



BINA AGARWAL

# Our Turings and Hawkings

Many in India still fail to achieve the unimaginable due to physical, social disabilities

**D**OES sexual preference or gender cast a shadow over the brilliance of the mind? Two films currently running in theatres in India answer with a resounding no. They also provide important insights. The films have much in common, but their differences are revealing.

*The Theory of Everything* and *The Imitation Game* are both biopics focused on two brilliant British scientists born 30 years apart. The first film covers the life of Stephen Hawking (born in 1942), a mathematician and theoretical physicist who changed forever our thinking about the origin of the universe and the nature of time. The second brings alive Alan Turing (1912-54), who gave us the early computer (the Turing machine) and laid the foundations of computer science, without which the development of modern computers that have transformed our lives would not have been possible. The ending of World War II more than two years before it might have otherwise ended, thus sparing millions of lives, is attributed to the work of Turing and his team. Both Hawking and Turing are today recognised as brilliant men to whom humankind and the world of science owe a deep debt of gratitude. But here the similarity ends. One major difference lies in their sexual preferences — Hawking is heterosexual, Turing was gay — with vastly differing consequences for their ability to live and work in peace.

Hawking, diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 1963 at the age of 21, and given only two years to live, is miraculously still with us — productive, world-renowned, much awarded and decorated, and surrounded by friends, colleagues and family, including the three children he fathered with his first wife, Jane Wilde. Turing committed suicide in 1954 at the age of 41 — alone, hounded, his remarkable wartime work buried under the British Official Secrets Act, and indicted for indecency for his homosexuality under then prevailing British criminal law. He was sub-

jected to oestrogen injections (a form of chemical castration) in lieu of prison. It was barely a year ago that the queen of England posthumously “pardoned” him for his 1952 conviction — ironically, for what should not have been seen as a crime in the first place.

Perhaps Turing would have found life less fraught in today’s Britain. But what about in contemporary India? In fact, Turing has a notable India connection. His father was in the Indian Civil Service and his maternal grandfather was the chief engineer of the Madras railways. Had he lived to visit India, Turing would have been pained and horrified to find that Section 377 continues to criminalise gay people, and that

some of our politicians still believe they can cure homosexuality medically. As I have argued before, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was written by the arch-colonialist, Thomas Macaulay, but many in our government who are working hard to vanquish symbols of our colonial past ironically continue to defend this law.

The films also have interesting takes on the position of women. In *The Theory of Everything*, Wilde sets aside her doctoral research at Cambridge for several years to build a life with Hawking and bear their children. In *The Imitation Game*, Joan Clarke, a brilliant mathematician herself (with a double first from Cambridge), solved in under six minutes the puzzle Turing set for inducting people into his team, and which he himself took eight minutes to solve. On the files, she was listed as a linguist, since the British Civil Service had no protocol for a female cryptanalyst, although in practice, she was an indispensable part of Turing’s select team that broke the German Enigma code, and its only woman member.

After the war, Clarke did not become a university professor in mathematics (as Hawking did at Cambridge, and Turing at Manchester). She married an army officer, and long years passed be-

fore her later work as a numismatist received recognition. Clearly both Wilde and Clarke sought intellectual companionship over other traits in potential partners: Wilde married Hawking despite his illness and Clarke was willing to marry Turing knowing he was homosexual. Today, exceptional women such as these would have many career opportunities, some on par with their male colleagues at universities like Cambridge and Manchester. But what would their situation be in India? How many Indian women are recognised among our top scientists?

Sexual preference, gender, caste, religion — these do not determine the power of the intellect. But they have much to do with the obstacles that we, as Indians, place in the paths of extraordinary minds, swamped as we are in the morass of social discrimination and prejudice. As Turing’s friend, Christopher Marcom, tells him in the film: “Sometimes it is the people no one imagines anything of, who do the things that no one can imagine.”

We might wonder how many brilliant men and women in India, faced with severe physical or social disabilities (our potential Hawkings or Turings), fail to achieve the unimaginable, because we fail to allow them the opportunity.

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