



## A Royal Perspective on LGBT+ Inclusion in India

### **SANDEEP:**

Hello everyone, thank you for joining this session, A Royal Perspective on LGBT+ Inclusion in India

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My name is Sandeep Nair, and I am the Programme Associate at Community Business, and honoured to be the moderator for this session, with our guest speaker, the Crown Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil.

The theme of this Conference is Impacting Positive Change, Challenging Assumptions and Disrupting the Norm. We recognise that when it comes to addressing inequalities and promoting inclusion, sometimes a bolder approach is required. Which is why we are so honoured, thrilled and delighted to bring you this personal interview with Crown Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil - the first Indian royal to come out as openly gay.

As many of you will be aware, being gay is considered a sin and homosexual behaviour is still a crime in India. It took the Crown Prince 30 years of internal struggle before he declared himself as openly gay. His highly public 'outing' in 2006 made the headlines in India and around the world and led to public humiliation and initial rejection by his family.

Since then, he has dedicated his life to gay rights activism and supporting the LGBT+ community, believing this to be his mission in life.

The work of his charity, the Lakshya Trust, is dedicated to supporting sexual minorities in India – and in particular promoting awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDs. In 2018, the Prince defied royal protocol and opened his 15-acre palace grounds to help house vulnerable LGBT+ people.

In this session, I will invite Prince Manvendra Singh to share his story and also discuss the impact he and his work is having in disrupting the norm and promoting LGBT+ inclusion in India.

### **SANDEEP:**

So, welcome Manvendra, thank you for being part of this Community Business India Conference 2018.

You have a public reputation as the first openly gay prince in India.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how this came about?

### **MANVENDRA:**

First of all, namaste and thank you for having me on this show. Yes, you are right, I happen to be the first member of the royal family to come out, in India and probably also in the world. And, that was a big stepping stone for me, a big challenge for me. I took this step because my fight is based on truthfulness and honesty. And I wanted to disrupt the assumptions prevailing in our society which is so in-co-operative that it is difficult to accept the fact that homosexuality was part and parcel of our Indian society since era. And yes, I definitely took this stand and I was going against the current, a lot of people opposed my coming out, there was a lot of homophobia in society. But I never went back, and I continued my fight, I continued my struggle. And yes, here I am, still fighting for the rights and I will continue fighting it as long as I live.



**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful. So, is there any kind of challenges have you faced growing up as an openly gay prince in India? As in, after you have come out.

**MANVENDRA:**

So, see, first of all, we have to understand that growing up in the royal family is quite different than growing up in a commoner family, as I would say. Even though in this democratic republic we don't have the powers to rule neither are we given the privileges or title. But we still are the custodian of the rich cultural heritage which has been passed to us by our ancestors. My dynasty dates to 13<sup>th</sup> century and I am the 39<sup>th</sup> direct descendant of the 650-year-old royal dynasty which is a very big responsibility. Growing up in this royal family with a lot of protocols, norms, restrictions, protections, it was very difficult for me to kind of accept my identity even though I knew I was different. There was no communication to the outside world. And within the family, there is no communication with the parents, I mean, I have said this in the past. The parents and the children have a very, very formal relationship in the royal families. We don't even call each other by names. So, it was, growing up was tough. And then when I got to realize, that yes, my identity is something which is I can call it being gay. That was quite late in my life, it was almost, you can say, when I was 30yrs, after I was married to a princess. It was again of my own choice. The marriage was a disaster and it ended in a divorce.

Just after that, this whole process of self-discovery, I began to understand myself. Then finally, I not just identified myself as gay, but I also feel proud that I am gay and that I would like to work for the gay community. So that I could understand the sufferings of the person when one even accepts his identity. I could foresee a lot of problems one can undergo.

**SANDEEP:**

Great, So, in your experience, what would you say are some of the biggest issues that LGBT+ community in India face?

**MANVENDRA:**

So, I think one of the biggest things is, see, I would say that, first of all I would like to say that India is country where more social behavior is accepted. When homosexual behavior is accepted, you have like same sex walking together, arm and arm together, men and men, women and women, if you want to rent out a place, or if you want to live in a hotel, it is very easy to get accommodation if there is two of the same-sex together. But, if it is the opposite sex, if a boy and a girl are seen even holding hands in public, then it is objected to. It is looked at upon as a strange behaviour. So, as long you are in the closet, there is no problem. You can live with your boyfriend forever in a social building and nobody will even pay attention to it. It is only when you come out of your closet, and people come to know about your identity and you being gay or lesbian or transgender or whatever it is. That is the problem. So, that is when the society or as I call it the bigotry in the society takes objection and you are subjected to stigma and discrimination, at home, at workplace, everywhere. So, I think that is the biggest challenge and I would say, the whole problem lies in our education system. There is no awareness among people. And even educated people are unaware about what homosexuality. Because that is when the parental issues come in. When you become a parent of a kid, the parents may accept it, but most parents never accept when you come out to them. And you are literally blackmailed, emotionally blackmailed and then forced to get married to the opposite sex when they are not even interested in it. So, these kind of issues and problems creates depression, we have suicidal tendencies, we are confused, don't know where to go, and social boycott. And all of us, most of us are also financial dependent on our parents, we live with



them. Indians are mentally conditioned to live with their parents, we cannot say that, we don't leave our parents till we reach them to their grave. No? So, we are so attached to the parents that we might have give-in. when we give-in, we asked to get married. We get married to the opposite sex, rather than live a life without our parents. So, these are all the problems which we have been facing as an openly gay person.

**SANDEEP:**

Okay. Can you share a bit about your work in supporting sexual minorities in India – particularly promoting awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDs?

**MANVENDRA:**

So, I founded Lakshya Trust in the year 2000. Primarily with an objective to give a platform to the community, sexual minority community to come together and to talk about their problems, which we are all commonly facing. And, we can, while talking to each other, we can bring about a solution, because first of all there is a problem of who would listen to us. So, that idea came dawned upon me and in year 2000, I started Lakshya in the state of Gujarat. It was the first community based organization in the state. I would say HIV has been a curse to society, but it has been a blessing in disguise for the gay and transgender community, as the government realised that they have to prevent HIV spread in the community, especially in the homosexual behaviour, which is called as MSM – that is men having sex with men community. Then they have to take help of organisations like ours, like Lakshya Trust, like Humsafar Trust, which was started in Mumbai. And, that is how, these organisations, not only got support, but also got funded by the government. And at Lakshya Trust we were the first again in Gujarat to be funded by the Gujarat Government, under the Ministry of health and family welfare. And, for a project which was called, HIV Prevention and Awareness amongst the men having sex with men population and the transgender population. So, that is how I began working for HIV under my organization and we spent almost 18 years on it now.

**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful. So, could you tell me what or who inspired you to start the Lakshya Trust?

**MANVENDRA:**

So, my role model, or what you say, my god father or god mother, I would say it was Ashok Row Kavi, who was the first activist or the only activist, and the first person to come out as gay in India. He was the one who kind of helped me identify or give an identity to my behaviour and make me proud of what I am and remove the guilty feeling, which is as you correctly said in India, even though it is not a crime to be gay, but it is considered a sin to be. He was the one who helped me come to terms with my sexuality and through him I got trained in Humsafar trust, which again happens to be the first organization in India to work for MSM community in India and is in Mumbai. So, Ashok got the idea, why don't I start in Gujarat, because a lot of people were dying of HIV/AIDS during those days. I am talking about late 1990s. Humsafar started in 1995 and Ashok said look he is quite happy working in Mumbai and he didn't want to go out of Mumbai and work in other parts of India. So, he encouraged me, why don't you start a network in Gujarat, with like-minded people and he would be able to help me. He was the one who connected me to the government of Gujarat for getting funding and to get support. And we had our first gay conference in my ancient town, in one of my palace grounds again where invited the community from all over the state. Ashok also came down from Mumbai, as a technical support and we invited the government also. And it was at that time that the government realized that we are big, we have



numbers, we were almost 60 to 70, I had the community coming from all over the state to a tiny little town in whole of India called Rajpipla. That is day we got as our anniversary day, which is falling on 31st July every year. And the government decided to support us and give us the projectile.

#### **SANDEEP:**

Very nice. Wonderful. So, how has your personal story challenged traditional stereotypes about LGBT+ in India – especially considering that you are from a royal family? So, what reactions have you faced from people, say from all walks of life?

#### **MANVENDRA:**

So, it is very interesting, when I came out to the media in 2006, I did mention that I may be the first member of the royal family to come out, but not the only one. Which meant that I knew a lot of people from the royal families in India, who are either gay or lesbian, and kind of they also knew that I also know about them. So, now their problem was that most of them were scared that he has been shameless, and he has come out of the closet, what is they all get outed, like me. So, they tried to put pressure on my parents that this guys has to be stopped or he will ruin the reputation of the royal families, who have already having a lot of things at stake, you know after the British left India, and we got independence, a lot of royal families are not looked upon that well as they used to. So, my parents got pressurized by this homophobic society and so-called hypocrites, as I would say, from the royal families and they publicly disowned me from the royal family and dis-inherited me from the property. Not only that there was a protest in my own town, where the Rajput community from which I belong, they burned my epogies in public and they protested against me. The entire town was against me. So, I maintained my calm and cool, and friends from media asked me to comment on this. And I only said that I don't want to blame people who have done this, I blame the ignorance. If I was in their place, I would have done the same thing. Because there is no subject in the society, so naturally people are going to behave in this manner, you know? But as I said, I am very sure that a day will come, when these same people, who have reacted in this manner, are going to come back and compromise with me. And, it is the duty of people like me, activists like me to educate the people, educate the society on what is right and what is wrong. And it is only when you educated and are aware of the facts that you start excepting and supporting the community. And, it happened very soon, I would say, in 2007 I was invited by Oprah Winfrey, I happen to be the third Indian to be invited by her. And the only royal from India, so far who have been invited by her and that was a big turning point in my life. Because there are many Oprah fans in the royal families and they adore her. So, the invitation by her itself opened a lot of people's minds and thoughts that there is definitely some substance to my fight, that Oprah has invited me all the way from Rajpipla to Chicago to be part of her show, which she called, gays around the world. So, after that lot of people, they kind of started coming back to me and oh...we are sorry, we did this. So, you know, there was a lot of changes happened. My own father, he kind of brought out an advertisement, not advertisement, a news piece and in the headlines it came and it said that I acted in anger and in which he has excepted due to the fact that I am a gifted individual, he talks about me as a gifted individual, but the same time he said it was the *pardan nasheen* society or the society which is under a veil, the hypocritical society which forced him to take this step of publicly disowning me and dis-inheriting me and he regrets about it. It was very clear that it was the society, it was the bigotry society which instigated him. And, now he is very fine with me, he supports me in whatever I am doing, and so is a lot of other people in the royal families, and also a lot of them who burned my epogies and they are all



like you know, they are fine with me. And, that is because of the fact that they were educated. And I would definitely say that the media played an important role, because till the time I came out, it was mostly the English media which used to talk positive stories on homosexuality. But after I came out, my coming out happened in a regional newspaper, in a vernacular newspaper, so first time in the history of India, the vernacular newspaper started writing positive stories, and that reached to the masses. Because you know in India, how many people read newspaper in English? Especially the people in rural don't even know English, you know. So it came out in the vernacular newspaper and television and that started changing the mindset of society towards acceptance and support.

**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful, that was so inspiring. Talking about inspiration, what was your reason or inspiration to open up your palace grounds to help house vulnerable LGBT+ people?

**MANVENDRA:**

The inspiration goes to my own life story in which I mentioned that I was publicly disowned, which means they tried to cut off my social support system by disowning me. And also they tried to dis-inherit me, which means they tried to financially disempower me. Because there are two things, social and financial empowerment. These are the two things which I thought are important objectives for starting this LGBTQA community center, campus which I call it, in my 60-acre royal establishment, which is near the city of Vadodara. It is nearly 60kms from Vadodara, it is a royal establishment, which is called Hanumanteshwar. And I thought that if this can happen to me, then it can happen to any other person in India, who is gay, lesbian, transgender in other parts of the world. So, I thought about this idea and I had this royal estate with me, which was given to me by my father as part of my compromise after getting disowned and dis-inherited. And, I knew that I am not going to have any children, so to whom do I leave this behind? So, let me leave this to the people, people of the community who are suffering, so that whatever sufferings I have gone through, I can try and reduce the sufferings as I can give them a safe space to live their lives with truth, truthfulness and honesty and have to freedom to be who they are.

**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful. Very nice. Thank you so much. So, what positive change or impact are you hoping for the LGBT+ community in India in the near future?

**MANVENDRA:**

So, the first and foremost thing which we are hoping to happen is our law, which has already been heard in the supreme court, which is called Section 377 of the Indian penal code, which criminalizes homosexual act, well, it also criminalises the heterosexual act also, but it is just that we have approached the court, so most of the people who know about section 377, knows that it is just targeting the homosexual sections. But anyway, this law is definitely going to bring about a change in society, because so far, the community has been living in a fear, so this law has been misused by the law enforcing authorities. This, I can share with authorities because my own staff was arrested by the police, when in fact what my staff have been doing is distributing condoms in the public gardens, which is again funded by the government, government funded project, to distribute condom amongst the gay community for HIV prevention and the police have arrested them saying that we are spreading homosexuality. And we are violating sec 377, and they have gone further by even having forced sex with my workers in jail. And that also without condoms. So, you can imagine, how much sec 377 has impacted even HIV control in India. So, this is definitely



help control HIV, specially in the MSM and transgender community and will also give chance for more people to come out to their parents, since they will not be criminalized anymore. But what is going to happen is, even after this law gets changes, our battle does not end, a new battle starts and that is where my community campus which is developed, I mean going to come. Because there will be so many people coming out to their parents and so many parents throwing them out. Because what happened to me, and what happens socially in India is very different. So, a lot of parents are not going to understand this issue, even if legally they might be getting the freedom. And that is time when we need to have spaces like these. Even though it's the first one of its kind in India, I would hope that more and more people start to create these kind of facilities in other parts of India, because the day it comes, we will need a lot of space, where we could accommodate people from the community who have been thrown out and have no safe space to kind of take shelter.

#### **SANDEEP:**

Thank you. So, talking about sec 377. What is your reaction to the upcoming 377 verdict by the Supreme court? Has anything about the hearing surprised you?

#### **MANVENDRA:**

So, I think the curative petition which was filed in the supreme court was itself historic, because so far in the Indian independence, only 3 petitions of these kind have been allowed by the Supreme court, So the supreme court has definitely felt that there has been injustice done to us by the chief justice who gave us the previous hearing in year 2013. So, that was a very thing that happened. The second thing, see the NALSA judgement which came in 2014, which gave rights to the transgenders, which again has happened. It was a very historical judgement, because even countries like America has not given transgender rights and India has taken the lead on that. So that kind of helped in a way. So, the other thing which happened was that the ministry of health, family welfare of government of India came out with an app, I think it was the year 2015, I don't remember it rather very well, this app very clearly, this app was made targeting the youth population, which is first in the world. And this app is saying that it is normal for a man to be attracted to another man and very normal for a woman to be attracted to another woman. That was another very important thing which happened. And, then, one of the rights which we were fighting for, which is the right to privacy was given to by the supreme court and by justice Chandrachud who gave this very important judgement, not taking sec 377 in to account but generally the right to privacy has been given and again he has quoted the sexual minority community in his judgement. This has paved way for, you know, another success in our story. And now when we have the bench comprising of the judges, honorable judges, and one of them happens to be justice Chandrachud who has given the right to privacy. And the chief justice and the other members of the jury who have been so patiently listening to the hearings and they have really open about the injustice which has happened so far. I really like the way they said that they would like to confide their judgement totally based on the sec 377 and not talk about the other issues of LGBT community. Which is very correct. Because this fight is based on asserting our constitutional right which has been guaranteed to all Indian citizens as fundamental rights. So Sec 377, is totally violating our fundamental rights. It is human rights issue, I would say, it's not even LGBT rights. Because it is also affecting the heterosexual population. So, I am very hopeful that this bench, which has so far given us a good positive hearing, has also set aside the government's plea that we should postpone the hearing, they have dismissed that plea and they have gone ahead with the hearing. Most of all, definitely this judgement is going to come in our favour and we



are just waiting for the day to come, where we can celebrate our freedom, which was denied to us when India got independence in the year 1947.

**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful. Hoping for a celebration, a positive impact. As we close, I'd like to ask Manvendra one final question: As you know this Conference is targeted at the corporate sector. What role do you think companies can play in creating a more inclusive society for the LGBT+ community in India? What would be your single biggest request?

**MANVENDRA:**

So, I think with the corporate world, I have been a lot of talks to corporate houses, industrial houses, even international ERGs giving talks and I think one of the things that the HR policies should have is the inclusion and equality without any kind of discrimination. And I think we should start looking beyond stereotypes. For example, when you look at a male, that person is with short hair and moustache and wear this kind of dress. And when you look at a woman, she should have long hair. So there are these stereotypes which are fixed with us. When we create these stereotypes is when we start discriminating. So I think this is one thing which the corporate houses should bear in mind, when it comes to being inclusive and equal. And I think that there should be openmindedness because after all what we do and how we behave in public. That is which naturally comes to us. So long as it doesn't affect our work, I don't think it should be a problem. Because I have also faced this when people come to me when the violation of human rights happens in the corporate houses and all. The person has an intellect but just because he comes out and opens up as gay or lesbian in the office, they face discrimination, they don't get promoted, they don't get better salaries, and they are discriminated against. So, education, I would say, education will be needed to educate the people, and educate them about the issues of the sexual minorities. It will take time and as I told you in the past, when I came out, I blamed the ignorance. I didn't blame the population. Similarly, the corporate houses and the industrial houses are ignorant about our issues. And if they are given the proper education and I am always available, if anytime, any corporate house needs me, I am always there to come and talk to their employees, talk to the HR department. And I think that is the best way how we can have a inclusion and equality at workplace.

**SANDEEP:**

Wonderful. Thank you so much. So, unfortunately, that is all we have time for.

As this session comes to a close, I would like to thank, on behalf of Community Business – our honourable Guest: Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil

Your example and work are a true inspiration and we thank you for all the work that you are personally doing to challenge assumptions and impact positive change when it comes to LGBT+ inclusion in India.

As you know, this is a topic that Community Business is very passionate about. We have been conducting research and advising employers on how to promote LGBT+ inclusion since 2009.

We have significant experience in supporting companies, from engaging senior stakeholders to launching LGBT+ networks here in India.

We encourage you to tap into the expertise and resources we have to offer – just contact me.

We also have strong partnerships with many global and local LGBT+ related organisations.

For now, on behalf of Community Business, I would like to thank you for attending this session.



The recorded session will be available for download for 30 days Please feel free to share with your networks.

We have many other great sessions, so don't miss the opportunity to browse the programme and tune in.

Thank you and Goodbye!



