

November 23, 2009

## A room of one's own

Sexual minorities occupy an odd place in the sub-continent's culture. Though their collective roots are ancient, in most situations, they live in closed societies, banding together to brace against widespread discrimination. After years of humiliating social stigmatisation, abuse and contempt from the wider community, the traditional Indian mindset is beginning to alter and changes are taking place in terms of how this group is being treated and recognised. The latest is the Election Commission's announcement that transgenders will hereafter be referred to as “others” in electoral rolls. We spoke to activists and members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community on how far they still have to go.

### Equal opportunity

Transgenders have been battling the system for long. However, LGBT people have been able to assert themselves only in the past seven to eight years. I wish the rights of sexual minorities are recognised. We need bold policymakers, an amendment in the law on transgenders' right to employment, and more policies aimed at ensuring equal opportunity in private and government employment. We need strong anti-discrimination laws. Equality and dignity for transgenders — that's the change I'd like to see. Parents are the root cause for transgenders' miseries. If they had accepted their transgender children, you wouldn't find these many of them begging and doing sex work. Often, they are school dropouts. When they choose to embrace the new life, the first thing they miss is schooling. And, because of the social stigma, no one gives them a job. Even if they do, the pay is less, and so, many return to sex work and begging.



*KALKI*

*Founder-Director, Sahodari Foundation, Chennai*

## **Head-start**

My blog is not only personal, it attempts to represent my community — that of the transgenders. Through it, I attempt to reinvent how mainstream communities look at transgenders, how a better visual representation in films will actually help the community, and how transgenders need their own space to thrive in. Most of our films show transgenders in poor light, either as villains or as objects of derision. The Censor Board should also look at how this community is being represented.

I wish the government, instead of terming us as 'others', comes up with advertisements that highlight the plight of the community. Loans, training and self-employment measures will help take the community from its low-end professions of begging and sex work to better avenues of earning. We want our space, and would like to be treated like other human beings. I ask only that we be given a head-start.



### *LIVING SMILE VIDYA*

*Writer and Assistant Director,*

*Tamil Film Industry, Chennai*

## **The need for acceptance**

The Delhi-based Naz Foundation (India) Trust's programme on the sexual health and rights of MSM and transgenders was initiated in 1994. It helps create a sense of solidarity, besides a space and support network for accessing information and guidance on issues affecting their lives. We conduct outreach programmes in cruising areas, and massage parlours to disseminate information on safer sexual practices, distribute pamphlets, provide telephone and face-to-face counselling, and refer people for HIV testing and treatment and support group meetings. Trainings are conducted with Community-based organizations, students, NGOs, and medical professionals to ensure awareness and advocacy. Legal and social intervention should focus on inclusiveness, equality and acceptance of all forms of sexuality. Our society needs to be more sensitive to them. The acceptance of transgenders as human beings is the need of the hour. Social empowerment will help integrate them within the mainstream.



*ANJALI GOPALAN*

*Executive Director*

*The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, New Delhi*

### **Community support**

Center for Counselling counsels members of the LGBT community. It also runs support group sessions for them in English and Tamil. We also run support groups for parents and siblings of transgenders. We need to treat all people with dignity and respect, irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation. Unfortunately, the majority heterosexual community believes that those who have same-sex relationships are not normal and must, therefore, change. I would like to see transgenders well-qualified, and in good jobs. And, that, as a community, we provide a supportive environment for them to be who they are.



*Magdalene Jeyarathnam*

*Counsellor and Director*

*Center for Counselling, Chennai*

### **Love, actually**

I've been an activist for LGBT rights for the last 12 years. It's just that the mass media has taken a long time to recognise the work in this field. Even the lawsuit reading down Section 377 has been going on for many years.

First of all, the word sexual minorities. We are not just sexual people. Yes, we do like to have sex with someone of the same gender, but we also love the person emotionally. What is so wrong with loving? Life is not all about procreation, and there is no need to demonise LGBT people. My film, “I Am” is particularly about parents of gay and lesbian people living in India.

The Government's decision to allow 'other' as an option in electoral rolls is a step in the right direction; however to be clubbed as 'other' is not. What is wrong in just having a category called 'transgender'?



*Sonali Gulati*

*Assistant Professor in Film,*

*Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia*