SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

Protest, You Must

Canning 377 needs a call to arms. And the common man must join battle.

SECTION 377 of the IPC no longer needs a qualifying line. In conversation and writing, it is now a metaphor—straight out of the imaginary thesaurus that lists new meanings in the New India. The more time we take to kill it, the longer it will live as a reference to talk about sexual minorities, human rights and HIV-AIDS issues. Its death may give birth to newer arguments that are badly needed for homosexuality as a free choice. The old contentions based on humanitarian, medical and compassionate grounds no longer seem enough.

The law may soon die, but the penalisation of homosexuals will live on. Moral policing is not a casual game played by the police, the judiciary and the government which will stop completely if a political referee blows his whistle. The polarisation perceived in this mess—homosexuals vs the law—is not as sharp as it seems. There are parents, siblings, teachers, friends, mentors, family doctors, dhobis, durbans, drivers...playing secret mind games of morality against those who love someone of their own sex. Ask the gays.

The one irony I have been unable to ignore in the responses to *Marie Claire* India's campaign against moral policing is the 'conditional open-mindedness' of people about sex, sexuality, homosexuality. People who live as judges inside homes, penalisers inside personal relationships, priests inside parenthood. Who will only stand up for a cause when it suits their current state of conscience. How will their points of view be overturned?

In all the sound and fury of the last one week, after a number of prominent Indians led by author Vikram Seth and supported by Amartya Sen took up Cause 377 as a campaign, what's missing was the great Indian middle class' involvement. This campaign will appeal to the rational and the radical. And hopefully to the judiciary. But what about the ordinary Indians who are neither homosexuals nor activists? Who have nothing to lose or gain whether 377 exists or doesn't. Who don't have gay sons or daughters living lesser lives, no friends tortured by the police because of sexual preferences. Who have no idea what a serious impediment this law is in the battle against HIV-AIDS.

R. PRASAD

Indians only stand up for a cause if it suits their current state of conscience. It's a 'conditional open-mindedness'.

Unless the irrelevance of 377 overflows beyond victims, social reformers or purposeful NGOs, and floods the minds of the masses, the moral police will thrive. Don't we all know that morality—as preached by the moral police—is more about hypocritical convenience, less about who is having sex with whom.

And by the way, anyone who has reported on relationships, sexuality and 'lifestyle' (I use the last with some reluctance) knows how moral the morality brigade is. And the types of sexual perversions that float around in 'Indian society'. What has homosexuality got to do with it?

If the bedroom must have moral invaders, let them also dictate the rules of goodness to those who hire men and women to play out deviant sexual fantasies. Those who will take a sex worker or two to bed with a spouse to have an orgy. Who will swap partners for fun. Who will pay more for virgin call girls. Heterosexual men, who will give poor gay men Rs 50 for oral sex and then throw them out of their cars. By the way, all this falls in the realm of consensual intimacy. I am not even talking about paedophilia, marital rape, incest or abuse at the workplace. The moral police—visible and invisible in the great Indian middle class—must be shown its face in the mirror.

But for a really effective campaign that goes beyond the law, nothing short of a call to arms will work. Which means including ordinary people: neither homosexual, nor perverted nor morally righteous citizens of this country. Who have never sided either with the moral police nor with intellectual activism. Who take the same chartered bus day after day to work and relish dal-bhaat at home. Who stand in queues to pay their bills. In them lies the ability to take the bull by the horns when it comes to injustices of bijli-paani, reservations quotas, medical negligence—and now, maybe gay rights. It is about invoking their ire to light a roaring fire.

While the government remains deaf and the judiciary blind, this campaign must be taken out of open letters and newspaper columns and turned into a household issue. That may be the new suitable protest against 377. ◘