

HINDUISM : THE ANCIENT SUPPORTER OF LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT :

India, popularly known as ‘the land of *Kama Sutra*’ has a fascinating cultural past when sex itself was not a taboo and its offshoots — homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism were acceptable behavioural patterns. Hinduism is one of the burning evidences that extensively reflects that rich cultural past. Hindu mythologies and scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* involve deities, divine figures and heroes whose attributes or behaviour can be interpreted as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or as having elements of gender variance and non-heterosexual sexuality. The ancient masters of sexuality like Vatsyayana, Koka Pundit wrote about homosexuality as a very normal sexual behaviour and response. Nowhere did they castigate the queer community the way the so called modern India do. One of the primary arguments against LGBTQIA+ community states that it defies Indian cultural values and morals, terming it unnatural. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the history of queer community in India and its presence in Indian values and culture. This research paper has tried to deal with various instances from Hindu mythologies and scriptures to affirm that Hinduism holds a positive remark towards LGBTQIA+ community and it accepts and celebrates love in all its forms.

KEYWORDS : Culture, Hinduism, India, LGBTQIA+, Mythologies, Scriptures, Queer.

Hinduism, also known as ‘*Sanatana Dharma*’ is largely considered as the world’s oldest living religion. It has been widely appreciated as a natural religion since its philosophies and practices are universally accessible through sincere study, reason and experience apart from special revelation. Today, Hinduism is a global religion with adherents representing virtually every racial, ethnic and national background and living on every continent and comprising majorities in three countries : India, Nepal and Mauritius.

This oldest living religion possesses certain fascinating ideas about humanity that make it exclusive in comparison to other religions available in the world. Hinduism views the universe as a family or in Sanskrit, ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’. It also advances the concept of the equal worth of all mankind, as expressed in the ancient hymn : “*Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete / Sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya*” [No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity]. Besides, the popularly recited Hindu invocation demonstrates this concern for universal kinship and well-being : “*Om sarve bhavantu sukhniyah. Sarve santu niramaamayaah. Sarve bhadraani*

pashyantū. Maa kaschid dukhbhaag bavet” [May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings experience prosperity. May none in the world suffer.]

However, 21st century India presents us with a different picture of Hinduism that pales in comparison to ancient Hinduism. It would not be so unethical to state that today, Hinduism has completely lost its glory since its universally acclaimed concepts of humanity and equality have been consecutively disrupted by various misinterpretations and misconceptions made by its post-colonial followers. The British Government proscribed consensual ‘homosexual conduct’ by introducing Section 377 in Indian Penal Code in 1861. After a long series of active protests, the Supreme Court of India, in a landmark judgement on September 6, 2018, finally decriminalized homosexuality. But immediately after the judgement, there was an uproar insisting that India is imitating the Western ideologies and concepts of liberalism. However, the historians and mythology experts in India completely debunked this false claim by stating that this judgement took India back to its actual roots where love was accepted and celebrated in all its forms. A close observation of Hinduism and Hindu mythologies makes it quite evident that the pre-colonial India was much more tolerant towards owning sexualities.

Hindu mythologies predominantly revolve around the stories of a number of deities, divine figures and heroes whose attributes or behaviour can be interpreted as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or as having elements of gender variance and non-heterosexual sexuality. Though there is no explicit mention of homosexuality in traditional Hindu literary sources, but several homoerotic encounters and third gender characters are often found in traditional religious narratives such as the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Puranas* as well as regional folklore.

Hinduism is generally based upon four *Vedas* — *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*. Though none of these ancient scriptures explicitly mention ‘homosexuality’, the closest reference that is found in the *Rig Veda* says : “*Vikriti Evam Pakriti*” which means “what seems unnatural is also natural”. This particular statement from *Rig Veda* debunks one of the primary arguments in which homosexuality is termed as unnatural. The later scriptures of Hinduism such as the *Manu Smriti* which was written about two thousand years ago, do consider the subject of same-sex quite explicitly. It says – “A twice-born man who has sex with a man or has sex with a woman in an ox cart, in water or during the day time, shall bathe, dressed in clothes.” This passage describes taking a ritual bath for the sake of religious purity, after engaging in a certain kind of sexual activity. It does not condemn the sex between males.

The *Manu Smriti* also describes the biological process that determines the sex of the baby like this - “When a male seed predominates, a boy is born. When a female seed predominates, a girl is born. When neither predominates, a non-male is born, or boy or girl twins are born.” Here, the word ‘non-male’ which is ‘*Apuman*’ in Sanskrit describes the one who is neither male nor female. The word ‘*Napumsaka*’ is much more common in the ancient texts of Hinduism and has the exact same meaning. According to the ancient sages of India, human beings are of three sexes – male, female and *napumsaka* which is the third gender. Thus third gender is an umbrella term that includes all the unconventional sexual orientations and gender identities. For this reason, it is not at all surprising to find various stories in the Hindu texts and scriptures that blur the lines dividing a male from a female.

Many deities in Hinduism are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnation or may manifest with characteristics of both genders at once. For example, several Puranic scriptures portray Lord Shiva as ‘*Ardhanarishavara*’, a bi-gendered deity whose right half is Shiva himself and the left half is Shiva’s wife, Goddess Parvati. This divine form unites the male element ‘*Purusha*’ with the female element ‘*Prakriti*’ and it represents the “totality that lies beyond duality”. According to Alain Danielou, “the hermaphrodite, the homosexual and transvestite have a symbolic value and are considered privileged beings, images of the ‘*Ardhanarishavara*’”.

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Lord Vishnu who is regarded as the protector of the universe takes the form of enchantress Mohini in order to trick the demons into giving up ‘*Amrita*’, the elixir of life. In spite of being aware of the true nature of Mohini, Shiva becomes attracted to Mohini and their sexual relationship results in the birth of a son, name Ayyappa who is referred to as ‘*ayoni jata*’ (born of a non-vagina) and also as ‘*Hari-Hara-Putra*’ (the son of Vishnu and Shiva). Ayyappa is still worshipped by millions who make pilgrimages to shrines in India. This story of Hari-Hara has been interpreted to “suggest the fluidity of gender in sexual attraction”. Renowned Indian mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik says that apart from the flavour of homoeroticism, the story of Hari-Hara has a deeper metaphysical significance. According to him, Mohini’s femininity represents the material aspect of reality and her seduction is another attempt to induce Shiva into taking an interest in worldly matters.

However, the instances of sex-change or cross-dressing are not only limited to the divine figures, but they are also found in mythology about non-divine figures. In one of the greatest Indian epics, *The Mahabharata*, one such figure is Shikhandi who was actually born as a girl named Shikandini to king Drupada of Panchala. Princess Amba who was badly rejected by Bhishma reincarnated as Shikhandini in order to avenge her humiliation and she was predestined to be the cause of Bhishma’s death. Following a divine command, king Drupada raised Shikhandini like a man, trained her in warfare and even fixed her marriage with a female. On the wedding night, after being discovered by her wife, Shikhandini fled in humiliation, but met a ‘*yaksha*’ who exchanged his sex with her. Shikhandini returned as a man with the name ‘Shikandi’ and had a very happy conjugal life with his wife and children. The great warrior in *The Mahabharata*, Arjuna himself is an epitome of gender variance. Arjuna spent twelve months hiding in the kingdom of Virata, disguised as a transgender dance teacher named Brihannala of the princess Uttara and her female attendees. Arjuna actually was cursed by the nymph, Urvashi that he would become a ‘*Kliba*’, a member of the third gender. But Lord Krishna suggested him to turn this curse into a blessing during the last year of their exile. In the *Padma Purana*, Arjun is also physically transformed into a woman when he requests to take part in Krishna’s mystical dance, which only women can attend.

In the Tamil version of *The Mahabharata*, there is a story in which Krishna took the form of Mohini and married Aravan in order to give him the chance to experience love before his death. Krishna after the death of Aravan stayed in the form of his widow for a significant period of time. The marriage and death of Aravan commemorate in a rite known as ‘*Thali*’, during which ‘*Hijra(s)*’ (the third gender in Indian term) take on the role of Krishna and marry Aravan in a mass-wedding, followed by an eighteen-days festival. A popular belief says that the origin story for the Hijras comes from *The Ramayana* which tells the tale of Lord Rama gathering his subjects in the forest before fourteen

years of exile. He tells the men and women to return to their appropriate paces in Ayodhya, but upon his return from the epic journey, Rama finds that some have not left the place of that speech and instead merged together in an intersex fashion. Then he grants Hijras the ability to confer certain blessings and this is how 'badhaai' tradition initiated.

The chief progenitor of the Lunar dynasty, Ila appears in many stories as male and female. He was cursed by Shiva and Parvati to alternate between being a man and woman each month. After changing sex, Ila loses the memories of being the other gender. During one such period, Ila marries Budha, the god of the planet Mercury who was completely aware of Ila's alternating gender. According to *The Ramayana* version, Ila bears Budha a son whereas *The Mahabharata* mentions Ila as both mother and father of the child. In another popular version, Budha has been described as transgender as well. Similar kind of story is often heard about Narada, the Vedic sage and devotee of Vishnu. Narada considered himself above being a victim of 'maya' (Illusion). In order to teach Narada a lesson, once Vishnu encouraged him to take a dip in a pool which completely erased the sage's memories and turned him into a woman. In that state, Narada would marry a king and produce several sons and grandsons doomed to die in a war. While Narada was in mourning, his gender was restored to male and he had a greater understanding of the power of 'maya'.

Hindu mythologies consist of several instances of homosexual and bisexual activity that highlight the idea of sexual liberalism in Hinduism. Though such sexual interactions are usually considered purely ritualistic, no one would be able to deny or erase its existence. Agni, the god of fire, creativity and wealth is depicted in the Hindu faith as married both to the Goddess Svaha and the moon God Soma. According to Conner and Sparks, Agni takes a receptive role in this relationship, accepting semen from Soma in his mouth which is quite similar to Agni's role in accepting sacrifices from earth to heaven. Not only Agni but Mitra and Varuna, the sons of Aditi from Vedic literature are also depicted frequently as icons for brotherly affection and intimate friendship between men. The ancient text of Brahmana depicts these two as alternate phases of the moon who join in same-sex relations. On the nights of the new moon, Mitra injects his semen into Varuna to start the moon cycle, with the favour returned upon the full moon. Besides, some versions of Bengali mythological text, *The Krittivasa Ramayana* contains a story about homosexuality. According to the story, there was a king named Dilip who had two wives but very unfortunately he died without leaving an heir. One day Lord Shiva appeared in the dream of the king's widows and said that they would have a child if they made love together. Following this divine instruction, the queens made love and one day one of the queens gave birth to a child. The child grew to become a great king Bhagiratha, who brought the River Ganges from heaven to earth.

The idea of sexual liberalism and equality in Hinduism gets more explicit when we find the references of numerous deities who have been considered patrons of third-sex or homoerotically-inclined people. For example, Bahuchara Mata is worshipped as the originator and patron of the Hijras, trans and intersex Bangladeshis considered in the faith to be of a third gender. Bahuchara is believed to have originated as a mortal woman who became martyred. In one story, Bahuchara is attacked by a bandit who attempts to rape her, but she takes his sword, cuts off her breasts and dies. In another story, Bahuchara curses her husband when she catches him sneaking to the woods to engage in homoerotic behaviour, causing his genitals fall off and forcing him to dress as a woman. Not only Bahuchara Mata, but also Samba, the son of Lord Krishna is also considered as a patron of eunuchs, transgender people and

homoeroticism. Samba dresses in woman's clothes to mock and trick people, and so that he can more easily enter the company of women and seduce them. According to the *Mausala Purana*, cursed Samba also gave birth to an iron pestle and mortar.

In another indicator of the liberal Hindu heritage, the *Kama Sutra*, a classic written in the first millennium by sage Vatsyayana, devotes a whole chapter to homosexual intercourse saying it is to be engaged in and enjoyed for its own sake as one of the arts. Besides, providing a detailed description of oral sex between men, the *Kama Sutra* categorizes men who desire other men as 'third nature' and refers to long-term unions between men.

Historical evidence of gay sex is often censored or buried in today's India. But so far as the ancient India is concerned, it was carved into stone on temple walls. In this context, we can largely refer to the Khajuraho temples, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The temples at Khajuraho are known for the architecture and erotic sculpting. These sculptures depict a lot of contemporary stories and talk about sexuality and in general about ways of life that often reflect the openness and advancement of thought process. The references of same-sex and bisexual activity are pretty explicit in these sculptures. For example, one sculpture at the Kandariya Mahadeva temple shows a man reaching out to touch another's erect penis. On the southern wall of the temple, we find an orgy including three women and one man. There is another orgy on the Lakshmana temple with a seated man giving oral sex to another man. All these sculptures of Khajuraho temples throw the light upon the fact that all kinds of sexual and gender minorities have long been a part of Indian culture.

In National Queer Conference 2013, Gopi Shankar Madurai accurately stated that "Hindu society had a clear cut idea of all these people in the past. Now that we have put them under one label 'LGBT', there is lot more confusions and other identities have got hidden.". It is undeniably a tragic irony that we are so unaware of our own mores and latitudinarian perceptions and practices that were so advanced in the pre-colonial India. Two imposed foreign religions and cultures confounded the Eastern idea of homosexuality and criminalised certain sexual practices as immoral and unethical. The hypocritical Indian society of 21st century has no real idea of our erotic spiritual consciousness, rich sexual heritage and mythological traditions. The false and misconstrued religious morality and incessant foreign invasions clouded our liberal and all encompassing attitude towards sex and sexual practices.

However, despite living in the golden age of innovation, an era in which things like internet and social medias have brought the whole world within the four walls of the house, a large section of the society still has an indifferent attitude towards LGBTQIA+ community. The community is still so far away from the mainstream of the society. The so called modern people of 21st century think hundred times before embracing the community wholeheartedly. Therefore, in such an unhealthy social scenario, it is truly essential to understand the rich history of Hinduism that by all means supports LGBTQIA+ community. Understanding and acknowledging the queer history of India through Hinduism will endow a sense of identity upon the LGBTQIA+ community in India. It will also help to remove ignorance on behalf of Indian society, which assumes homosexuality and queerness to be a Western interference and unnatural

activity. And thus, one day we would be able to make a much better and healthier Indian society where each and every member of LGBTQIA+ community will live like a free bird, not as an outcast.

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