Pakistan, “Queer”

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The use of the term queer in Pakistan, including related activist groups and the indigenous designation khwaja sira.

The word queer generally lacks the kind of salience enjoyed by the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, as well as the umbrella initialization LGBT, among both gender and sexually normative and nonnormative Pakistanis. As such, queer has not yet emerged as an inclusive, overarching framework, as a category against the fixity of categories (Johnson 2010; Sullivan 2003), for the purpose of either social identification or political activism in the country. This is not to say that the term should or will in time achieve salience in the Pakistani context. Such an assumption would support a flawed linear evolutionary and imperialist logic that presupposes that regions of the Global South are “backward” and in need of modernizing in step with Euro-American notions of progress. That said, it is worth mentioning a few queer platforms that have emerged over the last decade that have had some modicum of impact, especially with regard to identification, community formation, and information dissemination. It should be noted, however, that in the absence of a substantial historiography of what can be deemed “queer Pakistan,” the information presented here has been pieced together by the author largely from his own research and personal experience of having worked with Pakistani gender and sexual minorities since the late 1990s. Like any historical recounting, it should be treated as fragmented, incomplete, and still in the making.

Queer Organizations

The emergence of the first two organizations, referred to here as P and M (pseudonyms have been used throughout this entry for both people and organizations in order to protect their identities), can be traced to 2009 and 2010. The Lahore-based P’s stated mission is to “support, inform, and empower the Pakistani LGBT/queer community to advocate for its own rights and autonomy, strive to eradicate homophobia and transphobia from Pakistani society, and create community and fellow-feeling.” P not only has an online presence in the form of a website and a Facebook page, it also exists offline as a government-registered organization and a physical community space. According to its executive board, P was registered as a broad-based social welfare organization meant to serve a range of marginalized groups rather than just gender and sexual minorities (e.g., religious minorities and people with disabilities). It was this broad focus that enabled the group to safely and successfully pass the approval process and become a recognized nongovernmental organization (NGO). In 2011 P’s office location, a small apartment that doubled as the residence of one of the organization’s executive committee members, was set up to serve as a queer safe house for those needing to escape familial and communal persecution. Some of P’s activities have included, but are not limited to: hosting awareness-raising events with key stakeholders (e.g., meeting with medical and mental health professionals to learn about their treatment of queer people and then organizing sensitizing presentations based on their input); conducting research on gender minorities (e.g., an international donor-funded “project on violence experienced by lesbian and bisexual cisgender women and transgender women in Pakistan”); and issuing statements on relevant historical and current events to express solidarity with other oppressed groups that are marginalized for reasons other than gender and sexual difference. P strives to be inclusive and to reach a wider audience by publishing most of its original written content in both Urdu and English.

Asia and America, Performed in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779. Hartford, CT: Printed and sold by Nathaniel Patten, 1783.


Martin, John. An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands, in the South Pacific Ocean, with an Original Grammar and Vocabulary of Their Language, Compiled and Arranged from the Extensive Communications of Mr. William Mariner, Several Years Resident in Those Islands. London: Printed for the author, 1817.


Unlike P, M’s existence has been largely limited to social media, although the platform has occasionally organized group and individual meetups, thereby providing opportunities for its members to connect offline. Over the years the group’s online status has changed from an open to a secret group. This shift, brought about amid security concerns, involved a sizable membership purge in which the group’s participant pool shrank to fewer than 500 members in late 2017. For the sake of safety and privacy, M’s administrator runs the group under an alias but has personally met numerous group members, including the author. M has largely served as a platform for bringing together people of Pakistani origin as well as those interested in advocating for “queer equality in Pakistan” into a safe space where they can exchange pertinent information and engage in dialogue. The group has occasionally experienced moments of intense online activity followed by months of dormancy.

In the 2010s, a few more self-proclaimed queer spaces emerged on popular social media platforms. R and N, both of which are open to anyone wishing to join, are among the most recent online forums to organize under the banner of “queer.” R came into existence in 2013 to serve as a “Pakistani LGBTQIA advocacy and resistance group,” and N, formed in 2017, purports to be a “safe space” for the expression of “pride through art, culture, and dialogue.” Replacing the now defunct C, B was created in early 2016 to serve as a hidden online “hang out” space for Pakistani queers to “celebrate [their] … existence, make bonds, define and redefine what it means to be gay, bi, queer and trans!” The group is much more active than P and M because its broad focus on sociality, rather than just on issues of queer oppression and social justice, yields discussions on a diverse range of topics, including bawdy humor, popular culture, history, and current events. It also hosts postings for job openings in either LGBTQ-focused or LGBTQ-friendly organizations; personal experiences related to intimacy, sex, discrimination, violence, and familial problems; and group member selfies and photographs of events and small get-togethers. As of late 2017, B was primarily made up of gay and bisexual men, along with a handful of trans and intersex women, while trans men, lesbians, and other queer women have been consciously left out of the group.

To date, the five aforementioned forums have a combined social media following of close to 3,000 people but with significant overlap in membership and participation. These five should be viewed not as an exhaustive list of queer groups, but as a partial one meant to offer a sense of the type of activities that have transpired under the banner of “queer” in Pakistan between 2009 and 2017. The majority of queer groups in Pakistan maintain a clandestine existence due to the legal, religious, and cultural restrictions and stigmas associated with gender and sexual difference. In such an environment of secrecy, it would be highly improbable for the author to have access to and knowledge of all queer spaces, especially those that are kept hidden and/or cater exclusively to queer women. (The author, being a cisgender man, did not have access to or sufficient information about women-only queer groups.)

The Politics of Naming and Identification
Although there are several other prominent and not-so-prominent online Pakistani clusters with a similar focus, none of them functions under the queer framework, but instead works within the narrower, but more familiar LGBT classificatory scheme. One such group, A, a key player working to “inform, lobby/advocate on issues that affect the lives of Pakistanis/South Asians who identify as LGBTI,” deliberately eschews the term queer because its executive director considers it to be offensive and ineffective—not entirely unlike earlier generations of North American gays and lesbians.

A majority of the author’s own research participants identify as either khwaja sira and/or transgender alongside a host of other identity terms, including hijra, zennana, khura, murat, and trans. (Although the conflation of transgender with khwaja sira has increased in recent years, not all transgender people identify as khwaja sira, and vice versa, because the former is viewed by many as a modern label with insufficient cultural overlap with indigenous subject positions.) Most informants were either unfamiliar with the word queer or unclear about its meaning. This appeared to be the case both with lower-class, non-English-speaking activists who identified as khwaja sira and lower-middle-class, transgender-identifying informants who spoke a mixture of Urdu and English and were key constituents of gender and sexual minority rights organizations. For many, then, lack of proficiency in the English language limited access to information and became a major barrier in efforts to forge ties with local and global queer networks.

The terminology used for and by gender and sexual minorities has also been influenced by the domain of public health, especially HIV/AIDS intervention work. As in other regions of South Asia and the Global South, NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) working to curb the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Pakistan were among the first to organize collectives of gender- and sexually nonconforming people. These groups use a range of industry-specific terms to describe their nonnormative beneficiaries. For instance, the initialisms MSM (men who have sex with men) and TG (transgender), introduced by these organizations, are now routinely invoked as identity labels by NGO/CBO staff and their activist affiliates.
Although the global LGBT discourse has figured prominently in the context of these sexual health initiatives, *queer* as an organizing category that challenges categorization has been less useful because it defies the very logic of stable and discrete groupings on which STI interventions rely for identifying and monitoring target populations.

Still others organize under broader, more encompassing, and potentially less threatening labels, such as *gender and sexual minorities* and indigenous classifications like *khwaja sira*. Although the number of groups working under the banner of “*queer*” in Pakistan has gradually risen, whether or not the term will gain prominence in social and activist domains remains to be seen. To date, however, *queer* has not gained the same currency as the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *transgender*.

That said, the significance of an LGBT discourse in the Pakistani context cannot be overstated. Specifically, the adoption of identifier language that traces direct linkages with a global LGBT movement has proven to be ostensibly dangerous in that it has been perceived by local opposition forces as a foreign cultural imposition and an affront to the Pakistani nation. The following incident demonstrates that by using *khwaja sira*, a historically and culturally rooted term, in identifying themselves to the state and the national public, gender-nonconforming activists have managed to impede allegations of antinationalism.

In the summer of 2011, the US embassy in Islamabad hosted a pride event and subsequently issued a press release expressing its support for LGBT rights in Pakistan. The announcement of the pride celebration sparked anti-US and antigay rallies in several Pakistani cities where religious political parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, took to the streets, condemning the event as a form of cultural terrorism and “an assault on Pakistan’s Islamic culture” by the United States (*Express Tribune* 2011).

Subsequently, another religious organization, Muslim Youth Forum (MYF), launched a campaign against homosexuality by displaying antigay signage in Lahore. A banner hung at a busy city intersection stated, “There is no place for *Gay* and *Lesbian* in Islam.” Another poster, referencing the US embassy pride event, called for the immediate dismissal of the representatives of “gays and lesbians in foreign affairs agencies” and the “gay, lesbian and straight education network” from Pakistan (Kashif 2012).

The strategic significance and utility of the term *khwaja sira* as a safety measure for staving off allegations of dissent are evident in the different ways the US embassy’s actions affected various gender and sexual minority groups in the country. On the one hand, fearing that this incident would spark violence and jeopardize the safety of queer people, the core members of P and M organized a covert Skype meetup to deliberate over how to respond to the controversy. After careful consideration, the activists decided in favor of lying low instead of engaging in the heated mass-mediated debates surrounding the events. Although the collaborative potential of transnational connections is undeniable (Speed 2008), the case in point clearly demonstrates that they can have detrimental impacts as well. In this instance, local queer activists viewed the embassy’s action as an imperialist move that jeopardized their already meager efforts to organize.

On the other hand, khwaja siras were either unaware of, or unfazed by this entire controversy, and even the protesting groups did not seem to view khwaja siras as a part of LGBT. This is not entirely surprising because at the time, *khwaja sira* did not always translate as “transgender” in mainstream discourse. (It must be noted, however, that in the years since this incident, the terms *transgender* and *trans* have progressively become more salient identity categories.) Furthermore, unlike LGBT, khwaja siras was not perceived as a foreign import but as an indigenous category with deep roots in Islamic South Asian history. The language used to identify minority groups has consequences for how they are perceived, and in appropriating *khwaja sira*, community activists established distance between gender-nonconforming people and such politically charged English terms as *gay* and *lesbian*, which in the popular imaginary were associated with Euro-American sexual subjectivities and rights activism. Unlike khwaja siras, the gender and sexual minorities who identified with globalized LGBT categories risked their well-being and were condemned for colluding with imperialist forces believed to be working against Pakistani and Islamic interests. Hence, even though *gay* and *lesbian* are more prominent categories than *queer*, they have proven to be problematic and dangerous in Pakistan.

**Legal Developments**

If queerness is understood as an overarching and inclusive umbrella category, then within this broad domain of difference the nonnormative populations that have made significant progress in Pakistan, particularly in terms of activism and legal reform, are khwaja siras and transgender citizens. Though rarely invoked, Section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code, an injunction inherited from the British colonizers, criminalizes sodomy as an unnatural offense. With this colonial law intact, the Pakistani Supreme Court made a series of historic rulings from 2009 to 2012 in which third-sex/gender citizens were granted a range of legal privileges and protections. Among the rulings was the recognition of khwaja siras as a distinct sex/gender, the provision of security, inheritance and voting rights, the right to take public office, educational and job opportunities, and access to government-sponsored welfare programs for khwaja siras.
The proceedings commenced after Islamic jurist and human rights lawyer Aslam Khaki filed a Supreme Court (SC) petition in 2009 seeking protection of the fundamental rights of khwaja sirs. Khaki’s actions were in response to a police raid and the subsequent arrest of khwaja sirs at a celebration in Rawalpindi that was followed by a public protest staged by khwaja sirs (Redding 2015). Though unexpected, the SC’s actions coincided with similar developments in other South Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (Khan 2014). Moreover, the advancement of khwaja sira rights can be attributed to the historic significance of Mughal-era khwaja sirs (1526–1857), who played such important roles in the imperial courts as guarding the royal seraglio (Manucci 1906) and serving as army generals and regal roles in the imperial courts as guarding the royal seraglio era khwaja sirs (1526–1857). Moreover, the advancement of khwaja sira rights coincided with similar developments in other South Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (Khan 2014). Moreover, the advancement of khwaja sira rights can be attributed to the historic significance of Mughal-era khwaja sirs (1526–1857), who played such important roles in the imperial courts as guarding the royal seraglio (Manucci 1906) and serving as army generals and regal advisers (Lal 1994). As a historically rooted term, khwaja sira has retained legitimacy and respect in contemporary Pakistan, while most other queer descriptors are stigmatizing and harmful.

It was roughly in 2016 and 2017 that transgender emerged as a synonym for khwaja sira. This change occurred at the intersection of additional legal developments and the rise of a younger cohort of middle-class activists who have either a functional or a strong command over the English language. After being unanimously approved by the Pakistani Senate, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, was passed by the National Assembly in May 2018 and subsequently signed into law by the country’s president.

SEE ALSO Queer Names and Identity Politics in the Arab World; Section 377 and Section 377A; Section 377 in South Asia

BIBLIOGRAPHY


