Now allow same-sex marriages, says Indian American lesbian scholar

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Toronto, July 9 (IANS) Welcoming the decriminalisation of homosexuality by the Delhi High Court, a known lesbian Indian American scholar says India should now follow Nepal and allow same-sex marriages.

Kolkata-born Pamela Roy, who has done path-breaking research on homosexuality among South Asians in the US, said the Indian ruling was a “landmark decision” for human rights.

Roy, who has co-authored a study called ‘South Asian LGBTQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning) in the US’ said: “The overturning of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is a momentous event.

“It is a symbolic victory for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex (LGBTQQI) individuals and their allies.”

Speaking to IANS from Michigan State University, she said: “The decision signifies hope, change and the liberation of people previously oppressed and marginalised under the 148-year-old colonial law.”

She said the court verdict will bring “necessary attention to a segment of the Indian population that has been historically discriminated, ostracised, stigmatised and isolated socially, politically and institutionally on multiple levels.

“The landmark decision should, therefore, be seen as a human rights victory impacting all of society, not just gays and lesbians in India. This is a major step towards equality and solidarity.”

Backlash by some Indians who fear westernisation of Indian culture is inevitable, said Roy, who grew up in Toronto (where her family moved from Kolkata when she was one) before moving to the US in 1994.

But “taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most”, she said, quoting Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky.

“I believe the court ruling has caused backlash from some segments of society because individuals are fearful of change and the decision potentially challenges morals, ethics, and personal or religious values,” she said.
Roy said blaming homosexuality as a western import is “an uninformed homophobic” fear.

“I would encourage individuals to familiarise themselves with literature by scholars such as Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, and Gayatri Gopinath and then engage in informed dialogue,” she said.

Asked how a country that gave the Kama Sutra to the world became so oppressive about sexuality, she said: “This is a problematic question.”

Roy said: “Homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression will likely persist because of societal stigma and cultural norms.”

But the court ruling, she said, is an opportunity for India “to progress forward, educate and raise awareness, especially breaking barriers in rural areas of the country.

“India can follow the roads that have been previously paved by other countries and emerge as a leader in South Asia in terms of future policies and practices that protect the rights and welfare of LGBTQI individuals.”

She said it will be “empowering” to see India following Nepal’s decision last year to allow same-sex marriages.

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