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The Neglected Minority

I was in India for one month. I was in India, surrounded by over one billion people. I was in India, and only saw one homosexual couple. The existence of LGBT rights, or lack there of, have always been at the forefront of my concerns. Because they affect me so directly, I tend to pick up on subtleties and pay close attention to how these individuals are treated around the world. Thus, before I came to India, I already knew that the country's LGBT movement was severely lacking in comparison to that of the United States. However, I observed some incongruities that made me question the true status of the LGBT movement in India.

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in India. If one is caught, he or she can serve up to a lifetime of imprisonment. In the United States, sexual activity between members of the same sex has been legal nationwide since 2003. That is astonishing to me. How can a culture known for diversity and unity be twelve years behind and counting to the United States? Furthermore, this past year, the Supreme Court of India dismissed petitions against its verdict on 377, outlawing same-sex sexual activity, claiming that the population it affects is too miniscule. Basically, because the LGBT community of India is afraid to come out, they are seen as unimportant. Why would they need to change a law that affects such small group of people who is afraid to speak up for themselves?

However, this political close-mindedness is in sharply juxtaposed to my observations of the culture in India. Physical contact between members of the same sex is much more common here; I see men holding hands, which is something I rarely see in the United State. There is less of a stigma, or so it seems, with such friendliness. In the United States, homophobia and heteronormative standards prevent such intimacy to occur. In addition, India is one of the few countries in the world to legally recognize a third gender. In some aspects of the LGBT realm, India is making much progress.

In 2013, New Delhi decriminalized homosexuality. This led to homosexuality being more accepted in general; openly gay-friendly bars and venues opened and Bollywood movies started to feature gay characters. I noticed this the first week in India, when we were in Mumbai. One of our professors suggested that we go to the Mumbai Queer Film Festival. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that the city had such an event. Just like in the United States, there are Gay Pride Marches and film festivals, etc.

Despite marriage or unions between same-sex couples not being legally recognized, two women were married in a Gurgaon court in 2011. This was the only case of same-sex marriage in the country. However, it was reported that they received threats from friends and relatives in their village. I feel as though there are more severe cultural aversions to same-sex unions in India than there are in the United States. Because much of India practices Hinduism, I have noticed less of a separation between Church and State. Therefore, Modi and other religious governmental leaders are more likely to dismiss LGBT calls for action as a result of their own moral compass or the pressure of a largely Hindu society. Although there is much debate about whether this corruption is in the United States as well, the LGBT movement is moving forward quickly.

I am proud to live in a country in which same-sex marriage is legal in 37 out of 50 states. Although the US is still making progress and not all parts of DOMA have been repealed, it is, in some ways, much further along than India. India is a developing country and has made great strides in the trans community, but needs to focus more heavily on its gay rights situation. In order to begin a significant change in India, the constituents must repeal Article 377 and stop disregarding the petitions for change in the LGBT community. I understand that there are more pressing issues in India such as poverty and education. Even though reforming the social sectors are the primary concern of the policymaking in India, the voices of the LGBT community should be not treated as whispers.