



Indian Art

by Eve Millar

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Indian art has been quite explicit in exploring sexuality and the erotic. Most often couples exhibited in the visual media are involved in heterosexual activity, for physical union is regarded as analogous to union with the divine; but some representations depict men and women engaged with one another, with multiple partners, animals, or with inanimate objects, and some images are susceptible to queer readings.

Not only is sexuality celebrated in the arts, but many of India's gods also consider gender to be a fluid affair; some gods either take on attributes of the opposite sex or switch genders completely. Much of the information about the gods is handed down through India's great epics, the *Vedas* (ca 1500 B.C.E.), the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (ca 500 B.C.E.-500 C.E.).

The Indus Valley Civilization, ca 2700-1900 B.C.E.

Located in today's Pakistan, and spanning a territory of more than one million square kilometers, the ancient Indus Valley civilization spread from Afghanistan to the mouth of the Indus River. Within this vast terrain several expertly engineered large urban centers have been uncovered, which suggests sophisticated inhabitants, who not only built brick cities with elaborate sewerage systems, but also had a script that has not yet been deciphered.

Among artifacts unearthed from the Indus Valley civilization are artistic prototypes that indicate a uniquely Indian sensibility, including the veneration of both male and female principles. Numerous clay statues of women adorned with flowers and bangles, featuring wide hips and prominent breasts, were found. These depictions point toward a convention carried on in sculpture and observed in both Hindu and Buddhist art.

Hundreds of steatite (a kind of soapstone) seals, ca 2.3-3.8 cm. (1-1½ in.), were also discovered. One depicts a male figure seated in a meditation pose, whose head(s) are adorned with a horned headdress and who appears to be in an ithyphallic (or erect) state. Surrounded by animals, he could be a prototype for Shiva in his aspect as "Lord of the Beasts."

Shiva is an important deity to the *hijra* (transvestite) community in India today, for he is often shown not only in aniconic form (that is, represented symbolically), as a *lingam* (erect phallus), but also as an androgynous being. An ancient stone *lingam* found in the Indus Valley indicates the existence of phallic worship.

Lingams today are still revered in numerous places around India as Shiva's emblem and as the generative male energy of the universe. Devotees honor the *lingam* by performing *abhiseka*, the bathing or anointing



Top: A sculpture of Ardhanarisvara, the hermaphrodite form of the Hindu god Shiva (ca 1000-1100 C.E.).

Above: A sculpture in the Temple of Visvanatha, Khajuraho, India (built ca 1000 C.E.) shows a monk masturbating a man.

of the phallus with a substance.

This ritual has been practiced for so long that many *lingams* are smooth and shiny on top from the constant attention. Usually milk is poured over the *lingam*, and when performed by a male devotee, the homoerotic undertone of this devotional rite cannot be denied.

The Vedic Society, ca 1500-500 B.C.E.

Around the time the Indus Valley civilization mysteriously disappeared (ca 1500 B.C.E.), Indo-European speaking communities rose to prominence. Literary records reveal the picture of a semi-nomadic people who, equipped with horses and chariots, were interested in religious ritual, weaponry, and stockbreeding.

These people composed a body of sacred writing, the *Vedas*. Although most of the hymns in the *Rig Veda* (the oldest of the *Vedas*) are dedicated to male deities, Giti Thadani notes that many parts of this text were appropriated from earlier feminine cosmogonies. Her book *Sakhiyani* (1996) speaks of numerous references in this body of sacred writing to the dual and twin feminine and also of a multiplicity of interfeminine relationships.

Both heaven and earth were initially spoken of as two maidens or mothers; and creation was often brought about by the coming together of the dual feminine, the twins, sisters, lovers, or mothers.

The dual goddesses were the first parents who gave birth to sons. The heterosexual relegation of the female goddesses to mere consorts of male deities occurred later than these early feminine cosmogonies. Thadani offers many examples of homoeroticism in these myths, which makes for fascinating reading, but, according to Vanita and Kidwai, some are taken out of context.

However, subsequent stories about same-sex couples having children and the mention of homosexual activity in the epics, as well as in the *Kamasutra*, an ancient sex manual dated to around the second century B.C.E., indicate that homosexual practices were not uncommon in south Asia.

Buddhism, ca 500 B.C.E.

By the sixth century B.C.E., Vedic society had produced progressively more elaborate sacrificial rites, which resulted in a class/caste system that placed those with the knowledge of how to conduct the rites correctly, the Brahmins, in positions of power. This led to considerable discontent and a number of renunciants emerged.

One of them was the Buddha, Prince Guatama Siddharta. Initially he was depicted aniconically, represented by symbols such as footprints, a tree, or a wheel, rather than anthropomorphically. Gradually, between 100 and 200 C.E., images of the Buddha in human form emerged, portraying him with characteristics that are familiar today. Many early statues of the Buddha, dating from the second-century C.E. Mathura to the fifth-century C.E. Gupta periods, display a slightly androgynous being.

One aspect of the Buddha is Avalokitesvara, the compassionate Buddha. Avalokitesvara is a *boddhisatva* (an emerging Buddha); and Zimmer notes that "in Indian Buddhist tradition, Padmapani or Avalokitesvara is often an ambivalent or polyvalent character."

As Buddhism spread from India to East and Southeast Asia, Avalokiteshvara experienced a gender change. In China he became known as Guanyin, goddess of compassion; and in Japan she is Kwannon, goddess of mercy.

Many early Buddhist structures are adorned with *mithuna* (love couples or amorous pairs) or with abundantly proportioned *yakshis* and *yakshas*, female and male nature spirits. Pillar capitals at the Chaitya

cave of Karle (50-75 C.E.) depict *mithuna* couples seated on elephants, but one of the loving couples stands out, for the *mithuna* is of two bare breasted women embracing.

Often *yakshis* have discolored breasts and genitals from centuries of repeated handling. *Yakshis* not only lent structures auspiciousness, but also functioned as emblems of fertility, and it is interesting to speculate who would have done most of the touching--women or men? A second-century C.E. *yakshi* showing signs of frequent contact is found on a rail pillar from Bhutesar, Mathura, Kushan.

Androgyny

Buddhism faded almost completely from India around the twelfth century, but Hinduism continued to thrive. Around 550 C.E., a rock cut cave temple was built on the island of Elephanta, outside Bombay, to honor Shiva. Here Shiva can be seen in his aniconic state, as a *lingam*, but also in his androgynous aspect as Ardhanarishvara. Shiva is shown female on the left side of his body and male on the right.

As Ardhanarishvara he is united with his *shakti* (female energy); however, another popular interpretation is that he has merged with his goddess consort Parvati. Ardhanarishvara most often expresses the female aspect of the divine with a breast and the male essence through the *lingam*. The *yonis* (female genitalia) are seldom depicted as a female indicator and androgynes are usually split vertically rather than horizontally.

In Hindu mythology the power of the combined man/woman is a frequent and significant theme. In one instance, when the male gods were incapable of destroying the buffalo demon, Mahisha, they manifested Durga. She is the result of all the male gods combining their energy, so her gender could be interpreted as being rather ambiguous, although today she is worshipped as a female deity.

Durga succeeded in slaying the demon of ignorance and she can be seen in a dynamically composed stone relief carved ca 670-700 C.E. in Mamallapuram, south India. The relief depicts the goddess flaying her multiple arms and charging towards the buffalo who stands erect, waiting to meet her challenge.

As Nanda points out, there are numerous examples of "androgynes, impersonators of the opposite sex and individuals . . . [undergoing] sex changes" both among deities and humans in Indian art and mythology. Other Hindu gods who sometimes expressed androgyny are Ganesha, Rudra, and Daksa.

The elephant god Ganesha, Shiva and Parvati's child, was created by Parvati alone from water in which she either washed herself or rubbed herself. Other accounts of his birth attribute his origins to the union of Parvati with her maiden, or to Parvati and Ganga, the river goddess. His flaccid trunk and tusk are interpreted as phallic symbols, while his large temples and plump belly are regarded as female indicators.

Rudra is known as the howler and as the god of destruction. He is an aspect of Shiva, who not only castrated himself and set his phallus free, but was, as a primal androgynous being, so frightening to look at, even Prajapati/Brahma had to turn away.

The creator god Daksa, a form of Prajapati, was also known as an androgyne who divided his body in half, gave birth to daughters, and finally abandoned the female aspect of himself.

The Third Gender

Hinduism consists of a pantheon of gods. The idea behind the multiple expressions is that *Brahman*, God, is without form, but in order for the mind to meditate upon the divine, it needs a form to which it can attach itself. The infinite can be seen as a diamond, each facet, god or goddess, sparkling distinctly and to be worshipped as one aspect of the whole.

The multiplicity of forms is a manifestation of the universal spirit pervading all things. Not only does

Hinduism hold that divine spirit is manifest in all beings, but it also implies that male and female principles are inherent in all people.

As Nanda has pointed out, ancient Hinduism suggested a third gender, which itself was divided into four subcategories, that of the male with desiccated testicles, the castrated male, the hermaphrodite, and the non-menstruating female.

In spite of Indian society's strict adherence to conventional gender roles today, in Hindu belief gender is seen as a relatively fluid affair. The body is regarded as a temporary dwelling for a soul, and androgynous deities reflect this essentially sexless or multi-sexual aspect of the soul.

The Hijra

In India, the concept of third gender was expressed not only through the language and the androgynous gods, but also through the eunuchs and *hijras*, who are regarded as potent beings, for, in standing between the genders, they are seen as being closer to the divine.

Many of today's *hijras* make a living bestowing blessings on new born male children, performing at weddings, or working as servants or as prostitutes. In dancing and singing they often outrageously parody women. A wedding, especially among the devout poor, would not be considered complete without the presence and blessings of the potent *hijra*.

Sex Change

Besides manifesting as androgynes, some Hindu gods were also known to switch genders altogether. Usually the sex change occurred so gods could engage in intercourse with a being of their own gender.

In one of his incarnations, Vishnu manifested as Mohini (a beautiful woman) in order to seduce Shiva. Together they produced a dual gendered god Ayyappa, who is today honored by the *hijras*, many of whom are Lord Ayyappa's followers.

Krishna, too, transformed into a woman to fight the demon Araka who, having never set eyes on a woman, was strong only because of his chastity. After being married for three days, the demon was destroyed by his wife.

After the deed, Krishna revealed himself to the other gods in his true form, proclaiming there would be others like him, who, as neither man nor woman, would have the power to utter words, whether a blessing or a curse, that would come true. Today's *hijras* are attributed this power, so hosts take care to reward them generously when they perform at celebratory events.

According to a Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*, Krishna again took on female attributes in order to marry Arjuna's son Aravan. When Aravan offered himself as a sacrifice, he asked for the boon of marriage, but no woman wanted to marry a man about to be killed, so Krishna volunteered. This event is celebrated annually by the *hijras*, who honor and identify with Krishna in his transgendered form.

Shiva also changed sexes, but his reason for doing so was to make love to his wife Parvati as a female. A story in the *Ramayana* describes how, in order to please Parvati, he not only transformed into a woman, but switched the gender of every male who entered the forest where they were making love.

When King Ila stumbled into the grove, he and his stallion were transformed into their female equivalents. But King Ila's brothers pleaded with Shiva, who reversed the spell somewhat by granting Ila the state of being a woman one month and a man the next.

Women also switched genders. The princess Amba, although reborn as Sikhandini, a girl, was brought up by her parents as a boy. When Sikhandini married a princess, her true sex was discovered and she ran to the forest where a *yaksha* exchanged genders with her. From then on she was known as Sikhandin, a great warrior, who helped Arjuna in battle.

Homosexual Relationships

As is apparent from the stories above, sex between people of the same gender was not unheard of in the Hindu epics. A story from the *Ramayana* describes how Hanuman, the monkey god, witnessed women lying in each other's arms as if they were with male lovers; and the *Susruta* (ca 380-450 C.E.) notes that two women could act like virile men and have intercourse together, but their child would lack bones.

In a text ascribed to a fourteenth-century C.E. poet, King Dilipa's widows who "lived together in extreme love" conceived a child after they made love to one another. Their child was born as a lump of flesh, without bones, but a sage provided him with a sound body. The boy was known as Bhagiratha, the boy born of two vulvas (*bhagas*).

The dual-gendered Ayyappa, born from the union of Shiva and Vishnu (as Mohini), is also known as Skanda or Kartikkeya. Other accounts of his birth attribute his origins to Agni and Shiva. In this version, Ayyappa was born after Agni (the male fire god) swallowed Shiva's semen. Although Shiva reprimanded Agni, saying his action was improper, oral sex between males was not considered "unforgivable or uncreative," as Vanita and Kidwai point out.

Today Skanda, the son of two males, and a god who refused to marry, has a nearly all-male following. Hindu temples dedicated to him, as well as mosques devoted to his Muslim companion Vavar, abound, especially in south India where yearly up to 50 million devotees make the pilgrimage to the Sabarimala temple in Erumeli, Kerala.

This Hindu temple incorporates a shrine honoring Vavar (in his aniconic form as a sword), for Ayyappa considered Vavar an inseparable part of himself. Ayyappa's devotees also pay homage to the Vavarambalam mosque located outside Erumeli.

Just as Ayyappa felt Vavar to be a vital part of himself, Krishna and Arjuna also expressed similar feelings for each other. Their friendship is described in the *Bhagavad Gita* (part of the *Mahabharata*). As teacher and disciple, they were devoted to one another. Krishna's life meant more to Arjuna than his mother's and Arjuna was more important to Krishna than wives or children.

Although Arjuna was married, on their last day together, Krishna spent the night with Arjuna. Parting the next day, they hugged and gazed longingly at each other until they were out of sight.

Cross-dressing

Cross-dressing is also an activity engaged in by humans and gods alike. The first time the warrior Arjuna took on the appearance of a woman, he worked as a dancer, anticipating the modern day *hijras*. Years later, when hiding in the forest with his brothers, he again donned female clothing to disguise himself. As a female impersonator, he found employment at the king's court where he instructed the princesses in the art of dance.

Today, at festivals and in village theaters in south India, actors playing the part of Arjuna wear saris and paint their faces with one color on the left and another on the right, signifying the dual, or androgynous, aspect of Arjuna and, in O'Flaherty's words, "expressing the sexual ambivalence of the man/woman/eunuch/transvestite."

Evidence of cross-dressing in the visual arts can be seen in a Rajput watercolor painting from 1740, attributed to Nihal Chand, Rajasthan, Kishangarh, which is inscribed on the reverse as "the gathering of the uniformed, wine drinking restless ones." It depicts numerous women surrounding a wealthy, but inebriated old man. One of the "women" is a black transvestite, but there is also a couple of ambiguous gender, both dressed as women, who are clearly engaged in sexual activity.

Krishna the cow herder (not to be confused with Krishna from the *Mahabharata*) and his lover the chief *gopi* (cow-girl) Radha, also enjoyed cross-dressing. Kangra paintings of the eighteenth century C.E. often depict a scene of Krishna and Radha exchanging clothes. They not only exchange garments, but also imitate the mannerisms of the opposite sex in divine play called *Lila-hava*.

Another image of Krishna dressed as a woman can be seen in a miniature dated to the eighteenth or nineteenth century C.E. and today displayed in the Kota Palace Museum.

Cross-dressing Krishna Devotees

Not only Krishna, but also many of his devotees wear female clothing. One of the most famous followers was the teacher and transvestite Caitanya (1500 C.E.). Some regarded Caitanya as the avatar of Krishna, but he felt he was an incarnation of Radha. The myth grew around Caitanya that he was Krishna as Radha incarnate, so his body became the site for Krishna to undergo a sex change and manifest as Radha.

Caitanya dressed as a woman and also observed menstruation rites. S/he met her lifetime companion Jaganath Das (1490-1550) when he was nineteen years old. They saw in one another the incarnation of Radha and Krishna. Das, it is said, was born from Radha's smile and Caitanya from Krishna's laughter.

Caitanya declared Das to be a partial manifestation of Radha and therefore the object of Krishna's supreme devotion. After they met, Das and Caitanya embraced for two and a half days and from then on became constant companions. Caitanya addressed Jaganath as his female friend and s/he in turn saw herself as Caitanya's faithful maid-servant.

Some Krishna devotees today continue to cross-dress. Adopting the lives and attitudes of the *gopis*, who enjoyed numerous love affairs with their lord and lover extraordinaire, they adopt female clothing. In performing austerities, male devotees aspire to reincarnate as *gopis* in order to experience divine union with Krishna.

Temple Sculpture, Tenth to Thirteenth Century C.E.

Just as devotees long for sexual union with their lord as a vehicle for union with the divine, many temples in India depict explicit images of sexual practice. The temple itself could be regarded as a metaphor for union between the earthly and the divine, male and female.

An image of a deity is placed in the *garbhagriha*, the dark interior womb chamber, above which rises the *shikara*, the tallest element of the northern style temple and one that is often covered with sculpture. In cases where the sculpture is erotic, most are depictions of heterosexual *mithuna* couples, but in some instances they are attended by helpers, who not only engage actively with the couple, but also with one another.

An orgiastic group consisting of three women and one man depicted on the southern wall of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple in Khajuraho (1004-1035 C.E.) shows intense interaction between two women as one of them sits on top of the male and the other caresses her and gazes intently into her eyes

Another sculptural group of a similar configuration from the Kandariya Mahadeva temple's south wall, in Khajuraho, shows a woman facing the viewer, standing on her head, and perhaps engaged in intercourse.

She is held by two female attendants on either side and reaches out to touch one of them in her pubic area.

This could also be read as a sculptural group of not just three, but four women enjoying one another, for the figure on top of the woman is seen from behind and is of such ambiguous gender that it could easily be a female, rather than a male, with a narrow waist, wide hips, wearing jewelry and long hair.

Erotic interaction between females can also be observed on the Shiva temple at Ambernath, constructed in 1060 C.E. This relief is badly weathered, but the women's interest in one another is clear.

A sculpture at Khajuraho is less ambiguous, as it shows two women, their lips almost touching, embracing one another. Another sculpture, from the Rhajarani Temple in Bhuvneshvar, Orissa, dating from the tenth or eleventh century C.E., depicts two women engaged in oral congress. One stands smiling blissfully, as her lover kneels between her legs.

Two relief sculptures below the *sikhara* of the twelfth-century C.E. temple dedicated to Shiva in Bagali, Chola / Chalukya, depict a man of large proportions casually holding his huge phallus, slung over his shoulder like a feather boa, while another man of much smaller scale kneels on the giant's leg and attempts fellatio. On the same wall a man can be observed in self fellation, made possible by his enormous penis.

At the Lakshmana temple in Khajuraho (954 C.E.), an orgiastic scene featuring a couple copulating within a group also depicts a man receiving fellatio from a seated male; and at Padhavli near Gwalior, a ruined temple from the Kachchhapaghata period (tenth century C.E.), shows a man within an orgiastic group receiving fellatio from another male.

Paintings

The profusion of lively three-dimensional figures adorning the temples stands in direct contrast to some of the paintings that can be given queer readings. Much of the action in eighteenth-century C.E. paintings occurs within a shallow space; and compared to the dynamism of the sculptures, the paintings also exude an extraordinary sense of serenity. Weighed against the heavy solidity of the temple figures, most of the painted figures could be considered flat and ethereal.

One Rajasthani gouache painting from the eighteenth century C.E. that could be interpreted as homoerotic is called "Anointing and Massage of the Body of a High-caste Woman after Bathing and before Intercourse." It depicts maids holding up a piece of material to create a private space.

Within the enclosed space, the high-caste woman, seated on a low platform, prominently displays her genitals and awaits the anointing of her privates by one of her female attendants. Apart from their jewelry, the women are naked and as one approaches the high caste woman's pubic area, another massages her arms, and a third brings oil as the maids look on.

Another painting from the Punjab and dated 1710-1725 is "The Absent Lovers." Depicted within an extremely shallow space, it shows five ethereal women in a garden. Having just finished bathing, they are nude from the waist up. They are all physically connected, but there appears to be an especially intimate relationship between three of them as they touch one another and gaze soulfully into each other's eyes.

A painting from the Chamba school, at the end of the eighteenth century C.E., creates the illusion of more depth and also portrays women intimately involved with one another. In "Lady Suffering the Sorrows of Love," the lady lies on her bed where she is ministered to by female attendants who bring her tea, prepare food for her, massage her feet, fan her and caress her arms as the lady reaches back to touch one of the women's hand.

Krishna played numerous tricks on the *gopis*. A Kangra miniature from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century C.E., now in the National Museum, New Delhi, depicts an incident when Krishna hid all of the *gopis*' clothes while they were bathing. Only Krishna's blue feet are visible, for he is sitting in a tree, under which the women plead for their clothes.

However, a couple of women have remained in the water and seem to have forgotten all about their clothes, for they are engaged in oral congress.

Twentieth-Century C.E. Art

In spite of India's liberal sexual attitudes in the past, the antiquated British law making homosexual liaisons between men illegal is enforced in India today. Considering the recent outcry in India over the screening of the film *Fire* (1997), directed by Indo-Canadian Deepa Mehta, which depicts a scene of lesbian sex, it is no wonder that most homosexuals in India are deeply closeted.

Bhupen Khakhar

However, Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003) recently emerged as a gay Indian artist. His courage served as a source of inspiration for many others in the Indian gay art scene.

Khakhar joined the faculty of fine arts in Baroda in 1962. His early paintings depict images either of men by themselves or interacting; but whether they are alone or together, they all convey a sense of introspection, stillness, loneliness and inaccessibility.

Geeta Kapur notes the "uncanny sense of withdrawal in his otherwise social paintings." She describes the sensuousness in his tenderly modeled and brilliantly colored figures as "veiled, tremulous and diffuse," and speaks of the artist as being distanced.

After Khakhar visited Great Britain in the 1980s, he began making more explicit references to male homosexuality in his paintings. For example, "Two Men in Banares" (oil on canvas, 1982) depicts a sexual encounter between two men that takes place in an ambiguous, color saturated cityscape.

In "Yayati" (1987), Khakhar interprets a scene from the *Mahabharata* wherein an old, impotent king asks a youth for his virility by depicting the moment of transference just as their penises are about to touch.

"Green Landscape" and "White Angel," both watercolors from 1995, illustrate men engaged in a variety of homoerotic activities. "An Old Man from Vasad Who Had Five Penises Suffered from Runny Nose" (1995) shows a man swathed in a transparent orange material; his genitalia, with its multiple appendages, resemble a flower found only in dreams.

In 1995, Khakhar also painted "Sakhibav," an image of a *hijra* draped in transparent saris as s/he drinks tea.

Amrita Sher-Gil

Another artist whose work can be interpreted as queer is Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941).

Daughter of a mixed Sikh-Hungarian marriage, she moved to Paris in 1929 to study art. She had affairs with men, but also developed intimate friendships with Marie Louise Chassney, a painter in Paris, and with Edith Lang, a Hungarian pianist.

Amrita's parents destroyed her correspondence to these women after she married her Hungarian cousin Victor. She apparently entered into this marriage of convenience in order to escape dependence on her parents.

In 1934 the artist returned to India, where she evolved a painting technique inspired by the Buddhist cave paintings at Ajanta and by Mughal miniatures. Her paintings depict mostly women in scenes from rural India. Although they appear to be engaged in activity, the figures, reduced in form, evoke a tangible stillness--a serenity, a melancholy, a passivity-- that contrasts greatly with the ebullience and activity of early Hindu and Buddhist sculptures of females.

The remoteness between the figures is tangible in her painting "Three Girls" (oil on canvas, 1935). Sher-Gil suspends the interactive potential of the group by locking the individuals in silence.

This is also the case with "Hill Women" (1935), which depicts a silent group walking to market, and "The Swing" (1940). Although the women in these works are bathed in luminous tones of red, in spite of their activity and the brilliant color the painting emits a timeless calm.

Solid silence also hangs suspended in the painting "The Bath" (1940), which depicts a solitary female nude wrapped in privacy by a temporary cloth shield, yet exposed to the artist and viewer.

Vivan Sundaram interprets Sher-Gil's painting "Two Girls" (1939) as one in which the physical and emotional longing of two women for one another is tangible.

Although homoeroticism is never explicit in Sher-Gil's paintings, the distance of the figures from one another is remarkably reminiscent of the remoteness expressed in Khakhar's early paintings and may constitute a code for the depiction of homosexuality within an oppressive society. We can only speculate how Sher-Gil would have further developed her art had she lived longer.

Conclusion

Although homosexuality, gender-bending, cross-dressing and third-gender expression has always had a place in Indian art and culture, today homosexuality in south Asia is deplored by fundamentalists as a Western import. However, it is clear that many of India's favorite gods embraced and celebrated diversity.

Perhaps individuals whose sexual expressions differ from that of the majority can draw strength and inspiration from these roots. There may also be reason to hope for greater tolerance for sexual minorities in India. The recent election of a *hijra* as mayor in Uttar Pradesh may be a harbinger of increased respect for sexual diversity.

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About the Author

Eve Millar, of mixed cultural heritage, has lived in a number of countries and continents. She is currently a student in the history of art department at the University of Victoria, specializing in South Asian Art.