



Interview

Vani Bhardwaj



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In this next section, Notre Affaire à Tous was lucky to learn from **Vani Bhardwaj**, who took the time to answer our questions. Vani is pursuing her PhD about Climate Change and Gender Intersectionalities, focusing on how women and the queer population in India and Bangladesh are impacted by transboundary water politics. In addition to being a full time PhD student, Vani also takes part in different volunteering initiatives which focuses on gender and climate change, notably with both global and local queer feminist organizations.

Vani has kindly agreed to share her expertise with Notre Affaire à Tous, so to preserve the academic authenticity of her words and work, and to maintain the integrity of the people she lends her voice to, this interview will be rendered as closely to the discussion as possible.

Notre Affaire à tous (NAAT) : How do you think the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, queer individuals intersect with environmental concerns and climate change impacts?

Vani Bhardwaj (VB) : I believe environmental change is now known to have an exaggerated impact for women and girls, but what often gets omitted is that the queer population is also completely ostracized - there is a “queer blind narrative” around ecology and how we approach ecology. So in order to incorporate the queer population within our climate change narratives, we need to reframe the way we understand ecology itself. For instance, when we look at public spaces that are somewhat “taboo” - which are ostracized, or at the outliers of a city or even a rural hinterland - that is very similar to the way the queer population is treated in India.

So when we look at, say, climate disasters, and we think of restabilizing the lives of the people afterwards, we never cater to the queer population. And there are particular intersectionalities that even the queer population is not really acknowledging themselves. I once talked to a queer person living in Delhi [capital of India] which observed a certain position of power compared to people living on the periphery of the country, like Guwahati [city in North-East India, between Bangladesh and Bhutan], the city I am located as we speak. Guwahati is home for Dalit people [i.e. lowest caste in India, “outcastes” and “underprivileged”) and when I addressed the conditions of life for Dalit queer people, the person living in Delhi completely denied the terms “Dalit queers” stating that the queer population itself is not “casteist”, it does not have caste-based discrimination. But that is not true, when we look not only at literature but also lived experiences of many Dalit scholars, they talk about how even the “Dalitality” (a concept attributed to Dr. Suraj Yengde - <https://scholar.harvard.edu/surajyengde/about>) actually matters in everyday lives: Dalits are ostracized, and discriminated against when it comes to their career just on the basis of caste, so they are doubly marginalized if that individual is Dalit and queer.

There is some kind of a blind spot within the Queer community regarding that. So when this Dalit queer individual was embedded in such a society, faces displacement due to climate disasters, which are caused by climate change, they are doubly and triply marginalized. They are almost silenced in the mainstream narrative, and I think that is why it is very crucial to focus on the queer narratives within the climate change impacts, and not only impacts, but consequences as well. We really need to reframe how we approach ecology as such and I think the particular stance of queer feminist political ecology is the most inclusive frame.

NAAT : Are there any specific initiative, policy or advocacy efforts that have emerged from the collaboration between queer and ecological movements you can think of and how effective have they been in addressing the concerns and claims of both groups ?

VB : I would say that the convergence of climate change issues and the queer population is really not clear in India. Living and working in a place which itself is at the periphery in India, we are already trying to normalize the narrative that people are not to be ostracized, because the narrative against LGBTQIA+ population is very much prevalent in the peripheries. We are still working on normalizing the fact that we are also human you know. That's the kind of narrative that we need to normalize first.

I think the convergence between climate change issues and how it is exaggeratedly impacting LGBTQIA+ population has not really taken off in small Indian towns, it is much more prevalent in Mumbai or Delhi, which are the metro cities of the country. But in my own activism I have created a global and online community of practice approach in which we do invite grassroots scholars and academia together so people who are theoretically engaged in this space and who are practically on the ground, implementing and designing climate adaptation-related projects can come together and have these dialogue sessions. Many times when we talk about gender and climate justice frameworks, we have queer political activist from outside of the periphery who say that we need to go beyond these dialogue sessions but I think the ground realities are very different from the theory, particularly in Guwahati where the inclusion narrative has not really emerged. A local convergence of activism is not relevant and is almost ahead of its time in that sense.



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NAAT : What are some of the challenges or barriers faced by people either from the Global South, from the periphery, or even more locally in Guwahati in engaging with climate justice movements, and how would you say these challenges differ from the ones from the Global North or “Centre”?

VB : So first of all, if we look at it from a scholarly and theoretical manner, I always find it difficult to find any kind of literature regarding climate justice, queer population and their intersectionalities being explored in the “majority world’s academia”. Most, if not all the research available, usually comes from scholars from South Africa or Australia exploring the intersectional relations between the Global South and the queer population(s) getting impacted by climate change and climate disasters. In addition to being scholarly and theoretically limited, in a practical approach and real ground realities, when you do your ethnographic research and when you go to different households, you can’t expect a closeted person who has not come out yet to just be vulnerable to you outright for the sake of research. There is an inherent and prevalent patriarchy, transphobia and homophobia on ground realities within rural Bangladesh or India.

Picture this, the Brahmaputra river is flooding year after year, and we want to talk about disaster relief efforts with locals. What we see is that there is no sex disaggregation or gender disaggregation based data and there is a high degree of chance that people who have not revealed their sexual or gendered identities, and are part of a minority, may again be at a disadvantage because the shelter camps and post-disaster recovery efforts are completely blind to gender. They are blind when it comes to women and girls so they are also completely blind about queer populations.

For queer communities, there's a concept of housing, and then there's a concept of home, right? Where exactly is "home" is a question many queer people problematize and wonder their entire lives. If they do not have the support within their families, which without the intention to do a generalization is very often the case in hegemonic heteronormative families in India and Bangladesh. That creates settings that are transphobic and/or homophobic, and it becomes very difficult for people to come out to their own family. The entire concept of home becomes irrelevant, they feel alienated inside their so called home, and so they try to find community and networks outside of their bloodline. That is to say that in situations of climate disaster, it is not automatically their home being taken away, it is more their housing if they have one.

Lots of queer people in India will battle this trauma and this internal conflict of what really is "home" their entire lives and I think that wound reopens when climate disasters keep striking again and again. It is kind of a double or a triple displacement, a displacement at the social, economic, psychological and psychosocial level. I think the government has particularly been very much blind up until 2-3 years ago to the fact that queer population even existed when climate disasters happened because there is a very apparent transphobic and homophobic attitude within disaster relief volunteers themselves which participates in ostracizing the queer community when it comes to disaster relief efforts. And where I'm living, in the periphery of India, a very marginalized place in itself, climate disasters are very normalized events, striking very often. So people are "used" to these climate-related disasters. But if we look at the disparities of class and their related issues, the most vulnerable people are getting displaced repeatedly, and they really don't have economic stability.

So in this part of the country, when climate disaster strikes, not only does hegemonic masculinity and femininity get affected, but we also observe that indigenous masculinity and indigenous femininity get swept away in the disaster too. They get swept away in the disaster, in the sense that for example indigenous masculinity gets challenged as they no longer are the breadwinner of the household because of the climate disaster. So amongst all of these complex notions for a queer individual to even come out, and, you know, reveal "I am part of the queer community and I have exaggerated impacts due to the climate disasters" is quite difficult. In addition, asking the government for measures or policies, or to simply have queer activists sitting on the round table for policy making that is even more of a challenge.

The Indian civil society is trying to eliminate transphobia and homophobia through pride marches and push for community networking spaces like open libraries for queer community-members to come, sit and read together. More of these initiatives are emerging but intersectionality with climate change still hasn't been mainstreamed because queer people are missing in the public policy-making spaces dedicated to disaster management policies.

Frankly, heteronormative people are not going to sit there and you know, be so much as sensitive regarding the queer population's relation to climate disasters while they're transphobic and homophobic in their private sphere. We really need the queer population to actually be part of that policy circle which decides disaster management policies. And I think because the indigenous masculinity and indigenous femininity also get challenged by climate disasters, and within that, we need to find this queer narrative to challenge these multidimensional marginalities in relief efforts.

NAAT : What role do you think intersectionality plays in the relationship between the climate justice movement and the LGBTQIA+ movement, and how does it change the experiences and priorities of individuals who identify as part of both groups?

VB : First, let me make it clear that the LGBTQ+ community is not homogeneous so we need to recognize the heterogeneity of the community. Then secondly, we need to ensure that the spaces in which the community is embedded are comfortable so that it becomes comfortable for individuals to reveal their place on the entire sexual and genital spectrum, which is still very much of a struggle, at least in India, as I can't speak for the entire Global South.

For instance in India, there's a great difference and disparity between how much the lesbians and the gays get discussed in mainstream queer narratives, and how much the asexuals are completely marginalized. They are basically the "plus" in LGBTQ+. So obviously there are always differentiations but no categorization, because the moment you categorize anything, then you are endangering the entire community to exclusion. The moment you start categorizing, you are essentially trying to exclude somebody. So the moment you're trying to set boundaries by categorizing by putting a nomenclature, you are bound to exclude somebody or the other.

And I think that is how climate justice narratives and activism need to incorporate everybody within the LGBTQs if you really want to have a separate networking or like a separate community or civil society organization focusing only on lesbians then another organization focusing only on transgenders, those can be separate, because they don't have these separate differentiated demands , although they do have a common thread of getting ostracized multidimensionally. So it is very much essential for LGBTQ population because.

When a climate disaster strikes, what happens is that whatever landscape that has been established completely gets dismantled and you have to rebuild it once again. So in that same way, when we're talking about gender and sexuality spectrum, I think we can completely dismantle the way we have been heteronormative in discussing it and we can rebuild all of that. Climate disaster recovery and recovering and gender narratives are very much closely linked together.

There is this entire strand of queer feminist political ecology that talks about how the so called "unkempt and the pristine" forests that have not been touched, that are at the outskirts and the outskirts of the city, or the towns which are basically the embodiment of the ostracized - where nobody is living. Those are places which the local queer community can completely relate to, because of a shared sense of ostracization. Queer political ecology is how ecology is being understood by the queer population, how the queer community experiences the environment, how they experience ecology, how they experience, you know, the flow and flood of the river within the city or the polluted air around them? You know we only have cis-heteronormative and capitalistic narratives about our understanding of the environment. I remember like in primary school we were taught that there are biotic and abiotic components and so there are always binaries, there is the normal life and then there is the disrupted life due to climate disaster so that's again a binary. But if you really look at the queer activists and how they will see a climate disaster or even climate change, maybe it won't be that much in a binary context, it won't be so dualistic in classification and categorization and that is why would benefit from more trans and queer scholars to understand environment itself; we need to reframe how we understand the

concept of environment itself. We need to go to the basics and unpack those to really dovetail queer activism with climate change and climate justice.

NAAT : Climate movement(s) in France have lacked the perspective of the periphery in both academic circles and mainstream narratives. Would you have any recommendations for “Global North” countries and organizations to 1) better include the “Global South”, or rather the situated knowledge(s) and local experiences within international climate justice movements, and how can the Global North better include LGBTQIA+ people in their climate justice initiatives?

VB : Thank you for that wonderful question. I think it has many parts to it. So let me just talk about this classification of Global North and Global South and the moment you say Global North and South, they're juxtaposed into binaries and it becomes “Global North” versus “Global South”. Or at least that's what it comes off as in more general settings. Whenever I use those terms, they are defined by power dynamics and positionality. So most people have now started saying “majority world” instead of Global South, but I refrain from even using that because when you use “majority world” that it itself shows a very majoritarian thinking. You know, trying to do like a reverse discrimination that if you colonized us with a certain perspective or approach, we're going to reverse the power hierarchy. So I don't think we have found the particular terminologies to reflect this complexity yet, whether it should be “Global South” or “majority world” or “periphery”.

But I think as far as including localized narratives and knowledge within the LGBTQ and climate activism, in the Global North or the South, we need to have localizing vernacular language-based climate justice narratives. So even if you see global organizations or even local and national organizations, they are mainly dealing with the dominant language. For example, if an Assamese queer civil society organization approaches the climate justice perspective they would still frame their ideas and their advocacy in the dominant language, which is Assamese - and most probably English - but these are the 2 dominant languages of the state. These are not the only languages, we have hundreds and thousands of languages within a few 1000 kilometers so I think to really localize climate justice impacts on queer populations and even for women and young girls, what we really need to do is to make the entire queer and climate advocacy toolkits, and implementation guides, and scholarly literature very much localized and embedded in vernacular languages. And that is something that is also missing at the global level in the sense that when you are talking about voluntary national reviews and sustainable development goals and “not leaving anyone behind” - what we're really doing pushing the ostracization as we're not having an audit or we are not conducting vernacular language based voluntary national reviews. If they are all dominant language based, the language becomes an issue.

To say that Global North and Global South have completely juxtaposed to each other is also correct. [Wendy Harcourt](#) talks about how there are “margins within the centre” and periphery within the Global North. Global North is not a homogeneous entity itself. There are margins so we can create solidarity from the margin in Global South to the margin and periphery in the Global North because we also have power dominant and hierarchical places within the Global South who try to completely suppress the voices of the periphery in our countries. I think creating solidarity from the periphery in the Global South to the periphery in the Global

North is what we're really looking at when we're talking about climate justice solidarities from queer population across the spectrum.