



Hotelier and Section 377 crusader Keshav Suri celebrates after the Supreme Court decision on Sept 6

IS A LOVED ONE GAY?

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For the LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community in India, the decriminalization of homosexuality by the Supreme Court is one of the first steps in getting basic rights and fair treatment from the government. **I**ntr



oduced in 1861 during the British rule of India, Section 377 has influenced several generations of Indians to perceive homosexuality as immoral. Although Indian citizens have rarely been prosecuted for engaging in homosexual acts under Section 377, this law has largely been used to blackmail, intimidate, and

discriminate against Indians whose LGBTQ statuses are discovered. In effect, Section 377 functioned to censor the voices, experiences, and identities of many LGBTQ Indians, forcing most to remain in the shadows.

While this ruling is an enormous step for human rights in India, the change will also impact Indian-American families. Discussions surrounding LGBTQ topics will no doubt become less taboo in Indian circles. Close friends or family members may be more likely to build up the courage to reveal their LGBTQ identities. Children may ask questions as LGBTQ people become more visible in Indian media. This article will help readers become more familiar with LGBTQ topics so that they will be able to confidently approach any of the situations mentioned above. The article will also provide informa-

tion on issues impacting the Indian-American LGBTQ community today.

MISCONCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Many Indians immigrated to the United States of America to provide more opportunities and a better life for their children. With this brave step often came expectations of their children's lives in this great country. As a result of several misconceptions, when a child comes out as LGBTQ, their parents may feel as if everything they dreamed for their child will vanish. Parents who have not had much exposure to this topic might have certain misunderstandings about what it means to be part of the LGBTQ community and how others will react in response to their children's sexualities. In fact, some who are part of the Indian-American LGBTQ community have wondered if their Indian parents might worry more about 'Log Kya Kahenge?' (What will people think?) than their own well-being. Below are some facts about LGBTQ people that should help to dispel some common myths.

Homosexuality is found in all cultures around the world. For many South Asians, there is a misconception that homosexuality is an influence from the Western world. Occasionally, there might even be discussions of sending LGBTQ children back to India to 'save' them from this 'Western influence.' In actuality, the Indian government reported that about 2.5 million Indians self-declared themselves as gay to the Health Ministry in 2012. In the United States, about 325,000 or 2.8% of Asians recently identified as LGBTQ.

Homosexuality is not a choice and is not influenced by parenting styles. There is conclusive data that our sexual orientation or gender identity are not conscious decisions that we can make ourselves. There is nothing that parents can do that would influence their children's sexualities or gender identities. Parents can, however, have an influence on whether children choose to share these feel-

ings, or decide to hide their feelings in shame and despair, something that can lead to disastrous mental health consequences. Although the exact mechanism by which sexual orientation and gender identity are determined is not known, LGBTQ people often become aware of their differences at a young age.

Homosexuality is as natural as heterosexuality. Scientific evidence has determined that homosexuality is part of the expected spectrum seen within human sexuality. When considering all of the planet's animals, homosexual behavior has been observed in over 1500 different species across the animal kingdom. As it is not what a majority of individuals experience, many incorrectly state that it is unnatural. However, this would be the same as stating that it is 'against human nature' to have blue eyes, or 'unnatural' to be left-handed.

Being part of the LGBTQ community is not a mental illness and does not limit one's life. Homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973. 'Gender dysphoria' remains a diagnosis referring to people who may struggle with their gender identity. They may require psychological support to help them manage being different in a society that doesn't fully accept them, however the treatment may ultimately be one that is medical (hormone treatment) or surgical (gender-affirming surgery). Attempting to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity through therapy is unethical and has been found to be psychologically-damaging.

As there is more representation of LGBTQ Indians and role models, these stereotypes will change. Already, we have some influential people with Indian backgrounds who are open about their LGBTQ identities. Just a handful of current LGBTQ role models include: Aryan Pasha, an Indian lawyer and bodybuilder; Leo Varadkar, the prime minister of Ireland; Ritu Dalmia, celebrity chef and restaurateur; Gautam Radhavan, an activist who served in the Obama Administration; Manabi Bandhopad-



LGBTIQ supporters celebrate after the Supreme Court in a landmark decision decriminalized homosexuality by declaring Section 377, the penal provision which criminalized gay sex, as 'manifestly arbitrary' in Bangaluru on Sept 6

hyay, an openly transgender doctor of philosophy and college principal; Karan Johar, Bollywood film producer, director, and television host; and author Devdutt Pattanaik, who publicly acknowledged that he is part of the LGBTQ community only after the recent Supreme Court ruling.

LGBTQ INDIAN-AMERICANS

LGBTQ Indians in the United States experience unique challenges and social complexities. Although homosexuality has long been decriminalized and same-sex marriage legalized in this country, many LGBTQ Indian-Americans still struggle when they realize they are different.

In Indian families, oftentimes the behavior of one member is thought to represent the family as a whole. As a result, some think that being open about their sexual or gender minority status might smear a family's reputation. Some parents may accept their

children's sexuality as long as they keep it hidden from the rest of the community. For families who maintain the tradition of arranged marriage, there is worry that revealing the LGBTQ status of a family member might spoil marriage prospects for their siblings.

Research has shown that South Asian immigrant parents sometimes place social pressures on their children, causing children then to lead 'double lives.' Indian-American children may feel pushed to have one life where they accept their parents' wishes, and another where they secretly follow the desires which their parents might find unacceptable. This can be a regular occurrence for LGBTQ Indian-Americans leading many to experience feelings of anxiety and loneliness in response to having these double lives.

Another major aspect when one is both Indian-American and LGBTQ is the 'double minority' concept. LGBTQ Indian-Americans face homophobia and racism from the general population, racism from the LGBTQ community itself, and homophobia from the South Asian community. When one is a double minority, it can be more difficult to find others who relate to your experiences.

Discovering one's sexuality can be full of embarrassment, shame, and uneasiness. When there is no community that understands what you are going through, it can lead to self-hatred, low self-esteem, alcohol and drug use, and even suicide thoughts. Despite these added stressors, people who are LGBTQ often lead productive, successful, and happy lives, especially if they are accepted by their families and communities. Unconditional love and support from family and friends has been shown to decrease risky, self-destructive behaviors. South Asian LGBTQ groups are forming all around the country, and perceptions are changing at a rapid pace. This momentum will only be propelled by repeal of Section 377 both in India and America.

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