

Embracing Queer Love—Then and Now

Mythology provides an objective lens to humans with hypothetically fabricated situations that surpass logic and science to teach morals and ethics through anecdotes. Unlike other species on the planet, humans search for meaning, purpose, and value in life. The need for mitigation of one's environment is an apparent altruistic attribute of humankind. Mythology is a tool that can be refashioned to fit the purpose of the storyteller.

The Importance of Mythology in Society and India

People have rewritten mythologies and made them their own—the impermanence of mythology is as fluid as the gender roles of so many mythical characters. Ancient Indian artefacts, like the Ardhanarishvara sculpture in Khajuraho, depict the blurred lines dividing male from female. Kalki Subramaniam, an outspoken member and voice of the LGBTQIA community in India in an interview with Rediff News about her experience addressing a gathering at Harvard University mentioned that “ardhanaari” means “one power with both male and female together; it is the oneness of male and female. Transgender people are the symbol of that oneness and balancing”. She emphasised that contemporary India has forgotten its history and ignored this unique yet important part of society.

Indian mythology and the tales of the community were narrated with no guilt and shame and had their roots in Indian metaphysics. Mythology is a space where all manifestations of the divine exist with room for all humankind regardless of the present discrimination of gender binarity.

Spirituality was deep-rooted into the cultures of Ancient India. The common consensus then was that gender is what one feels from within—people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community

were not seen as unnatural but just another one of nature's creations. The daughter of Panchala King Drupada, Shikhandi was born as Shikhandini and raised as a son. She was thought to be the reincarnation of Amba, who sought vengeance on Bhishma. An inspiration to all the transgender officers of the Indian paramilitary, Shikhandi was the original transgender warrior. Gods and goddesses wielded the power of gender fluidity and were represented as queer identities in some Hindu mythic stories.

In a Harper Collins Broadcast Article published in support of the annulment of Section 377, many stories were listed to remind readers of queer literary examples. Brihanalla, a man who loses his manhood for a year, is one of the many homosexual characters in the Mahabharata's epic drama. Part of Bhagashavana's life is spent as a man, husband, and father, and the remainder as a woman, wife, and mother. Aravan's wife, Mohini, is the feminine form of Krishna-Vishnu, while Ila's masculinity waxes and wanes with the moon.

Prolific Indian mythologist, speaker, illustrator, columnist and author, Devdutt Pattanaik was one of the firsts to compile and comment on queer ideas in Hindu metaphysics and mythology. His work is well reasoned and available online for reference on his blog online and offline in his books.

Where religion meets the LGBTQIA+ community

The sacred scripture, Bhagavad Purana, holds one of the most well-known tales of all time—the Samudra Manthan. While the devas and asuras fought to get the Elixir of Immortality, Lord Vishnu used his Mohini avatar to enthrall the demons and tricked them into giving Amrita to the Gods. Mohini was indeed so breathtaking that Lord Shiva was left spellbound by her beauty. He did not halt pursuing her even after realising that she was just another one of Lord Vishnu's avatars. Their union led to the birth of Lord Ayappa.

An article by India Today, talking about homosexuality in

Ancient India, made various observations regarding the prevalence of homosexuality in ancient times by citing the following: epics like Ramayana had several instances of [M1] Rakshasa women engaging in same-sex activities and classical scripts like Kamasutra included entire sections dedicated to homosexual erotica. The temples in Khajuraho have images of women erotically embracing each other while men are displaying their genitals to one another. These depictions prove that homosexuality was indeed prevalent and acknowledged then.



Depictions of women erotically embracing other women seen in the temples of Khajuraho [Image Credits: scroll. in]

Non-deities, too, were no indifferent to the existence of the LGBTQIA+ community. According to a paper by the Free Press Journal, “In India, homosexuality is not a taboo but a tradition”, Karna’s wife Supriya, Bhisma’s half-brother Vichitraveerya, and as many as seventeen of the main characters of the Mahabharata Saga are believed to have been homosexual. However, just because people then acknowledged homosexuality did not necessarily mean that everyone accepted it. There are many religious inscriptions like the Narada Purana and Manusmriti, which look down upon homosexuality,

providing varying degrees of punishments given to men and women based on their indulgence in these “unnatural” activities.

Acceptance of all in religious subtext

The Hijra community has served as a haven for many who have fled poverty, violence, or familial rejection. Even today, the queer identities of Indian society seek a sense of belonging here. Through religious traditions dictated by the mythologies of Iravan—the patron god of well-known transgender communities called ThiruNangai—the community draws strength from their tales of bravery and selfless sacrifice for the greater good. (this paragraph makes sense)

As the Bhakti movement gained momentum during the Medieval period, a change in attitude was observed in various people who went from worshipping Gods to treating them as their lovers, partners, family, etc. Same-sex devotion was fueled to the extent that some poets spent all their time writing about the painstakingly one-sided love and attachment they felt for the Gods.

Jagannath Das expressed his overpowering feelings for Krishna’s avatar, Chaitanya, in his write-ups and went on to document their encounter, just like he had envisioned—

“Overwhelmed with love, he held Das in a tight embrace. They stayed in this posture for two days and a half.”

Chaitanya even went on to address Jagannath as his ‘sakhi’ (female friend).

Homoeroticism in the Mughal reign

A considerable rise in same-sex relationships was observed with time, especially when the Muslim rulers invaded India. Various literary pieces like the ones published by Madras Courier, Dailyo, and Lawcoptus Writers club and documentations

on architecture provide evidence regarding the inadvertent increase of homosexual tendencies in people at that time. Sultans and other higher-ups tended to get into same-sex relationships, mostly with their slaves and workers. Alauddin Khilji, a ruler in Medieval times, fell hard for his slave, Malik Kafur, and was so enchanted by Kafur that he could not even tend to his kingdom's need for a few years. Khilji's son, Mubarak, too had a similar experience with one of his noblemen. The Sharia has long condemned homosexuality, but that didn't deter these rulers from pursuing such dalliances.

The founder of the Mughal empire, Babur never hid the love and affection he felt for men. Sarmad Kashani, a Jewish migrant, had various Mughal establishments on the lookout to execute him, but, interestingly, they did not find his previous relationships with men punishable enough.



Homoeroticism in the Mughal era [Image credits: Twitter]

Post Colonialism and the Present Day

According to the International LGBTQIA+ Association, more than half of the 69 countries around the world where same-sex sexual relations are illegal are former British colonies or protectorates. Transgenderism, intersex identity, and the third gender, are culturally significant aspects of South Asia, particularly among the Hijra and Eunuch communities. The British judiciary frowned upon these communities and viewed their existence as a danger to “public morals”. This ignorance resulted in the blatant violation of the communities’ human rights. This was amended with the 2014 Supreme Court recognition and subsequent registration of the members of these communities to provide security and ensure their protection.



*British historian Lord Thomas Babington
Macaulay: the man behind the IPC of 1862
[Image credits: Wikisource]*

The annulment of the British colonial-era law, Section 377, and the recent Chennai court-ordered reforms to protect the LGBTQIA+ community’s rights are milestones towards establishing a utopian environment for the community. Albeit through collective efforts, legal acknowledgement for members of this community is underway, we still have a long way to go before their acceptance becomes normalised. Ever since its inception, the influence of mythology had spanned through generations, castes, and regions. There’s no doubt that it stands as an indelible tool to create more social acceptance and awareness.

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