WHEN COLLEGES HELP CREATE A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVITY

Namithaa Jayasankar

TIMES OUT & PROUD

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When Namithaa Jayasankar was an undergrad student in MOP Vaishnav College for Women, she wasn't too out and vocal about her sexuality. Back then, things were not that okay as it is now, in 2019. "Eight years ago, there were a few who knew about my sexuality and were OK about it, but we really didn't discuss it openly in the college. There was always that 'what if we're not accepted' fear. I was 14 when I realised I'm pansexual. Things have definitely changed now and I felt this in my next two colleges. In Madras School Of Social Work I was completely open about who I am and I didn't care about those who used to gossip behind my back and ridiculed me for being myself. We had multiple discussions, awareness programmes and seminars on LGBTQ+ and people knew about gender diversity. Coming to Madras University, I saw how many students were vocal about gender orientation, probably the sessions on gender sensitivity and gender identity helped students to understand us better," says Namithaa.

AT THIS CAMPUS, BEING YOURSELF IS AS NORMAL AS ANYTHING ELSE IN THE WORLD

Students in medical colleges probably understand gender diversity way better than in any other colleges, which is why it was never difficult for Arun Kumar. "Since I am studying in a medical college, my friends and faculty are very much aware about the community, and I have never faced any bullying or ragging in the college. I was 18 when I officially came out as a gender-fluid person and I am blessed that I haven't lost a single friend for being who I am," says Arun, a student of Saveetha Medical College. For his classmate and friend, Shalini Maria Rose, it was something new to understand and learn about sexual orientation and she says, "Most of us don't know even know that such a sexual classification exists because we're never taught about it in our curriculum. If we include this in our syllabus, only then will it get easier and normal. Nothing has changed since he spoke up to us. In fact, our friendship has only gotten thicker," she adds.

LOYOLA SHOWS HOW TO BECOME INCLUSIVE

Tamil Nadu has always been the flag-bearer when it comes to gender rights. The state has also had a liberal outlook in terms of making the third gender inclusive immediately after the Supreme Court judgment in 2014 that declared transgender as the third gender in our society. Work places, and now, even educational institutes have opened their gates to provide each and every person an equal opportunity. Loyola College is one such fine model of empowerment. Four years ago, the college included the third gender column in their admission forms. The college also has been creating programmes in the neighbourhood to make people aware of the education facilities they have for the community in their campus.

Print screen of the online admission form

> We have already created Male, Female and Transgender category in our college, you can even access the details online in the admission form. It was implemented four years ago. I still remember Nalina, who took admission then in the BSc Visual Communication under the added gender category. In the past, too, we have had transgender students studying in our college, but the category in the forms was not added officially. This academic year, we got two transgender students, M Mirthulla in BMM Animation & Multimedia and R Diya in BA French Literature.
> — Dr KS Antonysamy, Head Department of English, Loyola College.

SOME OF THE LGBTQIA+ GROUPS ON INDIAN CAMPUSES:

- **NLS Queer Alliance, National Law School of India University, Bangalore:** The on campus queer group has been created to provide a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ students. They regularly organise events and engage in conversations with the students and faculty.
- **Gender and Sexuality Club, IIT Gandhinagar:** The purpose of this club is to sensitise students towards gender and sexuality, and to demystify myths and combat stereotypes.
- **Unmukt, IIT Kanpur:** The club has more than 25 members and it is taking the conversation ahead on LGBTQIA+ matters by organising events.
- **Queer Qrew, Symbiosis, Pune:** They provide support for students wishing to come out and help students settle on campus. They also organise pride marches, screen films, hold talks, etc as part of their activities.
- **Dhanak, JNU, New Delhi:** They hold regular discussions on queer awareness, visibility and political issues, where students from other colleges are invited too.
- **Saathi, IIT Bombay, Mumbai:** They regularly organise lectures, seminars and debates and have representatives from staff, members and residents of IIT Bombay.
- **Queer Collective, TISS, Mumbai:** This is an advocacy group that aims to make campus life for LGBTQIA+ students free from fear. They run sensitisation programmes and are in touch with the students council to fight bullying.

For 19-year-old M Mirthulla, from Vellore, coming to Chennai has been life-changing. All her life she says she has faced bullying and harassment for being open about her gender and sexual orientation. After completing her plus-two from Sri Venkateswara Higher Secondary School, Vellore in 2017, she chose Chennai as her home. "I took a year's gap for sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) and this year, I got admission in BMM Multimedia and Animation in Loyola College. I never let my determination die even after facing all sorts of bullying and harassment from boys in school. I was always in search of an educational institute that doesn't discriminate students based on their gender and sexuality and I am glad colleges like Loyola exist. I aspire to become a model in the future."

Twenty-one-year-old Diya aims to travel across the globe and earn a PhD in French. "I was 15 when I decided to lead the rest of my life as a trans-woman. Things weren't easy. In 2016 after getting SRS done, I decided to complete my education and that's why I took admission in BA French in Loyola College. It makes me so happy to see how we're considered as normal as other people around us and I only hope things get better."

Law student, Andria B wants to become a successful lawyer to fight the issues that concern the LGBTQIA+ community. "Education is very important and colleges being inclusive is even more encouraging. I was 17 when I came out and had to take care of myself all alone. Bullying is very common, we have to be thick-skinned to be able to lead a respectful life. Not everyone is as privileged as I am; that's why I want to stand up for those voices and fight for them as a lawyer," shares the 26- year-old student of Dr Ambedkar Government Law College.

HOW COLLEGES HAVE BECOME A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Post Section 377, the changes have been gradual, but easy to spot in various colleges. Thanks to the various support groups and clubs sprouting up across campuses.

Ava Gilder, one of the founders of the LGBTQIA+ support group Queer Qrew at Symbiosis School of Liberal Arts, Pune, says, "In October 2016, we formed a platform where like-minded people could discuss ideas and issues related to the community." For IIT-Bombay student Avinash, coming out as gay had a lot to do with the support he received on his campus. "I'd known I was gay since Class 7. It was only when I came here and saw many like me, I got inspired to come out too."

IIT-Bombay was one of the first educational institutes in the country to found a support and resource centre for LGBTQIA+ students – Saathi (Hindi for companion), launched in 2011.

LIFE ON CAMPUS, POST 377

Devesh, a student of IIT Kanpur, who is out and proud on campus, feels that a meaningful conversation about inclusivity started on campus post the Section 377 verdict. "Post the verdict, things have definitely changed for me. I came out to my parents and my college life has become easier as well. My campus has become accepting and open. Those who made fun of me, show support and encouragement today. On campus, the student body has also written notes of love and support for the LGBTQIA+ students," he says.

"On-campus bullying of the LGBTQIA+ students was rampant across India. One of my friends went through this ordeal. However, things have changed for the better now. At least students don't have to keep things to themselves when they face any kind of harassment on campus. Faculties are sensitive and support is pouring in from all quarters. Students can easily approach support groups when they need help," says Aarti from JNU.

Gopal Mukherjee, a student of English Literature from Presidency College, Kolkata shares, "It's great that more students can feel safer to come out of the closet now. We need visibility on campus and students from the community can help others understand their world better. Kolkata has a large population of outstation students and conversations and communication is the key to acceptance."

— with inputs from Rishabh.Deb@timesgroup.com