

MAN, WOMAN AND THE OTHER: THE NEED TO BREAK THE BINARISED VIEW OF A CHILD

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Bindi, believed to be an ornament of women seemed a misfit resting on a male forehead; saree, which I had always seen draped up on a woman's hourglass body looked misplaced on a man's muscular figure. The initial few days at college came out as a cultural shock for me, where one's choice was given primacy over the social norms in contrast to the world outside college premises. And it was only a matter of time that the bindi adorned the forehead, where it earlier seemed a misfit; the saree liberated the body which was confined by norms.

In the absence of gender sensitisation at an early age, we are often introduced to the possibility of anything beyond the two genders by some class bully ridiculing our classmate as 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Family and educational institutions are the two primary social institutions that a child first encounters, who observes and mirrors everything they see around them. Everyday interactions between adults, the clothes they wear, the way people talk, sit, and behave or the media the child consumes in the early years of life, create the base through which a child makes sense of the world. Anything new/ different/ diverging from the 'normal' standardised behaviour that the child is accustomed to is viewed as deviance, an anomaly. At a very preliminary stage, formal education further etches these norms through English exercises such as 'change the gender', where the only correct answer to husband is wife. Moreover, textbooks are written with a heteronormative bias, casual sexism is a common feature in schools and bullies are reprimanded instead of sensitised.



Under such a spectrum of intolerance, young teenager who find it difficult to fit themselves in the binarised world, are in conflict with the identity they identified with for years, and find their whole lives upended and debased. This lack of sense of identity is further heightened in the absence of support from parents, peers or teachers. According to Fifty Shades of Gay, a community working towards empowering the South Asian queer community, 37% of the individuals interviewed had a history of being bullied. Gender and sexuality are some of the tabooed subjects, which are often swept under the carpet in mainstream political discussions and even from educational curricula. Manifestations of this silence can result to be very harmful even deadly for some. LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers (Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020).

They are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatised in society. (Trevor Project) The intersection of gender identity with multiple marginalities in terms of class, caste and ethnic identity further aggravates the situation. (Cyrus, 2017) In 2018, graphic designer Daniel Quasar added black and brown stripes to the LGBT Rainbow Flag to emphasise cumulative marginalisation experiences by intersectional identities and incorporated pastel blue, pink and white from the transgender flag designed by activist Monica Helms in 1999. Today, after years of battling the behemoth section 377 of the Indian Penal Code with the landmark judgement of Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, homosexuality finally stands decriminalised and now it is time for us to echo the judgment in our lives. This calls for greater structural, infrastructural and interactional changes.



These wounds of the past have eked our lives for long and cannot be cured in a closed room with a gender sensitisation lecture, rather it has to be an ongoing, constant learning process. If the child from an early age is made to believe that happy families don't always come in pairs of a man and a woman, they will grow up to be allies rather than bullies.

However, given the lack of awareness on the subject among adults, efforts should be made to sensitise parents, teachers and school administration who can then try to be more gender-neutral in everyday interactions with their children. Sensitising children to the LGBTQIA+ community, might not always involve introducing them to complex terms, but rather normalising that an individual might love a person of their own gender, that any activity or chore is interchangeable, that they can wear any form of clothing they are comfortable in and the choice of clothes is not dictated by the society. This can be normalised through picture descriptions of concepts such as 'family' in course books which shows a family of two women and a child along with the

heteronormative family, through story books, cartoons, the need to ask for pronouns etc. So, if children wouldn't observe any homophobia or see acceptance of differences at school, they will behave accordingly and would create conditions for a greater possibility of assisting them in discovering their identity and, as a result, developing empathy for the gender and sexuality of others.

Along with interactional changes, infrastructural changes such as the creation of gender-neutral washrooms, ramps for the disabled, and the installation of menstrual pad vending machines in public places can go a long way towards a more egalitarian society. Moreover, political changes often act as drivers for change in society by laying the foundation on which popular perceptions change. At the same time just as the decriminalisation of homosexuality, liberated and helped people come out; a more open discourse about the issue and changing attitudes can lay grounds for the legalisation of homosexual marriage and fuller recognition of their rights.

We might have started off from a binarised view of the world but we are increasingly moving towards more acceptance of diversity and inclusion. Martin Luther King echoes the same sentiment in his words, "The arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice." And what better, if the process begins straight from childhood. The minds of young children are fertile grounds, it is our duty as adults to lay the seeds that bear fresh and beautiful flowers in terms of the creation of a more egalitarian, democratic society where respect isn't limited to a particular group and mutual empathy binds people together.

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