

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Mumbai & Delhi

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Delhi, the nation's capitol and the Indian state that last year decriminalized homosexual intimacy, was a complete surprise to us when we landed here today. Despite knowing that it is the seat of government, we expected to see the same abject poverty along the route from the airport as we had seen just two hours earlier on our sad exit from Mumbai. Instead of shanty towns along rutted roads, we saw a clean and elegant city with the classy feel of Washington, D.C. We were taken aback by the sophisticated roadways, the impressive monuments, and the beautiful government buildings and we felt quite at home with the rotaries and the abundantly blooming bougainvillea and frangapani. Twenty million people call Delhi home, including the many who work in the extensive double row of massive, highly secure foreign embassies. From the 19th floor lounge of our hotel we saw a massive canopy of trees that hid any indication that we were in a nation of 1.2 billion people, the majority of whom are desperately poor.

Tomorrow, Ray and I will rise very early for an extraordinary all-day whirlwind tour of Agra and Jaipur, in which we'll see the treasured Taj Mahal, several beautiful forts and palaces, and, most exciting for me, ride an elephant. But as I lie here listening to Ray's gentle nap-time snore, I'm aware of being a little depressed about leaving Mumbai, feeling as if I departed prior to being ready, and before I really understood the meaning of all that I had witnessed.

It's not that I don't feel great about the success of my work. I'm thrilled with the session I did with Kevan Watts' leadership team at Bank of America/Merrill Lynch (BA/ML). I feel very good about the historic opening of doors and minds that took place in our two-hour dialogue about how the firm might be a leader rather than a follower in effectively addressing gay and transgender workplace issues in India. It wasn't a workshop without major cultural challenges—incredibly strong expectations to marry and have children, aversion to sexual topics, narrow gender role beliefs, confusion between sexual and gender identity, religious intolerance, Victorian influences, lack of personal exposure to any happy, openly gay people, and reluctance to stand out in the crowd, even as a corporation—but the resistance I initially sensed in some people, particularly in a few of the men, dissipated when trust was established, information was provided in a non-threatening way, and I was able to touch their hearts by putting a face on the issue. Many senior leaders came up to me or to Ray afterward and said how much they had learned, and how grateful they were for the honesty and directness of the session. They were coming away, they assured us, with a much better understanding of why sexual orientation and gender identity were business issues that deserved their attention.

At dinner afterward with Anshuman Das (A.D.), the indefatigable 33-year-old Indian head of BA/ML's Asian gay networking group, Charu Sippy, the beloved and highly respected local head of Diversity and Inclusion for the firm, and Kevan Watts, the very wise and skilled, but regrettably soon-to-be retired head of the region, we each offered reflections on the impact of the session and discussed the next logical steps in addressing the issues. Kevan had announced at the end of the

afternoon presentation that he wanted to regroup in two weeks to strategize with his team on where they go from here. A.D. desperately hoped it would include immediately creating an Indian gay networking group but it seemed from the discussion as if that might need to wait until the country's BA/ML senior leaders were all on board.

Despite my feelings of relief and satisfaction at a job well done, I nevertheless felt enormously frustrated that despite how hard I had worked to become culturally competent prior to and during my stay in Mumbai, I had yet to get my arms around the many facets of India's soul. I wanted to confidently offer wise insights on how the bank might proceed in transforming the workplace to be more conscious of—and responsive to—its gay and transgender employees, but India defies easy analysis and understanding. Here I was in the nation's counterpart to the progressive financial centers of New York, London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, and yet those in Mumbai were far more reluctant to address gay issues than in Delhi.

My contribution to the discussion seemed limited to providing an understanding of who gay and transgender people are, what they need, and why it makes good business sense to address their issues. I successfully countered the arguments given on why India was different from the other countries in which I had spoken, and why it was not ready to "accept" homosexuality, but I couldn't add much to the discussion on how best to proceed, especially when I learned that the firm had already been threatened with violence for its socially progressive positions by a rapidly-growing right-wing nationalist party in Mumbai, described by some as Gestapo-type "goons". Pushing a firm to take steps that might endanger the physical well-being of employees was beyond my expertise and pay grade. But I had done my job.

So, it was not with feelings of professional failure that I left Mumbai, but more that I hadn't yet figured out the heart and soul of the city. Also, I so loved our experiences there that I didn't want to end my discovery process.

Mumbai, more commonly referred to as the port city of Bombay in the rest of India, has a population of 20 million people living in a space too small for 10 million. It presents an extraordinary banquet for the senses and the psyche that may well defy description and understanding even by those who have lived there for many years. I can't imagine a person spending time in the city without being mesmerized, repulsed, delighted, horrified, confused, inspired, energized, and exhausted. It is filled with contradictions and opposites. Its people are physically beautiful, friendly, fun, curious, spiritual, wise, and resilient. If you smile at any one of them, they will smile back gratefully. But they can also be pushy, oblivious of others, and prone to litter.

The Hindu women are dressed in extraordinarily beautiful saris in colorful patterns as exquisite as any fabric I have seen in any design showroom. The joy of that sight is balanced by the presence in each crowded sidewalk of the dour, black burkas of Muslim women. Religious beliefs—as well as caste, skin color, and Indian state of birth—determine where you live, work, and with whom you socialize. Animosity and suspicion between Hindus and Muslims is strong, yet the people speak earnestly of, and are deeply devoted to, their Eastern beliefs in the equality of all living things, including bugs.

Five-star hotels line the Arabian Sea coast in postcard-perfect settings—except for the high gates, metal detectors, machine-gun clad guards patrolling and stationed in bunkers, and the security personnel who prohibit the taking of pictures in the lobby. Multinational corporations are building skyscrapers with abandon in the home of the largest slum in all of Asia.

Women, seemingly revered, can't be touched unless they initiate a handshake, but they are second-class citizens who receive less affection and deference from their husbands than do his male friends.

The city hosted a large, gay film festival while we were there and is considered by some to be the gay mecca of India, but we didn't see any openly gay people in our extensive tour of the city and no native with whom we spoke, including our two very savvy tour guides, knew any homosexuals personally.

The World Heritage-designated Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus train station, stunning in its colonial architectural beauty, is filled daily with hundreds of Indian people who patiently sit on every open inch of inelegant floor space waiting for trains into which they will push and pull to pack themselves into cars where they can barely move for the two-hour standing rides home after work.

A few blocks from the fanciest and most expensive import shops, hungry birds circle over a sacred small forest to devour the waiting remains of Parsi men, women, and children who have been placed on nets by the two priests designated to enter the woods.

A short distance from the most trendy housing area of town, 12 million pieces of laundry a day are boiled in a dingy, open-air labyrinth of washing and rinsing cement tubs where open fires are stoked and clean, wet commercial sheets, towels, aprons and uniforms—as well as personal attire—are hung to dry on miles of lines before they are ironed by hundreds of people and then stacked into large, heavy cloth bundles to be carried for miles on the backs of permanently bent men who, grateful for the work, pay a dollar a month to live in a dirt floor hovel in one of the city's many slums.

Honking cars ignore all rules of the road including red lights and lanes, pedestrians cross wherever there's an opening, and illegal tea carts draw large crowds of men to the nation's favorite drink which is served in quickly washed and reused tin cups. In their midst are late-model town cars operated by staff drivers and bearing corporate executives and wealthy women. They fight for road space with human-drawn, rickety carts, flea-infested dogs, and the occasional wandering cow.

People—especially the uneducated indigent—accept their condition because of their beliefs in karma and reincarnation. They are told, and they accept, that they are poor because of something they did in a past life. Their task is to live joyfully and to learn from their oppression, and if they are successful, they may be rich in their next life.

Amazingly, in the midst of all of this contradiction and inequality, you see smiles and looks of resignation. Despite the huge piles of garbage on the street in front of their tiny, corrugated tin rooms, in which they have no personal space or privacy, you'll nevertheless see the slum residents fastidiously washing the cabs most of the men drive, sweeping the small area in front of their door, and putting out at their entrance a potted plant that also seems to be struggling for survival.

To begin to understand India—which, given its status in the world, we all would be wise to do—it is important to give it a framework, the most important element being that a baby is born every second and in 40 years the country, one-third the size of the United States, will have the world's largest population. Over half of the country's population are illiterate and without sustainable work. One-third of the population is wealthy, and the rest hover above the poverty line. India lives in constant vigilance against terrorism from fundamentalist Pakistanis, who on November 26, 2008 infiltrated the city of Mumbai and with guns, grenades, and fire bombs, killed over 200 foreigners and nationals, including some in our Trident Hotel. India has nuclear weapons but a government known for rampant, systemic graft and political instability. Each of the country's 27 states are independent and autonomous. Though it is considered the oldest populated land in the world, it didn't achieve independence as a nation until 1947 through the non-violent political resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and his followers. Some people wish the British—who once considered India the jewel of their crown—would return to restore order and services.

Ray and I will eagerly return for the season to our Provincetown home on Saturday, where my boat and garden await me. But we will arrive there forever changed by our trip to Japan and India, most deeply impacted by what we experienced in Mumbai. We won't ever be able to adequately describe to ourselves or to others what we saw there. The experiences are all unconnected but cherished dots.

We hoped to have left some positive impressions and questions in the hearts and minds of those we encountered in India—not just the BA/ML executives, but also everyone else with whom we made personal contact, from our tour guides to the hotel staff, all of whom we engaged in discussions on gay life.

It is always my goal to start a ripple of awareness that will create waves in the cultural consciousness of each place we visit. I believe we did so this trip with Amish, our 29-year-old tour guide who holds two Masters degrees and is an expert speaker on his faith of Jainism. The son of a wealthy family—and considered the top guide in Mumbai—the ever-pleasant Amish told us at the beginning of our extensive day-long tour of the city that we were the first gay couple he had ever met. Throughout our time together, I repeatedly brought gay issues into the conversation. We talked about marriage, stereotypes, bisexuality, transgender people, homosexuality in Indian history and religious lore, and how he might be treated if he was gay. When Amish proudly brought us to his beautiful Jain shrine, I suggested to him that a gay person couldn't achieve spiritual self-realization without coming out.

By the time he dropped us off at the hotel, Amish was freely using the word "gay" and he left us with the statement, "You are absolutely the two nicest people I have ever met, and I want you to come to my marriage whenever it might be arranged." He repeated his affirmation of affection in an e-mail two days later.

Though Indians are well-known to exaggerate their feelings to make others feel good, I trusted the sincerity of the young man's statement and I believe that just as India is forever in our heart, so too are we a part of its heart.