

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From problem-centered to centering relationalities: Engagements with disability and sexuality in India

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**Abstract**

This article analyses how the sites of disability activism, special education, and online-matchmaking approach the sexuality of disabled people in India. It argues that across these distinct yet overlapping sites, the sexuality of disabled people is engaged as a problem in need of a fix, which ultimately leads to the narrowing of disabled people's sexual choices, behaviors, and identities. The article suggests that when these field-sites move away from a problem-centered approach which focuses on looking for normative solutions and instead engage in the process of "problematization" by facilitating the sexuality of disabled people, they end up opening non-normative, uncertain, yet perhaps more fulfilling sexual opportunities for disabled people.

## INTRODUCTION

"The most important thing is that to keep them away from behaviors like this, they need to be kept busy. If they are just sitting without anything to do, they will have "*Ulte-pulte khayal*" in their heads (topsy-turvy thoughts)." Bunty,<sup>1</sup> a special educator who works at Jyoti, a respite care facility for intellectually disabled people in Wada, a village 3 h from Mumbai, India, shared these thoughts with me during an interview in August 2018. Bunty was talking about behaviors that relate to sexuality such as getting erections in public and masturbation. In his experience, intellectually disabled adults exhibited sexual behaviors in public settings when they were supposed to be doing routine group activities, such as exercising or vocational activities. They would touch themselves and others in ways that, according to Bunty, were private activities.

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He preemptively nipped the behavior in the bud by occupying intellectually disabled people in activities such as exercise, yoga, music sessions, and walks.

Much like Bunty, other special educators in India whom I met also approached the sexuality of intellectually disabled people as a problem to be proactively managed by non-disabled authority figures such as teachers, administrators, and parents. I start with this vignette because it illustrates a problem-centered approach toward sexuality that I observed across diverse ethnographic sites during my fieldwork in India. By a problem-centered approach, I refer to the fact that my interlocutors framed the sexuality of disabled people as a negative problem to be dealt with in various ways involving redirecting, changing, or channeling behavior. With all the strategies, the goal was to get people *not* to do something or to get them to do *something else*. In Bunty's case, he shut down sexual behaviors even before they made an appearance. Others attempted to solve, manage, and regulate the problem of sexuality by replacing sexual behaviors (such as masturbation) with another physically demanding behavior (such as exercise) and heavily supervising encounters that could be considered romantic.

I analyze three distinct and sometimes overlapping spaces in which the sexuality of disabled people is taken up as an explicit theme of engagement: disability activism, special education, and online matchmaking. In the space of disability activism, I analyze a disability and gender rights organization in Kolkata, West Bengal, named Jigyasa Center where sexuality was addressed as a problem of sexual violence and lack of sexual access for disabled people. Jigyasa Center conducts legal advocacy and awareness workshops and is one of many sites within the broader field of disability activism in India.<sup>2</sup> Within the space of special education, I engage with nongovernmental special schools, vocational centers, and residential facilities in Kolkata and Wada, Maharashtra, in which the bodies and behaviors of intellectually disabled people was a focus of intervention for special educators. They viewed sexuality as a broad concept encompassing activities of daily life like toileting, bathing, and dressing as well as behaviors such as masturbation, touching, and kissing. For special educators, managing, regulating, or (in some cases) eliminating inappropriate and problematic bodily urges and sexual behaviors was an important professional duty. The final field-site I explore is Rishtey, an online matchmaking platform that framed disabled people as having problems with finding romantic prospects and enabled the same by creating a platform that focused on disabled people.

I acknowledge that I risk reducing the complexities of the lived experiences of disabled people in India by using "disability" as a category for analysis. I recognize that disability experiences are variously shaped by factors such as gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, and disability status. Despite its broadness, I hold on to the term *disability* and illustrate how it is a complex category that may connote different meanings, communities, and norms depending on who is deploying the category and for what purpose. I also demonstrate how different people and institutions creatively take up the category of disability and produce various "disability worlds" (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2020, S6), each with their own relations, logics, and power dynamics.

For instance, Jigyasa Center catered to disabled people belonging to diverse impairment groups in Kolkata through its work of legal advocacy but cast a wider net by connecting with disability and gender rights activists across India through its awareness workshops. The special education sites specifically provided services to intellectually disabled people belonging to middle- to upper-middle class backgrounds. Finally, given Rishtey's online modality, the platform was designed to cater to disabled people, across impairment groups, and any non-disabled people who signed up for the app.<sup>3</sup> By examining each site separately and then in relation, I explore how my interlocutors across diverse fieldsites shared similarities in their approach to the sexuality of disabled people—they anticipated the sexuality of disabled people as a problem area in need of a normative fix. However, the problem of

disabled people's sexuality and the responses to it emerged in disparate ways at the different fieldsites.

I situate my analysis within a larger Indian context wherein institutions of family and state intersect to position sexuality as a problem unless it is contained within the confines of intra-caste, intra-religious, heteronormative marriage; disabled people do not easily fit into the parameters of this institutional arrangement and are often left out of it (Chakraborty & Mukherjee, 2016; Lamb, 2022; Ramberg, 2014).

I use Sameena Mulla's framework of "anticipatory structures" (2014, 30) to think through how my fieldsites define and, in the process, limit the scope of sexuality to a problem. Mulla (2014, 59) focuses on sexual assault interventions and argues that the structures of the criminal justice system limit sexual assault narratives as these are oriented toward determining a fixed beginning and end of the act of violence and by the search for evidence of assault, which may diverge from the more complex experiences of the victims themselves. In resonance with Mulla, I argue that Jigyasa Center, special educators at various special schools and vocational centers, and Rishtey, deploy specific anticipatory structures that frame the sexuality of disabled people as a negative and in the process simplify the nuances of disabled experiences. Drawing on ethnographic vignettes from my fieldsites, I demonstrate that when disability rights activists anticipate sexuality as a problem of sexual violence, when special educators anticipate sexuality as a problem of bodily urges and inappropriate behaviors in need of regulation, and when the online matchmaking platform anticipate sexuality through the heteronormative lens of marriage, they make assumptions about what matters to disabled people when it comes to questions of sexuality and how best to address these concerns. In doing so, they fix sexuality in place.

Having analyzed the problem-centered approach, I then turn to examining instances from the same fieldsites wherein disability activists, special educators, and online matchmakers, instead, engage in the process of problematization by facilitating the sexuality of disabled people. Michel Foucault's concept of "problematization" refers to a mode of analysis that traces how different sets of difficulties are transformed into a generalized problem to which simultaneous responses are possible (Foucault, 1997, 118). Rather than intervening in a problem, problematization involves examining the contingencies and constraints that give shape to the domain of a particular problem and the multiple, sometimes contradictory responses to that problem (Rabinow, 2002). Problematization aims at the "freeing up of possibilities" (Rabinow, 2002 139). I use this understanding of problematization to analyze instances wherein disability activists, special educators, and the online matchmaking platform, instead of looking for normative solutions to the problem of sexuality, approach it in ways that are facilitative and non-interventionist. I suggest that in adopting the lens of "sexual facilitation" (Kulick and Rydström, 2015), my interlocutors end up creating sexual possibilities for disabled people.

Further, I contend that problematization, which takes the form of sexual facilitation at my fieldsites, is inherently relational in nature. I draw on feminist disability scholar Alison Kafer's (2013) idea of a political/relational model of disability to frame and examine the relationalities that emerge at my fieldsites. In her framing of the political/relational model of disability, Kafer argues that disability is experienced in and through relationships, never individually or in isolation (2013). In resonance with Kafer's approach, I illustrate later in the article how centering relationalities creates new sexual pathways for disabled people. Scholarship at the intersection of feminist and disability anthropology also challenges Western ideals of individualism, rationality, and independence, and it demonstrates how non-normative relationships can give rise to unconventional forms of personhood and kinship based on empathy, care, and technological facilitation (Buch, 2013; Ghosh & Banerjee, 2017; Rapp & Ginsburg, 2011; Wolf-Meyer, 2020). I extend these conversations to questions of sexuality. Moving from a problem-centered approach to a facilitative and relational one that enacts problematization may lead to uncertainties, since there is no one solution in sight. However, I contend that

there is value in acknowledging and pursuing messy pathways as they may open previously unavailable sexual possibilities for disabled people.<sup>4</sup>

## METHODS

The ethnographic research for this article was primarily conducted between July and September 2018. My original research aim was to investigate the intersections of the disability and queer movements in India. This led me to Jigyasa Center, a disability and gender rights organization in Kolkata that frequently interacts with queer rights group. There, I conducted three days of participant observation during a disability and gender rights workshop organized by the center, followed by two weeks of observing the centers' activities and interviewing disability activists I met during the workshop. Latika, the founder of Jigyasa Center, suggested that I should interact not only with activists but also with stakeholders who negotiate the sexuality of disabled people on an everyday basis, such as special educators. This led me to conducting in-depth interviews with special educators at vocational centers and residential facilities in Kolkata and Wada between July and September 2018 and long-term participant observation at Udaan, an arts and vocational center in Pune, in 2021–2022. Disability activists I met at Jigyasa Center's workshop also informed me of Rishtey, a matchmaking platform for disabled people, and urged me to interact with its founders, which led me to conducting an interview with Shalini, the founder of the organization, as well as an analysis of Rishtey's website.

Thus, disability rights activists and advocates advised me to pursue the ethnographic routes that I present here.<sup>5</sup> By focusing on sites such as activism, special education, and online matchmaking, I move away from traditional sites of power, such as the state and family. I maintain that it is important to do so in the post-liberalization Indian context in which, given the receding role of the Indian state, international development organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations actively engage with disability as a category and produce specific kinds of disabled subjects (Chaudhry, 2015; Friedner, 2017). While I acknowledge that a majority of my interlocutors (other than the disability rights activists) are non-disabled individuals, this article illustrates how organizations and individuals in positions of relative power define discourses and practices regarding the sexuality of disabled people in India. Finally, I situate myself as a non-disabled researcher from India who is currently located in the United States. I demonstrate my commitment to a framework of social justice by analyzing and critiquing societal structures that create and sustain ideas of normalcy that marginalize the identities of disabled people (Davis, 1997; Minich, 2016).

## DISABILITY AND SEXUALITY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Disability is not a fixed medical category. Disability studies scholars have used a model-based approach to convey the socially constructed nature of the category of disability. The social model of disability, widely adopted within the field of disability studies, suggests that disability arises from social and infrastructural barriers, instead of any limitations within the individual body (Kafer, 2013; Shakespeare, 2013). Furthermore, disability studies scholar Simi Linton argues that though the term *disability* has medical connotations, it has been used to build socio-political alliances among people with varying physical, emotional, and behavioral conditions that make them the target of oppression and discrimination (2006). Keeping in mind that experiences of disability are multiple and mediated, I stay close to how my interlocutors define and interpret disability.

Anthropological scholarship on disability is not new, and in recent years, anthropologists have explored a wide array of topics, ranging from kinship (Addlakha, 2020; Rapp & Ginsburg,

2011; Sargent, 2021), community (Green, 2014; Ryan Idriss, 2021), and religion (McKearney, 2018; Reinders, 2008) to scientific, media, and medical institutions (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013; Hartblay, 2020). In India, anthropologists have analyzed specific experiences of impairment and disability with respect to gender, familial care, the state, and neoliberal structures (Friedner, 2015; Ghosh & Banerjee, 2017; Staples, 2005). Little work in the field of anthropology has focused on the intersection of disability and sexuality.

Following a Foucauldian (1990) perspective, I understand sexuality not as an unchanging objective reality but a socially and historically specific phenomenon that is influenced by relations of power and knowledge. I approach sex and sexuality as discursive facts shaped by factors such as who speaks about sex and sexuality, the position from which they speak, and the institutions that prompt people to speak about it (Foucault, 1990). I engage the intersection of disability and sexuality by paying attention to how diverse stakeholders define the ambit of sex and sexuality for disabled people. For instance, activists approached sexuality in terms of sexual violence and disabled people's lack of access to sexual opportunities. Special educators engaged with behaviors such as bathing, using the bathroom, and masturbation. Finally, the matchmaking platform took up questions of love and marriage.

Addressing disability and sexuality is important because the intersection of the two categories has emerged as an important concern for disability scholars, disability activists, and policymakers internationally, including in India. Disability studies scholars and disabled activists have framed sexuality as a source of oppression, distress, and exclusion for disabled people (Finger, 1992; Shakespeare, 2000). Unequal social contexts such as institutional barriers, norms of desirability, and a lack of access to public spaces are viewed as actively hindering sexual opportunities for disabled people (Hahn, 1981; Shuttleworth & Mona, 2002). This is also the case in India where scholars have commented on the social and attitudinal barriers that make sexuality a fraught issue for disabled people, especially disabled women. While Veena Das and Renu Adlakha (2001) analyze how families negotiate kinship networks and the Indian nation-state to secure heteronormative futures for their disabled daughters, Anita Ghai (2001) and Adlakha (2007) explore how disabled women are either forced into arranged marriages or not considered responsible enough to fulfill the normative duties of marriage and motherhood. These writings point to how institutions such as marriage, family, and the nation-state regulate disabled people's sexuality in India. Drawing on this scholarship but shifting focus from the abovementioned institutions, I examine the emergence of sexuality at the sites of disability activism, special education, and online matchmaking in India. I first illustrate the emergence of the problem-centered approach at the fieldsites separately and, in the final section, examine the three sites alongside each other and illustrate the emergence of problematization.

## DISABILITY ACTIVISM: SEXUALITY THROUGH THE LENS OF LAW

In this section, I draw upon participant observation I conducted at Jigyasa Center. Jigyasa Center is a disability rights organization based in Kolkata that works in the field of legal and social advocacy, with a special focus on disabled women. The organization is situated at the intersection of the disability rights and women's rights movements in India. The disability rights movement in India emerged in the 1980s, which saw a gradual perspectival shift from welfare to development and rights (Mehrotra, 2011). This shift was influenced by a combination of factors, including the rise of gender- and caste-based identity movements in the 1980s and the United Nations making disability their focus by declaring 1983–1992 as the Decade of Disabled Persons and 1993–2002 as the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. Within this context, disabled communities lobbied for the passing of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act, in 1995. Later on,

the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008 led to the formulation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPD) Act in 2016. The RPD Act came into being through the actions of representatives of different impairment groups who form the disability rights movement in India. Many of these activists, especially those that represent people with physical disabilities, follow a rights-based model of disability (Friedner et al., 2018). Jigyasa Center locates itself within the disability rights movement and engages with the state to provide justice, entitlement, and services to disabled people, especially disabled women. It also actively engages with other social justice movements, such as the women's right and LGBTQ rights movements, by conducting awareness workshops on topics of disability, gender, and sexuality.

The perceived need for Jigyasa Center's founding emerged from a case of sexual violence against a deaf girl, in the year 2000. At that time, neither disability rights groups nor women's groups felt equipped to deal with the case. Latika, the organization's founder, told me that when she tried to intervene, the police officers in charge discouraged her from taking up the case and said that the girl was clearly "oversexed" because she was deaf. Though the girl lost the case in court, Jigyasa Center played a major role in negotiating with the state and ultimately winning monetary compensation for the survivor. Since its inception, Jigyasa Center has addressed the problem of sexual violence as a top priority.

Latika actively engages with legal and state machineries by filing complaints with the police, assisting people at courts, writing petitions and letters to government officials, and participating in drafting committees for laws that pertain to disabled and mentally ill people. Even when it comes to its awareness activities, Jigyasa Center focuses on educating diverse stakeholders about the incorporation of the question of gender into laws regarding disability and mental health in India. It deals with concerns such as vulnerability to sexual violence, reproductive rights, and right to guardianship—issues of importance to the disability rights movement in India (Goyal, 2017; TARSHI, 2018).

These activities, I argue, shape the center's emphasis on sexual oppression and violence. While significant, this focus may be inadequate in addressing more relational facets of sexuality, such as, love, pleasure, intimacy, or companionship. Latika herself acknowledges this. According to her, law and pleasure are incommensurable. She says, "See, a law can talk about consent, a law can talk about coercion—about going how far is consent, going how far is coercion. But I don't know how pleasure can be talked about in law." I understand Latika as making a self-reflexive comment about her organization's role and its limits, given that it works with the law and state; she does not know how areas of pleasure can be encompassed within this approach. In contrast, working with the law on questions of sexual rights, violence, and harassment may be less messy, given that there exist tangible structures such as the police and courts which (at least in theory) recognize sexual violence as a legible issue. While Latika stated that the law could address consent and coercion, she also believed that legal mechanisms were lacking when it came to dealing with actual instances of sexual violence. During the workshop, she said that not even 0.1 percent of women would get a say in cases of sexual violence if they depended on the due process required by law. She said that the law requires a survivor to present evidence of abuse or harassment, which is very difficult to produce in most cases. Latika's statement aligns with Mulla's (2014) work on sexual abuse interventions as both point to the narrow, evidence-based nature of sexual abuse as anticipated by law.

Thus, while Jigyasa Center anticipated sexuality as a problem of law, it did so while acknowledging the limits of the domain of law, both with respect to its inability to address pleasure and its narrow, evidence-based definitions of sexual abuse. Instead of addressing sexuality within the normative constraints of the law, if Jigyasa Center engaged with disabled people directly, maybe it would be in a better position to address sexuality in a complex, relational manner. Before addressing an instance of this, I next move to the site of special education and demonstrate how sexuality there is addressed as a problem of bodily functions and behaviors.

## Special Education: Control and Regulation in Public and Private Spaces

As I said, we work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their comprehension abilities vary. So, we have to take that under consideration. For instance, if they understand more, we tell them, yes you can do WhatsApp, exchange pictures, but only to this much in one day. Or if you talk on the phone, not more than twice.

Pallavi shared her insights and experiences with me in her office as the principle of Kamalavadan, a special school<sup>6</sup> in Kolkata, which Latika had referred me to. Latika had conducted sexuality education workshops with special educators including Pallavi and urged me to meet her. Thus, Pallavi had been exposed to a disability rights perspective through Latika's workshop, but she was also the authority figure at a special education institution, which was oriented toward providing life skills, including discipline and appropriate behaviors, to intellectually disabled people.

Pallavi stated that her students had diverse capacities and their behaviors, especially if they pertained to sexuality, such as exchanging pictures with a potential romantic interest, needed to be overseen by educators. Pallavi's views were shared by a majority of the special educators I interacted with during my fieldwork. Whether it was using the toilet, masturbation, or falling in love, special educators considered monitoring, managing, and sometimes erasing these behaviors to be within the ambit of their job; they anticipated the sexuality of intellectually disabled people in terms of bodily functions and problematic behaviors in need of regulation. To determine what their students were capable of, special educators categorized their students as having mild, moderate, or severe forms of disabilities and associated each level with certain forms of sexual needs. Further, they also trained them or others around them to manage bodily functions, behaviors, or desires by doing things such as teaching them to use the toilet in private, involving parents in the management of sexual behaviors, and closely supervising romantic interactions.

During my visits to special schools, vocational centers, and residential facilities in Kolkata and Wada, I noticed that educators were intensely involved in the lives of their students. For example, educators at Prajwal would regularly conduct home visits and at the respite care center, Jyoti, in Wada, residents would live with teachers and staff for five days of the week. Within this context, in addition to teaching, special educators played a large role in the lives of their intellectually disabled students by caring for them in various ways: helping them use the toilet, reminding them to take medication, and accompanying them during meals. The divide between public and private was blurred in these institutional spaces and special educators spent a considerable amount of time teaching appropriate public and private behaviors to their students. Educators had a say on the most intimate aspects of their students' lives.

Indeed, anxieties around teaching students how to appropriately use the toilet, bathe, and dress came up time and again when I interviewed special educators. While I was initially perplexed, I soon came to realize that the body was a focus of intervention for special educators. They viewed sexuality as a concept encompassing activities like toileting, bathing, and dressing. Since teaching students to govern their bodies and its supposedly involuntary processes and urges in socially appropriate ways was one of the major goals for special educators, they often shared their experiences around matters of sexuality by first broaching the topic of personal hygiene. Bunty, an enthusiastic 22-year-old teacher at Jyoti, had interesting comments on the process of toilet training:

Toilet training is a very good example. It is very hard for these children because they remove their clothes anywhere. . . . So, things like bathing, to close the door

or not . . . or if it has to be done, for example if it's a joint family and there is less space, how do we adjust there? Who is in front of us? If they are ladies and bathing then it is okay, if it is gents, then it is wrong. So, making them realize, see, who is in front of you, you shouldn't do these things in front of them.

In Bunny's narrative, bathing, changing clothes, and going to the toilet, though far removed from the act of sex, are enfolded into the discourse around sexuality, as these activities focus on the body and the body in relation and potentially on display to others. The body is viewed as both the site of sexuality and social personhood and transgressing any rules around these activities threatens both the safety of the body of the individual as well as the normative social order.

Across my interactions at different institutional sites, special educators talked about masturbation. While no one said that masturbation was wrong, they shared diverse strategies for managing masturbation, since it was viewed as a problem behavior. Bunty said that while masturbation is natural, it can be controlled if his students, all of whom are boys, are kept busy with a consistent routine of waking up, using the toilet, brushing, having tea, and going for a walk. While Bunty shared his anticipatory structure of using routine as a distraction with his students, Pallavi talked about her tactic of involving the fathers of her students. She stated,

The boys are doing masturbation in the classroom situation, they are doing it as often as they want to release their urge and we have seen that lot of boys, they don't know how to handle their discharge. . . . In that case, we always try to teach the father.

Pallavi directly articulates the problem of "handling" masturbation. In her narrative, masturbation appears as a socially problematic behavior in the classroom space. In recruiting support from parents, Pallavi demonstrates how the public and private are yet again blurred when educators and parents collaborate to direct the sexuality of intellectually disabled people.

Special educators also talked about love during our interviews. They acknowledged that their students have crushes, fall in love, and think about getting married. These discussions usually pertained to students considered capable of having romantic desires, namely, people with mild intellectual disabilities, while students diagnosed with significant disabilities were perceived as only having bodily needs. Educators made this distinction because they associated having romantic feelings with having an inner world and an ability to understand one's own thoughts and feelings. This was something they only saw people with milder intellectual disabilities as being capable of, since these individuals could express their feelings using spoken language and exist in the social world in more independent ways, something significantly intellectually disabled people could not.

Thus, sexuality was not only viewed as a problem that needed containment but different disabled subjects were being limited by differing and fixed understandings of what they are or are not capable of thinking and feeling regarding their own sexuality. The anticipatory structures set up by educators did not allow for uncertainty. They fixed students into levels of disability, anticipated the nature of desires to be expected from each category of disability, and carefully choreographed their interactions. Instead, if educators collaborated with intellectually disabled people and made space for uncertainty, perhaps it could lead to the emergence of new relational possibilities. Before addressing these relational possibilities, I turn next to the final site—Rishtey.



## Heteronormative Love and Marriage: Technical Solutions

“One billion people. 15 percent of the world’s population. World’s largest minority. They are under-served. We were disheartened. We had to do something because no one deserves to be alone”. I start with a quote from the “About us” section of Rishtey’s<sup>7</sup> website. I met Shalini, the CEO and cofounder of the matchmaking platform Rishtey, on a hot afternoon in her office in Gurgaon, Haryana. After having heard of Rishtey from workshop participants at the Jigyasa Center, I contacted Shalini via email. She responded promptly and was happy to set up a time for an interview. The office was located in the basement of a building in a locality that appeared to be fancy but residential. The bathrooms displayed elaborate signage indicating it was accessible to disabled people, the doors to meeting rooms were unusually large so that people using wheelchairs could easily come in, and though located in the basement, it was accessible by a lift. Observing its built environment made me realize that Rishtey was unlike the rights-based Jigyasa Center or the special education field-sites I had encountered thus far. At the end of her interview, Shalini told me that she is not an activist. She shared that though rights and laws are very important, who is going to help you to get a cup of coffee? Shalini framed Rishtey, a for-profit platform, as a space for forging intimate connections for disabled people. What was Rishtey’s organizational logic and what kind of intimate connections did this logic allow for? On the website itself, Rishtey anticipated disabled people as having a problem, as “underserved,” which necessitated the platform to “do something” In the rest of this section, I delve into Rishtey’s overarching narrative, vision, and operationalization. I demonstrate that Rishtey is a technical anticipatory platform that adopts a problem-centered approach to questions of love and marriage and foregrounds normative intimate connections.

During our interview, Shalini told me that her passion was always matchmaking. When I asked her why disability, she said that wanted to do something different from regular matchmaking apps and thought of community-based matchmaking. She was of the belief that people with similar experiences connect better. She set out to create a platform for people ignored on other platforms. While Rishtey was an inclusive platform in theory, its membership heavily skewed toward disabled people, with 70 percent of its members being disabled and the rest being non-disabled. Though the statistic itself is not a problem and there is nothing wrong with disabled people themselves choosing to interact with, date, and marry other disabled people, the structure of the platform encouraged this option, without any concrete consultation with disabled people. Instead of asking why non-disabled people do not consider disabled people as equal partners, it assumed that disabled people need help accessing love and that is best facilitated by creating a separate platform that emphasizes their disability, rather than working toward making existent matchmaking platforms more accessible to disabled people.<sup>8</sup>

How did Rishtey operationalize its vision of being a matchmaking platform that served disabled people? Shalini explained to me that to make a profile, you had to specify whether you want dating, friendship, companionship, or marriage, categories that she had set up. You also had to clarify whether you have a disability or do not. If you did, you had to specify what kind: physical, intellectual, or health disorder. Then you had to specify whether you wanted someone with a disability or not. Once this was complete, the app directed people to profiles. The app provided you with predetermined disability categories based on the relatively new disability law, the RPD Act (2016). The RPD Act gave effect to the UNCRPD and is viewed as an improvement over the previous disability law in many ways, one of which is the inclusion of 21 new disability categories, including health disorders and acid-attack survivors within its purview. Rishtey depended on categories of disability sanctioned by the Indian state to operationalize their platform. These categories, while valuable for accessing welfare entitlements, are medicalized and static. They do not draw directly from the lived experiences of disabled people.

Shalini also shared with me that while multiple disability categories existed on the app, most of their users were people with physical disabilities, followed by health disorders, and lastly, by people with intellectual disabilities. In Shalini's words, the reason for the distribution was as follows:

Every intellectual disability comes with a limitation of how you use the app. People with autism cannot use our app, and people with schizophrenia . . . it may not be safe for them to use the app sometimes. . . . They may just have a sudden outburst and scare somebody else on the platform.

Thus, people with intellectual disabilities and mental illnesses were viewed as being incapable of participation or as being threatening to other users, respectively. These assumptions limited the user-base of Rishtey to only certain disabled people (i.e., people with physical disabilities).

While there were predetermined disability categories to choose from, when it came to sexual orientation, Rishtey did not provide the option of choosing your preferred gender(s). If you were a man, you could only choose a woman and vice-a-versa. Shalini told me that the app users were not highly educated and got confused by the gender preference option (by thinking the app was asking for their gender). Noting that she will make the option available in the future, she said, "Most of the people that are on the app, if you see their chats, they speak in Hindi. So, they don't understand the concept of same gender orientation and all that."

Shalini's argument implies a binary that codes queerness as a Western concept that is accessed through an English education, a language associated with upper-class and caste privilege in India. On the other side of the binary are disabled folks who are largely uneducated and thus do not understand the concept of queerness. This logic restricts disabled (and non-disabled) people from forging any connections beyond the norms of heterosexuality.

Not all heterosexual pairings were equally valued on the platform. The possibility most highlighted for disabled people was marriage. The website's home page had a section that highlighted its success stories with photographs of happy looking couples, many of whom were in traditional Hindu wedding garb. Marriage, instead of sex or other forms of intimacy, was promoted as the ideal form of love. Thus, Rishtey was a technological structure that anticipated disabled people as having a problem of not being able to find life partners on their own. Within this framework, disabled people were bracketed off as being capable of inhabiting only certain identities, expressions, and institutions. The solution to the anticipated problem of singledom among disabled people ended up being marriage. Instead of learning from disabled people about their desires, Rishtey fixed disabled people's sexuality as a problem and ended up limiting how people could be both disabled and sexual while using the platform. In the next section, I talk about companionship, an option on Rishtey's platform that provided a non-normative alternative to marriage.

## Moving from Static Problems to Messy Relationalities

Having analyzed how sexuality is anticipated as a problem at each site, in the final section I bring these sites together and demonstrate how each site holds within it the potential to transcend the problem-centered framework by problematizing sexuality through the lens of "sexual facilitation" (Kulick & Rydström, 2015). Don Kulick and Jens Rydström base their model of sexual facilitation on their ethnographic study in Denmark where cognitively disabled people engage in a multitude of sexual activities in collaboration with caregivers and professionals. In their formulation, the authors question the framing of sex as a right. In their words, "No. Because if sex is a right, what—or, more to the point, whom—is it a right to?" (2015, 19).

Instead of focusing on sex as a right to sexual access, they urge for more interventions that “facilitate disabled people’s capacity to engage in a range of social and emotional relations with other people” (2015, 20). In this section, I turn to illustrations from these fieldsites that demonstrate an approach of sexual facilitation and argue that facilitation is a form of problematization in that it opens uncertain, and relational possibilities for disabled people.

At Jigyasa Center, an instance of sexual facilitation came up during the panel of disability and sexuality at the three-day workshop on disability and gender I attended. Latika introduced sexuality as a problem area in the lives of disabled people and argued that social and attitudinal barriers get in the way of them accessing sexual opportunities at par with non-disabled people. To delve deeper into the subject, she presented case studies of disabled people who had approached the center seeking advice regarding their sexuality. One such story was about a woman who shared that she had met her husband through a newspaper matrimonial advertisement without knowing beforehand that he had mild autism and he had no interest in having a sexual relationship. She asked what to do in this situation. Latika opened the question to the workshop participants and asked, “What should have been our answer?” This led to a lively conversation about how nuanced the situation is and how tricky it is for the organization to provide any one solution. One participant suggested counselling, to which Latika responded, “Of whom? The husband, wife, or parents?” He continued that the wife should talk to the husband, they should see a counsellor, and figure out what each person wants, to which another participant responded by asking, “how can I keep my sexual desires repressed by reaching an agreement?” Someone suggested that if the couple agrees, they might seek sexual pleasure outside marriage while someone else brought up divorce as a possibility. Finally, after considering all the possibilities and realizing that none of them was ideal, a workshop participant asked Latika what steps this woman should follow. Latika responded by saying, “Should I decide for her?” In Latika’s opinion, Jigyasa Center cannot give a yes/no answer. They could provide the woman with options ranging from filing for divorce to acceptance of life as it is, but the woman had to decide for herself. Latika said that in a situation like this, people often need someone to talk to, someone who will be there to listen. This was a task that Jigyasa Center was ready to take up. In facilitating multiple and contradictory sexual possibilities and creating a space for her to talk through her concerns, Latika engages in a process of problematization.

In the field-site of special education, I witnessed an instance of sexual facilitation during my recent fieldwork in India in 2021–2022 with special educators at Udaan, a newly registered, nongovernmental arts and vocational center in Pune. From its inception in 2017, Udaan had always prioritized principles of fun and pleasure. While activities like cooking, arts, and crafts were conducted, the so-called less productive activities such as music and camping were pursued with equal enthusiasm. Furthermore, the founders of Udaan, a married couple named Sarika and Sahil recognized and facilitated the sexual needs of their students, even those with significant disabilities, since they approached sexuality as a “natural” phenomenon experienced by everyone. Sarika and Sahil especially loved talking about two of their students, Geeta and Swarup. When I asked them how they knew that Geeta and Swarup were interested in each other, Sarika told me that Swarup showed his interest in Geeta by taking care of her by applying ointment to her feet. Geeta’s feelings for Swarup were interpreted through her gestures and body language. Whenever they would ask her where Swarup is, Geeta would clasp her hands together, smile, and look sideways in a seemingly mischievous way, which was interpreted as her interest in him. Sarika and Sahil facilitated this relationship by letting Swarup and Geeta spend alone time in a room, where they would cuddle and sometimes kiss. They would keep a watch on them but let them be as well. In making uncertain and generous interpretations regarding the sexuality of their students, and subsequently facilitating it, the founders of Udaan engaged in problematization. They centered the relationship that Geeta and Swarup shared, instead of focusing on enforcing socially normative behavior. In doing so, they opened previously unavailable sexual pathways for them.

At Rishtey, the matchmaking platform, the option of companionship was a facilitative, relational, and open-ended alternative to the problem-centered solution of heteronormative marriage. When I asked Shalini, Rishtey's founder, to elaborate on what the category of companionship implied, she told me that when Rishtey took off, people between the ages of 40 and 70 years started making enquiries about the app and shared that because of their disabilities or financial status, they could not get married but wanted to meet someone now. Hence, she created the category of companionship. She shared, "Both just want to stay with their families, but you want that sense of belonging, that you have somebody in your life." Rishtey indeed already provided an option for people seeking something more open-ended and less defined than marriage. Shalini understood companionship as a decision taken in the absence of options. Nevertheless, companionship was a possibility that enabled disabled people, in difficult situations, to make connections that did not fit into normative institutions.

Thus, across the three sites of disability activism, special education, and matchmaking, problematizing sexuality through facilitation decentered normative solutions and provided non-normative relational possibilities. Whether it was activists listening to and facilitating people to make their own sexual decisions, educators interpreting and acting upon intellectually disabled people's sexual desires, or a matchmaking platform providing non-heteronormative relationship options, there did exist possibilities that centered relational collaborations and intimacies, rather than a singular normative path. In moving from a problem-centered approach to a sexual facilitation approach that problematizes the domain of sexuality, the sites of disability activism, education, and matchmaking open multiple relational possibilities for disabled people that are uncertain yet perhaps ultimately fulfilling.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for individuals and organizations.

<sup>2</sup> I encountered organizations that addressed the intersection of disability and sexuality in other ways, including publishing policy and research reports and representing disabled people's voices through internet blogs. Much like Jigyasa Center, these organizations adhered to a human rights discourse. Thus, while Jigyasa Center is not fully representative, it is similar and connected to other rights-based efforts/organizations around disability and sexuality in India.

<sup>3</sup> In the sections below, I explore how gender, disability status, and sexual orientation shape the constituencies of disabled people served by the different fieldsites. Jigyasa Center focused on disabled women, special education sites engaged with intellectually disabled adults, and Rishtey catered to heterosexual physically disabled people.

<sup>4</sup> While the problem-centered approach is an emic concept that was articulated by my interlocutors (with them variously referring to the problem of sexual violence, the problem of masturbation, or the problem of finding love and marriage), problematization is an etic concept I use to describe the relational and facilitative practices that I witnessed which went against the problem-centered approach.

<sup>5</sup> I conducted the interviews in English, Marathi, Hindi, and Bengali, which I later translated into English.

<sup>6</sup> Following Linton (2006), I acknowledge that neither intellectually disabled people nor their education are "special." Nevertheless, I use the term to stay close to the words used by my interlocutors.

<sup>7</sup> Rishtey translates to relationships in Hindi. Rishtey had to shut down in 2019 when investors started pulling out because the platform could not show a growth in user numbers.

<sup>8</sup> Many disabled people I interacted with during the Jigyasa Center workshop and in other contexts have critiqued the creation of a segregated matchmaking space for disabled people.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I firstly want to sincerely thank all my interlocutors for sharing their worlds and expertise with me, even though I cannot express my gratitude using their real names. This research has been supported at various stages by the Pozen Family Center for Human Rights, Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago, the Wenner- Gren Foundation, and the University of Chicago. I am hugely grateful for the multiple conversations with and com-

ments from Dr. Michele Friedner- writing this article would not have been possible without her constant support . I also want to thank Dr. Alyson Patsavas, Dr. Eugene Raikhel, and Dr. Constantine V. Nakassis for their insightful feedback.

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**How to cite this article:** Vaidya, Shruti. From Problem-Centered to Centering Relationalities: Engagements with Disability and Sexuality in India. *Feminist Anthropology*. 2023;1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12127>