

CHAPTER 2

BEHIND THE MASK: INTERSECTIONAL (IN)VISIBILITY OF INDO-FIJIAN QUEER EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The Fijian LGBTQI+ movement has significantly grown, shaped around a more significant Pacific identity. The participation of queer activists from the Indo-Fijian community, which represents about 35% of Fiji's population, is limited, and the struggles, needs, and aspirations of this LGBTQI+ community are mainly invisible. This invisibility is framed within Fiji's political conflicts. However, there is also a form of self-censorship due to cultural and religious barriers, as well as to dynamics that speak about the trauma of the indentured system and postcolonial violence. Contemporaneously, non-political spaces provide avenues for visibility. While some Indo-Fijian religious contexts welcome gender and sexual diversity forms, these are becoming visible aided by popular social media platforms and Bollywood cinema's influence. This project explores the dynamics of the Indo-Fijian queer community within Fiji and its broader LGBTQI+ movement, aiming to identify barriers specific to their community and strategies for recognition, visibility, and participation in advocacy and activism. The project is approached as activist research and includes interviews and group discussions with Indo-Fijians self-identifying LGBTQI+.

Keywords: queer experiences; post-colonial; invisibility; Fiji; Indo-Fijians; identity

ENCOUNTERING INDO-FIJIAN NON-HETERONORMATIVITY

“Madam, could I bring you to the temple tomorrow evening? I want you to *see* something relevant to our discussions on gender in Indo-Fijian settings.” The class was over, and Sidhant, a self-identifying queer Indo-Fijian student, who had been raised into Hinduism, stayed behind to talk to the lecturer. It was September 2020, and Sidhant would attend a Friday prayer at a South-Indian temple in Suva, the Fijian capital, part of the rituals leading to the yearly fire-walking ceremony. The religious service involved close kin of the devotees preparing to walk on fires on Sunday night. Families could invite a few people to attend the ritual. The fiancé of one of the candidate fire-walkers had asked her “brother” Sidhant, whom she had charged with taking care of her makeup and hair for the rituals she was involved in. She had approved Sidhant asking his lecturer to come along for learning purposes. On Friday early evening, wearing a salwar kameez suit, the lecturer walked into the porch where the prayers were held and sat on the floor next to Sidhant. The immediate families of the devotees were taking turns sitting in a circle with a young priest, where they were to give offerings and receive blessings. Others like Sidhant and his lecturer observed from the floor or benches along the porch balustrade.

Some of the spectators included radiant trans-women wrapped in a beautiful sari. Sidhant had noted that religious events in some Indo-Fijian Hindu contexts, specifically the ones associated with South India, may include trans-women, appointed by female members of the devotees’ families “to make them look beautiful”. The participation of Sidhant testified to the space gender and sexually diverse people may be granted within some Indo-Fijian Hindu settings on the grounds of their creative skills. Sidhant confirmed that the young priest conducting the prayers, who displayed feminine mannerisms, was gender non-conforming. Those religious spaces, Sidhant added, could also assign spiritual connotations to non-heteronormativity. At the sunset, visitors arrived at the temple, and the ritual moved to the temple section external to the porch, involving the whole community. In this crowded space, where religious traditions inherited from Southern Indian ancestors were being celebrated, gender and sexual diversity seemed to hold a place, in contrast with the narratives of absence associated with Indo-Fijian non-heteronormativity that were being iterated in the postgraduate gender studies courses at the University of the South Pacific.

Upon that occasion, Sidhant noted that attending a Hindu religious ceremony might be the only way to encounter Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative lives visibly.

Sidhant felt quite relaxed within that space in contrast with the significant effort he put in “looking as masculine as possible” before his father, a priest within another Hindu religious community that is less accommodating of gender and sexual diversity. Indeed, Sidhant was wearing multiple masks. He also had a life as a queer activist within Asia-Pacific and experienced dissonance as a representative of Fiji whose experiences were embedded in the realities of the Indo-Fijian minority and yet diluted within a Fijian/Pacific frame. Sidhant eventually joined conversations that the lecturer was having with two other Indo-Fijian activists who had previously taken the gender studies courses. They all shared the desire for what they identified as Indo-Fijian queer experiences to be seen, including scientific visibility. Since the visit to the temple, Indo-Fijian non-heteronormativity has become ostentatiously visible in other settings, notably the social platform TikTok, echoing other influences from popular culture that encourage degrees of recognition of non-heteronormativity amongst Indo-Fijians. What are, then, the dynamics of visibility and invisibility of Indo-Fijian queer experiences within their communities, their country, and the LGBTQI+ movement?

Indo-Fijian Queer Lives: Navigating Non-Heteronormativity in a Girit Space

Fiji's LGBTQI+ activism is framed within its history as a former territory of the British Empire. Since a feature of British colonialism was the introduction of sodomy laws criminalizing same-sex relations, which outlived the Empire, LGBTQI+ advocacy in former British territories has emphasized addressing colonial legacies in the legal system and people's minds (Nicol et al., 2018). In 1997, Fiji was the first Pacific Island Country (PIC) to abolish such law and the second in the world after South Africa (UNAIDS, 2010); its current 2013 constitution provides more significant safeguards for people based on their gender identity and expression (Fijian Government, 2013). Still, discrimination persists at many levels, and the LGBTQI+ movement has been advocating for SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics) sensitization and awareness (ILGA, 2019). In Fiji and other PICs alike, some use cultural and religious references to dismiss the LGBTQI+ discourse as a re-imposition of Western values. In contrast, some local non-heteronormative experiences have been revisiting and embracing the “Pacific” heritage to present it as inherently gender fluid while interacting with globalized discourses and practices (Besnier & Alexeyeff, 2014).

Within these debates and representation, the struggles, aspirations, and needs specific to the LGBTQI+ Fijian population of Indian descent are mostly invisible, and the presence of Indo-Fijian activists within the Fijian LGBTQI+ movement is limited. Additionally, Indo-Fijian settings are mostly invisible within research on LGBTQI+ issues and experiences in Fiji, including a recent overview of sexual and gender diversity in the region (Presterudstuen, 2019a), and research on Indo-Fijian queer experiences is just emerging (Prasad, 2021; Shandil, 2019). Indo-Fijians are themselves a product of colonial history. Between 1879 and 1916, British rulers recruited Indian laborers to work in the Fijian sugarcane

plantations. As a result of the indenture system and the later migration of free traders, mainly from Gujarat, about 35% of the Fijian population has Indian ancestry. Because interethnic conflicts have shaped the historical relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations¹, Fiji is now focused on asserting and constructing an ethnicity-blind national identity (Kant, 2019).

While the invisibility of the Indo-Fijian issues and the limited presence of activists do reverberate with political tensions within the nation, they also suggest a form of self-censorship. Indo-Fijians of diverse gender identities and sexual orientation need to negotiate cultural and religious barriers in the context of their community's status as a non-Indigenous minority. A discourse emphasizing the virtue of Indians, particularly in terms of sexual behavior, emerged during the indentured system to oppose a colonial hegemonic discourse that racialized the Indian laborers as sexually immoral. This discourse persisted in association with devotional elements as Fiji's Indians developed a political identity in the post-indentured and post-colonial days amidst intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic tensions (Kelly, 1991).

References to pre-colonial cultural and religious legitimation of gender and sexual fluidity, including the *hijra*, a cultural category largely understood as “neither man nor woman” (Nanda, 1999), which in India and other countries in the Indian subcontinent have contributed to the legalization of the third gender (Hossain & Nanda, 2020), do not feature in the Indo-Fijian collective memory and representation as “Indians.” These elements have been largely left behind in the passage through *kala pani*, the “dark waters” that severed many Indians from their land and its systems (Mishrani-Barak, 2021, p. 2). This historical experience significantly altered their relations, interactions, and practices, contributing to the articulation of a new and contextually specific identity, the Indo-Fijian (Gillion, 1973 (1963); Naidu, 2017; Mishra, V., 2008). This also resulted in a collective consciousness built around the memory of *girmit*² and its brutality (Lal, 2004; Long, 2018; Mishra, V., 2001; Mishra, S., 2005) and reinforced by the trauma of postcolonial violence (Trnka, 2008). The dynamics of invisibility of contemporary Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative people thus unfold against the background of an experience of “double colonization”³ through the experience of indentured labor.

Today, Indo-Fijian queerness is becoming visible in non-political spaces. If gender and sexual diversity is normalized and thus codified in specific roles and norms within the boundaries of some Hindu communities, the TikTok platform has become a stage where young Indo-Fijians perform queerness. Their presence in social media partly echoes Bollywood cinema, which has played a significant role in framing and re-framing Indian identity among the Indo-Fijians (Upall, 2011). This industry increasingly includes allusions to and forms of gender and sexual fluidity, though this may be crystallized as entertainment (Gopinath, 2000; Kalra & Bhugra, 2015; Subhan, 2013;).

This chapter engages with the experiences and subjectivities of Indo-Fijian gender and sexual minorities as they navigate (in)visibility, exclusion and inclusion, and recognition and belonging (or lack thereof) in the context of Indo-Fijian communities, the Fijian/Pacific LGBTQI+ movement, as well as the mainstream society. The late Pacific scholar Teaiwa (2014, p. 267) underscores the necessity of this study in her statement that “further work is needed to capture the complex

layers of tolerance and intolerance that can coexist in Fiji and shape the everyday experience of those who identify as sexual minorities.”

Research Approach and Design

The term queer is here used as an umbrella term to capture the different contextual negotiations, strategies, formations, and identities that shape the Indo-Fijians non-heteronormative gendered and sexual lives. This position acknowledges the ability of the term to capture differences and margins around gender, sexuality, and identity (McCann & Monaghan, 2020) and endorses “queer theory as a lens that emphasizes the slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of categories and boundaries” (McCann & Monaghan, 2020; see also Browne and Nash, 2010). In the context of Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative experiences, queerness is situated in postcolonial dynamics and discourses that speak to more significant debates of representation, inclusion, recognition and eventually empowerment for queer lives in the Global South (Brown et al., 2010). The examination of those experiences equally calls for an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991), recognizing that gender, sexual orientation, race⁴ and other categories of identity are inter-related and mutually constitutive.

Grounded in the critical intersectional queer theory, the approach to Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative experiences has been framed within the activist methodology. This suits the research aspiration to unfold as a dialogue and collaboration with the people affected by the conditions under scrutiny and have a transformative effect on those conditions (Hale, 2001). If the call for this research originated from the dialogue of Indo-Fijian LGBTQI+ and feminist activists within the local gender studies program, its design was influenced by the conversations that those activists tried to initiate with Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative people and with some Fijians of all ethnicities engaged in relevant civil society organizations (CSOs). The project thus supports advocacy for Indo-Fijian LGBTQI+ recognition and inclusion and operates as a form of meta-activism, aiming to reinforce the national LGBTQI+ movement.

This chapter rests on the early findings of the research, for data collection started in July 2021 and is expected to continue in 2022. Adopting a qualitative approach, it involves Indo-Fijians who self-identify as non-heteronormative (at least with any researchers). Participants have been approached through snowball sampling, starting from the networks of the three Indo-Fijian researchers. So far, 18 people have been involved, with non-heteronormative males significantly outnumbering other participants. Notably, the participants included six homosexual men, one bisexual man, four queer males, one androgynous male, two queer females, one transwoman, one homosexual female transitioning into man, a bisexual woman, and a lesbian. While this chapter opened with the recollection of an episode set in a Hindu context, Indo-Fijians are religiously diverse, and some research participants are of Muslim and Christian backgrounds. All of the participants have completed tertiary studies. Four of them are involved in political activism, one of whom also advocates for LGBTQI+ recognition in the religious space. Six of them are instead involved as TikTok content creators.

Since the research conception, researchers have engaged in reflexive practices corresponding with their different positionalities and in reflective dialogue over such positionalities and reflexivities.⁵ Within the frame of an activist methodology, those involved in political activism have been alert to any biases toward comrades whose stances were distant from theirs or those who critiqued the political movement and yet disengaged from it. As an outsider to both the Indo-Fijian community and LGBTQI+ community, the lead researcher had gained trust through the space for relevant and safe discussion carved in the gender studies program since 2018. Data collection has meant extending that trust and monitoring power dynamics.

Initially conceived in a COVID19-contained Fiji, the original research design included an ethnographic approach and face-to-face data collection. It also spanned from the urban setting of the greater capital area to two semi-urban areas⁶ with a strong Indo-Fijian presence due to the concentration of sugar cane plantations. However, the outbreak of the Delta Variant in Fiji during mid-April 2021 and the consequent lockdown caused the temporary shift to online data collection, and most of the participants are based in the greater Suva area. Three of these are initially from Ba, a sugar-cane area in the Eastern part of the main island. Two participants are instead based in Nadi, and two are from Suva, but now settled in Auckland, New Zealand, and temporarily based in Europe.⁷ Additionally, some of the initially recruited participants were no longer available due to bad Internet connectivity or living arrangements preventing them from engaging in online discussions. The latter observation speaks to the “Do No Harm” research ethics upheld within the project. In this regard, all participants’ identities are here anonymized via pseudonyms.

Another change to guarantee a safe and secure context for participants has consisted of conducting nearly exclusively one-to-one interviews. While we had initially planned focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key informants, namely people involved in social movements (LGBTQI+ organizations and religious/cultural groups) or people not wanting to disclose their non-heteronormativity in front of other participants, only a group of three people and two close friends have thus far been comfortable with being involved in data collection together. The participants’ responses to the data collection modalities express the “culture of silence” within the Indo-Fijian community, which was identified as the first theme during data analysis. The other themes this chapter builds on include the participants’ sense of erasure from cultural and religious narratives that connect them to India; the emphasis on a quest for success within a context where the belonging of Indo-Fijians remains precarious; national dynamics that provide limited space for an assertion of ethnic distinctiveness within the LGBTQI+ movement; and the ambivalence of the increasing visibility on social media, specifically on TikTok.

Do Not Ask, Do Not Tell

As soon as the researchers started to have conversations around Indo-Fijian queer realities, the Indo-Fijian ones immediately evoked what they described as

the “culture of ‘do not ask, do not tell’” upheld by their community. This practice engenders relationships based on mutual silence over aspects of life that may be considered uncomfortable. Indeed, Indo-Fijian gender studies students have regularly observed how people within their community do not ask about “certain things.” Omar, 28-year old bisexual male working for an LGBTQI+ organization, and coming from what he described as a conservative Muslim Indo-Fijian family, noted that his brother was the only family member who knew about his sexual orientation. That did not imply that he had opened up, or that the brother had asked him, “I have never had that conversation with my brother on who I am, but he’s very much aware because one, he has heard because of the classmates.” As for his parents, Omar had planned to tell them following his graduation in medicine to compensate with good news, but once the pandemic caused the cancellation of the graduation ceremony, he decided to leave the situation the way it was because that seemed to be the best arrangement for the family dynamics:

I feel that my parents have an idea because they watched me grow up, and there was what I would call the peculiarities of not doing things that they would assign to a straight boy. So, I feel like they are aware at the back of their minds, but it’s not confirmed as long as we don’t acknowledge it. We can all go about our day as if nothing’s different in, uh, with me in their mind. [...] as long as we don’t speak on it, as long as we don’t, you know, sit down and acknowledge it, everything is fine.

Leah, a 33-year-old woman, had long felt uncomfortable about her homosexuality with her Christian mother and her religious community, but decided to fully embrace who she was and break the silence once she started working for a Fijian feminist organization. She emphasized how her mother did not seem surprised but had never wanted to ask. A similar experience was related by most of those who had come out to their parents.

The main deterrent for “coming out” among our participants was its interpretation as a danger to the concept of *izzat* (honor/respect), which features a critical aspect of Indo-Fijian communities (Subramani, 1979). In many South Asian communities, *izzat* and its corollary notions of *haya* (modesty) and *sharam* (shame/embarrassment) are crucial determinants of sexual identity construction and disclosure (Chekola & McHugh, 2012; Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006; Jaspal, 2020). Sahil, 32-year-old homosexual man now in New Zealand, explicitly stated how his concern about coming out was to cause shame to the family. As Leah related her experience of liberation, she equally shared her pain for a close male friend, who instead did not envisage any possibility to open up about his homosexuality to his parents due to his fear of being erased from the family. Another participant, Darsh, 32-year-old male self-identifying as androgynous, and long engaged in faith-based and political activism, felt privileged because his very religious Hindu family had always been supportive and protective, but shared about some queer cousins whose families mistreated them physically and verbally. Disrespecting the family’s *izzat* results in communal shame and raises the likelihood of being the object of community gossip, “finger-pointing,” and contempt (Toor, 2009), which may result in marginalization and disownment (Gilbert et al., 2004).

Being LGBTQI+ in a minority ethnic or religious group thus necessitates negotiating and interweaving numerous rules, expectations, and social

conventions related to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Abraham, 2009). As for Indo-Fijian society, strong emphasis is additionally placed on projecting an image of cohesion and stability. This anxiety stems from the challenges of being a settler community intensely conscious of their distinctions from both faraway India and the Indigenous iTaukei people of their Fijian homeland, and reveals itself in attempts to manage all elements of everyday life to convey a sense of coherence (Shandil, 2019). During the interviews so far conducted, it was observed that several participants, who were particularly enthusiastic about research addressing the experiences specific to Indo-Fijian LGBTQI+ people, still struggled to articulate the difficulties that had shaped the formation of their non-heteronormative identity and their disclosure, and/or their participation in the LGBTQI+ movement, within an explicit Indo-Fijian frame. They would verge toward an indistinct Fijian or LGBTQI+ experience, which necessitated that the interviewee reminds the participant of the frame. This dynamic suggested that the culture of silence within the Indo-Fijian context may have been settled within the individuals more than they were aware of.

Vice-versa, two of the participants interpreted the safe and open space of the interview as a chance to share their concerns and frustrations, which they felt could not be expressed within the Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative space itself. Mainly, our conversation with Darsh was partly dominated by his pain over the death of his cousin, a transwoman, who committed suicide in 2020, following a 1-year communication breakdown. Darsh added that a total of three non-heteronormative people in his area alone had committed suicide in recent times and shared his dismay, which, for a while, affected his commitment to LGBTQI+ activism:

All this while I am trying to empower, my people, my community [...] I was like, just shocked, why all these people are not communicating, are not, like, I have tried to be very open about...um... myself, and I thought, like, I am motivating people, that yes, you can be bold, you can be open, you can fight for yourself, you can take a stand...and...and, we should be talking, we should be helping each other.

Finally, Darsh emphasized that several people in his district would address him in a state of distress to talk and ask for support, particularly from rural areas. Still, he could not usually take any action, given that many of them were closeted and feared disclosing their conversations.

Indo-Fijian Culture and the Erasure of Queerness

A few research participants noted the stark contrast between silence and visibility in other contexts, recalling the visit to the temple that the co-author Sidhant used to *show* gender and sexual diversity to his then lecturer. For instance, Varun, 38-year-old queer male working in the feminist/human rights space, noted:

Within culture, queer people are so invisible, but also very visible as well at the same time. Because like, when we see cultural events or even the temple. I guess like I'm speaking on, from like, a very Hindu Indo-Fijian culture, um, like, uh, yeah. Events are run by like men who appear to be non-binar appear to be like, sort of like gender-fluid.

Upon the visit to the temple, Sidhant had also specified that there were other situations in Fiji where Indo-Fijian gender and sexual diversity was visible, weddings and baby showers among them. Some functions conjure the concept of *hijra*, who had the power to bless newlyweds and newborns as much as to curse (Ali, 2010; Nanda, 1999). However, several of our interviewees were not familiar with the notion or had only learnt about that through activism or their studies. Some of the participants shared a sense of erasure of non-heteronormativity as part of the formation of the Indo-Fijian identity within the colonial *girmit* experience. Omar echoed this point:

We always pinpoint our ancestry from the Girit system. We know our ancestors who were in India and came here had that hijra that has existed from way before thousands and thousands of years ago. But we can't relate to it because our ancestors are the slaves who came to Fiji from India.

Some participants manifested a sense of despondency at the lack of documentation of queer experiences, possibly due to colonial attempts to erase these during and post indenture:

And you know how the British, at that point in time [colonization of Fiji and implementing indenture in Fiji], had brought laws and practices that were very discriminatory, even to the hijras back in India. So there are, so that disconnect is legitimate because we were brought in by the British. The British opposed anything around gender variance, around a celebration of sexualities or different gender identities, and then with, with the implementation of discriminatory laws by the British, everything went, haywire [...] those beautiful Lahenga dancers is the only thing that we have remaining of what could have been a display of the diversity, of the gender fluidity. They were like drag queens, you know? (Sashi, 42-year-old transwoman, LGBTQI+ activist working for a feminist organization).

In our Indo-Fijian society, there's a lot of gatekeeping in terms of what they want children to know and what they don't want children to know. [...] We are not being told about, even though there is a queer culture in the religion [Hinduism] itself, it's rarely told to us, we're rarely made aware of it (Amrit, 25-year-old homosexual male, NGO worker).

Indo-Fijian settings' forms of non-heteronormative visibility suggest that cultural practices have survived concepts and, more broadly, the silence over gender and sexual diversity. At the same time, non-heteronormativity has partly been desacralized and neutralized by being categorized as fun. Indo-Fijians identify the transgender and gender-fluid people providing entertainment at weddings and possibly other social gatherings, as *nachaniyas* or traditional dancers/performers, known for *lahanga naach* (long skirt) performances. The Indo-Fijian audience does not openly recognize or outright denounce *nachaniyas*, and as a result of their performances, spectators are forced to reconsider traditional ideas about Indo-Fijian gender identities, as well as cultural norms and societal expectations (Shandil, 2019).

Darsh bitterly opposed the above considerations:

[Recognition] is very conditional. I know a lot of... my friends who are in that field, and I have also been doing it, like, when I was in school days, I loved doing makeup and dressing, so, I did take part in all those things, like doing the mehndi design, on hands and stuff. So usually, the appreciation will come from the ladies because you are doing it for them but not from the men [...] they will make faces, or they will abuse you, like, it can be sexually, verbally [...] Women...because you are

doing something for them, usually they will appreciate the art, the talent... they will praise you, pay you... they might chat with you, joke with you, laugh with you, but the times, it only happens when they are with you, but as soon as they go out, you can see a different color? Like, then you are just like a joke, you know? Like, just someone to have a good time with, stuff like that, some can be genuinely good friends, and they might offer support when you in need, but that it's not a very good, like, it's not a high number of people who do that.

Finally, the fun/artistic dimension warrants the silence over the exclusion many genders and sexually diverse people are subjected to.

Striving for Success: Sanctioning Silence

Silence and erasure emerged as being enhanced by the Indo-Fijian coping mechanisms vis-à-vis the trauma of *girmit* and their positionality as Indo-Fijians within the nation. All of the interviewed participants talked about being charged from a very young age in leading a “good life” by striving for a good education and securing good employment (preferably white-collar jobs). After the abolition of the indenture, many former indentured laborers desired for their children a life free of manual labor to escape the horrors of their servitude and education was key to achieve it (Gillion, 1977, p. 127). In Fiji, the population of Indian descent has only been allowed agricultural leasing to preserve native rights to the land. As leases on native land started to expire in 1997 at a time of political tensions (Lal, Lim-Applegate, & Reddy, 2001), education emerged reinforced as an Indo-Fijian value. In this regard, the participants whose families were involved in farming noted their parents’ attempts to distance their children from agriculture.

For our research participants, focusing on doing well at school and ultimately securing a good job expectation formed the basis of accepting invisibility within the LGBTQI+ movement in Fiji. Since Indo-Fijian familial and communal expectations of material success have been embedded in a heteronormative social order, participants also highlighted how homosexuality challenged fundamental ethnocultural norms and values, such as marriage, family-building and procreation. For instance:

I haven't participated in anything [LGBTQI+ and human rights movements] as such, uh, because I just graduated a few months ago. I just got admitted to the bar in March and got employed this month. Lucky me, I would say there's a few things that I had to keep in mind before I joined the, uh, joined such, uh, movements and stuff. [...] And I haven't joined it before because I was very focused on my studies because these things require time, you know, and, uh, studying law is not easy (Hussein, 25-year-old female transitioning into man, lawyer).

Look, in an Indo-Fijian family, if you're growing up [...], you are only taught that you have to achieve good marks. You have to do well in school because you have to achieve great things in life. [...] And then after that, you have, as soon as you achieved all that, then the pressure is you have to get married. Um, have kids, have a good job (Sahil).

So your academic excellence, which will then lend you into a tertiary institution... which would then get you a good job that will allow you to earn, uh, at such a level that you can own a house or own a car and become independent in that manner. But at the same time, living and looking after an extended family, that is not your nuclear unit of mother-father and sibling, but other people included in that (Omar).

The latter's quote emphasizes that the focus on individual pursuits of success to the detriment of collective efforts towards LGBTQI+ rights is only apparently individualistic. Not only is that success a family/communal expectation, upon which recognition and belonging rest. It is also expected to benefit several people. The effect of the *girit* experience on Indo-Fijian gender identities has been observed in the context of masculinity, where concepts like independence, autonomy, and hard labor have developed into essential characteristics of Indo-Fijian masculinities (Presterudstuen, 2019b, p. 53). In the case of gender and sexually diverse people, those concepts instead contribute to suppressing non-heteronormativity. However, for others like Sashi, initially prioritizing education instead implied being able to live a life defying heteronormative pressure:

You know, I was what motivated me to study and get a degree and get a job so that I was financially independent and could live my true, authentic life. And that's what I did.

Sashi equally suggested that in the context of political precarity and heteronormative intolerance, Indo-Fijian queer people have a dual motivation to privilege their education in the hope of resettling in another country more open to their lifestyle. For instance, Sahil settled in New Zealand, where he had married. The notion of emigrating for a better life has infused queer Indo-Fijian aspirations as part of a broader phenomenon of Indo-Fijians pursuing better opportunities outside of Fiji as a result of the political crisis in the years 1987 to 2006 when four coups took place (Harris, 2008; Kant, 2019; Shandil, 2019). In turn, the interiorization of emigration as a likely possibility has increased the Indo-Fijian attention to education. Overall, *girit* history and its postcolonial legacies may indirectly contribute to many Indo-Fijian non-heteronormative individuals staying socially and politically silent, since those feel the pressure of upholding the values associated with their survival as Indo-Fijians.

Invisible Actors in the LGBTQI+ Movement

As observed earlier in this chapter, Fiji has achieved consistent progress on LGBTQI+ human rights advancement over the last 25 years. Several community-based and non-governmental organizations actively campaigning for human rights are politically engaged in the LGBTQI+ movement (Fiji National Civil Society, 2016). However, queer Indo-Fijians are largely invisible in the public sphere (Prasad, 2021). Jasmine Kaur⁸, the founder of Oceania Pride, an online LGBTQI+ network, spoke at a public event in 2015: "If I introduce myself, the first thing I hear is 'Oh my gosh! You're the first Indo-Fijian lesbian I've met'" (Fiji Times, 2015).

To Varun, indulging in activities like activism and/or acquiring a political profile become themselves a source of *izzat* for Indo-Fijian queers:

You know, most of them [queer Indo-Fijians] are not out to their families, and there was this, uh, um, you know, like, um, I think like, um, fears around the security, you know, they come to a workshop. They have their photos taken and, and then families find out and all of that [...] and even, even if you are like visibly queer, um, you know, like I think, I think there is this expectation that like, yeah, you can do this or whatever, but like, please do not like bring shame to the family by participating in a workshop or training.

Indeed, Ishaan, 27-year-old journalist self-identifying as a queer man and coming from a multi-religious family, did note having stopped engaging with LGBTQI+ spaces for the way these exposed people, making it difficult for them to avoid certain family members or anyone they wanted to hide aspects of their gender and sexuality from. Ishaan equally alluded to the prevailing racialized political climate as a contributing factor to the political invisibility of Indo-Fijians within the Fijian civic spaces:

I guess, I guess it's the space because already, like, you know, in, in this country, it's a barrier to get into the political space and you, being [Indo-Fijian], because you know, like the coups that we had...like a non-Indigenous person and entering into a political space in Fiji, it's just, adds on to a lot of challenges.

Arti, 29-year old journalist mostly closeted about her bisexuality, was part of the discussion with Ishaan and another participant, where she argued that the conjuncture of the political climate and non-heteronormativity made activism hard to sustain for Indo-Fijian queers:

Just putting yourself out there as a political voice on top of everything else and being LGBT will be like, it'll be huge, huge stress and pressure on you. Not strength, like a huge burden on them. Emotionally, even physically for your safety mentally, is just too much to take on.

According to Varun, the experiences of queer Indo-Fijians are also shaped by the existing threats to Indo-Fijian masculinities (Trnka, 2008) and their possibilities to be part of a nation built on masculine ethnonationalism (George, 2008; Teaiwa, 2005; Thompson, 2014):

I think I also want to comment on masculinity as well. Like, you know, I think for us, as people, who are descendants of Giriti and then also, experiencing a recent political history, I think Indo-Fijian masculinity is always under threat...you know, from Fiji and the nation, Indo-Fijians are not considered part of the nation first. And then, there's an expectation that our Indo-Fijian man has to be heterosexual and start a family so that they can become part of the Fijian nation. Queer Indo-Fijian people threaten that masculinity, um, because you know, within the hierarchy of masculinity is like first, it's like iTaukei masculinities and, then, iTaukei women and then at the bottom would be Indo-Fijian men and Indo-Fijian women. Then queer people would be right at the bottom because you know, we threaten masculinity, we threaten patriarchy. So, it's very easy for people to trample on us.

A couple of participants noted that the ultimate problem was being a minority within a group that is constantly reminded to be *vulagi* (outsiders). The participant Darsh has otherwise suggested that Indo-Fijians may need their own spaces that address the specific religious and cultural realities of Indo-Fijian queers. In this regard, other than participating in the national LGBTQI+ space, he has been long active in LGBTQI+ awareness and empowerment with children and youth within the religious space. Two other participants, who were not politically active, still noted having participated in some sessions where Indo-Fijian queer people could share their stories, which pointed to the attempt to create Indo-Fijian LGBTQI+ spaces. At the same time, Darsh emphasized the lack of cohesiveness and struggled to commit within the actual Indo-Fijian queer community, which hampered the development of such spaces, but also broader engagement:

Because if they can't come together as within their own community, within the Indo-Fijian community, then that is the first step, then only they can move on to the next step, where they can communicate with the other ethnic groups. So first, we need to fix this, then we can talk to a larger group.

Visible Invisibility: Indo-Fijian Queers on the Tiktok Platform

The visibility of Indo-Fijian queers as performers in social media, particularly the TikTok platform, has recently counterbalanced the absence from or silence within the political space. Most of our youngest research participants so far are active content creators with a large following on TikTok and see that as an opportunity to express who they are and encourage others to do so. Varun viewed such phenomenon as an extension of the culture of the *Lahanga Naach* (skirt dance):

I think this idea of like people sharing their stuff on social media platforms is very much linked to how the queer Indo-Fijians express themselves in cultural spaces.

From this perspective, younger Indo-Fijian queers using social media reclaim and reformulate culturally-rooted forms of gender and sexual diversity. The weight of cultural legitimacy is evident in that *nachaniyas*, who represent the “tradition,” are reluctant to get involved in the broader Fijian LGBTQI+ movement, lest they should lose the legitimacy thanks to which they are “worshipped as goddesses” at cultural events, if they joined LGBTQI+ organizations that “aggressively battled for human rights” (Shandil, 2019, p. 35). Different participants also addressed the influence of Bollywood culture in situating non-heteronormativity within “Indian” life. In today’s popular culture, Indo-Fijian discussions and visibility present masks signaling recognition and addressing internalized homo, bi, and transphobia.

However, the presence and visibility of queer Indo-Fijians on social media are not without criticism. Arti felt that social media mostly gave space to what she defined as “flamboyant gays.” She thus wondered where “quiet gays” were and shared the impression that Indo-Fijian lesbians barely featured on social media altogether. A few participants mentioned criticism from the broader Indo-Fijian community about the shame and embarrassment the visibility of queer Indo-Fijians on social media, especially TikTok, is bringing to the community by large, including the queer one. The activist Varun noted how some people went to him to comment on the performers by using the expression *bezzati kare yaar* (they are embarrassing us/me).

Similarly, as a reputed activist, Sashi mentioned that people in the community constantly asked her opinion, “Sashi, have you watched this TikTok? Have you seen this person? You know, it’s very shameful.” Sashi was largely critical of the movement, arguing that the performances countered political activism to normalize non-heteronormativity within the community. Interestingly, her stance reproduced the notion of *izzat* inside the queer community. Darsh noted having regular discussions with Sashi, highlighting that the overly critical approach nonetheless perpetuated silence over Indo-Fijian queerness.

The negative connotation of non-heteronormativity and its expected invisibility within Indo-Fijian contexts becomes blatantly visible via TikTok. All those active on social media, particularly TikTok, noted receiving many negative

comments targeting their sexuality. Chaya, 32-year-old bisexual female working as an HR officer in the private sector, has an alternate identity on social media. To her, negative feedback “was not threatening. It was more of hate speech and how they would say I’m such a disappointment to my family.” For Pranit, 23-year-old homosexual male influencer and popular TikTok content creator, silence was the answer to hate comments:

I just do not react to it, to be honest. I mean, why would I waste my time and energy trying to fight these people who will not understand. Why would I waste my energy typing all of that, I mean, when I get hate comments, I just delete them. Simple as that.

Indo-Fijians who occupy a liminal space within the Indo-Fijian culture have been subject to abuse and, in some instances, physical violence (Shandil, 2019, p. 38). In this regard, deletion of hateful comments and their perceived non-threatening nature may reassert silence over their vulnerability. In Fiji, social media have allowed new forms of gender-related activism to flourish (Brimacombe, Kant, Finau, Tarai, & Titifanue, 2018). It has also been noted how TikTok performances can be an alternative way to voice political opinions and push for social change (Burns-Stanning, 2020; Serrano, Papakyiakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020). However, as Indo-Fijian queer users choose not to be inherently political, invisibility is restated. To Dhruv, 32-year-old homosexual male entrepreneur, the potential of TikTok in enlightening and educating people and what being queer and an Indo-Fijian means depended on the narrative upheld:

But what is the narrative? What is it that we want to break for people to accept us? Or to see us in a good light. What is it? What are these things that we are saying, ‘Hey, it’s okay, I’m kidding.’ Yeah. But, but the education, like, you’re not like, to educate somebody to say that I’m gay and that means that I’m just human, that I’m capable of loving the same kind or the same gender, you know, or loving anybody in regards to the gender.

CONCLUSION

While Indo-Fijians have developed Pacific cultural identities and “constructed a transnational space around Fiji as the new center largely excluding the cultural hearth of India” (Voigt-Graf, 2008, p. 81), for queer Indo-Fijians, being a minority within a minority poses specific challenges to articulating their visibility. Silence has emerged as an overarching structure for the Indo-Fijian queer experiences, which are intrinsically shaped by the legacy of the colonial paradigm. A practice of not asking and not telling what may be uncomfortable for the family and community interacts with the apparent erasure of queerness from the formation of the Indo-Fijian identity, where it mainly survives as a form of fun. The resulting silence intertwines with the self-censorship engendered by the responses to the intergenerational trauma of the *girmit* experience and postcolonial political and material precarity in the context of continuous racialized tensions. Notably, as Indo-Fijians strive for success to counter that precarity and the memory of their “origins,” and with the political crisis having intensified the hostility of the political space, silence is to some extent normalized within the Indo-Fijian queer community. While social media are providing platforms for queer Indo-Fijians to

bypass that in a safe way, they partly reinstate their invisibility, sanctioning the dimension of fun as the only way to legitimate queerness in Indo-Fijian contexts.

Confirming that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140), the different degrees of silence within the Indo-Fijian community connected to the Indo-Fijian identity and its positionality within the Fijian nation create a unique form of invisibility. This is much harder to address, inasmuch as many queers internalize it. Research over Indo-Fijian queer experiences on its own is piercing that silence, leading to discussions within the Indo-Fijian queer contexts and the larger Fijian LGBTQI+ movement. This research equally addresses invisibility by providing a perspective of Indo-Fijian history, its identity and its formation from a queer lens, joining increased attention to the place of gender in Indo-Fijian history and dynamics (see Mishra, M., 2008) and in similar contexts like the Indo-Trinidadian (see Raghunandan, 2016). This lens can be reinforced by comparing experiences and stories across different historical, geographical, and social locations and taking class into account.

Recalling the interaction between religion, sexuality, and counterhegemony in the context of Indo-Fijian history (Kelly, 1991), the impact of religion requires sustained attention, even more so given that the Indo-Fijian experiences can be diversely affected by Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and other religions their lives may be shaped by. This chapter only allowed limited space to address how religion adds to the Indo-Fijian queer experiences based on our participants’ accounts, and these also call for a more significant examination of how queerness features (or does not feature) in different religious spaces, LGBTQI+ activism framed within religion, and the relation between queer individuals and religion. The recent Indo-Fijian queer visibility on Tik Tok presents a novel direction, bringing to the surface existing contentions – the actual discrimination and the confinement of “cultural” visibility within the space of entertainment. The dynamics of visibility and invisibility that unfold through this platform demand closer attention, including the influence of Bollywood. Finally, it would be helpful to observe queer Indo-Fijian experiences against the constructions of Indo-Fijian masculinities and femininities in the politicized context of the Fijian nation and how those “threaten” each other in the struggle to belong to Fiji.

NOTES

1. In Fiji, Indians were presented as a race as a result of this category being a function of British colonialism, and this categorization persisted in the postcolonial Fijian nation often conflated with ethnicity, leading to racialized political tensions (Mishra, V. 2008). The current use of the notion of ethnicity within discourses of Fijian national identity conceals the fact that several Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians continue to think of each other and themselves as a race. Several Indo-Fijians describe themselves as Indians, emphasising the notion of race, rather than Indo-Fijians, which is a political identity, resulting from the indenture experience and a long history of social and political marginalization in Fiji.

2. *Girmityas* or Indentured Labourers, is the name given to the Indians who left India in the middle and late 19th Century to serve as labourers in the British colonies, where the majority eventually settled. *Girmit* is a corrupt form of the English word “Agreement”. A labour emigrating under the Agreement or *Girmit* was a *Girmitya*.

3. Coined in the mid-1980s, the term refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of the empire, and the male domination of patriarchy (Holst Petersen & Rutherford, 1986). This term can also be applied to queer people.

4. In the case of Indo-Fijians, the racialization of this ethnic minority inherited from British colonialism entails that the notion of race in fact plays a key role in identifying how intersectionality operates for Indo-Fijian queer lives.

5. The project builds on the lived experiences of three Indo-Fijians advanced graduates, their participation in the USP Gender Studies Programme, and their experiences as LGBTQI+, feminist and human rights activists; and the Gender Studies coordinator's experience in Fiji, teaching gender courses at the postgraduate level and engaging with the Indo-Fijian community since 2018.

6. Nadi/Lautoka in the Western region of the main island of Viti Levu; and Labasa, in the second main island, Vanua Levu.

7. The shift to online data collection enabled us to involve queer Indo-Fijians out of Fiji. We plan to involve the semi-urban centers and revert to face-to-face data collection, limiting online data collection to overseas-based queer Indo-Fijians, as soon as circumstances allow it.

8. Jasmine Kaur is the name the co-author Jasant Kaur has been using in the activist space.

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