



Hinduism

by Walter D. Penrose, Jr.

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Hinduism is the dominant religion of modern India. It is a polytheistic religion that evolved from the Vedic religion of ancient India. Hinduism emerged in response to Buddhism and Jainism, movements beginning in India *ca* 500 B. C. E. that rejected the caste (rigid class) system, a salient marker of Vedic religion and still an integral part of Hinduism today. Despite its retention of the caste system, Hinduism has been affected by aspects of Buddhist and Jain religions, particularly an emphasis on non-violence.

Traditional Hinduism contained certain prohibitions against homoerotic behavior. Nevertheless, there has been great variation in Hindu thought regarding sexuality. The definition of Hindu *dharma*, or right conduct, has been debated in various Hindu texts for thousands of years, and has been tied to caste, locale, stage of life, and individuality. Colonialism also affected Hindu attitudes toward gender variance and sexual deviance.

Caste, Homoeroticism, and Penance

During the Colonial period, the British chose to enforce the ancient *Laws of Manu* as the Hindu civil code, and this particular text has therefore enjoyed greater influence in modern Hinduism than it may have otherwise. The *Laws of Manu* 11.58 and 11.174 state that men who participate in anal intercourse are "traditionally said" to lose caste, but also prescribe that a man who has shed semen in another male perform penance. Ruth Vanita suggests that penance replaced the loss of caste as a punishment for anal sex in ancient Hinduism. Given that Manu's text is a compilation of many contradictory scriptures, this is certainly plausible.

Hijras

There may have been a difference drawn between the man who shed his semen and the man who received that semen, however. Today, men who take a passive role in sex with other men *may* lose caste and become hijras. They are not untouchables, however. Hijras occupy an in-between space in rigidly patriarchal, sex-differentiated Hindu society. They proclaim themselves to be "neither man nor woman" and band together in communal groups as a unique sub-caste.

While today some hijras label themselves as gay, others are intersexed persons and barren women. Those who are biologically male generally join the hijras because of a lack of procreative sexual desire and eventually undergo ritual castration.

As devotees of a Hindu mother goddess, hijras are thought in traditional Hinduism to hold the power to make others impotent with their curses, or to make them sexually potent through their blessings. They sing and dance at Hindu birth ceremonies, and demand payment in return for their conferral of potency upon the newborn child. Many also work as prostitutes.

Passive/Active Contrasts in Hindu Thought

Men who have sex with hijras generally do not identify as gay. In modern India, the partner who penetrates retains his masculine identity. The penetrated partner, to the contrary, is seen as effeminate or queer. While hijras are eunuchs, many female-to-male prostitutes, known as *jhankas* or *zenanas*, keep their genitals and stereotypically take a passive role in sex. Other men take a passive role in anal sex but dissimulate. Parks, in particular, are venues for clandestine same-sex male encounters.

The Indian men who frequent these parks are differentiated by a host of native terms in various Indian languages that note their preferences for active or passive homosexual sex and whether they prostitute themselves. Terms such as gay and queer may take on different meanings in Hindu contexts than they would in a Western venue, although there is a small, emerging Western-style glbtq subculture in the larger cities of India.

Hindu Mythology

Hindu mythology contains many stories where miraculous sexual transformation allows homoerotic desire in both men and women to be enacted as heterosexual behavior. Hindu folklore may mirror reality, where both male and female homosexual behavior is often gender-differentiated. Such a hypothesis may oversimplify Hindu reality, however. There are stories of dual goddesses mating in Hindu cosmology, in addition to representations of androgynous gods and goddesses.

The *Kama Sutra* and Male Homoeroticism

The *Kama Sutra*, written in approximately the third century C. E., describes a "third nature" (2.9.1). The third-natured male, like a hijra, is described as wearing clothing perceived as appropriate for women, and providing oral sex to male customers (2.9.2-5). Masseurs who dress as men also provide oral gratification (2.9.6-24). Ancient Sanskrit medical texts identify fellatio, along with masculinity in women and impotence, as markers of essential, pathological sex/sexuality/gender difference.

Oral sex techniques are both prescribed and admonished by Vatsyayana, the author of the *Kama Sutra*. Vatsyayana states his "opinion" that it is not a sin to have oral sex with a prostitute, only other persons (2.9.27). He further notes that "Opinions differ on the matter of purity between the authority of moral codes, occasional local customs, and one's own feelings. One should therefore behave according to one's own inclinations" (2.9.34).

At the same time, Vatsyayana notes: "According to the Acharya, the masters of learning, this practice is not recommended. It is contrary to sound morals and is not a civilized practice. One is defiled by the contact of the sex with the face" (2.9.26).

Vatsyayana (2.9.40) advises that high-caste Brahmans (priests), educated men, government officials, and famous persons should avoid oral sex. The commentary notes that such a prohibition was not absolute, however. Vatsyayana observes that youthful servants sometimes performed oral sex on "other men" (2.9.35).

These passages suggests that, in addition to gender, caste and age were used to differentiate male-male eroticism in ancient India, both with respect to position and restraint.

The *Kama Sutra* specifies that two [male] citizens might have reciprocal relations with one another (2.9.36). To date, this passage remains a mystery, given the emphasis placed on distinctions of gender, caste, or age in homoerotic relationships in other Hindu contexts. It may simply be another variation, however, of a complex set of norms that could be applied in certain circumstances.

Sex Between Women

The *Kama Sutra* (2.8) also describes "virile sexual behavior in women." Whether this chapter refers to female homoeroticism (as opposed to women sitting on top of men), is controversial. In a later passage (5.6.2), however, the text clearly describes gender-differentiated sex between royal women and their female-to-male cross-dressed servants. The commentary (2.9.36) also mentions female-female oral sex, conducted in the privacy of harems or quarters restricted to women in other households.

The *Laws of Manu* (8.369-370) provides penalties for women who take a girl's virginity, but describes no punishment for oral sex or vaginal sex between post-virginal women.

Anal Sex

Anal intercourse, more so than oral sex, is seen as a perversion in traditional Hindu thought. Although Vatsyayana notes that anal sex was practiced in South India, the commentary notes that doing so used the "bad route" (2.6.49).

In the nineteenth century, Richard Burton noted that pederasty was permitted amongst Muslims and Sikhs in Northern India, and ignored in Southern India and the Himalayas. He wrote that Hindus were scandalized by being called "Gand-mara (anus beater) or Ganga (anuser)." Burton seems to equate pederasty with anal intercourse.

Hinduism Today

The term *gandu*, "one who has his ass taken," is still used as an insult in North India. Traditional procreative sexual roles are enforced by Hindu society, generally speaking, and arranged marriages are still common. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, especially among Hindus who live outside of India.

While there has always been an emphasis on marriage in Hinduism, homoerotic sex outside of marriage, generally speaking, is not tolerated in the way it appears to have been in pre-colonial Hinduism. Regarding homosexual behavior discussed in the *Kama Sutra* 2.9, the modern commentator Shastri writes: "These acts are clearly to be condemned and avoided."

The modern commentary makes allusion to inverts and perversion, not only with reference to anal intercourse but all homoerotic acts. Yet other aspects of traditional Hindu thought remain strong, as the continuing presence of the hijras attests, despite post-colonial discrimination against them.

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