

Pride

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My comfort with the word *pride* was challenged significantly during the Mumbai Pride parade I walked in 2018. Mumbai Pride is India's biggest pride parade, with the average number of people always exceeding fifteen thousand. We would march in the popular old part of Mumbai (the south), with the hope of disrupting normal life for Mumbai's citizens who peer out of their windows or watch from the roadside as we walk. Anyone is free to attend, and the event usually begins and ends with dancing, after-parties, and pride events extending over the course of one month.

The night of the parade, my partner and I were sitting on the Bandra Promenade sipping hot tea and waiting for the 5:00 a.m. train back to my grandparents' house. This was when I met X. She asked us for a light for her cigarette, as we all stood facing the sea. I asked her whether she was returning from Pride. She laughed and said, "there is no place for people like me at Pride," and moved on with the conversation into what we were doing, astrology, and the beauty of the night. Our conversations were framed by the free time she spent with us on our bench while she wasn't talking to potential customers. At first, I didn't understand what she meant by "people like me," and a lot of brain-racking went into understanding that she meant sex workers, trans women, or trans sex workers. This sentence was only thirty seconds out of the twenty-minute conversation we had with X that night, but it is one that stayed with me for the next five years. X's view of the Mumbai queer movement and the community I was a part of opened in my mind a few threads of thought that I have since explored more deeply over many years. I didn't ask X why she thought there was no space for her. Somewhere deep down I knew the answer and didn't think to dig further then; we were all just enjoying our tea. That night led me to my masters' thesis and then to my PhD project in researching who gets to be proud, and what this word means on a daily basis to everyday people living in a formercolony.

Pride is a word that forms a large part of my identity as a queer person. I felt, willingly or unwillingly, the imperative to be proud of myself, to forgive myself for being "different" in order to experience the fullness of being queer and knowing "what" I am. It allowed me to navigate the deep discomfort I felt with family and friends who "didn't understand"—a pride walk being the first time I even had the space to question what I always thought was my identity. Feelings of pride were always attached to the work I was trying to do with other community members.

Pride despite the pain, hatred, and violence.

Years later, I understood the naivete with which I asked X if she was at Pride. I understood better the kind of spaces that do not exist for people like X, and which exist for people like me (privileged, class and caste-wise) to be comfortable and engage in a version of what I thought of and understood as community. The lack of space for others was not a new conversation. Some of the most historically oppressed communities in India, such as Dalit queer people, had been talking about the exclusivity of these spaces, and how their increasingly capitalized and depoliticized nature was chipping away at the heart of how we navigated pride as “people who shouldn’t be”—Black people; trans people (especially trans women); informal workers (especially sex workers); people across class, caste, and city barriers; people with disabilities, asexual and agender people. Pride was/is inaccessible for many.

Pride has always been a part of the vocabulary for queer, trans, and by extension sex worker communities to lean in and take pride in what the rest of the world might call “deviant behavior.” Maybe pride is that quick look you share with another person share across a crowded room to say you are similar. *Pride* itself is a word brought by the English. It is not like pride wasn’t being felt prior to colonization, it just was not expressed in the same way. The symbology of pride is also something we learn—a large number of people from privileged class backgrounds who had early access to television and the internet learned the meanings associated with symbols like rainbow flags. However, the concept of pride and a particular version of history is repeatedly being shared on the internet without nuance. For example, I only knew about Black trans women’s involvement in the US LGBT movement much later, after I knew about the movement itself and one historical event: Stonewall. There was no access to a history with multiple stories.

As I have worked with and gotten to know more friends who are sex workers over the past six years, I was introduced to the idea that pride also meant to “mask”—to be collectively resilient and proud in your struggles and pain—a resilience that falls very heavily on the shoulders of marginalized communities. Not only do they have to mask pain (unless the situation calls for physical resistance) caused

by the violence of the world and individual feelings for the sake of the “larger movement” and “larger collective,” but they also have to relay these painful narratives to be more visible. Visibility has been deemed important for all communities mentioned in this piece; we are often told that masking, or finding safety away from flashing a spotlight on our “origin stories,” will lead to a future of safety for the rest of the community. For me, and other trans people, that safety will not come with “same-sex marriage” allowances, nor while sex workers remain criminalized and caught in the world’s moral panic. So why render our pride visible if it is only dropped into a box of other proud stories? The commodification of our stories, mostly the horrifying, shocking ones, lead us to swell our chest when someone listening in the crowd says “I’m so proud of you.” There is no way of healing this pain together, and it ends up hurting the collective, tiring people out, and asking some members of movements and collectives for the labor of fixing these emotional breakages.

Today, X and I probably would not go to Pride at all. We would have more to talk about outside of Pride—the place, and the feeling.