

# Sex in indian society

Society



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Hindu views of homosexuality and, in general, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues, are diverse. Same-sex relations and gender variance have been represented within Hinduism from Vedic times through to the present day, in rituals, law books, religious or so-called mythical narratives, commentaries, paintings, and sculpture. The extent to which these representations embrace or reject homosexuality has been disputed within the religion as well as outside of it.

In 2009, The United Kingdom Hindu Council issued a statement that 'Hinduism does not condemn homosexuality', subsequent to the decision of the Delhi High Court to legalise homosexuality in India Unlike the West, the Hindu society does not have the concept of 'sexual orientation' that classifies males on the basis of who they desire. However, there is a strong, ancient concept of third gender, which is for individuals who have strong elements of both male and female in them. Third genders include males with a predominant feminine soul or gender orientation.

These males are not classified as men. Only non-feminine gendered males are classified as 'men. ' The Hindu society, since the ancient times, does not consider the men's desire or sexual activity with men, the same as that of a

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third gender's desire or sexual activity with men. Although, the society, formally does not acknowledge sexuality between men, it formally acknowledges and gives space to sexuality between men and third genders as a variation of male-female sex (i. e. , a part of heterosexuality, rather than homosexuality, if analysed in western terms).

In fact, Hijras, Alis, Kotis, etc. -- the various forms of third gender that exist in India today, all are characterized by the gender role of having receptive anal and oral sex with men. Sexuality between men (as distinct from third genders) have nevertheless thrived, mostly unspoken, informally, within men's spaces, without being seen as 'different' in the way its seen in the West. Like in other non-western cultures, it is considered more or less, a universal aspect of manhood, even if not socially desirable.

Its the effeminate male sexuality for men (or for women) which is seen as 'different,' and differently categorised. Men often refer to their sexual play with each other as 'Masti. Western concept of Homosexuality seeks to break this distinction between third gender and men, and to isolate sexuality between men along with the third genders, with all its negative consequences. As such, men in India have long resisted the concept of 'gay,' and have sex with men without identifying as a 'homosexual. Gay activists, have sought to introduce a locally acceptable term for 'homosexual' for two decades, without success. Finally, the term MSM was taken, because it was technically difficult for men to avoid, if they had sex with men. However, it too was rejected by Indian men, as if was seen as just another term for 'gay. ' In the past few years, however, the concept of 'homosexuality' has finally

taken root, as men's spaces have weakened because of Westernization and gay groups becoming strong with years of gay and AIDS activism.

A significant fallout of this has been that sexual desire between men, which was near universal earlier, is now become more and more isolated from the mainstream, as men are distancing themselves from it because of the stigma of effeminacy or third gender attached to the notion of 'gay. ' Things have become so bad in some westernized urban spaces, that two men can no longer hold hands -- something which was a common sight in India, not too far back.

## **Contemporary Hindu Society**

Sexuality is rarely discussed openly in contemporary Hindu society, especially in modern India where homosexuality was illegal until 2009, due to colonial British laws. On July 2, 2009 The Delhi High Court in a historic judgement decriminalised homosexuality in India; where the court noted that the existing laws violated fundamental rights to personal liberty (Article 21 of the Indian Constitution) and equality (Article 14) and prohibition of discrimination (Article 15).

Even before this judgement, in India homosexuals were very rarely prosecuted despite the existence of such laws in the penal code. Even though Hinduism is never known to exclusively ban homosexuality, certain Hindu nationalist factions are opposed to legalizing homosexuality while certain others choose to remain silent. However, in the last twenty years homosexuality has become increasingly visible in the print and audio-visual

media, with many out LGBT people, an active LGBT movement, and a large Indian LGBT presence on the Internet.

From the 1990s onward, modern gay and lesbian Hindu organizations have surfaced in India's major cities and in 2004, plausible calls were made for the first time to repeal India's outdated and nontraditional laws against homosexuality. Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire*, which depicts a romantic relationship between two Hindu women, was informally banned for "religious insensitivity" after Hindu Nationalists attacked cinemas where it was being screened on the grounds that it denigrated Indian culture, not on the grounds of homophobia per se, a position shared and confirmed by feminist Madhu Kishwar.

In addition, The Bharatiya Janata Party (Hindu Nationalist Party) who were in power in India at the time, refused to ban it. Similar protests occurred in 2004 against the lesbian-themed film *Girlfriend* — even though the portrayal of lesbianism was this time distinctly unsympathetic. Several human-rights groups such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties have asserted that sexual minorities in India face severe discrimination and violence, especially those from rural and lower caste backgrounds.

Hijras and other third-gender groups are similarly oppressed in modern-day India, forced to live on the margins of society. In her book, *Love's Rite*, Ruth Vanita examines the phenomena of same-sex weddings, many by Hindu rites, which have been reported by the Indian press over the last thirty years and with increasing frequency. In the same period, same-sex joint suicides have also been reported. Most of these marriages and suicides are by lower

middle-class female couples from small towns and rural areas across the country; these women have no contact with any LGBT movements.

Both cross-sex and same-sex couples, when faced with family opposition, tend to resort to either elopement and marriage or to joint suicide in the hope of reunion in the next life. Vanita examines how Hindu doctrines such as rebirth and the genderlessness of the soul are often interpreted to legitimize socially disapproved relationships, including same-sex ones. In a 2004 survey, most — though not all — swamis said they opposed the concept of a Hindu-sanctified gay marriage.

But several Hindu priests have performed same-sex marriages, arguing that love is the result of attachments from previous births and that marriage, as a union of spirit, is transcendental to gender. Many Indian and Hindu intellectuals now publicly support LGBT civil rights. Some liberal Hindu reform movements, especially those in the West, also support social acceptance of gays, lesbians and other gender minorities. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar writes that Hindus are more accepting of "deviance or eccentricity" than are adherents of Western religions, who typically treat sexual variance as "anti-social or psychopathological, requiring 'correction' or 'cure'".

Hindus, he argues, believe instead that each individual must fulfill their personal destiny (svadharma) as they travel the path towards moksha (transcendence). Commenting on the legalization of homosexuality in India; Anil Bhanot, general secretary of The United Kingdom Hindu Council said: The point here is that the homosexual nature is part of the natural law of God; it should be accepted for what it is, no more and no less.

Hindus are generally conservative but it seems to me that in ancient India, they even celebrated sex as an enjoyable part of procreation, where priests were invited for ceremonies in their home to mark the beginning of the process. The third gender Hindu philosophy has the concept of a third sex or third gender (tritiya-prakriti - literally, "third nature"). This category includes a wide range of people with mixed male and female natures such as transgenders, homosexuals, transsexuals, bisexuals, the intersexed, and so on.

Such persons are not considered fully male or female in traditional Hinduism, being a combination of both. They are mentioned as third sex by nature (birth and are not expected to behave like ordinary men and women. They often keep their own societies or town quarters, perform specific occupations (such as masseurs, hairdressers, flower-sellers, domestic servants, etc. ) and are generally attributed a semi-divine status.

Their participation in religious ceremonies, especially as crossdressing dancers and devotees of certain temple gods/goddesses, is considered auspicious in traditional Hinduism. Some Hindus believe that third-sex people have special powers allowing them to bless or curse others. In Hinduism, the universal creation is honored as unlimitedly diverse and the recognition of a third sex is simply one more aspect of this understanding. In 2008, the state of Tamil Nadu recognised the "Third Gender"; with its civil supplies department giving in the ration card a provision for a new sex column as 'T', distinct from the usual 'M' and 'F' for males and females respectively.

This was the first time that authorities anywhere in India have officially recognised the third gender. Hindu religious narratives The Hindu god Shiva is often represented as Ardhanarisvara, with a dual male and female nature. This sculpture is from the Elephanta Caves near Mumbai. In the Hindu narrative tradition, stories of gods and mortals changing gender occur. Sometimes they also engage in sexual activities as different reincarnated genders.

Homosexual and transgender Hindus commonly identify with and worship the various Hindu deities connected with gender diversity such as Ardhanarisvara (the hermaphrodite form of Shiva); Aravan (a hero whom Krishna married after becoming a woman); Ayyappa (a god born from the union of Shiva and Mohini, a female incarnation of Vishnu); Bahuchara-devi (a goddess connected with trans-sexuality and eunuchism); Bhagavati-devi (a Hindu goddess associated with crossdressing); Bhagiratha Maharaja (an Indian king born of two female parents); Caitanya Mahaprabhu (an incarnation of Radha and Krishna combined); Chandi-Chamunda (twin warrior goddesses); Gadadhara (an incarnation of Radha in male form); Gangamma-devi (a goddess connected with crossdressing and disguises); Harihara (Shiva and Vishnu combined); Kartikeya; Vallabhavardhana, Yellamma-devi and countless others There are also specific festivals connected to the worship of such gender-variant deities, some of which are famous in India for their crossdressing devotees and homosexual undertones. These festivals include the Aravan Festival of Tamil Nadu, the Ayyappa and Chamaya-Villaku Festivals of Kerala, the Bahucara-mata Festivals of Gujarat and the Yellamma-devi Festivals of Karnataka, among



others Mahabharata In the Mahabharata, as the result of a curse he was compelled to honor, the hero Arjuna takes a "vow of eunuchism," that is, to live as the third sex for a year: "O lord of the Earth, I will declare myself as one of the "neuter" sex. O monarch, it is, indeed difficult to hide the marks of the bowstring on my arms. I will, however, cover both my cicatrized arms with bangles. Wearing brilliant rings on my ears and conch-bangles on my wrists and causing a braid to hang down from my head, I shall, O king, appear as one of the third sex, Vrihannala by name Another important character, Shikhandi, is born female, but raised as a boy.

Sikhandi's father, King Drupada, had begged the god Mahadeva to give him a son, to which Mahadeva replied: "Thou shalt have a child who will be a female and male. Desist, O king, it will not be otherwise. " When Sikhandi comes of age and marries, Sikhandi's wife "soon came to know that Sikhandi was a woman like herself, refusing him. " Fleeing from the unnamed wife's enraged father, Sikhandi encounters a male Yaksha (nature spirit) in the forest, and they agree to swap sexes. Now in a male body, Sikhandi proves to his father-in-law that he is truly male, after the latter sends "a number of young ladies of great beauty" to Sikhandi to test him.

They report back that he is "a powerful person of the masculine sex," and Sikhandi becomes a skilled and famous warrior, playing a pivotal role in the war. Ramayana In some versions of the Krittivasa Ramayana, the most popular Bengali text on the pastimes of Lord Ramachandra (an incarnation of Vishnu), there is an interesting narrative of two queens that conceived a child together. When the famous king of the Sun Dynasty, Maharaja Dilipa, died, the demigods become concerned that he did not have a son to

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continue his line. Lord Shiva therefore appeared before the king's two widowed queens and commanded them, " You two make love together and by my blessings you will bear a beautiful son.

The two wives, with great affection for each other, executed Shiva's order until one of them conceived a child. Unfortunately, however, the child was born boneless, but by the blessings of a sage, Astavakra, the child was restored to full health and continued the dynasty. Astavakra accordingly named the child " Bhagiratha" - he who was born from two vulvas . Bhagiratha later became one of the most famous kings of India and is credited with bringing the Ganges River down to earth through his austerities. Hindu texts Hindus have many sacred texts and different communities give special importance to different texts. Even more so than in other religions, Hindus also foster disparate interpretations of the meaning of various texts.

The Vedas, which form the foundation of Hinduism for many, do not refer explicitly to homosexuality, but Rigveda says Vikruti Evam Prakriti (perversity/diversity is what nature is all about, or, what seems un-natural is also natural), which some scholars believe recognizes the cyclical constancy of homosexual/transsexual dimensions of human life, like all forms of universal diversities. People of a third gender (tritiya-prakriti), not fully men nor women, are mentioned here and there throughout Hindu texts such as the Puranas but are not specifically defined. In general they are portrayed as effeminate men, often cowardly, and with no desire for women. Modern readers often draw parallels between these and modern stereotypes of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sexual identities.

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Historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their pioneering book, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, for the first time compiled extracts from Indian texts, from ancient to modern times, including many Hindu texts, translated from 15 Indian languages. In their accompanying analytical essays, they also demonstrated that Hindu texts have discussed and debated same-sex desire from the earliest times, in tones ranging from critical to non-judgmental to playful and celebratory. Historian Devdutt Pattanaik summarizes the place of homosexuality in Hindu literature as follows: " though not part of the mainstream, its existence was acknowledged but not approved. " Other Indologists assert that homosexuality was not approved for brahmanas or the twice-born but accepted among the lower classes. In his book, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*, Vaishnava monk Amara Das Wilhelm demonstrates how ancient expressions of Hinduism accommodated homosexual and transgender persons much more positively than we see in India today: " Early Vedic teachings stressed responsible family life and asceticism but also tolerated different types of sexualities within general society. *Manu Smriti* The Manuscript, which lists the oldest codes of conduct that were proposed to be followed by a Hindu, does include mention of homosexual practices, but only as something to be regulated. Though homosexuality was considered a part of sexual practices, it was not always well accepted.

There were punishments prescribed for homosexual behaviour. For instance, the verse referring to sexual relations between an older woman and a virgin (woman) reads "... woman who pollutes a damsel (virgin) shall instantly have (her head) shaved or two fingers cut off, and be made to ride (through the

town) on a donkey", suggesting a severe punishment. However, the verse referring to sexual relations between two virgins suggests a relatively milder punishment - "... a damsel who pollutes (another) damsel must be fined two hundred (panas), pay the double of her (nuptial) fee, and receive ten (lashes with a) rod". These provisions, quoted out of context, seem homophobic, but in fact they are concerned not with the gender of the partners but with the loss of virginity that rendered a young woman unworthy of marriage.

For instance, the punishment for a forced sex act between a man and a woman states "... if any man through insolence forcibly contaminates a maiden, two of his fingers shall be instantly cut off, and he shall pay a fine of six hundred (panas)", which seems more severe in comparison to the punishment prescribed for the same act between two virgins. Sex between non-virgin women incurred a very small fine, while homosexual intercourse between men was sought to be censured by a prescription of a bath with one's clothes on, and a penance of " eating the five products of the cow and keeping a one-night fast"- the penance being a replacement of the traditional concept of homosexual intercourse resulting in a loss of caste.

The discrepancy in treatment may have been due to the text's non-equal views on males and females, considering that the Manusmriti is the same scripture that has stated that the status of woman in the society is the same (or even lower than) that of a man's land, his cattle and other possessions. For Brahmanas and twice-born men, " causing an injury to a priest, smelling wine or things that are not to be smelled, crookedness, and sexual union with a man are traditionally said to cause loss of caste In the same chapter, the atonement for twice-born men is a ritual bath: " A twice-born man who

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has intercourse with a male, or with a female in a cart drawn by oxen, in water, or in the day-time, shall bathe, dressed in his clothes.

Here again, it can be noticed that the proscriptions are specifically for brahmana and twice-born males; there is no mention in the Manu Smriti of punishment for homosexual behavior between males of the other classes. The majority of sexual matters dealt with by the law books are heterosexual in nature, and the punishments prescribed for heterosexual transgressions are often more severe. For example, "A man who is not a Brahmana ought to suffer death for adultery (samgrahana)" (2. 8. 359). The Manu Smriti also notes the biological origins of a third gender: "A male child is produced by a greater quantity of male seed, a female child by the prevalence of the female; if both are equal, a third-sex child [napumsaka] or boy and girl twins are produced; if either are weak or deficient in quantity, a failure of conception results." (MS 3. 49)

## **Narada Smriti**

The Narada Smriti, written around 400 CE, forbids the marriage of homosexual men (mukhebhaga - men who perform oral sex on other men) to women: "These four [irsyaka, sevyaka, vataretas, and mukhebhaga] are to be completely rejected as unqualified for marriage, even for a woman who has been raped." (NS 1. 12. 15) The Narada Smriti also lists fourteen different types of panda or men who are impotent with women.

## **Kama Sutra**

The Kama Sutra is an ancient text dealing with kama or desire (of all kinds), which in Hindu thought is one of the four normative and spiritual goals of

life. The Kama Sutra is the earliest extant and most important work in the Kama Shastra tradition of Sanskrit literature. It was compiled by the philosopher Vatsyayana around the 4th century, from earlier texts, and describes homosexual practices in several places, as well as a range of sex/gender 'types'. The author describes techniques by which masculine and feminine types of the third sex (tritiya-prakriti), as well as women, perform fellatio. The Second Part, Ninth Chapter of Kama Sutra specifically describes two kinds of men that we would recognize today as masculine- and feminine-type homosexuals but which are mentioned in older, Victorian British translations as simply " eunuchs. " The chapter describes their appearances - feminine types dressed up as women whereas masculine types maintained muscular physiques and grew small beards, moustaches, etc. - and their various professions as masseurs, barbers and prostitutes are all described.

Such homosexual men were also known to marry, according to the Kama Sutra: " There are also third-sex citizens, sometimes greatly attached to one another and with complete faith in one another, who get married together. " (KS 2. 9. 36). In the " Jayamangala" of Yashodhara, an important twelfth-century commentary on the Kama Sutra, it is also stated: " Citizens with this kind of homosexual inclination, who renounce women and can do without them willingly because they love one another, get married together, bound by a deep and trusting friendship After describing fellatio as performed between men of the third sex, the Sutra then mentions the practice as an act between men and women, wherein the homosexuals acts are scorned, especially for brahmanas. (KS 2. 9. 37)

The Kama Sutra also refers to svairini, who are " independent women who frequent their own kind or others" (2. 8. 26) — or, in another passage: " the liberated woman, or svairini, is one who refuses a husband and has relations in her own home or in other houses" (6. 6. 50). In a famous commentary on the Kama Sutra from the 12th century, Jayamangala, explains: " A woman known for her independence, with no sexual bars, and acting as she wishes, is called svairini. She makes love with her own kind. She strokes her partner at the point of union, which she kisses. " (Jayamangala on Kama Sutra 2. 8. 13). The various practices of lesbians are described in detail within the Second Part, Eighth Chapter of the Kama Sutra.