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SECOND OPINION

SUBVERSE

Gays and democracy

Jug Suraiya

Even that darkest of dark clouds — the AIDS pandemic looming over India — could have a silver lining: identifying male same-sex relationships as a significant factor in the spread of the disease, health minister Anbumani Ramadoss has proposed that homosexuality be legalised. The health minister's initiative — a welcome respite from his obsession with the evils of smoking — ought to be widely welcomed, and not just by the gay community.

The statute of the Indian Penal Code which makes homosexuality a crime is a fossilised relic of Victorian Britain. Indeed, same-sex relationships have long been not just decriminalised but de-stigmatised in Britain and other societies which deem themselves to be liberal democracies. Far from being freak shows, gay marriages and gay rights parades have become a commonplace in several parts of the world. Homophobia has been relegated to the same jurassic park of prejudice as has racism.

In India, the law in this, as in so many other matters, lags woefully behind the reality of changing social mores. Samesex relationships have been reflected with sensitivity by Indian film-makers and Mumbai has long had an openly published, and widely circulated, magazine specifically aimed at the gay community.

Welcome as it is, health minister Ramadoss's intervention on behalf of gays is a case of too little, too late. The health minister seems to be concerned largely with male-with-male sex as a potential spreader of the HIV virus; his remarks, as reported, do not take into account lesbian relationships. Moreover, as health minister, he has addressed only the epidemiological aspect of a complex issue which goes far beyond the purely physical or pathological realm. Homosexuals are indeed a high-risk AIDS group. This is partly, if not largely, owing to a hostile legal and policing apparatus which turns same-sex relationships into dangerous liaisons, furtively brief encounters, often commercial and often precluding precautionary health safeguards.

Homosexuality — for both genders — does need to be sanitised. Not just physically but equally, if not more importantly, it needs to be sanitised of the legal and social taints that have been inflicted on it.

The removal of legal and social sanctions against homosexuality has positive ramifications that go beyond concerns of public health and which strengthen the foundations of a democratic polity. Gays — like anti-globalisation activists, vegans, poets, and others who belong to often misunderstood and misrepresented minorities — are good for democracy. Perhaps it's not just a coincidence that the universal symbol for gayness is a rainbow. Which is also a metaphor frequently used to describe a multihued, pluralistic society founded on the conviction that freedom of choice is the cornerstone of democracy.

In a truly democratic dispensation, sexual preference should be treated as an elective option as valid and legitimate as the choice of one's political affiliations, dietary habits and religious beliefs (or lack of them). Homosexuality seen not as a health hazard, or a genetically transmitted disease, or a hormonal or behavioural aberration but as nothing more, or less, than a lifestyle choice.

Ramadoss has, laudably, taken the first step in what we can only hope will turn out to be a journey of emancipation, of coming out of the closet. For gays, of course. But, equally, also for the so-called 'straight' majority who would be enabled to free itself from the confines of ingrained sexual prejudice and enter into a space of social discourse and interaction made larger, and more colourful, with the inclusion of the gay rainbow.

So hug a gay today. Because you believe in gay rights. Or because you believe in democracy. Or, best of all, if you believe that the two should be part and parcel of each other.

secondopinion@timesgroup.com