# Digital Hijras:
## Intersex/ tions of Postcolonial and Queer Digital Humanities

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## Abstract

The goal of this talk is to historically and critically read hijras' (M2F transgender women's) identities on social media platforms of *Bombay Dost* (*BD*) – namely the organization's Facebook group page. I engage in this research as a means for complicating and extending the ways in which digital identities come together in the purview of publications in Digital India. In this vein, there are two key Digital Humanities readings that I would turn to: 1) Roopika Risam's 2018 monograph titled *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press) and 2) "Queer Digital Humanities" by Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe in the recently published collection *Bodies of Information: Feminism and Intersectionality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) by co-editors Jacqueline Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh. These readings open up an avenue that allows us to critically meditate on the link between gender, sexuality, and the digital milieu in postcolonial India in the 21st century.

As Bhavya Dore notes, there were other queer print publications in India before *BD*, but the latter "became India's first gay publication to be registered, which is a bureaucratic requirement that allows a publication to be sent in the post…In the first four years, the magazine wasn't just a printed publication, it was an all-purpose platform" (2016).This difference between *BD* and all other LGBTQ publications in India at the time is a crucial one with respect to availability and dissemination, especially for those who reside outside of major metropolitan center like Mumbai (formerly called "Bombay").

I turn my critical acumen to *BD*'s social media platform because it re- configures accessibility on the "all-purpose platform," in Dore's words, of social media in the twenty-first century. It is on this electronic stage of hyperlinked identities and corresponding data conglomerations that contemporary identities in India are being transformed and made visible to a digitally literate public. According to Sandip Roy, such internet sites moreover globally enable safe, anonymous spaces while facilitating e-commerce and even the sale of condoms (Roy 2003: 188). This safe space, however, is profoundly shaped by the British colonialist laws that framed gender and sexuality during the reign of the Crown throughout the subcontinent.

The evolution of *BD*'s print culture to hypertext (cross-referenced, or "linked," electronic texts that contain graphics and often other links), from 1990 to 2016, demonstrates the contradictory position of queer South Asian agents in the world's largest democracy. The flows, disruptions, and consequences of these individuals in queer India will continue to foster and shape, through online communities fostered by *Bombay Dost*'s Facebook group page, and how they form alternative online communities that facilitate real life interactions despite the social media juggernaut's criticism for spreading fake news and pandering to capitalist perversions. One example is the use of the social media platform to champion India's first transgender band, The 6 Pack Band (pictured below), who achieved acclaim throughout South Asia for its remake of Pharrel's pop song "Happy." These digital subjects who stretch the limitations of gender — and thus of sexuality, third world feminism, intersectional thought, etc. — also challenge spatial configurations of identity, time, space, and place as they renegotiate identities that they are absorbed and inflected by the dawning of queer cybercultures in the digital public sphere.



HUL's 6-Pack Band

**About the speaker**

Dr Rahul Krishna Gairola is The Krishna Somers Lecturer in English & Postcolonial Literature and a Fellow of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in Greater Perth, Western Australia. He is a co-author of *Migration, Gender and Home Economics in Rural North India* (Routledge, 2019), author of *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belonging* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), and a co-editor of *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, & Politics* (Orient Blackswan/ Lexington Books, 2016). He is also co- editor with Roopika Risam of the *South Asian Digital Humanities Then and Now* special issue of *South Asian Review* (Taylor & Francis) and co-editor with Martin Roth of the *Digital Spatiality* special issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia* (Brill Publishers). He is, with Dr Bina Fernandez (University of Melbourne), co-editor of the Routledge South Asian book series of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), and editor of the forthcoming volume Trauma, Memory, and Healing in Asian Literature and Culture (Routledge, 2020) in loving memory of Sharanya Jayawickrama.