

Cities

D'Klosest closes: how the only gay fashion shop in Mumbai lost its fight for survival

An Indian government ruling that restricts an LGBT law containing criminal provisions against the order of nature 'spelled the end for D'Klose'



Prakash Thakur, owner of D'Klose, in his shop in Mumbai

A few years ago, the trendy Mumbai shopping district of Bandra lost the gay-friendly store of Anand Bhanu when high rental costs forced it to close. Now, the city has lost its last gay fashion store (D'Klose), and the store is not only along commercial areas that are often closed for the night – but also a judgement by the Indian supreme court to criminalise gay sex.

When the supreme court reversed a Delhi high court judgement that legalised consensual gay sex, it reinstated section 377 of the penal code – a provision introduced by the British colonial government in 1861 which criminalised what it calls "unnatural intercourse against the order of nature" and effectively bans same-sex relationships.

Entrepreneur Prakash Thakur – who worked his way up from the garment store to founding D'Klose in Bandra (Mumbai) in 2007 – says he and his customers were hit as a result of being targeted by Hindu extremist groups.

"Prakash says his currently landlord has refused to renew his lease on the store, and he has already been named down by two potential landlords. "They clearly told me that they didn't want any issues at the store, because Section 377 made us unrentable", he said.

"I never thought that one verdict could affect my life so much", Thakur added. "I support myself and my family with the revenue of the store... The owner did not know about the gay concept before, so here we are victims."



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"I was with my partner in a rented apartment and after this reinstatement of section 377 we had a bad profile. We have stopped going out at all and our friends have turned away. It's very much a gay couple who are not in the landlord, and takes of blackmail are etc."

A few years ago, some of this was a problem for Thakur. After the Delhi high court struck down section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009 by violating fundamental human rights, gay culture in India became more open – with pride parades, gay magazines, dating sites and gay-friendly events making an appearance.

When some of Thakur's friends wanted to invest in a start-up in Mumbai, he feared the idea of a gay fashion store that would offer the community a place to shop without any children – equated by his non-regretful experience shopping in the city's malls. "When I asked for the idea, my non-regretful experience would bring the pain from the western section and from the suburbs."

He opened D'Klose in December 2010 with stock from Bangkok and China, later moving to its current location.

At the time Thakur didn't tell his family about D'Klose – but when a front-page news article featured his shop, he called his mother and told her to show the family. They were shocked.

"Looking back at the start of my life in Goa, it's painful to realize that I never really had a childhood", said Thakur. "My father died when I was three years old, and my earliest memories were of my mother struggling to bring up three children in a shanty where even clean water was considered a luxury. My parents had realized the entire family to come out of the slum and stay in a better locality."

When Thakur, one of the employees of D'Klose, which aims to create safe spaces for the city's gay community, said "I was shocked when I saw the article and I was sure I was in a bad place for the young LGBT crowd. Running an LGBT store is difficult in a city where even normal people are being harassed to arrive. It's a landlord's market. If there is any sort of controversy, they will definitely say no. Further, LGBT stores across the world are shutting down due to the pressure of conservative religious like Muslims. We need more cultural centres which are funded."

"The price point is definitely the USP of the store," said 25-year-old customer Neel Parikh. "The clothes are affordable than those from other boutiques... And the fact that the store is run by a gay guy makes members of the gay community extremely loyal to his brand."

Thakur says Bollywood stars came to his shop and gay tourists from all over the country used to visit. Last year British comedian Stephen Fry paid a visit to D'Klose when filming his film, *Anonymous* (2010).

And some prominent Mumbaians continue to back Thakur. "Prakash is a self-made person and has come up for the toughest challenges", said Bollywood actress Gaithe Jadhav. "It is absolutely not acceptable that he cannot continue his dreams and this amazing concept of D'Klose because of an article."

This article was commissioned as part of the Guardian's Cities Reporting Programme.

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