LGBT Communities in South Asia: When social values, religion or politics aren't enough to marginalise people

"Perhaps now fears over my life may have eased somewhat. But as a bisexual woman, I do not think I will ever escape being marginalised. Even though I reside within what you'd consider a tolerant society."

These are the words of one Ms Taushnuva Fardousi, a Bangladeshi Muslim woman, who is currently on a study leave in the UK. She happens to be one of many members of the LGBT community, scattered across the world, seeking refuge because of their unique sexual preferences. Her words meanwhile are more or less echoed by almost every single lesbian, bisexual, transgender or gay person we have had the benefit of speaking to.

It is no secret that a large number of LGBT men, women have actively sought asylum anywhere where they would not be fined, harassed or ostracized because of their sexuality. And most of these applications, alarmingly, tend to originate from South East Asia.

There are several reasons to slate South East Asia as a sub-par region of a continent which in truth has been on the ascendancy in the last few years, if latest audits of economic growth and standard of living ratios are anything to go by.

The likes of Pakistan still dabbles in honour killings (such as the high profile one of Qandeel Baloch, 26, a social media celebrity) in attempt to subdue anyone who struggles to come to terms with its conservative values. Bangladesh to be honest has found it quite difficult to shed its reputation as a hostile nation towards religious and ethnic minorities. According to latest country reports, it is now in the on its way to be (if it's not already in the throes of) overwhelmed by an epidemic of religious fundamentalism. Not to mention it legally condemns LGBT individuals as 'unnatural' offenders, reserving fines and generous jail times for them.

The Indian Supreme court meanwhile has decriminalised homosexuality and bisexuality in a landmark ruling (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-45429664), and that in itself qualifies as a step forward in the right direction. But is it enough to convince us sceptics? Because to be honest India, just like Pakistan, still remains amongst those nations whereby the death penalty is the highest form of punishment dished out. And really, has that stopped anyone from committing murders in India, or Pakistan for that matter where regular honour killings are still a legitimate concern? Thus, should we just believe that the Supremes court's abovementioned decision has completely abolished or will fully stem the incessant abuse LGBT communities in India continue to be subjected to till today?

We would whole-heartedly like to say yes but unfortunately we can't. For if the Indian sub-continent has proved something throughout its rather long, rich, and illustrious history is that it is not all that receptive to change. The continuing Hindu-Muslim conflicts across the continent, minority persecutions (such as the systematic extermination of Rohingya's in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border), and the existence of medieval, superficial social values are living proof of that.

Bangladesh it seems is worse off according to Mr Abdur Rahman, who is living in the United Kingdom.

"Back home people think I am carrying some of sort of virus which has made me like this. As if I woke up one day and I suddenly "felt" gay. My dad, may Allah bless him, I could never tell him. How can I? His only son, his pride and joy. Who he was going to find a lovely bride for? So my options back then were one suicide, two suicide, or three just run away and keep running", he finished.

While its immediate neighbour (India) seems to be at least attempting to redeem itself in front of the LGBT community, Bangladesh continues to be trigger happy when it comes to reprimanding members of its own LGBT communities. Often severely so.

As recently as 19/05/2017, Bangladesh Rapid Action Battalion (an elite paramilitary force with certain special executive powers) arrested as many as 27 young men on charges of engaging in 'homosexual activities' (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bangladesh-authorities-arrest-27-men-gay-homosexuality-muslim-country-islam-police-charge-a7744366.html)

"It is absolutely terrifying, and it goes to demonstrate the deplorable state of members of the LGBT community in South-East Asia, not just in Bangladesh" Taushnuva replied, when we asked her how she felt about the aforementioned crackdown on gay men in Bangladesh.

We also probed her further on whether she considered the implications of coming out as a bisexual Muslim woman in Bangladesh. "Of course I did and I had to. The internal struggle with myself (whether to come out or not) was unbearable. I had to account for my life, my career choices, what it meant for my education. I did not have an inkling that the consequences would be of such severe magnitudes, that I would have to hide myself like a rat from my own people. It is as if I am the by-product of some sort of sin. That I never should have been born" she said.

It truly is a brutal picture painted by the above mentioned individuals we spoke to. It begs the question whether there is an end to this acrimonious cycle. While India seems to be bucking the trend, we are sceptical of its effect. The immediate aftermath of course is that homosexuality or bisexuality will no longer be a crime. But we wonder just how long it will take to change the Indian society's perspective. Will it truly stop homosexual or bisexual people there from being bullied or ostracized? Meanwhile India's neighbours continue to be as rigid and as conservative towards such liberal sexual preferences in general. If anything it seems as if their efforts crackdown on the LGBT communities across the sub-continent have intensified.

What adds to fire to the fuel of course is the sub-continents stiff religious values, here strict adherence to them. We can write a book debating the pros and cons of religion, but perhaps that discussion is for another time. For the time being though, religion, especially Islam condemns homosexuality or bisexuality as a shameful sin worthy of being punished with death. Bangladesh and Pakistan of course are Muslim majority countries and India, although dwarfed in terms of numbers, still has a sizeable contingent of Muslims within their boundaries.

It feels sad to conclude on such a bleak note, but what can we do? After all even the slightest improvements often raise more questions than answers. We can sit here and talk about radical change, but is there even the slightest whiff of anything forthcoming? It is almost as if the sub-continent has settled into a lull, a stupor state where it finds itself to be very comfortable. How long before members of South-Asia's LGBT community continue to seek refuge elsewhere out of fear of persecution? How long before they can go back home? How long before the can say with pride and without fear that I am a gay man, a lesbian woman or a bisexual person?