
VIKRITI EVAM PRAKRITI: UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ IDENTITIES IN HINDU RELIGIOUS TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of gender and sexuality in ancient Hindu civilisation is remarkably pluralistic and nuanced, in stark contrast to the strict modern binary. Using mainly Vedic literature, epics, mythological stories, medical treatises, and classical texts like the Kama Sutra, this research study investigates how gender diversity and homosexuality are portrayed in ancient Hindu texts. The study emphasises the idea of Tritiya Prakriti, or third nature, which recognises people who don't strictly fit into the male or female categories. Early Hindu philosophy viewed gender and sexual diversity as a natural part of life rather than a moral aberration, in contrast to many later moralistic interpretations. This study shows that same-sex relationships, gender fluidity, and transgender identities were acknowledged, documented, and, in some cases, socially integrated through an analysis of texts like the Rigveda, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, and Dharmashastras. Homosexuality was never considered a serious crime or a spiritual sin, even though some legal texts introduced mild penalties for non-procreative acts. Hinduism placed a strong emphasis on dharma, ahimsa, and the pursuit of moksha; these principles applied to everyone, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. This essay delves deeper into the applicability of these antiquated viewpoints in modern legal discourse, especially when it comes to constitutional morality and human rights. The study makes the case for a culturally grounded understanding of gender justice and inclusivity in contemporary India by revisiting indigenous traditions.

Keywords: Gender Diversity, Homosexuality, Hindu Law, Tritiya Prakriti, Ancient Indian Texts, LGBTQ Rights & Identities.

INTRODUCTION

The conversation about homosexuality and gender diversity is frequently seen as a contemporary or Western construct. Indian civilisation has historically had a sophisticated and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality, though, as can be seen from a close reading of ancient Hindu texts. Hinduism accepts diversity and fluidity in the social and metaphysical domains because it is a way of life rather than a rigid religion. With a primary focus on mythological stories, medical treatises, and legal texts, this research paper aims to investigate how ancient Hindu texts addressed non-binary gender identities and same-sex relationships. The study dispels the myth that homosexuality is not a part of Indian culture by examining these sources. Rather than originating from indigenous customs, it demonstrates that prejudice against LGBTQ+ identities primarily developed during colonial rule and later social conservatism.

Through the analysis of stories in texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and ancient Ayurvedic texts like Sushruta Samhita and Charaka Samhita, the paper brings out the acceptance of gender variation and same-sex love in different social and religious settings. These texts usually talk about sexuality and gender as a part of nature, regulated by the laws of karma, dharma, and individual choice rather than moral dualities. The presence of gods and characters with dual or fluid genders further cements the acceptance of non-conformity in the Hindu universe.

The paper also investigates how the notions of Vikriti (Variation) and Prakriti (Nature) form the philosophical basis for understanding sexual orientation and gender identity. Rather than labeling non-heteronormative identities as sinful or unnatural, Hindu philosophy often views them as expressions of the natural diversity of the universe. This view is worlds apart from the moral systems imposed later during colonial rule, which made same-sex love illegal and enforced strict gender norms through legal and social systems.

Through this look back at these ancient texts, the paper attempts to reclaim an indigenous notion of inclusiveness based on Indian tradition. It hopes to help modern debates on LGBTQ+ rights by showing that acceptance and coexistence are not strangers to Indian culture but are deeply embedded in its religious and philosophical traditions. This is not only a way of debunking common misconceptions but also of promoting a more informed approach to

equality, dignity, and constitutional morality in modern India.¹

Literature Review :-

In order to refute the widely held belief that LGBTQ+ identities are only contemporary or Western inventions, this project aims to investigate how same-sex partnerships and gender diversity are understood in ancient Hindu writings. The research emphasizes how early Hindu civilization acknowledged gender fluidity and allowed consensual same-sex partnerships as part of its social and cultural reality by examining religious, medical, legal, and mythological texts from ancient India. To comprehend ancient views on gender and sexuality, a thorough analysis of primary sources like the Sushruta Samhita and Charaka Samhita as well as political and legal writings like the Manusmriti and Arthashastra was conducted. The portrayals of non-binary identities and gender transition in mythological stories from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and other Puranic texts were also examined. In addition, peer-reviewed academic works by scholars including Wendy Doniger, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, Serena Nanda, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Abeetha were consulted to ensure scholarly credibility and contemporary interpretation.

The literature was organized thematically to provide a structured analysis. Mythological representations such as Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, and Ila reflect acceptance of non-binary and fluid gender identities. Social communities like Hijras, Aravanis, and Jogtis were found to hold recognized ritual and cultural roles, indicating their integration within society. Legal texts addressed same-sex conduct in a limited manner, focusing primarily on social regulation rather than moral condemnation.

The study further identifies gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of integrated analysis combining legal, philosophical, and medical viewpoints, as well as insufficient linkage between historical recognition and modern constitutional debates. Overall, the findings demonstrate that ancient Hindu traditions adopted an inclusive approach toward gender and sexuality. Acknowledging these indigenous perspectives offers a culturally rooted basis for promoting equality, dignity, and LGBTQ+ rights in contemporary Indian society.²

¹ Aditi Yadav, A Brief History of LGBTQ+ in India – The CBS Post, (May 23, 2024), <https://newsletter.sscbs.du.ac.in/a-brief-history-of-lgbtq-in-india/>.

² Vidarshna Mehrotra, Depiction of the third gender in Indian Mythology, Dhaara (July 26, 2023), <https://dhaaramagazine.in/2023/07/26/depiction-of-the-third-gender-in-indian-mythology/>.

Gender in Ancient Hindu Thought :-

The Ancient Hindu View of Gender Human identity is not restricted to a strict male-female binary in ancient Hindu literature. Purusha (male), Stri (female), and Tertiya Prakriti (third nature) are the three general gender categories recognized in Sanskrit texts. An inclusive worldview is reflected in the Rigveda's introduction of the phrase "Vikriti Evam Prakriti," which means "what appears unnatural is also natural." Intersex and gender-variant people are acknowledged in the Sushruta Samhita and other Ayurvedic texts, which address gender as an innate characteristic established at conception. Centuries before modern science, these texts show a biological and psychological understanding of gender variance.

Social Position and Tertiya Prakriti :-

Social Position and Tertiya Prakriti Intersex, transgender, and gender non-conforming people are all included in Tertiya Prakriti. These people were not necessarily marginalized, despite what many people think. According to historical accounts, they were present as dancers, musicians, attendants, and ritual performers in royal courts, temples, and cultural venues. Different spiritual and social roles were developed by groups like the Hijras, Aravanis, ShivShaktis, Jogtas, and Jogtis. Based on Hindu mythology and rituals, Hijras in particular were thought to have divine abilities that bestowed fertility and prosperity.

Ancient Texts on Homosexuality :-

Even though they don't use contemporary terms like "homosexuality," ancient Hindu texts unmistakably record same-sex relationships and desire. Vatsyayana's Kama Sutra freely discusses nonprocreative sexual acts and recognizes same-sex relationships between men and lesbians, known as Swairinis. Crucially, there is no moral condemnation of these acts. Along with dharma, artha, and moksha, sexual pleasure (kama) is acknowledged as one of the four purusharthas (aims of life). Therefore, according to Hindu philosophy, consensual sexual expression was not intrinsically sinful.³⁴

³ Homosexuality in India, Wikipedia (2026), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_India (last visited Feb 8, 2026).

⁴ Vidarshna Mehrotra, Depiction of the third gender in Indian Mythology, Dhaara (July 26, 2023), <https://dhaaramagazine.in/2023/07/26/depiction-of-the-third-gender-in-indian-mythology/>.

Gender Fluidity and Mythological Storytelling :-

Gender fluidity and transformation are often depicted in Hindu mythology: In the Mahabharata, Shikhandi plays a crucial part in the Kurukshetra war despite being born a woman. After being cursed by Urvashi, Arjuna takes on the identity of Brihannala, a transvestite dance instructor. The composite form of Shiva and Parvati, Ardhanarishvara, represents the inseparability of feminine and masculine energy. The fluidity of gender identity is further reinforced by Ila, a ruler who alternates between male and female forms. These stories imply that gender change was assimilated into cosmic and moral order rather than mocked or demonized.

Legal Views: Regulation and Dharma :-

Legal texts like the Manusmriti and Arthashastra take a regulatory stance centered on procreation and social order, whereas mythological texts demonstrate inclusivity. Ayoni, or non-vaginal sexual acts, were occasionally punished with small fines or ritual purification. These punishments, however, were light and never connected homosexuality to serious crimes. Importantly, homosexuality was not considered a crime against nature under Hindu law. Rather than sexual orientation, the basis for ethical judgment was harm (himsa) and breach of social obligations.

Moksha and Spiritual Equality:-

Hindu philosophy places a strong emphasis on the idea that the atman, or soul, transcends physical boundaries. Regardless of gender or sexual orientation, everyone can achieve moksha, the ultimate goal. Spiritual writings, which are equally applicable

to heterosexual and homosexual people, promote restraint and disengagement from desire. LGBTQ+ people were therefore not thought to be less spiritual. Conversely, many were thought to have special spiritual attributes.

Current Significance and Legal Consequences :-

Modern legal systems can learn a lot from the ancient Hindu approach. Examining indigenous customs enhances the case for LGBTQ+ inclusion in light of human rights law and constitutional morality. Compared to laws from the colonial era, the decriminalization of homosexuality is more in line with India's cultural legacy. Acknowledging this historical

inclusivity encourages a rights-based strategy with roots in Indian philosophy and aids in the destruction of stigma.⁵

Conclusion :-

A flexible, inclusive, and non-binary conception of gender and sexuality can be found in the study of ancient Hindu texts. Gender variance and homosexuality were never considered serious moral or religious offences, despite the introduction of regulations in later legal texts. Spiritual egalitarianism, mythological stories of metamorphosis, and the idea of Tiritiya Prakriti all support the idea that diversity was a normal aspect of human life. In order to promote social acceptance and legal equality in contemporary India, this indigenous viewpoint must be reclaimed. Fundamentally, Hinduism promotes spiritual unity, pluralism, and compassion—values that are still highly pertinent in today's conversations about gender justice.⁶⁷⁸⁹¹⁰

⁵ Syama Allard, Shikhandi: the Mahabharata's transgender warrior, (June 14, 2021), <https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/shikhandi-the-mahabharatas-transgender-warrior>.

⁶ Trans masculinity in Indian Mythology: Misinterpreted, forgotten?, Regional Office New Delhi (Feb. 28, 2022), <https://in.boell.org/en/2022/02/28/trans-masculinity-indian-mythology>.

⁷ PMC <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7539026/>.

⁸ The Kama Sutra & Hinduism, Hindu Perspective (Feb. 10, 2013), <https://hinduperspective.com/2013/02/10/the-kama-sutra-hinduism/>.

⁹ Vidula Chopra Rastogi, Pride and prejudice, *The Hindu* (Apr. 22, 2017), <https://share.google/Th8HTQn5N9xPjGitj>.

¹⁰ The Tale of Ardhanarishvara: The Union of Shiva and Parvati, Om Spiritual Shop (Nov. 26, 2024), <https://www.omspiritualshop.com/blogs/news/the-tale-of-ardhanarishvara-the-union-of-shiva-and-parvati>.

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