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COLONIZATION AND QUEERNESS IN SOUTH ASIA

Understanding Evolving Public Perceptions of Queer Identities in Pre- and Post-Colonial India

By Megan Mehta

Ancient India has a strong history of accepting, highlighting, and celebrating queer identities, genders, homosexuality, and polyamory—often permanently commemorating these individuals in carvings, paintings, and other forms of art at Hindu temples and holy sites. Transgender, transexual, and homosexual gods are not only extremely popular, but also significant pillars of Hinduism and holy scriptures. As colonialism spread and the British Raj asserted more power over Indian culture, Western frameworks and definitions of “civil society” that mandated heteronormativity led to the outlawing of homosexuality under Section 377 of 1861. Although India gained independence in 1947, such discriminatory attitudes against queer people became embedded in Indian society and amplified over time—permanently altering the public’s perception and opinions on homosexuality. On September 6, 2018, the Indian Supreme Court ruling eradicated Section 377 and decriminalized queer sexual activities—a major advancement in the ongoing cultural decolonization of India and the growing LGBTQ+ rights social movements. These efforts are magnified by the growth of more queer characters in Bollywood movies and media and by creating spaces to openly discuss queerness in a socially acceptable manner. Advancing queer rights in India is part of the larger structural decolonization of the Western norms that were forcibly embedded in society through colonialism, and the continuous struggle demands a reclamation of ancient Indian perspectives that can uproot such bigotry.

Keywords: Queer rights, Hinduism, Ancient India, British Raj, Section 377, Hijra

I. Introduction

India is one of the most populous nations in the world, and many South Asians have established lineages in other nations. Yet, the world of sex, distinctively queer sex, is extremely taboo in modern Indian society—contrasting millennia of its progressive status regarding sexual freedom. Many Hindu gods are queer, and LGBTQ+ individuals were widely accepted and recognized in ancient Indian culture through Hindu texts, art, temples, stories, and more. Although not all Indians are Hindu, India has held the largest concentration of them—“nearly 1 billion by

2011”—and maintains its status as the largest growing religious group in the country, thus, Hindu culture has dramatically influenced non-Hindu Indian people and shapes Indian culture.¹ Discriminatory attitudes towards queer people are Western concepts that were embedded and enforced through colonialism during the British Raj and have permanently distorted the public’s acceptance in the post-colonial world. Queerness became a taboo topic after the British outlawed homosexuality.

II. Understanding ancient India

Ancient India had extremely complex and contradictory perspectives towards sex (particularly homosexual sex) and sex education. The popularity, legality, and regulation of prostitution varied greatly in ancient India, especially over time due to everchanging kingdoms, empires, and wars within the Indian subcontinent. Researchers note that sex work was “common in society much earlier [than the development of Vedic literature]” but “was not regarded as a profession.”² Vatsayayana’s the *Kama Sutra*, written between 400 BCE–200 CE, was considered the first Sanskrit sex education text and Hindu guidelines for love, sex, erotica, and relationships. It primarily focused on pleasure within heterosexual sex and marriage, reiterating that procreation should be the purpose and priority of Hindu marriage, even as far as noting that a woman who “bears [her husband] no children, she should herself tell her husband to marry another woman.”³ It was sexually progressive literature that recognized dominant and submissive roles in sex, other roles that we denominate as “service tops” and “power buttons” in modern slang, and prioritized sexual gratification. Most importantly, however, it recognized a third gender, implied same-sex marriages or relationships, and discussed homosexual sex practices.

“Swarinis” were women who married other women and raised kids together—lesbians. “Kilbas” referred to men who married other men or men who were effeminate. Under the Vedic system’s eight categories of marriages, union between “two gay men or two lesbians were classified under the ‘gandharva’ or celestial variety—‘a union of love and cohabitation, without the need for parental approval.’”⁴ In other words, not only were homosexual marriages recognized in ancient India, but they were also celebrated and deemed divine. Chapter nine of the *Kamasutra* “discusses oral sexual acts, termed Auparashtika, homosexual and sexual activities among transgender persons” and names third-gender individuals as “*Tritiya-Prakriti*.”⁵

Such open-minded attitudes towards sex were not uniform throughout ancient India. The *Manusmriti*, written in 100CE, justified the caste system, demanded female subordination and women bowing their heads to their husbands, and regarded homosexuality as marital ritual pollution—a sin that should be eradicated from society.⁶ Despite the contradictory existence of equally authoritative Hindu sex and marriage texts, sculptures and art on Hindu temples were, even by present standards, sexually frivolous. Built “between 950 and 1050” in modern-day Madhya Pradesh, the Khajuraho Temple is one of the most striking paradigms, and it has countless depictions of “amorous couples” including homosexual male and homosexual female sex, wild orgies, and general erotic carvings.⁷ “Sexual fluidity between man and man and woman and woman” is proudly displayed, depicting three women and one man having sex together, four men fornicating, three women engaged in coitus

1 Stephanie Kramer, *Key findings about the religious composition of India*. September 21, 2021. Hinduism, Religion, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>.

2 Sukumari Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” *Social Scientist* 15, no. 2 (1987): 32-61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i369362>.

3 Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra, Complete in Seven Parts with Preface, Introduction, and Concluding Remarks*, trans. R. F. Burton (Society of the Friends of India, 1925). Accessed January 2023.

4 “Homosexuality in Ancient India,” Track2Training, accessed January 2023, at <https://track2training.com/2020/07/23/homosexuality-in-ancient-india/>.

5 “The Pre-Colonial History of Homosexuality in India: Why Love Is Not Western (Part I/III),” Academike, accessed June 29, 2021, at <https://www.lawctopus.com/academike/history-of-homosexuality-in-india/>.

6 “Manu-smriti,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed February 4, 2015, at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manu-smriti>.

7 “Khajuraho Group of Monuments,” UNESCO: World Heritage Convention, accessed January 2023, at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/240/>.

next to a group of three other women and a man, along with countless more.⁸ It is possible that such perceptible sexual acts were added to religious sites in accordance with “ancient treaties on architecture” which deemed that “a religious structure is incomplete unless its walls depict something erotic, for sensual pleasures (Kama) are as much an expression of life as are righteous conduct (dharma), economic endeavors (artha), and spiritual pursuits (moksha).”⁹ In other words, ancient India and Hinduism not only acknowledged homosexuality, but also deemed it natural, common, and an established aspect of the human sexuality spectrum. The blatant and corybantic representation of sex, especially queer sex, implies a sexually progressive society that was beyond simply tolerant of LGBTQ+ identities; rather, it incorporated such people within its art, temples, and scriptures.

Nevertheless, ancient India was a celibate society and there was an expectation of marriage before sex. The *Mahabharata*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India in Hinduism, describes the story of Shakuntala—a woman who has a child, Bharat, with a King out of wedlock and moves away from the city. It is implied that the power of the King protected Shakuntala from shame from external society and potential physical harm. Today, Indians refer to their country as Bharat in Hindi. Another example is Arjun, the main character in the *Mahabharata*, who was abandoned by his mother, Kunti, as a baby because he was born outside of wedlock. Perhaps, the co-existence and competing popularity of the Kama Sutra and Manusmriti in ancient India, which was dominated by Hinduism, created a paradoxical civilization that recognized queer people, whose role and approval in society was on a sliding scale between acceptance, tolerance, and execration, encouraged discussions about sex, but remained largely celibate. Along with the recognition of queer people, Hinduism also had countless queer deities.

III. Sexuality and queerness in Hinduism

Major gods such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna are the same divine figure in different forms, and each of these separate forms transmutes into other characters including those of the opposite sex. Ardhanarishvara is the gender-fluid/third-gender form of Lord Shiva with the right half portraying a male and the left half representing a female. Vishnu “frequently took on the female avatar of Mohini” and “procreated with Shiva in the Mohini form, resulting in the birth of Ayyappa, a major figure.” Krishna also took the form of Mohini “in order to marry Aravan... [and] stayed in the form as the hero’s widow for a significant period of mourning.”¹⁰ Vishnu killed a demon dressed as a woman. Warrior Shikhandi, another character in *Mahabharat*, was born a female and raised a male. They permanently changed their genders after marrying a princess. Arjun, as mentioned earlier, dressed as a woman (though, it is debated if this was for disguise or cross-dressing). Ila, the creator of the lunar dynasty, changed genders every month.

Most queer Hindu gods are nonbinary/third gender, transgender, and express gender fluidity; however, the stories explaining their evolving gender identities and the context of their cross-dressing almost always relate to reincarnation, change in form, or a disguise. This begs the question: are all of these figures queer representations of divinity that showcase complexity in the gender spectrum and expression, or simply temporary instances of Gods in disguises and costumes? On top of that, many stories involving transgender beings and their partners relate to marriage and procreation—the backbone of Hindu marriages, as described earlier. This presents more nuance regarding the purpose of such transformation and its intertwined connection with procreation—which of these relationships and figures were of the third gender, and which of these were simply same-sex couples that are depicted as a third gender or transgender to have a child? Despite such obscurity, there are records of undoubtedly homosexual Gods: Mitra and Varuna, a renowned gay couple that “start[ed] the moon cycle” through gay sex, Agni, the Goddess of Fire, who married a male and female God, amongst countless others.¹¹ Queer sexual identities amongst divinity are evident, but queer gender expressions are slightly less discernible. The queer nature of any of these figures is not specifically discussed or outlined, much less delineated as something

8 Jean-Pierre Dalbéra. “*Le Temple de Lakshmana (Khajurâho)*,” at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dalbera/page38>.

9 Track2Training. “Homosexuality in Ancient India.”

10 Jacob Ogles, “19 LGBT Hindu Gods,” *The Advocate*, at <https://www.advocate.com/religion/2016/9/06/19-lgbt-hindu-gods?p-g=1#article-content>.

11 Jacob Ogles, “19 LGBT Hindu Gods.”

unnatural, uncommon, unconventional, or atypical. This attitude prevents the “othering” of queer identities and ostracism of LGBTQ+ people from society, however, it simultaneously inadvertently overlooks the complexity of sexuality, thus to a certain extent, promoting ignorance and taboo against LGBTQ+ identities. Nevertheless, the normalization of the gender and sexuality spectrums through blatant visibility in ancient Indian society via Hinduism helped develop a relatively tolerant society. The legacy of such attitudes is relevant to our increasingly global society that allows fights for equality to transcend national and geographical boundaries, and Hinduism has grown to the third-largest religion in the world today.

The most famous instance of queer Hindu gods is Bahuchara Mata and Rama, who are described as the originators of Hijras—third-gender people that Western society might describe as transgender and intersex individuals. Bahuchara Mata “self-immolated their own breasts” and “is worshiped as the patron of the Hijras,” usually amongst transgender Hijras.¹² The story of Rama, an extremely prominent and powerful God, creating intersex people is described in *Ramayana*, the second major Sanskrit epic of ancient India in Hinduism.¹³ He is usually celebrated amongst intersex Hijra people. Most Hijra people are “born male but look and dress traditionally feminine.... Many, but not all, choose to undergo a castration ceremony, removing their male genitalia as an offering to Bahuchara Mata.”¹⁴ They are unified under and maintain the “third-gender” identity, and a 2014 estimate suggests 3 million of them live in India.¹⁵ Mirroring India’s inconsistent and contradictory perspectives towards sex, Hijras are treated with respect that is partially born from fear. The Hijra community is considered extremely holy—direct descendants/relatives of Bahuchara Mata and Rama—thus, their blessings are extremely valuable, and are often invited to births, weddings, etc. Those who reject blessings or refuse to welcome them, regardless of their invitation status, will be met with powerful curses; superstitions and a sense of disquietude regarding their holy status and cultural authority, even 2,000+ years later in modern India, is “so powerful, that the police will often do nothing to remove them.”¹⁶

IV. British colonial rule and the outlawing of homosexuality

In 1861, the British Empire introduced Section 377 which stated that “whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal” would be punished with imprisonment or fines; it effectively outlawed homosexuality, and severely stigmatized Hijras by “naming them criminals” by 1871.¹⁷ In her book *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights*, author Laurie Marhoefer explains that “Europeans believed that people of the supposedly less-civilized world were more accepting of gender nonconformity as well as an individual’s passage from one gender to the other. Hirschfeld and his allies frequently cited ethnographies of ‘primitive’ civilizations to demonstrate that transvestites were valued in those cultures.”¹⁸ The British Raj led the war against LGBTQ+ people, and it is no surprise that “more than half former British colonies or protectorates” are part of the 71 countries that still have same-sex criminality statutes today.¹⁹ This war was not limited to overseas territory—Alan Turing, a WW2 hero, mathematician, and father of Computer Science, was chemically castrated by the British government for having sexual relations with a man.

The strict enforcement of colonial rule and oppression of LGBTQ+, notably through the warped usage of the *Manusmriti*, “the British found [a] tool to promote their interests or perpetuate the social divide among Hindus to consolidate their power” by distorting the public’s perceptions regarding sexual equality and effectively

12 Jacob Ogles, “19 LGBT Hindu Gods.”

13 Jacob Ogles, “19 LGBT Hindu Gods.”

14 “Hindusim Case Study - Gender,” Harvard Divinity School, 2018, https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/rpl/files/gender_hinduism.pdf?m=1597338930.

15 “Hindusim Case Study - Gender,” Harvard Divinity School.

16 “Hindusim Case Study - Gender,” Harvard Divinity School.

17 “Hindusim Case Study - Gender,” Harvard Divinity School.

18 Laurie Marhoefer, *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights: A Sexologist, His Student, and the Empire of Queer Love* (University of Toronto Press, 2022), 52.

19 Ben Westcott, “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire,” CNN, September 12, 2018.

squashing millennia of queer history.²⁰ This also included the sexual subordination of women to their husbands and the caste system.

The colonizers deemed eunuchs as “ungovernable” and “increased surveillance of the [queer] community” in an attempt to eradicate them.²¹ They were considered moral danger and ungodly, a “British rejection of the sensual strains of Hinduism as filthy paganism.”²² The legacy of 200 years of stigmatization, bigotry, and precedence against LGBTQ+ people that was “based in Christian beliefs at the time” is best seen amongst Hijras, who are now “almost always excluded from employment and education outside of their ancient ritual roles.”²³ They are largely invisible to the public and fight to reclaim basic human rights and civil treatment.

V. Modern repercussions

The ingrained homophobia in Indian society is a stain left by the British Empire on the much more accepting ancient Indian social canvas, and the effective dehumanization of an LGBTQ+ person “seriously impacts their access to education and career opportunities as well as increase their risk of poverty and physical violence.”²⁴ “Once a law is in place, it’s difficult to dislodge, both from a legal and physiological perspective... [T]he law didn’t only trap members of the LGBT community in the closet, it also invited other forms of discrimination, providing a cover for blackmail and harassment, and even sexual assault,” a University of Hong Kong Professor explains.²⁵ This further invigorated toxic masculinity and turned an ancient acceptance and progressive society on its head. By restricting sex and gender expression to heteronormativity, such rules and consequent attitudes towards the queer community killed the potential for any productive conversations regarding sex education and the sex and gender spectrums. LGBTQ+ people feared for their lives, freedoms, and safety daily from the British Raj, and then consequently from their peers during decolonization. Despite gaining independence in August 1947, it took more than 70 years of activism to overturn such horrendous rules.

VI. A new tide: Evolving attitudes and tolerance

On September 6, 2018, the Indian Supreme Court unanimously ruled that Section 377 was unconstitutional and legalized homosexuality in India. Activist Arif Jafar notes, “Indian society still has to contend with the deep and insidious stigma of being queer” because “repealing the law criminalizing homosexual sex will not save young men and women [overnight].”²⁶ Although such attitudes were entrenched in Indian culture by the British, it is up to present-day Indians to affirm sexual freedom and equality to queer peers by eradicating the strong scent of discrimination and insisting on returning to a more sexually and socially progressive society. Although the British and their prejudiced laws are gone, the effects on society remain, and “South Asian American spaces are not safe or welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals. The world’s oldest South Asian LGBT magazine, *Trikone*, was not founded until 1986.”²⁷

India now legally recognizes a third gender again, and louder global calls for sexual equality have spilled over into mainstream media. The groundbreaking 2008 Bollywood film *Dostana* starring Bollywood royalty Amitabh Bachchan’s son featured two straight men pretending to be gay to get an apartment. Although this was not “true” queer representation, it reintroduced homosexuality on the big screen before homosexuality was formally decriminalized, chipping away at prejudice and stigma. The 2019 film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (How I Felt When I Saw a Girl)*, is a lesbian remake of a heterosexual Bollywood classic love story. *Chandigarh*

20 V. Jayaram, “Manusmriti the Laws of Manu - Introduction,” *Hinduwebsite.com*, at <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredsceipts/hinduism/dharma/manusmriti.asp#gsc.tab=0>.

21 Soutik Biswas, “How Britain tried to ‘erase’ India’s third gender,” BBC News, May 31, 2019.

22 Biswas, “How Britain tried to ‘erase’ India’s third gender.”

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24 Tessa Wong, “377: The British colonial law that left an anti-LGBTQ legacy in Asia,” BBC News, June 29, 2021.

25 Westcott, “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire.”

26 Sandip Roy, “India’s Battle for Same-Sex Love.” *New York Times*, July 17, 2018.

27 Cynthia Chockalingam, “Pride Month: South Asia’s Ancient Queer History into Today,” South Asian Network, at <https://southasiannetwork.org/south-asias-ancient-queer-history-into-today/>.

Kare Aashiqui (Lovers of Chandigarh), released in 2021, features a heterosexual relationship between a cisgender man and transgender woman. Although it receives some criticism for not casting a transgender actress, some progress is better than no progress. The 2020 film *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savhnan (More Fun Meeting Together)* received similar criticism for casting two straight men to play gay lovers in this gay wedding/coming out story. Again, these are not small-budget indie movies for a niche market. Rather, they are massive major Bollywood blockbuster films that earned hundreds of millions at the box office and feature some of the biggest stars in Bollywood—many of which are the sons and daughters of reigning Bollywood royalty that achieved peak fame during the Independence War or amidst the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. The evolving characters in Bollywood are reflective of an evolving public perception and acceptance of queer people across generational divides. The widespread effect of overcoming colonial-era homophobia would be a cause for celebration in cities across the globe, and ongoing efforts should be fervently encouraged wherever and whenever possible.

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