



Forward March

IN ASSOCIATION WITH LEVI'S®



When we set out to do this piece, we knew it was not going to be easy. India's queer community is bursting at the seams with talent, and there has **never been a better time** to be out of the closet than now—nearly a year after the Supreme Court gloriously struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Since its reading down, the community is shining brighter than ever before. And it's not just Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru we're talking about. All across the motherland, **pride parades** are marching down the streets, **open-mic nights** are packed with poets professing their feelings for the love that (only a short while ago) dared not speak its name, bars are hosting **queer nights** on a regular basis, and **drag performances** are going from invite-only events to the bright lights of the theatre. And your Insta feed? It's never seen this much rainbow love.

In order to capture the zeitgeist and its accompanying optimism, we teamed up with Levi's®, a brand that has long been associated with the importance of unleashing authentic self-expression, while speaking truth to power in a quest for absolute freedom—because nothing other than total equality is acceptable. June is International Pride month, so we wanted to celebrate and further drive home the message that we *all* belong, and that we are all proud, together. Here, you will meet six of **queer India's torchbearers**: contemporary pop cultural icons who, through their work, have made it possible for us to arrive where we are now—moving past the spectre of 377 and working towards a truly equal future. We owe them more than they know, and more than we could ever repay. >

WRITTEN BY NEVILLE BHANDARA

PHOTOGRAPHS SOUMYA IYER AND ADIL HASAN

STYLING SAANIYA SHARMA

On Ashok Row Kavi (second from left): Linen shirt, ₹3,499, jeans, ₹4,999, canvas shoes ₹2,999; all **Levi's**. On Sakshi Juneja: Cotton T-shirt, ₹1,299, jeans, ₹3,799, denim jacket, ₹3,499, canvas shoes, ₹2,799; all **Levi's**



An economics graduate from Brown University, Ishaan Sethi, 28, is the co-founder of Delta, India's first homegrown LGBTQIA+ dating app. While working at Prophesee, a marketing analytics platform, Sethi met Sachin Bhatia, the co-founder of MakeMyTrip, but also of TrulyMadly, which was all about creating safe spaces for women looking to date. Bhatia told him about how his company was inundated with requests from the queer community to develop something similar. Soon after, they teamed up and Delta was born.

Q: What makes Delta stand apart?

A: It's much more than an app. It's a way to talk to the community at large. What makes me proud is the work we have done offline—things like the Delta Network,

a first of its kind initiative that brought businesses, employers, bars and industries together to encourage inclusivity. Interestingly, 30 to 40 per cent of our users come from non-metros, which is where being a homegrown app really comes into play. We're now looking at greater vernacular availability and regional language support, and attempting to take a non-dating version of Delta to a younger audience.

Q: Your hope for the next generation?

A: For them to never feel alone. Isolation is one of the worst things that can happen to anyone. It's why I believe

we need to have better support services for kids in middle school.

Q: What is the need of the hour?

A: To mobilise; it's hugely important. And it's often the little things that make a difference. For example, I'll wear a rainbow T-shirt just to go to the store if it means there's a chance that a young kid struggling with his/her/their sexuality may see me and not feel alone. Just knowing that there are others like you out there is powerful.

Cotton T-shirt, ₹2,099, jeans, ₹4,501; both **Levi's**.
Inset: Cotton T-shirt, ₹1,299, jeans, ₹4,501, denim jacket, ₹6,999, canvas shoes (white), ₹3,999, leather shoes (red), ₹4,999; all **Levi's**

ISHAAN SETHI

FOR BRIDGING GAPS AND HARNESSING THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY

PARMESH SHAHANI

As head of the Godrej India Culture Lab, Parmesh Shahani, 43, has steered some of the most important discussions on gender and sexuality over the past decade. From hosting talks, to launching the transgender inclusion white paper (a manifesto for trans inclusion in the workplace), collaborating with the UN, or nurturing intersectionality by way of panel discussions on what it means to be Dalit and queer, there is no other space in Mumbai that has accomplished what the Culture Lab has under the watch of the TED Fellow and author of *Gay Bombay* (2008).

FOR ESTABLISHING A HAVEN
FOR QUEER FOLK AND
CHAMPIONING MINORITIES

Q: What have been your favourite collaborations at the Lab?

A: The first event we hosted—a performance of Mona Ambegaonkar's *Ek Madhav Baug*, a one-act play about a mother who discovers her son is gay. The reaction was amazing. It was a full house, and the audience (largely straight) was sobbing openly. Good queer programming can really build bridges. Then, when the UN chose Godrej to launch its global standard on LGBTQ inclusion. It was a parallel launch in London, New York, Paris, Hong Kong and Mumbai. And when the transgender dance troupe Dancing Queens chose us to be the venue for its first performance.

Q: Who are your icons?

A: Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai for writing *Same Sex Love In India* (2000). The book empowers us to believe that not only are we normal, but also that our desire is valid, and that there is a history of queer people in this country. To be gay and to be accepted is desi. What is western is homophobia. And mathematician Shakuntala Devi, who wrote *The World Of Homosexuals* (1977), which very few

people know about. She was married to a gay man and she wrote about it. It's amazing not only because this was 30-plus years ago, but also because it was written with empathy.

Q: The most pressing matter facing the community?

A: The need for increased intersectionality. If we are not looking at gender, class, caste or religion, and not acknowledging what it means to be queer from various perspectives, we're not doing it right. The experience of a rich queer person in India is different from someone who has not been afforded the same luxuries. Our marginalisation is deeply connected to other kinds of marginalisation. We are not queer in isolation.

Cotton shirt and trousers, both Shahani's own. Denim jacket, ₹10,000, **Levi's**. Silver-plated earring, ₹4,600, gold-plated necklace, ₹19,000; both **Amrapali**. Gold-plated bracelet, ₹5,500, ring, ₹10,500, metal brooch, ₹9,250; all **Outhouse**



Cotton T-shirt, ₹1,299, jeans, ₹3,799; both **Levi's**

When Sakshi Juneja returned to Mumbai after completing her MBA in Sydney, she realised that there were no safe spaces for queer people, especially women, to meet. There wasn't even anything online. Juneja, had some blogging experience under her belt, so she turned to the Internet in the hope of finding

more queer women.

This eventually led to the launch of Gaysi in 2008, an online resource for queer Indians. As the movement gained steam, Gaysi carved a unique space for itself and became a beacon

SAKSHI
JUNEJA

FOR CREATING
SAFE SPACES,
BOTH ONLINE AND
OFFLINE

for its honest, diverse content and strong visual language. It also hosts on-ground events ranging from open-mic nights to parties to bring the community together.

Q: Tell us about the mood right now.

A: We're in a place where whatever we do is going to be game-changing for the next generation. It will be in a more privileged space because of the work we are doing as a community. We are creating history, and it's a very exciting time to be queer in India.

Q: What keeps you up at night?

A: The religious vibe that has dominated the conversation. It's worrisome. Minorities are being silenced. So now imagine the queer folks within that—someone who is Dalit and gay, for example. It just makes it so much more difficult. Which is why intersectionality is so important. >



Sridhar
Rangayan

Ashok
Row Kavi

From left, on Rangayan:
Cotton T-shirt, ₹2,000,
jeans, ₹4,199, leather
shoes, ₹4,499, denim cap,
₹1,599; all **Levi's**. Silk
scarf, Rangayan's own

On Row Kavi:
Denim shirt, ₹2,999,
jeans, ₹4,999, canvas
shoes, ₹2,999; all **Levi's**

Opposite page,
on Iyer: Cotton T-shirt,
₹1,699, jeans, ₹5,999,
denim jacket, price on
request; all **Levi's**. Silver-
plated necklace, ₹28,000,
Amrapali.

Opening spread: Canvas
shoes, ₹5,999, **Levi's**

HAIR AND MAKE-UP:
JEAN-CLAUDE BIGUINE
INDIA, BLOSSOM
KOCHHAR COLLEGE OF
CREATIVE ARTS AND
DESIGN; ASSISTED BY:
SUHANI LOTLIKAR,
HARSHITA CHOPRA
(STYLING)

ASHOK ROW KAVI

FOR STARTING THE FIGHT AND LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Popularly known as the father of the Indian gay rights movement, and affectionately called “Mother” by many, Ashok Row Kavi, 72, grew up in Mahim in a conservative yet forward-thinking South Indian household,

where strict gender norms were enforced but the question of his sexuality was never taboo. In an interview with a magazine in 1984, he became the first man to publicly declare he was gay. In the 35 years that followed, he’s racked up many other milestones: in 1990, he founded *Bombay Dost*, the country’s first gay magazine; in 1994, the LGBTQ rights NGO Humsafar, which was the first of its kind to be funded by the government.

Q: Where do we go from here?

A: It’s going to get tough, because every law that’s gendered will have to be fought—marriage, adoption, surrogacy, tenancy, pension, insurance, and so on. To succeed, we need a chronological plan, because we can’t fight every battle simultaneously.

Q: What is your biggest concern?

A: That young queer people take too much for granted. They think the way is clear, and so they live in a bubble. That becomes dangerous. I worry about their health. There is so much substance abuse. Sexually transmitted diseases are increasing, HIV is still high, and mental health is a big issue, as is suicide.

Q: Moving forward...

A: We can’t trust out freedom and faith to any political party. We have to look at each of them in light of what we want from them at that particular moment. We’re moving slowly, but steadily. I don’t care which party comes to power; nobody can take away our freedom.

SRIDHAR RANGAYAN

FOR MAINSTREAMING QUEER CINEMA

57-year-old film-maker Sridhar Rangayan was raised in a traditional Brahmin family in Mandya, a small town near Mysuru. Sex and sexuality were forbidden topics, and a young, struggling Rangayan knew he had to leave. So, he came to Mumbai in 1984, and enrolled in a two-year course at IIT Bombay. In 1990, at the age of 26,

a chance encounter with a copy of *Bombay Dost* led Rangayan to finally accept himself. Cut to the present, and Rangayan, as the founder of KASHISH Mumbai International Queer Film Festival (Mumbaiqueerfest.com; this year’s edition runs from June 12 -16), is one of our leading cultural representatives. Since 2010, he has been bringing some of the best global queer cinema to our screens, alongside some of his own award-winning films such as *Evening Shadows* (2018) and *Breaking Free* (2015).

Q: Why do you do what you do?

A: It’s important because some young boy in a small town in Arunachal Pradesh might see one of my films and understand that he is normal, and that his feelings are valid.



HARISH IYER

FOR MAKING HIS VOICE HEARD, NO MATTER THE COST

Equal rights activist Harish Iyer, 40, has been one of our queer movement’s loudest voices. He’s part of the National Human Rights

Commission and a member of the US-based Human Rights Campaign. An advocate for the eradication of child sexual abuse, Iyer, himself a survivor, recently started his own NGO called the Jimmy Foundation. And in April, he joined the Indian National Congress and made history as the first openly gay person to join the party.

Q: If you could tell the people in power one thing, what would it be?

A: Come sit with us before you judge us. We’re the same as you.

Q: What is your message to the next generation of queer Indians?

A: You are riding a new wave of equality, but don’t forget history; it has a habit of repeating itself.

Q: If you could go back in time, what would you tell that little boy in Mandya?

A: It’s alright to feel different; don’t be afraid to live it. Be brave and confident, and believe in yourself.

Q: What is your biggest fear?

A: Growing up as a gay man, I think you’re always trying to over achieve, to make up for that “lack” of being normal. It makes you strive to be good (or worse, perfect) at multiple things. So, a fear of failure, of not achieving, of not being appreciated is always present.

Q: Whom do you admire?

A: The film-maker Gus Van Sant, and the director Sanjay Leela Bhansali—he is high camp and cinematic, and I love that. >

Now that SECTION 377 IS GONE, what's the NEXT BATTLE? What do you want to see INDIA DO for its QUEER CITIZENS?

“There’s still more work to be done. I’d like to see some kind of partnership rights, where we are able to do things like share property and gain rights over our partner’s body. For example, if something were to happen to my partner and he was in hospital, I wouldn’t be considered next of kin or family. That thought is agonising. I’d also like India to recognise that queer people make equally good parents, and allow us to adopt.”

— SRIDHAR RANGAYAN

“If heterosexuals are allowed to marry under the constitution, we must be allowed to as well. Citizenship entitlement must be given to everyone, because we are all citizens of this republic, and we want equal rights. It’s as simple as that.”

— ASHOK ROW KAVI

“Greater education. I want the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to incorporate equal rights in the curriculum. I want India to enable this movement to grow, so that in the next decade we have effective mainstreaming, where being queer isn’t even a topic of conversation, and certainly not a person’s defining characteristic. I also want to see the formal legal recognition of same-sex relationships by way of civil unions and partnerships.”

— ISHAAN SETHI

“I think the last 10 years have been fantastic for the queer movement. From barely any visibility to now having people who not just identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, but pansexual, asexual, non-binary,

trans... It’s been a lot to absorb for a society that until recently wouldn’t even acknowledge women as sexual beings. Now, I want us to have all civil rights that any law abiding, tax paying citizen is entitled to in a democracy.”

— SAKSHI JUNEJA

“There are multiple battles to be fought, but for me the most important is employment. LGBTQIA people need to imagine better lives and possibilities for themselves, and one way to do that is to earn livelihoods. When organisations employ queer people they not only empower them, but also entire ecosystems. If a queer person has a job then he/she/they can imagine a future for themselves and their partners. I want companies to have specific anti-discrimination policies. I want them to have benefits in place for queer employees equal to those offered to straight employees. I want an increased recruitment of LGBTQIA people. Our community needs more jobs, the kind they don’t have to hide. In other parts of the world, perhaps your family can be your first welcoming space. But in India, we may have to reverse it as not everyone is lucky to have a supportive family. So, our institutions have to be more welcoming first.”

— PARMESH SHAHANI

“Decriminalisation is only the first step. Next, we need strong anti-discrimination laws in place, and more awareness on LGBTQIA issues. The challenges we will face now are very different from the ones we faced in the fight to abolish Section 377. Know that the first step to societal acceptance is self-acceptance. When a greater number of young queer people accept themselves, and the more visibility we get, higher is the chance that society will accept us. I also want to see more political representation for queer people.”

— HARISH IYER