

IN GOOD FAITH: THE NATURAL FALLACY

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When the Supreme Court struck down the part of Section 377 dealing with consensual adult homosexual relationships, it did so with remarkable eloquence, quoting everything from mathematics to Goethe's "I am what I am, so take me as I am". But even as the landmark verdict established itself as a significant step forward for Indian democracy and society, it was overshadowed in certain circles by two less nuanced words — "natural" and "unnatural".

"Contrary to the ordinary course" — this is among the more common definitions available for the word "unnatural". And as soon as the Sec 377 judgment began to make headlines, some parts of social media emanated a collective wail of scandalised dismay, with that very word at its epicentre. The thought process behind it can perhaps be best summed up as the fear that decriminalising homosexuality would soon result in society extending the same benefits to paedophiles and bestiality, ultimately culminating in the biblical end of times. Views like these are numerous and drive in the challenge that we as a society must now face. We must ensure that the heart of the verdict becomes a living, breathing belief in the mindset of people; after all, words on paper tend to have little power in the face of a mob.

Homosexuality's equation to crime is not just about placing it on a scale of criminality, but about deviance — about saying that it is so perversely against the "natural" course of things that it deserves to be a crime. Rationalisations are quick to follow such an assertion, and from an admittedly creative number of directions at that. We have ever-so-popular slogans such as 'Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve', lines quoted from various religious scriptures and even heapings of what once used to be biology. Given biological imperative, we are told that humans are inbuilt with heteronormativity, and any variance must be a problem with the wiring.

Another timely example is Pope Francis's reported recommendation that "psychiatry" was a good option for children who "show homosexual tendencies". The Vatican later removed this phrase from his official account, telling reporters that he had "not meant to suggest homosexuality was a mental illness". The dubiousness of this assertion aside, what is beyond doubt is that homosexuality itself is still seen as a deviance to be corrected by one of the world's largest and most embattled religious organisations, despite its so-called attempts to modernise its views.

It wouldn't do to underestimate what are, perhaps, two of the most powerful phrases in our vocabulary, in both society and religion. Believing in and arguing from a position that assumes all things natural are superior and all things unnatural are inferior — that is something everyone has perhaps done at some point. One needn't look to an issue as earth-shattering as the Section 377 verdict to find examples of this. Such a structure, which utilises everything from morality and normative values to "logic" and "science" to give itself the higher ground, has a hand in nearly everything. After all, don't people say it is unnatural for a child to be quiet instead of boisterous; to play with certain toys instead of others; to wear certain clothes; to perform certain tasks or choose particular professions? Once these deviations are identified, those who exhibit them are met with a deluge of disapproval, contempt, entreaties, threats and various forms of coercion to correct themselves.

The problem worsens when the people on the receiving side of this twisted logic choose to turn the tables by using the very same thought process. For example, when people who live outside

conventional sexual norms, as a response to prejudice, insist that long-term heterosexual monogamy is “actually” unnatural. Instead of dismissing the entire structure as a fallacy, they simply fall into the same trap as their detractors.

That too many arguments operate along these lines is one of the great downsides to being in a time as vocal and polarised as ours. Immigration, racism, communalism, religion, abuse, mental health and simply the right of any particular group of people to exist — all these issues and others find themselves riddled with those two dangerous words.

The need of the hour, then, is to move the conversations of our time away from the natural/unnatural, moral/immoral, sacred/sin dichotomy. The Section 377 verdict will make its way to the lips and social media accounts of people across the world; this is both inevitable and necessary. But for there to be any tangible progress when it comes to changing societal mindsets, the parameters of the discourse must evolve beyond polarising assertions of binaries. After all, persisting in using a power structure that is designed to oppress in both its natural and inverted state wouldn't just be irrational — it would be unnatural.

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