



**A free country:** Participants with rainbow-coloured flags at a gay pride rally in Delhi in June 2009; (right) the camp favourite, Rohit Verma of Big Boss fame

HOMOSEXUALITY: THE IMAGE

## Beyond The Pink Rupee

Queer India youngistan isn't just a colour-coordinated party. Why doesn't the media get it?

PARMESH SHAHANI

On the face of it, there couldn't be a better time to be gay in India. The reading down of section 377 by the Delhi High Court in July this year decriminalised adult homosexual relations. There was a steady din of news stories in the English media in the run-up to this decision and they have continued since. Most talk about the power of the pink rupee as evinced by commercial dance parties and social events in different cities, along with annual queer pride marches, online dating websites, clothing brands, travel services, magazines and books. They point to major advertisers who have joined the spirit of bonhomie with their queer-friendly advertisements. Ads by Amul, Hindustan Times and Hajmola have suggested a modern India—a country where having a gay friend is now trendy in college and gay people choose to come out of their colour-coordinated closets without discrimination in the workplace. This is a skewed and a dangerous perspective, as it suggests that the fight for justice is over, when it is just about beginning.

There is a lot that these kinds of stories overlook. I find it problematic when this increasingly visible gayness is framed as something 'modern'. Ancient Indian temple art, literary texts and society were all pluralistic and accepting of sexual diversity, as historians like Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, and mythologists like Devdutt Pattanaik have pointed out in their research. A failure to emphasise this will empower the homophobics to continue their opposition to homosexuality with their "this is against our culture" reasoning. On the other hand, underlining this rootedness will give a sense of confidence to queer Indian youngistan as it asserts its presence in contemporary society.

Despite the tremendous volume of coverage, many of the stories deal with urban life and construct gayness as a consumption-oriented lifestyle, rather than delving deeper into the complex, lived experience that it is. Mini revolutions are taking place in small towns, the other India, as well as in Bharat. Lesbians marry each other in

Kerala villages and pride parades happen in Bhubaneswar. Yet, the popular coverage tends to focus on the metros and accentuate stereotypes. Besides, it's not just fashion designers that are gay, but also accountants, farmers, taxi drivers, software engineers and bureaucrats. Their stories are fascinating but they seldom get heard.

It's unfashionable to praise government, but the exciting changes are really coming from there.

Instead, the focus remains on television celebrities like Bobby Darling and Rohit Verma, heralded not so much for their sexuality but for their camp performance of it. Almost every mainstream gay portrayal on television (*Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, *Bigg Boss*) or popular cinema (*Dostana*, *Fashion*) is comically camp. I'm not anti-camp, however I'm certainly uncomfortable when it becomes the norm, in the same way that most lesbian portrayals (as in *Girlfriend*) are 'masculine', threatening and evil. Sure, there are some nuanced, realistic characters like those in *My Brother Nikhil*, *Honeymoon Travels Pvt Ltd* or in the forthcoming *Do Paise Ki Dhoop*, *Char Aane Ki Barish*, but there need to be several more so that the ignorance or animosity

towards homosexuality, even among the urban educated, can be addressed. Here's a selection of bulletin board posts from rediff.com after Rohit Verma's eviction from *Bigg Boss* that make me realise that we are a far way off from India Accepting.



*Re: why does he do eyebrows like gypsy women by—on Nov 28, '09; 04:28 AM*

*From the looks of things, his name should have been Rohita Verma.*

*Must be a mistake.*

*Re: why does he do eyebrows like gypsy women by—on Nov 29, '09 03:46 AM*

*coz he is gay*

*Re: rohit the undecided child*

*by—on Nov 27, '09 11:56 PM*

*Pankaj, rohit to be treated prperly? wht absurd?? he's a gay n u seem to have a lot of love for him, I hope u arent gay either :)*

While researching my book, I began to appreciate the tremendous amount of imagination that gays undertake in order to express and accommodate their desires within

their social lives, especially with regard to their families. The Gay Bombay group in Mumbai holds social events called 'parents meets' for accepting parents of gay children to share their experiences with a larger audience. Indeed, it's all about loving your family, but all biological families are not so accepting. This is when they form families of choice, or communities that they fit into and construct, often using the template of a biological family. *In Our Family*, a moving documentary by Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, we get a glimpse in the life of a family of three generations of transgendered female subjects, who have connected themselves to each other through adoption. Aasha, the grandmother, lives in Chennai. Seetha, the daughter, lives with her male partner in Coimbatore. Dhana, Seetha's adopted daughter, divides her time between her adopted and her birth families. The film, while tremendously optimistic, also narrates the difficulties faced by all protagonists within their homes and lives. It would help to see more of these complex stories in the popular media.



**Liked it:** Models have a Katy Perry moment on the ramp at an Aki Narula fashion show

Section 377 may have been modified, but homophobic physical attacks, police blackmail and doctor apathy—especially with regard to hiv-related information and care—continue. Can't stories be highlighted more as are those about forced marriage, the effects of being in the closet, and of legal rights?

It may be unfashionable to praise the government and the bureaucracy, but the most exciting changes are coming from these directions. In May 2008, Tamil Nadu became the first state to grant official recognition to the transgendered. Applications for admission to educational institutions, government hospitals and ration cards in the state since then have allowed one's gender to be designated as M, F or T. Just last month, on November 12, the Election Commission of India decided to allow individuals to indicate their gender as 'other' where they do not want to be described as male or female. Besides the electoral roll, the decision also applies to all other forms used by the Commission wherein the provisions of indication of gender of the elector is made, including IT-based formats and the website.

There have also been reports that the current cabinet is likely to give a go-ahead to the Union health ministry's proposal to launch a Rs 55-crore campaign to "destigmatise gay and lesbian relationships" and launch an awareness campaign on the issue. Politicians like former health minister Anbumani Ramadoss, law minister Veerappa Moily and MP Milind Deora have recently been very open in their support of gay rights. In an op-ed in the *Times of India* dated September 5, 2009, Deora exhorts: "The next time you see your gay friend, relative or neighbour, think about the rights you were born into and the rights of others for which you've fought. Ask yourself if you can step out of your comfort zone to advocate for the rights of all." This is unprecedented. While stories like these may not have the sensational value of a Bobby Darling or the pink rupee, I believe they are ultimately more significant in the larger fight for queer rights and human rights that is taking place in modern India.

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*(Shahani is Editor-at-Large at Verve and research associate for the MIT Convergence Culture consortium. His book, Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)Longing in Contemporary India was released last year.)*

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