

GAVEL AND GOSSIP: HOW CULTURE PRESSURES THE COURTROOM ON LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

by

Ritu Bhati

PhD Research Scholar,

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

Legal orthodoxy insists that judicial decisions emerge from an austere, sterile sanctuary insulated from public noise. Yet the contentious history of LGBTQ+ litigation exposes a persistent, messy dialogue between the judge's bench and the street. This article unpacks how cultural friction—what we might call ambient societal 'gossip,' majoritarian anxieties, traditionalist dogmas, and media spectacles—quietly steers the course of constitutional jurisprudence. Using India's legal trajectory as a primary lens, from the liberation of Navtej Singh Johar to the judicial caution displayed in the Supriyo marriage equality ruling, and drawing parallels with courtrooms in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, this paper investigates the fragile boundary between constitutional morality and majoritarian sentiment. It asks how judges manage counter-majoritarian dilemmas when legal rights collide with sacred social structures, mapping why courts often champion individual liberties behind closed doors only to retreat into institutional deference at the threshold of civil recognition. In doing so, this study argues that real equality cannot rely on legal mechanics alone while ignoring the cultural prejudices that quietly shape how the law is interpreted.

Keywords: Constitutional Morality, LGBTQ+ Rights, Majoritarianism, Judicial Deference, Supriyo v. Union of India, Transformative Constitutionalism.

I. INTRODUCTION: CRACKS IN THE HERMETIC COURTROOM

Law students are taught to treat the courtroom as a cloister. In theory, once the heavy wooden doors swing shut, prejudice, politics, and social clamour fall away, leaving an impartial judge armed only with statutes, precedent, and dispassionate reason. It is a comforting picture. It reassures us that justice is insulated from the chaos of everyday life. Yet anyone who has watched courts grapple with queer rights knows how quickly this pristine myth collapses in practice. Behind the formal decorum and the striking of the gavel, the courtroom has always listened intently to the chatter outside—what we might broadly call 'gossip,' the ambient hum of majoritarian unease, moral panic, religious tradition, and executive posturing.

Judges do not live on mountaintops, nor do they interpret constitutions in a vacuum. As legal realists argued a century ago, statutes rarely carry one undeniable meaning. They must be read by flesh-and-blood human beings situated in specific historical moments, shaped by class biases, social habits, and the prevailing cultural climate.¹ When issues touch intimate life—bodily autonomy, who one may love, and what a 'family' looks like—cultural anxieties do not wait outside the courthouse door. They shape what judges view as 'common sense,' alter how evidence is weighed, and quietly define just how far an appellate bench is willing to stick its neck out against the crowd.²

This paper explores how cultural gossip infiltrates constitutional adjudication. Focusing on the Indian experience—where landmark moments have veered from bold judicial courage to cautious institutional retreat—and comparing it with parallel battles in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, it looks closely at the friction between constitutional morality and public sentiment. The central question is straightforward: Can a court ever truly act as an engine of social transformation, or does it inevitably remain on a leash, held back by the cultural instincts of the majority?³

II. POPULAR MORALITY VERSUS CONSTITUTIONAL MORALITY: AN UNEASY TRUCE

Every major legal battle over LGBTQ+ equality eventually boils down to a clash between two competing ideals: what the public finds acceptable, and what the constitution actually demands. Popular morality is familiar and instinctive. It reflects the comfort of the herd—shared

traditions, religious orthodoxies, and long-standing social habits. Constitutional morality, by contrast, is demanding and deliberately disruptive. As framed in Indian jurisprudence, it requires judges to defend individual dignity, equality, and personal liberty even—and especially—when doing so scandalises the broader public.⁴

During the Constituent Assembly debates in November 1948, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned that constitutional morality was 'not a natural sentiment' in India; it had to be cultivated with deliberate effort. He observed that Indian society was deeply hierarchical, fractured by caste prejudice, and instinctively resistant to egalitarian change.⁵ His warning carries immense weight for queer litigants today. If constitutional protection depended on winning a popularity contest, minority rights would never stand a chance. The foundational point of an independent judiciary is to serve as a counter-majoritarian shield—to protect vulnerable individuals when the majority insists on conformity.

Yet judges frequently blink when confronted with majoritarian pushback. The Supreme Court of India's ruling in *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation* (2014)⁶ remains a stark reminder of what happens when cultural prejudice hijacks legal interpretation. Overturning the Delhi High Court's progressive ruling,⁷ the bench reinstated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, summarily brushing aside the fundamental rights of queer citizens. Justice G.S. Singhvi famously dismissed the entire community as a 'minuscule fraction of the country's population,' remarking that fewer than two hundred people had faced prosecution under the provision across a century and a half. By treating the validity of fundamental rights as a numbers game, the Court subordinated constitutional principles to social comfort.⁸

III. THE PENDULUM OF INDIAN QUEER JURISPRUDENCE: FROM LIBERATION TO RETREAT

A. Navtej Singh Johar and the Rhetoric of Transformative Constitutionalism

The shame of *Koushal* was finally erased four years later in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018).⁹ A unanimous five-judge Constitution Bench struck down Section 377 to the extent that it criminalised consensual sexual activity between adults. What made *Navtej* remarkable was not merely its final order, but its uncompromising jurisprudential philosophy. Chief Justice Dipak Misra insisted that constitutional morality must always prevail over public morality,

declaring that judges cannot allow majoritarian sentiment to dictate constitutional protections. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud pushed the analysis further, observing that treating queer individuals as criminals effectively reduced them to second-class citizens, denying them the dignity promised by Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21.¹⁰

Navtej felt like a watershed moment. Building upon the foundational recognitions of gender identity in NALSA¹¹ and the landmark recognition of informational and spatial privacy in Puttaswamy,¹² the Supreme Court did not merely decriminalise same-sex relationships; it issued an explicit apology for past institutional neglect and affirmed bodily integrity and personal choice as fundamental human entitlements. For a brief period, it looked as though the Court had broken free from the gravity of cultural gossip, establishing that long-standing custom could no longer serve as a legal excuse for state-sponsored bigotry.

B. Supriyo v. Union of India: When the Gavel Met the Cultural Wall

That bold momentum hit a stone wall five years later in Supriyo @ Supriya Chakraborty v. Union of India (2023).¹³ In Supriyo, petitioners were not asking the state to simply look away from private intimacy; they were demanding equal standing in civil life—specifically, the legal right to marry under the Special Marriage Act, 1954.¹⁴ The Union Government mounted an aggressive defence, arguing that marriage is an exclusively heterosexual sacrament anchored in India's cultural DNA, and warning that legalising same-sex marriage would tear through personal law systems and cause social bedlam.

Faced with this direct challenge, the Supreme Court pulled back. The bench unanimously held that there is no fundamental right to marry under the Indian Constitution, ruling that modifying the Special Marriage Act to cover same-sex couples exceeded judicial boundaries and belonged to Parliament alone. While the judges spoke empathetically about queer struggles and affirmed the right to form intimate relationships, the majority stopped short of creating any enforceable legal status. To make matters worse, a 3:2 majority struck down adoption rights for unmarried queer couples under CARA regulations, leaving queer families without statutory recognition.¹⁵

The contrast between Navtej and Supriyo reveals precisely where judicial courage falters. Decriminalising private adult relationships was socially palatable to middle-class and elite sensibilities because it asked very little of society. It did not alter inheritance rules, family

structures, or welfare entitlements; it merely promised privacy behind closed bedroom doors.¹⁶ Marriage equality, on the other hand, knocked directly at the front door of the traditional family—an institution fiercely defended by religious and cultural orthodoxies. When faced with the prospect of genuine social friction, the Court's counter-majoritarian nerve gave way, and the bench retreated into cautious institutional deference.

IV. COMPARATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL BENCHMARKS: CULTURE'S FOOTPRINT ABROAD

This judicial tug-of-war between public comfort and minority rights is hardly unique to New Delhi. Constitutional courts around the world constantly measure their rulings against the cultural climate.

A. The United States: Polling Ahead of Precedent

The United States Supreme Court offers a prime case study in how legal doctrine mirrors shifting social attitudes. In *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986),¹⁷ Chief Justice Warren Burger openly leaned on 'millennia of moral teaching' to justify criminalising consensual homosexual acts, invoking Judeo-Christian religious norms as valid constitutional reasoning. It took seventeen years of visible activism and generational shifts in public opinion for the Court to reverse course in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003).¹⁸ When marriage equality finally arrived in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015),¹⁹ Justice Anthony Kennedy anchored the ruling in fundamental concepts of equal protection and individual dignity. Yet many legal scholars point out that *Obergefell* was handed down only after national polls showed that a clear majority of Americans already supported same-sex marriage. The Court moved boldly only when it felt safe within the cultural mainstream.²⁰

B. South Africa and the United Kingdom: Alternative Paths

South Africa charted a bolder path. In *Minister of Home Affairs v. Fourie* (2005), the Constitutional Court struck down the common-law exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage.²¹ South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution explicitly bans discrimination based on sexual orientation under Section 9(3), giving judges an unmistakable textual mandate to reject traditionalist cultural defences. Even so, the Court granted Parliament twelve months to amend the law, deliberately balancing constitutional principle with institutional pragmatism.

Across the Atlantic, the United Kingdom took an almost entirely political route. Following the landmark Wolfenden Report of 1957,²² reform crawled forward in small legislative steps. British courts consistently hesitated to create new civil rights through judicial rulings under the Human Rights Act 1998. Marriage equality was eventually secured through the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013²³—the product of robust parliamentary argument and civil lobbying rather than a judicial decree. Across all these jurisdictions, one reality remains consistent: whether a court chooses bold intervention or passive silence depends directly on how loudly the cultural waters are churning around it.

V. HOW THE GOSSIP GETS IN: CHANNELS OF CULTURAL PRESSURE

If judges take an oath to apply the law without fear or favour, how does cultural pressure manage to seep into judicial chambers so effectively? In practice, this happens through three distinct channels.

A. State Litigators as Cultural Megaphones

The first conduit is executive litigation strategy. When arguing queer rights cases, government lawyers rarely confine themselves to statutory interpretation. Instead, they deliberately import societal anxieties into their written pleadings. In *Supriyo*, the Union Government repeatedly branded the demand for marriage equality as an 'urban elitist' obsession that was alien to authentic Indian values, warning that tampering with the institution would unleash legal chaos. By framing popular prejudice as an issue of 'public order' and 'cultural stability,' state counsel subtly warn the bench that defying social norms will trigger severe institutional backlash.²⁴

B. The Fishbowl of Digital Media

The second mechanism is the digital media environment. With constitutional hearings now live-streamed in India, the traditional insulation of the courtroom has largely evaporated. Every oral exchange, offhand bench observation, and counsel argument is clipped within minutes, pushed onto social media platforms, and subjected to instant public outrage. Judges are human; they read the news and understand digital sentiment. The subtle fear of viral blowback or being branded out-of-touch by vocal majorities works as a powerful, unspoken deterrent against bold judicial leaps.

C. The Social World of the Appellate Bench

Finally, judges are themselves shaped by their own social worlds. The senior judiciary in India remains demographically homogenous, overwhelmingly drawn from privileged class and caste backgrounds. Even judges with the best intentions carry internalised beliefs about marriage, family structures, and gender roles. In *Supriyo*, the majority's lingering anxiety about the 'welfare of the child' in same-sex adoption reflected everyday cultural assumptions that children can only thrive in traditional heterosexual households—an assumption contradicted by decades of empirical research across developmental psychology and sociology.²⁵

VI. REBUILDING THE BENCH'S COUNTER-MAJORITARIAN RESOLVE

If the idea of transformative constitutionalism is to mean anything beyond eloquent prose in law journals, courts must fundamentally rethink how they handle cases where individual liberties clash with cultural orthodoxies. Abdicating responsibility to Parliament whenever an issue touches sensitive social traditions strips the Constitution of its emancipatory power.

To begin with, constitutional courts need to enforce rigorous evidentiary standards whenever the state defends discrimination on grounds of 'cultural values' or 'social cohesion.' Vague claims that granting a minority equal rights will disrupt social harmony cannot pass constitutional muster under Article 14 without concrete proof of tangible harm. Tradition alone can never serve as a legal justification for continued exclusion.

Furthermore, jurisprudence must move beyond the narrow idea of negative liberty. Freedom for queer people cannot simply mean the right to be left alone in a private bedroom without the police knocking at the door. Genuine equality demands substantive citizenship—the right to participate fully in public life, access workplace benefits, inherit property, and build recognised families. For the courtroom to remain a credible forum for justice, the judge's gavel must cut through the ambient murmur of cultural gossip and insist that human dignity is never subject to the approval of the majority.

VII. CONCLUSION

The ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ equality in India and across the world makes one reality painfully clear: the courtroom has never been an island. Gavel and gossip remain entangled in an uneasy relationship. While cultural pressure will always attempt to pull constitutional law down

to the level of popular prejudice, the entire purpose of a constitutional court is to resist that pull. As the queer rights movement steps into its next chapter—pushing past mere decriminalisation toward full civil and familial recognition—the judiciary faces a defining test. It must decide whether it will comfortably mirror majoritarian cultural instincts, or summon the constitutional courage to strike down entrenched prejudice and ensure true equality under the law.

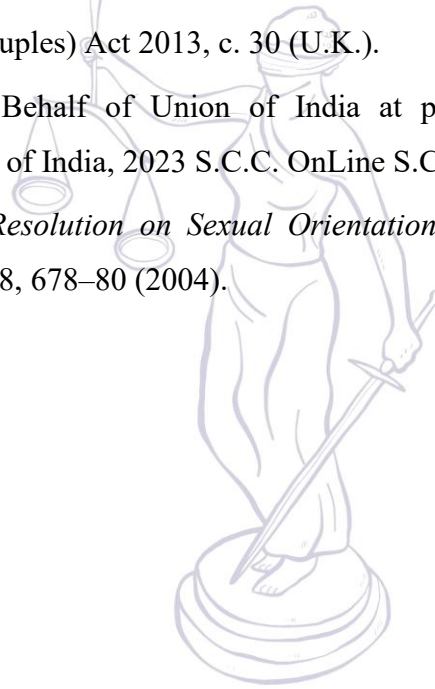


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