



India

by Walter D. Penrose, Jr.

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Modern India, the largest nation in South Asia, and one of the largest in the world, is an extremely diverse country--ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally. Indian thought about sexuality and gender has been shaped by many factors, including religion and the influence of various ethnic groups. In the past, Indian thought towards same-sex eroticism and gender variance seems to have more tolerant than it is today.

Currently, the major religions of India are Hinduism and Islam. While Christianity is not a predominant religion in India today, Western thought derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition has left its mark on India through colonialism.

Under British rule in 1860, sodomy was outlawed in India, and it remained so until a court ruling in 2009. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code condemned those who engage in sodomy to imprisonment of up to ten years or life. In practice, however, punishments tended to be less than this.

Over the years, the definition of sodomy provided by the code was challenged, but was established in a 1982 case as any act of non-coital sex. The law was not used to punish women engaging in lesbian sex, but it was used to threaten them.

At the end of the twentieth century, activists in the small glbtq equality movement began attempts to repeal the repressive law, which had a powerfully stigmatizing effect even though it was not widely enforced.

Finally, on July 3, 2009, the Delhi High Court issued a landmark ruling, which declared that "that treating relations between consenting adult homosexuals as a crime is a violation of basic human rights safeguarded under the Indian Constitution."

Announcement of the decision inspired celebratory rallies in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and other major Indian cities. It was denounced by religious figures and groups, but others regarded it approvingly as evidence of India's movement toward modernization.

When the government subsequently declined to appeal the ruling, homosexuality was decriminalized throughout the vast nation.

Despite decriminalization, modern Indian attitudes towards homoeroticism remain, in many ways, a legacy of colonialism. There was never the same kind of organized, systematic persecution of homosexual behavior in pre-colonial India as there was in Medieval or Early-Modern Europe. Nevertheless, Indian societies have traditionally placed a strong emphasis on reproduction. Therefore, impotence, more than homoerotic behavior, has traditionally been a locus of shame for Indians.



Top: India and neighboring countries in 2004.

Center: A monk masturbates a man in this sculpture in the Temple of Visvanatha, Khajuraho, India (built ca 1000 C.E.).

Above: This sixteenth or seventeenth century painting depicts two men and a woman copulating.

Hijras

Hijras, sometimes described as "neither man nor woman," have existed in India for centuries, though they were called by other names in the remote past. Many are men with passive homoerotic sexual proclivities who are ritually castrated; others are intersexed or otherwise impotent persons. They generally wear women's clothing and typically live in small communes.

The hijras maintain a third-gender role that has become institutionalized by tradition within Hindu and even Indo-Islamic communities. With the increasing Westernization of India, the plight of hijras has become more difficult, and they are increasingly dependent on prostitution for their livelihood.

Transgendered Persons

Non-castrated, male-to-female transgendered *jhankas* or *zenanas* also practice prostitution in India. They are not hijras, though some aspire to become part of hijra communities.

While the hijras have maintained a place in modern Indian society, female-to-male transgendered persons are less accepted in India today, although they appear to have had a more visible role in the past. In pre-colonial Indian regimes, cross-dressed women acted as bodyguards and porters for Indian royalty (both kings and queens).

Ancient Indian Sexuality

Ancient Indian mythology is replete with stories of both male and female sex change, dual goddesses who mate, and gods and goddesses who take on attributes perceived to be both male and female, such as the androgynous Shiva.

Ancient medical texts describe what Sweet and Zwilling translate as "masculine lesbian" females. Although they were pathologized, these women (like men with certain homoerotic sexual proclivities or impotence) were seen as essentially different. It was thought that either embryonic damage or the mother sitting on top of the father during sex caused their sexual and gender preferences.

The *Kama Sutra* (ca 3rd century C. E.) provides us with much of what we know about ancient Indian sexuality. The *Kama Sutra* 2.8 discusses "Virile Behavior in Women." Some of the sexual techniques described are quite graphic, including "the thunderbolt," "the wild boar's thrust," as well as "normal copulation." There is much scholarly dispute over whether this chapter refers entirely to women taking an active role in sex with men, or whether the latter section of it refers to sex between two women.

It is clear from another passage in the *Kama Sutra* (5.6.2), however, that gender-differentiated sex between women was socially accepted. Royal women are recorded in this passage as having homoerotic sex with their servants, whom they dressed as men, using fruits, vegetables, and dildos. A commentator on the *Kama Sutra*, Yashodhara (ca 12th century), indicates that women also had oral sex with each other in the privacy of quarters restricted to women (2.9.36).

Kama Sutra 2.9 also mentions a "third nature." It is widely agreed that some males who took on a third nature in the South Asian past dressed in women's clothing and performed oral sex. The text also refers to masseurs who performed oral sex on other men. Whether the third nature mentioned in the Sanskrit literature also refers to women is disputed.

The third-natured person in the *Kama Sutra* is described as performing oral sex, but not anal sex. It is noted that anal intercourse was practiced in South India (*Kama Sutra* 2.6.49), but the anus is considered the "bad route" in the commentary of Yashodhara, written approximately eight-hundred years later (2.6.49). While

Yashodhara considers anal intercourse to be a perversion of Southern origin, he notes that oral sex with a third-natured person is not a form of "special copulation" (2.6.49).

With respect to male-male *kama* (desire), an active/passive dichotomy is apparent in the historical record as well as in present day thought. The male passive partner takes the receptive role in sex, and is more stigmatized. There is less stigmatization of an active partner in such a relationship, and in modern India the passive partner in male-male sex is called by different terms than an active participant.

The Muslim Conquest of India

Many aspects of Indian life, including sexuality, were changed by the Muslim conquest of South Asia that began in the eighth century. Islamic rule spread into modern-day India in the early eleventh century and culminated with the tenuous conquest of most of South India in 1707. The introduction of Islam had a more profound effect on North India, which was held mostly under Muslim rule until the nineteenth century.

While anal intercourse between men is forbidden in the *Quran* (4.15), the punishments prescribed are less severe than those in the Old Testament. Male-male desire is not taboo; however, acting upon such desire is prohibited. It is also worth noting that Islam is not a uniform religion, and a liberal form of Sufism in India called for contemplation of God's bounty through pleasure.

Indo-Islamic poetry suggests that men had sex with one another despite prohibitions, and there were only slight attempts to curb this activity. One poem is particularly revealing: "He is the king in Delhi who lies under the lover" (trans. Rahman). Indo-Islamic love poetry is usually written from the point of view of the older, sexually active (penetrating) male, but often indicates that the younger man in such a relationship held the power of rejection and was perhaps not as passive as his denoted sexual role might otherwise indicate. Less is known about female-female sexuality in Muslim India, though some illustrations and poetry are illuminating.

European Colonialism

European colonialism began with the Portuguese, *ca* 1500, and culminated with direct British rule of India in 1857. Not only did the British introduce anti-sodomy legislation, but Judeo-Christian social attitudes towards homoeroticism and gender variance as well.

Women who dressed in men's clothing and served as bodyguards and porters were noticed by English colonials prior to 1857, but disappeared with the decline of Indian court life. Male-male homoerotic poetry ceased to be published. Although some poetry discussing love between women, called *rekhti*, continued to be written in the late nineteenth century, it was eventually suppressed as well.

India Today

Today, homosexual behavior in India consists primarily of acts performed with great discretion, with the partners usually adopting rigid sexual roles. Open, Western-style gayness is not something that has taken root in India, outside a few large cities.

The family is still the source of economic security, and many men and women who engage in homoerotic acts also marry because of parental pressure, economic necessity, and the need for children to provide geriatric care. As a result, exclusive same-sex relationships are rare in India.

The lack of a public social security system, poverty, and compulsory heterosexual marriage may indeed be the most oppressive aspects of everyday life in India for individuals who identify as glbtq. Consequently, those who do adopt a Westernized gay, lesbian, or transgendered identity often migrate to large Indian cities or live abroad as part of a larger, worldwide South Asian diaspora.

In Mumbai, Delhi, and other large cities, a small glbtq culture that includes bars, magazines, organized parties, support groups, and activist organizations (often organized around AIDS issues) has begun to emerge. This phenomenon, in addition to the appearance of gay and lesbian characters in contemporary Indian film and literature, as well as very recent developments in the Indian academy to incorporate Queer Studies, represents the beginnings of a queer civil rights movement within Indian society.

The recent ruling decriminalizing consensual homosexual activity, along with India's emergence as an economic powerhouse and a modern state, may well create more favorable conditions for glbtq activism.

It could be said that those who identify as bisexual or heterosexual have an easier time living in contemporary India than lesbians or gays, but such a statement risks enforcing Western categories in a multicultural, multiethnic country where sex, sexuality, and gender are often understood and lived very differently than in the West.

Even less categorizing terms--such as men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women--may deny the complexities of reality in India, where active/passive contrasts are still very strong and native terminology generally reflects the nuances of Indian life better than Western identities.

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