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Conversion Therapy: Glimpsing through the Indian Lens

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INTRODUCTION

India is not a country that forgets easily its controversies, as we have often seen with such issues in the LGBTQ+ community whether it has been the same-sex marriage issue or something as flamboyant as the sports controversy. Their unconventional lifestyles have always been making the headlines. With me belonging to Generation Z, it would be weird if a long-standing friend came out as non-binary, or a 50-year-old math teacher announced she was trans. Embracing diversity may prove difficult to most people who follow traditional ways of thinking, especially during Pride month. Traditional views are very common, such as women being caregivers, men being breadwinners, children carrying on family business, and so on. This attitude is very deep-seated, and the notion of LGBTQ+ counters the conventional understanding of reproduction in the sense that same-sex partners do not have an option to have children except through adoption, sperm donation for lesbians, or gestational carrying for surrogacy in gays.

Now, take a moment.

When a child, say 16 years of age, realises that he is, attracted to both male and female, in a household like India, it is not particularly the best feeling. For someone whose family has always been after a having a solid plan. “*Pacchis pe naukri, chabbis pe chokri, tees pe bacche, saath pe retirement aur phir maut ka intezaar*” — a very famous and pervasive dialogue which was used in the film “*Yeh Jawani Hai Dewaani*”. Strangely enough, that describes 80% of the people of our country. For some, this may seem like the one thing they’re meant to achieve in life. For some, a dream such as this might be too much to afford, and for some, life doesn’t stop there.

I mentioned earlier how Indian parents and their ancestors are cultured in traditional stereotypes. For them, anything that departs from the norm is taboo. But what if that 12-year-old

daughter, who has always been fascinated with Barbie dolls and princess movies, realizes that she is attracted to girls? While many families welcome this discovery and make their child's happiness paramount, other families are less able to accept it and seek out conversion therapy. Looking at the matter in greater depth, however, puts conversion therapy into a very sinister light.

And trust me, that sounds a lot worse when you dig deeper into it.

WHAT EXACTLY IS CONVERSION THERAPY?

It is obvious that the practice referred to as "conversion therapy" bears no resemblance to therapeutic practice in any traditional understanding of the term. In fact, this term encompasses a wide range of discredited techniques purporting to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. For many years, these techniques have been generally condemned by reputable medical and mental health organizations, yet they are still performed by some practitioners due in great part to ongoing prejudice and societal bias against LGBTQ+ people. This therapy poses enormous risks, particularly for minors, who may possibly come to suffer from depression, anxiety, substance abuse, homelessness, or even suicides. It is comforting to know that California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, and most others have placed laws in place to safeguard the lives of their citizens against this lethal service of conversion therapy. There are religious groups on the right that try to push this therapy through religious practice or the belief that praying to God can change a person's sexuality and gender identity. They advocate it through prayers or other religious means.

DOCTOR SAID, "LET'S TRY TO CHANGE HER"

I'll tell you a story about a young woman. To those who read news about the rights of LGBTQ+, it couldn't have been long ago when Meenakshi Sajeesh was dragged into a hospital and subjected to conversion therapy. This is where the doctor went on record saying, "Let's fix her."

Reflecting on this statement, ask yourself this question: Was there something fundamentally wrong with her to begin with?

Meenakshi Sajeesh was in her twenties. Her parents had taken her on a trip. They did not tell her where they were going. And so, before long, she found herself standing at the gates of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church Medical College in Kochi, Kerala. If you searched for her, you would have found that she is rather petite,

with a beautiful smile and gorgeous black hair that falls down to the waist. Such beauty is savoured and guarded at whatever cost. However, the moment she saw the place, the colour utterly drained from her face and her stomach dropped. She did not say anything.

They say a parent's love is unlike any other. It was that "love" that led her parents to bring her here to "cure her," after she had come out to them as a lesbian just a week earlier. Love is a strange thing, isn't it? You never know the lengths it will drive you to. The boundaries between good and bad, insensitivity and humanity seem to blur when love is involved.

She didn't waste any time; as soon as she left the doctor's clinic, she telephoned her friends and told them everything about the experience. She wisely pressed the record button of her phone thinking they might confiscate this also from her. She hid it in case they confined her somewhere or took her to their place.

The doctor, apparently a woman around the middle years of her age proposed, "Let's try to shift her." Further she proposed admitting her to the psychiatric ward without going into any further details of her treatment in her presence.

Brave Sanjeesh responded that she had nothing wrong with her in the first place, so no change whatsoever was required. The remarks of the doctor gave her parents "false hopes" and scared her considerably. She told her parents, "I am never going to another facility like this again. I will never agree to this again." "I don't know if I would be alive today if I had agreed," she said about standing up for herself. "I don't think I would have even left that place," she added.

Sajeesh's conversation with Abraham, which is also recorded, forms part of the writ of petition filed by a community-based LGBT organisation, Queerala, in October 2020 before the High Court of Kerala. Here, Sajeesh is identified as one of the co-petitioners along with a 46-year-old woman who, following marital problems, had gone to a psychotherapist for counselling to "cure" herself of her same-sex orientation and had revealed this to her husband in 2018.

The petition looks forward to banning "conversion therapy, harmful and scientifically discredited methods aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression." The reasoning behind the petition was the findings of the fact-finding visit by Queerala in 2019, when this organization learnt that "conversion therapy" was being administered by no

less than 20 healthcare professionals in the state. If the petition succeeds, judgments from the Supreme Court would be pushed upon those advocating conversion therapy, thereby criminalizing them. "Members of Queerala said they have confirmed their legal team is prepared to move the case to the Supreme Court if it is rejected.

THE TRAGIC REALITIES OF CONVERSION THERAPY IN INDIA

It does not end there from hypnosis to weird religious rites and even stories in India's shocking tales. Dev's parents took her to a temple on the outskirts of Pune, Maharashtra, and what happened there would leave a permanent scar on her life, a deep wound resonating through time. Born male, she knew that "I was too feminine for boys' company, too masculine to be friends with girls." From the earliest recollection of her existence, she felt that her identity constituted such an aberrant example.

What happened next will shock you. The baba, to whom she was taken to, made her sit inside a circle which was bordered with a petrol drip setting the circle on fire. A big pumpkin was set on her head which was sliced open half with a sharp swordlike structure. Even for a moment, to think of what she had been thinking, is enough to scare a person out of their wits. Blood oozed out, as a tuft of her hair seemed to have been cut as the sword had struck her scalp. But there she was, jumping out of the ring of fire, without causing any scene, calmly descended the hilltop because she was aware if she caused a ruckus, she wouldn't have been let out of there. Making her wear ornaments, rings and necklaces, putting powder in her food, you name it, the most bizarre of methods were tried on her, leaving her traumatised. The baba was later found out to be a *dhongi* (imposter) who was charged with sexual harassment.

As if this wasn't the worse, Div had later tried committing suicide by swallowing a bunch of sleeping pills but fortunately enough she was rushed to the hospital and her life was saved.

Rianna Price, a PhD student studying the origins of psychiatric conversation on the "treatment" of homosexuality in India, observes that conversion efforts arose from resistance techniques used by psychiatrists to treat behavioural disorders — whenever a patient engaged in inappropriate conduct, they were subjected to stimuli that would cause discomfort.

In 2014, for example, the Indian Psychiatric Society issued a statement declaring that homosexuality was not a mental illness

or disease after former president Dr Indira Sharma made controversial statements about queer people, arguing that they make people uncomfortable by bringing their “talk of sex to the roads.”¹

LEGAL STATUS IN INDIA

The Madras High Court in Chennai on Sunday, 10 July put out a string of directions aimed at uplifting the LGBTQ+ community. Amongst several actions, it asked the National Medical Council, or NMC, to label "conversion therapy" as professional misconduct.

This is after a string of previous orders the court had issued, demanding that the NMC make sure that state Medical Councils inform it that conversion therapy is a form of misconduct in order to bring uniformity of rules.

Justice Anand Venkatesh of the bench was presiding over the matter regarding Draft Conduct Regulations 2022, in which he noted that despite earlier orders, the draft had classified gender-based discrimination only as misconduct and excluded mention of "conversion therapy".

This led *S. Sushma v Commissioner of Police*², to be the landmark under this aspect. After running away from their respective houses in Madurai, petitioners, a lesbian couple whose parents were against their relationship, came to Chennai for shelter. NGOs and members of the queer community helped them find lodging and safety and simultaneously search for employment to finance themselves. Meanwhile, their parents lodged independent missing persons cases with the local police, which resulted in two First Information Reports (FIRs). In fear of safety at the hands of police, the couple approached the court seeking directive to stop police harassment and protection against the threat/ hazard posed by parents.

The question before the Court was whether it should positively direct the police to desist from hounding the Petitioners and give police protection. However, after deciding on the former issue, the counsel for the Petitioners pressed upon the Court the question of issuing further directions for other comparable cases.

The main plea was thus accommodated by the Government Advocate for police who assured that the police would be

¹ Nolina Minj, *The Horrors of Queer Conversion Therapy in India*, Scroll.in (2022), <https://scroll.in/article/1032115/the-horrors-of-queer-conversion-therapy-in-india> (last visited Nov 16, 2024)

² *S. Sushma v. Commissioner of Police*, 2021 SCC OnLine Mad 2096.

instructed properly and the safety of the petitioners would be ensured.

It repeats the constitutional guarantees of sexual orientation freedom and liberty of gender identity, and brings the same into practice. For this purpose, it ensures and oversees several critical measures that the community has fought hard for, including a ban on conversion therapy, curricula, and sensitization programs that are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ Also, it repeats the same as a duty of the State under the Trans Act.

It also obviously gives the process that should be adhered to by the police in missing persons complaints filed for people who are in a consensual relationship, so that their freedom of choice in picking a partner is not overruled.

Judgment however addresses only medical conversion therapy and does not extend to therapies used under alternative medicines or religious therapy.

CONCLUSION

“You are too deep in your phone. You are too much into Western culture and we are not western”.

“I was like a living dead body, I didn’t laugh”.

“Let’s try and change her”.

“He needs to be fixed”.

“You are a disgrace to our family. I’d rather not have a kid than someone who believes in these silly westernized culture”.

These are some quotes by real people who have faced conversion therapy. It is really not an issue of a person being influenced by western culture or watching too much Instagram. It is not an issue of looking at your favourite singer come out as androgenous and get influenced by that. It is definitely not an issue with someone’s brain or mind or heart that strange practices such as slicing pumpkins placed on one’s head or palm reading or hypnosis. And it is certainly nothing someone should be “cured of”.

We are living in a world where people exist in different shapes, sizes, colour and identity. We evolved from amphibians to apes and finally to humans. We get only one life and this is it. They cannot change their course of nature. For them, it is natural. It is taught to us to embrace our individuality. And it cannot be done

when there is brain surgeries conducted to “fix” a person for the purpose of changing their gender identity or sexuality. Where they should be told to embrace and celebrate their nature, they are being sent off to facilities who get paid for fixing them. Are they really fixing them or doing the damage?

For a nation like India, it should realise that food depravation, sitting inside a ring of fire, slicing open a pumpkin on someone’s head, hypnosis, black magic or even exorcism is not the answer here. Indians are so hell bent that everything can be fixed through these methods that they fail to realise you cannot change something which for a person is natural. The individual cannot help but be the person he was born; live with the nature he is blessed with. They cannot just spend their whole life living like a person they are not. But you cannot clap with just one hand. Issues like this, need voice, recognition, people. Everyone was afraid to raise their voices because of these exact issues; the Indian way of fixing people. It is not easy to accept someone whom you’ve known your whole life as a gay, but changing him for worse is the worst solution. Therefore, before it is too late for people, let us make room for optimism. Let there be hope for the helpless and reasonable ways to approach the issues.