

UNPACKING THE IMPACT OF THE TIKTOK BAN
ON LOCAL CONTENT CREATORS AND THE RISE
OF INDIANIZED SOCIAL MEDIA APPS

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This paper investigates the repercussions of the TikTok ban in 2020 and the subsequent migration of local content creators to alternative platforms, with a particular focus on the identity negotiation of the marginalized LGBTQIA+ community. The author positions this paper as an exploration of the displacement experienced by rural young queers in expressing their queerness following the ban. TikTok was a platform that transcended class barriers and provided an equal platform for socioeconomically diverse users. However, its ban led to the emergence of Indianized social media apps that have further segregated the classes. The author argues that this phenomenon requires academic attention because the rise of these Indian apps coincides with the overshadowing of right-wing populism. By exploring these complex dynamics, this paper contributes to the understanding of the impact of digital media on the social fabric of contemporary India.

Introduction

Co-creation, discussions, and modifications of user-generated content are a few dimensions of social media that make it a highly interactive platform. The platforms

cater to content creators, where they can express their identities [1]. Herein, the viewers on the platform interact with content that relates to their identities, and interests. Tiktok, a video-sharing platform capitalises on the ability to create and recreate content accessible in fifteen to thirty seconds short-form video [1]. For instance, the primary way to share personal experiences is by recreating dance trends [1].

TikTok appears to be a platform that semi-urban, digitally unbanked users seem to prefer [3]. Often the semi-rural young Indian Tiktokers, choose to dance to regional songs or Bollywood hits. For instance, men wearing sarees and recreating effeminate dance moves which is receptive by a larger Indian rural audience. The article narrates several Indian TikToker accounts, emphasising how the formerly cohesive digital world, which overcame past divisions, was fragmented by the divisions that exist in the physical world. The unifying space that once transcended old divisions of caste and homophobia in the country, vanished after the TikTok Ban. An Indian regional content creator accounts for the platform as “I’ve never seen a platform celebrate so many male belly dancers or male makeup artists or gay couples.” [13]

Nitish Pahwa’s article reasons Tiktok as a platform that managed to transcend caste, religion, and other societal barriers in a highly stratified society. The author owes it to an addictive algorithm where the user’s engage in content around lip-synchs and skits, and as well as its role as an “escape from a repressive government” [8] during the pandemic. Hence, TikTok allowed for greater social mobility and a breaking down of traditional hierarchies.

In this paper, I examine the aftermath of the self-expression of marginalized Indian local content creators at the behest of the TikTok ban in India and the overshadowing of right-wing populism. I position this paper as an exploration of the displacement experienced by rural young queers in expressing their queerness following the ban.

15.0.1 From Shared Struggle to Isolation: The TikTok Ban

On 29th June 2020, the government banned TikTok from arguing in favour of the “integrity of India, defence of India, security of the state and public order”. TikTok’s user base in India extended up to 200 million monthly active users. With its sudden disappearance, it created a void and displaced content creators from mainstream platforms.

Pushpesh Kumar and Debomita Mukherjee [2], have explored the sociological context of underprivileged TikTokers who were devastated by the ban. Their work draws on the different accounts of rural TikTokers who rose to fame despite their

marginalisation due to their caste. It is an exploration of how low-wage, informal labourers such as barbers, watchmen, rickshaw drivers, tailors, and other lower-class content creators got a chance to make a possible career in entertainment through TikTok. Although the question that remains unanswered is what platforms did they migrate to and negotiate their identities when they were rendered invisible after the ban. I aim to focus on the LGBTQIA+ sect within the rural marginalised youth of TikTok users.

Therefore, the TikTok ban rendered a loss of community, and the equaliser that TikTok was between different social classes was lost. To fill the gap, Indianised social media apps emerged. The emergence can be tied to a furthered class segregation where the upper and the lower classes do not co-exist. Given the rise of Indian apps, the overshadowing of right-wing populism requires adequate academic attention.

15.0.2 The Death of an Equaliser: TikTok

TikTok transformed into a platform that isolated different segments of society, allowing inhabitants of distant villages to connect with prominent public figures and achieve a level of fame that was previously unattainable. In contrast to the adding lip-sync of Bollywood romantics numbers, the urban elite peers on TikTok pick trendy songs.

The social media applications get segregated based on the audiences and the performative acts. For instance, Instagram has turned into a platform where affluent elites exhibit their destination weddings, and extravagant dinners, indicating their privilege [12]. This creates a divide.

Whereas, young rural TikTokers have millions of likes and lakhs of followers despite being caste-class marginalised and lacking cultural capital. As short-video content creation reigns supreme on the social media platform TikTok, its accessibility without the need for specialized knowledge or formal literacy has resulted in its prevalence. Its democratic character can be attributed to its accessible interface, which effectively surmounted cultural and linguistic barriers, giving access to content in 15 regional languages. Furthermore, its compatibility with low-cost devices facilitated greater inclusivity [13].

As per Thakur's [4] findings, despite popular belief, women comprise almost half of the leading influencers on TikTok in India and have amassed an extensive following of tens of millions, therefore providing a platform to local content creators.

An article highlights the rise to the popularity of Shaikh, who hails from the largest Mumbai slum, assisted his father in managing an unprofitable "nightie"

business, consistently created between TikTok for a year. TikToks give an insight into the socio-economic lives of domestic spaces such as kitchens and bedrooms.

Before the TikTok ban, different socio-classes coexisted in the platform, wherein, the algorithm filtered viewers' content according to their preferences and interests. Instagram inherently does not provide space for lower-class content creators to exist as their content limits their reachability.

Loss of a Community for Local Queer Content Creators

One of the first studies on digital queer activities in India was carried out by Mitra and Gajjala [6]. They examined meanings associated with labels as "gay," "lesbian," and "bi," as well as how bloggers encoded these meanings as parts of their South Asian or Indian identities in transnational online spaces. They focused on queer blogging practises among Indian and Pakistani bloggers within the South Asian digital diaspora. The authors followed the history of early queer movements online and drew attention to issues with class and digital exclusion as well as the 'othering' of trans identities like kothis and hijras.

From a different perspective, Mitra [5] looked at the queer blogging community as an interpretive one, and how blogging helps to expand and support the queer community. Another study, [7] demonstrates that members of the Hijra community in Bangladesh are now active users of digital venues. The investigation focused on Facebook use by the Hijras and unveils how the platform's design failed to address Hijra user's needs around privacy and self-presentation and instead promoted violence against them by not accounting for local cultural and community contexts in Bangladesh.

The contours of expression of queer couples in India were prominent on TikTok. A glimpse of a gay couple Ram and Rudhra (@ramrudhra), used TikTok as a medium to profess their love by lip-syncing to Tamil songs. Another user by the name of Sunny (le)One, cross-dressed and garnered over 37M likes [9].

LGBTQ artists on TikTok, highlighted the intricate understandings of the relationship between non-Western digital media and the day-to-day experiences of socially ostracized groups in the periphery of mainstream platforms.

The Rise of Indianised Social Media Platforms

Although, the user interface and filter options on Instagram are superior to those on Moj. TikTok created a gap in the market that local entrepreneurs were quick

to fill. After the ban, a few short-form video apps, Moj and Josh, Chingari, and Roposo, among others, emerged for Indian consumers. As Moj was designed to be a regional localised Indian social media platform, it further secluded the lower-class content creators.

With the advent of localised social media platforms, the assertion of the right-wing ideology would be pushed within the algorithm. Chingari appears to be betting on the nationalist sentiment that has been increasingly prevalent in India's political climate to drive its growth [10]. The app has relegated its news aggregation section to the sidelines, which was primarily attracting an audience over the age of 35 that came to the platform to consume news. Instead, the platform plans to introduce a one-minute news bulletin video clip, as a replacement for the text format, to broaden its reach and appeal to a wider demographic. By positioning itself as a locally developed alternative to foreign social media apps, Chingari is tapping into the patriotic fervour that has swept the country.

Numerous organisations have expressed concern over the Modi administration's propensity for using a variety of policy tools to achieve political objectives. The Internet Freedom Foundation, an entity committed to safeguarding online freedoms in India, highlighted the fact that the recent incident of web censorship has had a more extensive impact on Indian citizens than any prior instances. Apar Gupta, the executive director of the organization, noted that in the current political milieu in India, nationalistic sentiment is likely to be prioritized over other factors [8, 13].

Hence, the advent of homegrown apps raises concerns about the potential of right-wing ideology being propagated within their algorithms. TikTok as a global platform transcends the ritual of content replication and self-expression, wherein the socio-classes can coexist.

To Conclude

This paper examines the aftermath of the self-expression of marginalised young rural TikTokers at the behest of the TikTok ban. The ban created a void, wherein the upper-class and the lower-class content creators were not able to co-exist, rendering the social media platforms divided.

Author's Positionality

The author identifies as a cis-gender female, queer, and has been a part of online and offline queer spaces in New Delhi and Bangalore.

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Chapter 15. Unpacking the Impact of the TikTok Ban on Local Content
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