This is a Suno India production and you're listening to The Suno India Show!

It was in Chennai that Shivakumar felt that he found himself. He is a queer man from Vishakhapatnam and was living there for a few years.

Shivakumar: I was living in Chennai, for a while, that's actually I really understood what is LGBTQIA plus and that they will be all this kind of all these different identities. So that's when I saw the pride March, when they were conducting the pride march.

He became a member of the organising committee of the Pride March in Chennai. After many years of staying in the closet, he felt validated.

Shivakumar: People were very solid people coming from different backgrounds, all identities, feeling so together, and they are all giving one voice out like we should fight a fight for our rights. So that's the kind of representation I saw. Maybe they were showing themselves. Again, the expression could be something, but the voice that is coming out from that body is what is to be cared about. So every person on the streets when we were walking, they were not staring at us. They were curious to know what this is all about? Why are they on the streets and making such a hullabulla? So that's the kind of expressions I saw on the faces of the people. So that made me understand that there is really an importance for this pride march. It is not about just you coming in different styles or various styles and just walking on the roads, it's about making people listen to you, listen to what you're shouting and draw their attention while we are trying to do such a march. So that's what made me feel like the pride march is really important. So that's how we felt to start even in a small city.

When he moved back home, he got together with his transgender friend, Harsha Hayati. They created an organization, Nestam in the city for the LGBTQI community there. But the dream has been to make pride march happen. But the members of his community were not willing to publicly walk on the streets of Visakhapatnam.

Shivakumar: All the other community persons whom I met, they were all comfortable, I should speak this. Definitely, because they were happy with what they're getting in their life, like, especially the gay community persons, they're happy with their sex life, and they don't want to really mess up. And we don't want to really mess up our lives with all that. And why would we ask society to stop looking at us as weird people, because we are getting enough benefit from them? And why would we really do such things? So all these kinds of answers made me really go down. I thought it's not going to happen.

Most of the members from the community refused to join in the Pride parade. Oddly the queer

folk from outside the city were more willing.

Shivakumar: The people from the city were nowhere ready. Because, yes, they were not out. They're still in the closet. And though we gave them all kinds of suggestions, why they don't need to fear about and all that kind of guidance. Still, they were not comfortable.

Shivakumar first tried organising a pride march in 2016. He is still trying.

Hi, I am Suryatapa Mukherjee, reporting on this episode of Pride and Prejudice, our series on all things LGBTQIA. LGBTQIA stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. We will be using 'Queer' as an umbrella term for all these identities. In this episode, we will explore the evolution of Pride through history across various Indian cities to understand what goes on behind the displays of rainbow and opulence.

The first pride march took place in 1970 in New York. It was in response to Stonewall riots- a clash of the police and the queer community in Stonewall Inn, one of the few gay bars as they were called then.

The first Pride march in the country happened in Kolkata in 1999. It was called a friendship walk. I spoke to Rudra Kishore Mandal. They told me back then, the most visible Queer people involved in these things were gay and bisexual men and transgender women. The planning for the walk happened in Hyderabad, where Rudra was at the time working for a support group.

Rudra: At that point, when I got involved, it was mostly GBT guys, like gay, bisexual and transgender people were mostly in the forefront. I will say gay, gay men were basically in the forefront at that point of when I got involved. This is 1998 that I'm talking about. So I got.. I joined the gay support group. GBT support group basically, in Hyderabad, I was in Hyderabad, I was studying. So I got involved with the functioning of the support group. I'm continuously saying GBT here because the visibility of lesbian people was not there. At that point of time, many there.

The group put in their own money to organise this pride march. The entire affair was relatively peaceful.

Rudra: In 1999, we put in a little bit of our own funds, money, whatever we could raise from people that we knew and organise All India conference for out gay men in Hyderabad called Yariyan 1999. That is when I first met people who were in the forefront of activism. And of course, it was like, for me, it was like, I was young, and, you know, with a lot of dreams. And so it was a major event in my life at that point. And that is where the seed for the 1999 friendship walk, which happened in Kolkata was sown. In that conference, people started talking about why can't we have pride march in India and that is where the discussion went on and people said so let's do within Kolkata Ronjan said that okay, we will go ahead and do something in Kolkata. And that is where how it's like they organised the first friendship walk in. I think that was July, July 1999.

Like in Visakhapatnam now, the first pride walks in the country and in Kolkata ran into challenges and were not held every year. Life in a way came full circle for Rudra. They were at the organising meeting for the first pride in Kolkata, and then they returned to their home city for its second innings. They had pride walks every two-three years. It became a regular feature after 2011.

To those who are closeted, pride marches mean a lot. Pride marches are sometimes their first exposure of the queer community. In 2014, Nuzhat Nasreen Islam had just passed out of school when she saw the first pride walk in Guwahati. It was the first Pride for all of North East India.

Nuzhat: The first pride that I went to was, when I was I just passed out of school. And I, I found out like, two days early, earlier than the pride day that the very first pride walk would be held in my city itself. But again, because of the rampant homophobia that was, is still in existence, I shouldn't use past tense. So what happened is me and my best friend, we just went there, and we were like, 10 to 20 meters away and just looked, looked if there were enough people, for us to join, so that we will not be, you know, we won't be noticeable there. So we found that there were at least, like 50 people, at least there, so it was fine with us going there, plus, they were providing us with masks and the wigs and all that, you know, so that you can protect your identity, which was fine with us. So I wanted people in Assam because back then we did not have this regular dialogue, or we didn't even have any organisations that were actively working for the LGBTQ community in Assam. So to get that, that was the very first very, very public event that involved, you know, discussing about LGBT rights. From the second pride onwards, I basically joined as an organiser, I was there as an organiser itself. And so I've been, I've been in the Organising Committee for at least five out of the seven prides that have been held.

Nuzhat Nasreen Islam is now the co-founder of Xomonnoy, a queer organisation based in Guwahati. In the initial years, she says, police permission was maybe the toughest part of organising Pride in Assam.

Nuzhat: So earlier, it was very difficult for us to get permission from the police and the administration. And it would take us a long time to actually, we had to go to the police station almost every day. And as you know, it's as women I don't think it's a very safe you know, enforce law enforcement spaces are not you know, top notch for women of you know, persons identifying as woman or even the queer community itself. So, to go there itself was a very tedious task, you know, you when you would, when you would go most of the time the asking for the permission part was dealt by me and other female identifying persons. So, what would happen is they would take one look at the application and they immediately assume that the three of us are together, the four of us are together immediately right. So, you do not have your privacy, of course, is being hampered plus you are in a space that is very, very much judgmental of your life choices. So, all of that combined, in the initial years, it was very difficult to navigate those spaces where you know, where as soon as you're asking for permission to hold the pride immediately there would be questions, a lot of questions. However, as time has passed by, I can assure that the

Assam police has been very supportive. And we have not had any issues in the recent years.

So, how did this change come about? How did the police go from foe to friend over half a decade?

Nuzhat: One point has to be that you know, there is more media representation, at least during the pride work time and the, as you know, like capitalising on the Pride Month, and everything that happens a lot. So at least up before, it was like something unheard of, to find a, you know, a gay couple or lesbian couple people who didn't even know what those terms at least now I think, with the like, you know, with more and more like the, every year we do have this thing called the queer pride party, and people do know that and that is very highly publicised in the media also. So I think in that sense, there is a constant, not constant, but there is some discussion around that particular aspect.

Shivakumar, however, has not been able to organise the Pride March partly because police did not grant him permission in 2016 and 2019, when they came close to organising the community to come out and march with them. One time, a policeman told Shivakumar, are you all going to come out wearing saris and dance on the road?

The relationship between pride parades and law and order, have been shifting in other ways. In Mumbai, just last year, a transgender student was arrested for raising anti NRC CAA slogans at the annual pride gathering.

Fifty others were slapped with sedition charges. The police had denied permission for a march, fearing that the thousands in attendance would protest against NRC-CAA. So the organisers had moved it to a park instead. Attendees still protested against the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the Citizenship Amendment Act.

'I condemn CAA-NRC because in 2000 trans people not included in Assam. I am a transgender woman and an Indian citizen nobody has the right to take away from me my identity.'

CAA or Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 seeks to naturalise illegal migrants from all religions, except Islam. This is based on a National Registry of Citizens or NRC proposal which seeks to make a registry of "legitimate citizens" based on a specific set of documents. The process is complete in Assam excluding more than 1.9 million people living in the state.

But perhaps the most surprising part of the story is that pride organisers distanced themselves from the CAA protests and those charged. In fact, one of the organisers identified the prime accused publicly on social media for protesting and asked their university to hold them accountable.

Queer Azaadi Mumbai, the body that organises Mumbai Pride, released an official statement, saying, and I quote, "We completely dissociate ourselves from and strongly condemn the abrupt

radical slogans in support of Sharjeel and/or any other slogans against the integrity of India at the gathering. We feel that irresponsible sloganeering under the garb of dissent not just affects the safety of individuals who signed the permission but QAM as an entity.”

But that’s not all. In Pune last year, organisers said that they would submit a list of ‘known troublemakers’ to the police in advance to avoid what happened in Mumbai.

Many queer groups feel that the movement should be circumscribed to the rights of queer people, and not broad-based. Rudra talks about this sentiment among many people in the community

Rudra: There is a sentiment, there is a amongst a lot of queer people that do other other movements don't talk about queer people. So why should we talk about them? That kind of a sentiment basically works against I believe that kind of sentiment works against the inclusivity politics of pride. Because we are being discriminated against doesn't mean that we also go ahead and discriminate against others. And that is where I think the main issue lies. Certain people see that queer issues like civil rights, marriage equality, anti discrimination law, and all that should be only what we should concentrate on doing that.

Besides, queer spaces do not exist outside of society and so queer spaces often have the same problems as elsewhere in society.

Nuzhat says that she has faced Islamophobia within queer, so-called, safe spaces same as anywhere else. She says that these are the issues that need to be worked on so that spaces can truly be inclusive of all queer people.

Nuzhat: To be very honest, I've also found a lot of Islamophobia in the queer community, in the queer circles, right. Since the past years, I was the only Muslim person, I was the only Muslim representative if you can, if you might, in queer circles. So I've also had my fair share of Islamophobia, in queer circles. So I think we are not like, the LGBT community is definitely not perfect. And we are all again, we are not living on an island. So because we are at such intersections, I think these kinds of issues do need to be spoken about. And it's, if, if in turn, like, you know, the platform of pride is used in order to benefit marginalised communities, then I think it's a very good idea.

Nuzhat talks about the so-called good queer and bad queer.

Nuzhat: There's a lot of, you know, discussion for, you know, the whole, the bad queer and the good queer, right. So, nowadays, what happens is, you know, sometimes even within the community, you're saying that, you know, one section of the community deserves more right? rights, because they fall it in the quote, unquote, good, queer definition, right. And that is so unfair, you're not letting go of your privileges to make space for, you know, other persons in the committee who might not be as privileged as you are, you're just, you know, you're just moving

the wheel of inequality. You're just not if you're not even willing to listen to other people, you're living in your own bubble, and bubble of privilege, and, you know, expecting that everyone in the community is the same as you. And they do not require rights, which are different from you, or you have an active problem with rights being granted to other marginalised communities. I think you should relook your entire, you know, moral morality or your ethics, I feel.

At the other end of the country from Mumbai, NRC-CAA featured as one of the main official reasons for the Pride March in Guwahati. Nuzhat said that in Guwahati Pride march, people openly talk about CAA.

Nuzhat: We allow people to bring up bring their own placards, and a lot of people talk about issues raised issues that they feel very passionate about. And some issues that do need do need to be not be talked about, for example, this year's this year, the theme was that you know, about how trans act, and also how the NRC has excluded transgender persons in particular. Right, so all of those are and of course, being from Assam, I think we have been affected, we are directly affected by the CAA. Right. So I mean, I don't think that any of those protests would take away from our, you know, goal of getting more rights for the LGBTQ community, because I think, in the world of intersections, I don't think that there's, there's a point to stick to only one or, you know, to make boxes out of, you know, social issues, because at the end of the day, I mean, all of us are living in the same society, right? We can't just ignore one thing, and then talk about something else. A lot of times, you know, a lot of times we are, we have interconnected issues. So as indigenous persons from the N East and from Assam, I think we will be affected by more things other than simply homophobia, homophobia, or even transphobia. So I think it's very important to talk about issues like that. I mean, the basic history of pride is a means of protest. Right? It is a celebration. But the very fact that we are celebrating our queerness is also an act of protest, at least I believe that.

Like any movement, it is usually the dominant groups in that movement that take charge of setting agendas.

Bittu says that these incidents show who is in charge of organising the Pride in question. Bittu is an academic and has helped organise Pride marches in Hyderabad, Bangalore and Delhi.

Bittu: I mean, these are perspectives that are brought in by rich gay men largely. But it's one where I think the solution is very simple, which is that people who are privileged need to learn to listen to those who are not. But in addition, a failure to understand how the caa nrc are very fundamentally, issues concerning the queer and trans communities. I mean, the NRC left out, left a large number of trans persons, and an extremely large fraction of the trans community. I think, even though because in terms of absolute counts, the number of trans people that the state even acknowledges, understands as trans is very low, but an extremely high fraction of the trans community was left out to the NRC exercise in Assam. So it's very clearly a queer and trans issues as well. And everybody who's connected with queer and trans communities across class instead of solely socialising within that class would know that.

He says that in some places, pride has become more about some queer people rather than all queer people. That it is agitating against the government that secures rights, not conceding to it.

Bittu: So, you know, you look at a place like Tamil Nadu where, you know, trans activists really fought from several of the things that the government's giving the central government, and, you know, support and so on they are giving other people now, such as rights to ID and welfare, he started long before the transaction. And these were examples where there are struggles, the government concedes, and then there is a clear path for the community to continue to struggle and to get more things. What's been happening now is the politics of lobbying. And that politics of lobbying is what I think has also changed pride in certain places. So the police give permission to pride to only certain kinds of people, right? Who goes and asks the police for permission matters. The police, you know, determine and sort of differentially act upon pride, depending on who's there, what kinds of slogans are shouting, and so on, so forth. So I think that all of these structures, and really the particular history of a pride in a particular location influence these outcomes.

Bittu says that it comes down to if the pride is led by the more marginalised or the more privileged among the queer community. Who do we think of when we think of queer people? What do we imagine when we think of a Pride march?

These are conversations happening from the beginning of Pride. There is a famous speech by Stonewall rioter and activist Sylvia Rivera. With both applauders and hecklers in the crowd, she spoke about the difference among queer people in America. There were queer people like her who led the riots—who were from ethnic minorities, transgender, poor, routinely beaten and violated by the police. Then there were queer people who were white, middle class, cis-gender men and women who did not have to fight in the same way.

*'I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the f***'s wrong with you all? Think about that! The people are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white middle class white club. And that's what you all belong to! REVOLUTION NOW!'*

Whenever he has been able to organise a Pride, Bittu says he has tried to maintain the original principles of the movement.

Bittu: In Bangalore and more so in Hyderabad, the goal was really to use the idea of pride whose origins are in a revolt against the various ways in which poor people are policed to really to sort of in that spirit, link it with the political issues and forms of violence and harassment and policing that queer and trans communities face even today. So in Hyderabad with the Swabhiman yatra, I think that's really what we were trying to do. And that march continues to. The Prides before I think were not like this, but ever since we began organising it as a

Swabhiman yatra have been largely working class and Hijra and kothi led. Unlike, very much like what was happening in Bangalore, but unlike, I think, the way in which the march plays out in Delhi, and as I've heard in some other cities.

In Visakhapatnam, organising a pride march seems like an uphill task. But people like Shivakumar are already laying the groundwork to slowly help people come out of the closet and join him in public.

He recounts being horribly bullied while growing up, both in school and at home, and realising how the world needs to change.

Shivakumar: You should have been born as a female, when it comes to my family members they used to say this all the time, right, so all this thing really put me into a lot of depression. But somehow, the strength which I gained myself, I could focus on my studies and really do good in academics, especially, which I found was a very difficult task for many of the LGBTQI plus community people. So taking all this trauma into their head, especially. So that is the first thing that made me feel like enough of it, like nobody like me should suffer right from the school stage, so that they would not drop out. And at least they will feel strong in mind to an extent and focus on their education and career through education.

So, his own experiences motivated him to spread awareness about queerness in education institutions through his organisation Nestam. In the short run, this would make schools safer for queer children, and in the long run, this would make society safer for queer people.

Shivakumar: So Nestam was started in 2015. along when I met a trans friend, Harsha Hayati, and I told her what is running in my head. So she got connected to it immediately. And that was to create an understanding and acceptance of the LGBTQIA plus community in mainstream society. So my motto was to create this understanding and acceptance by conducting awareness sessions in schools, colleges, all kinds of educational institutions especially.

Already he feels a change, and hopes for more. He says students listen focused with attention. Sometimes college students do workshops with them independently if college authorities do not give permission. He sees an increasing change in young people's attitudes to queerness.

Shivakumar: And after the sessions, all those who got connected, they used to come to us and say and ask more about things and ask, like, how can they be a part of this community, in your activities and all this? So just imagine how beautiful it is out there.

Hopefully, these shifts will soon make it a friendlier world where queer people in Shivakumar's city can march in broad daylight with pride.

Please rate our podcast and leave a comment if you like it. Underreported and

underrepresented stories can become mainstream only if it reaches more people so please support us by visiting our contributing page on our website sunoindia.in or follow us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.